
The Middle Length Lamrim

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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A subdued mind will benefit yourself and others

Make sure that you are seated comfortably and that you are relaxed – but not to the point of falling asleep. We have come here to learn and practise meditation because we understand that practising the Dharma brings true peace and happiness. The great Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyaltsen said that if you have freedom you have happiness, whereas if you are under the control of others you have suffering. This implies that you must have control over your mind to have freedom and thereby have happiness.

On the other hand, if your mind is overpowered or controlled by other forces such as mental afflictions, you will experience problems and suffering. But once your mind is tamed and subdued, you will find happiness for yourself and also be able to benefit others. Lama Tsongkhapa said that if your mind is not subdued, you won't be able to benefit others. We can understand this from our own experience: when our mind is calm, we are relaxed and joyful, and because of this, those close to us, like friends and family will automatically feel relaxed and happy just by being with us. A Christian friend once told me that they use the word relaxation to describe the inner peace that we all need.

A peaceful mind in your hands

Indeed all religious systems teach about ways to find peace and joy. Importantly, peace and happiness are not just external goals but something to be cultivated within ourselves. When we focus on what is conducive to bringing about this sense of peace and joy, we understand that we need to get rid of the obstructions to achieving these conducive factors.

Buddhism says that it is in our hands to find peace and joy because it lies within our minds. If our mind is calm and not disturbed, then we will enjoy peace. On the other hand, we will find no peace when our mind is disturbed. In theistic religions, everything is a creation of the almighty God, which infers that both the peaceful and the disturbed, agitated minds are the creation of God too. This indicates that the peace and joy that we seek does not lie in our hands.

From our own experience, we can recognise that whether we are happy and at peace is directly related to our state of mind. If we think about it this is just common sense. When we have a lot of tension, stress, conflict and unhappiness at home, everyone in the household will be affected by that. And this is primarily caused by our unsettled minds. If one person's mind in the household is agitated and afflicted by delusion, this will have a detrimental effect on the peace and joy of the whole family. The same applies to the community in which we live.

Less self-centredness and more good heart

We can understand that for our own peace and happiness or for benefiting others, we must first achieve a calm state of mind. To enhance our inner peace we must minimise self-centeredness. By opening our hearts to others, and being less

self-centred, we will feel more peaceful and more relaxed. In fact, the whole point of studying and practising the Dharma is to transform our egocentric mental attitude into one of love and compassion towards others. Not only will that be good for others, but we will also benefit.

In terms of numbers, when we say 'I' we are talking about one single being, but when we say 'others' we are talking about countless beings. So, just by number, the welfare of others is more important than the welfare of the 'I'. Dharma practice is about right thoughts and right actions, it is about living life more wisely and more skilfully. Applying the Dharma to the way we talk to others and our body language will greatly improve our relationships with others, enabling us to enjoy the tremendous benefits of living a happy and meaningful life.

How to achieve a peaceful and a joyful mind

Subduing or taming our minds means not falling under the power of mental afflictions and delusions, which are the main source of unending problems. We confront problem after problem because our mind is overpowered by afflictive emotions, not because we are starving, thirsty, or have no clothes to wear or no shelter. The real problem is the uncontrolled delusions that lie within our minds. It must be clear to you that this is why you have been studying the Dharma and engaging in meditation practice because we recognise it as an effective tool for overcoming mental afflictions and delusions.

Engaging in meditation practice entails focusing our mind single-pointedly on the object of our meditation. To do that we need to know how to meditate, including recognising the object of meditation. The actual object of meditation is internal, inside of us, so in meditation we concentrate on and acquaint our mind with the internal object, not on any external object. We might use some external object as an aid to focus but the actual object is within ourselves, which is the mental image of whatever object we use. If our mind is thinking of an external object then we are not really meditating. Ultimately, through meditation we want to completely destroy mental afflictions and delusions together with their seeds and propensities. At the moment however we may not be in a position to do that, but what we can do is prevent any obvious afflictive emotions from arising within us. By preventing afflictive emotions from arising, we can immediately bring about inner peace and satisfaction.

Meditation is a form of discipline and training for our mind, where we train our mind to sit on the mental image of a chosen object. As the mind abides on that object, it abides within us, thereby preventing any distracting thoughts from arising and enhancing inner peace. The Tibetan word for *shamatha* or calm-abiding is *shī-nay*, where *shī* means peace and *nay* means abiding. So, *shī* or peace implies the pacification of all external distractions and *nay* indicates abiding on the virtuous object. Through meditation practice, we can slowly gain more and more awareness and control of our minds. As Lama Tsongkhapa puts it, we can make our minds as immovable as Mount Meru.

Generating bodhicitta

Once we have a calm and subdued mind, we can cultivate any mind that we want, such as bodhicitta, the aspiration to achieve complete enlightenment to benefit all sentient beings. To cultivate bodhicitta we need to know what bodhicitta is. Bodhicitta has two aspirations: an aspiration to achieve one's own welfare, the state of buddhahood; and an aspiration to

achieve the welfare of other beings, the buddhahood of all other beings.

In terms of the causal sequence of the two aspirations, the aspiration to achieve the welfare of other beings is generated prior to the generation of an aspiration to achieve one's own welfare. However, in terms of the causal sequence of fulfilling the two aspirations, the aspiration for one's own welfare is achieved first, meaning one achieves buddhahood before placing all other beings in the state of buddhahood.

To cultivate an aspiration to achieve the welfare of other sentient beings we need to cultivate impartial and spontaneous love and compassion for all sentient beings who are all afflicted with suffering and who wish to be free from that suffering. As we meditate and train ourselves in developing love for other beings (wishing them to have happiness) and compassion (wishing them to be free from suffering) this feeling will arise forcefully, and we will then generate a special or superior intention to personally leading all beings to happiness and liberate them from suffering.

With special intention we generate the thought, 'I shall endow all beings with happiness, and liberate them from suffering.' Let this special intention of taking responsibility for all sentient beings grow, and then contemplate and decide on the best way to fulfil that aspiration to benefit others. We then realise and generate an aspiration to achieve complete enlightenment or buddhahood for the sake of all other beings.

We can see here how an aspiration to achieve our own welfare, buddhahood, arises after an aspiration to achieve the welfare of other beings, which is generated in the stages of cultivating love and compassion.

Once we develop a forceful special intention, we generate bodhicitta. So, it is through the force of an aspiration to benefit other sentient beings that we develop a strong aspiration to achieve buddhahood and engage in bodhisattva deeds for that purpose.

The term 'buddha' is a Sanskrit word meaning 'awakened one'. The early Tibetan translators cleverly rendered it into *sang-gye*, to express all the qualities of an awakened one. The first syllable, *sang* means the elimination of all the obstructions to connote the Buddha's quality of the cessation of all the objects of abandonment. The second syllable *gye* means the development or maturation of all the excellences to connote the Buddha's quality of inner realisations. So the Tibetan word *sang-gye* in itself resonates with a powerful description of the qualities of a fully awakened one.

Remedying afflictive emotions

As I have said before, for as long as we remain in the grip of mental afflictions we will have no freedom, and without freedom we can't be happy. Here, being free means not being under the power of afflictive emotions. Can we be happy and peaceful while under the overwhelming power of anger and attachment? No, we can't be happy, nor can we be our normal selves. Likewise, with strong attachment and desire, we can't be at peace. So it is important to recognise the shortcomings of afflictive emotions to understand the benefit of Dharma practice, which is to counter these afflictive emotions and achieve control over our minds.

To remedy attachment we meditate on the desired object as being unattractive or unpleasant. Attachment is based on our perception of the object as being attractive. So, to eliminate attachment we need to change our mental perspective of the object, seeing it as unattractive rather than attractive. Remember, we don't have to do anything to the object itself,

we just need to work on developing the right perspective of the object, by meditating on its attractiveness, or lack of it (Tib: *mi-dugpa*). Basically, we have to dismantle the mental projection of attractiveness we superimpose on the object. To remedy anger or hatred we meditate to cultivate love and compassion which counters hatred towards the object. If the problem is too much pride, we meditate on the various categories and enumerations of the objects of knowledge, and to remedy ignorance, we meditate on dependent origination.

Two types of meditation

Generally, we say there are two types of meditation: stabilising meditation and analytical meditation. **Stabilising meditation**, *jog-gom* in Tibetan, means cultivating single-pointed concentration on an object, such as shamata or calm abiding, or *shi-ne* in Tibetan. **Analytical meditation**, *che-gom* in Tibetan, is analysing the object while concentrating on it, for example, vipassana or special insight. The Tibetan term is *lhag-tong* where *lhag* means special or extra and *tong* means seeing.

We can also talk about the combination of calm abiding and special insight. Calm abiding is a perfect state of concentration, where our mind remains on the object single-pointedly and the force of the concentration results in the mental and physical bliss of pliancy. Whereas special insight is an ability to analyse the object while maintaining perfect concentration, and the force of the analysis results in the mental and physical bliss of pliancy. This mental and physical bliss of pliancy produced by special insight is greater than that produced by calm abiding.

So, from this perspective we have to understand the meaning of the 'special or extra' in the context of the term 'special insight'. Some people mistakenly think that special insight means seeing some extraordinary attributes. Special insight is not related to knowledge. Rather, as we said earlier, it relates to the analytical power of meditation while in the state of calm abiding. The bliss of pliancy arises by virtue or force of concentration, and the virtue of analysing or penetrating the object. From this point of view, special insight has the features of the bliss and concentration of calm abiding. However, this is not the meaning of the union of method and wisdom.

Calm abiding meditation

This state of calm abiding is developed through the nine stages of mental development. We have to develop these nine states stage by stage; we cannot jump straight to the ninth at the beginning. You start by achieving the first of the nine stages, which is called placing your mind. This means being able to focus on the object for one to two minutes. Even though we cannot reach the ninth level, reaching the fourth or fifth level is considered to be a great accomplishment.

In calm abiding, it is very important that we stick to the same object. Changing the object is considered to be an obstacle to the development of perfect concentration or calm abiding. As explained before, if you use an image of the Buddha as your object, then the actual object on which to focus and cultivate calm abiding is the mental image of the Buddha in your mind. If we focus our mind on an external image of a buddha out there, we will never achieve calm abiding.

Initially, you have a close look at a statue or painting of the Buddha, scanning through the details of the Buddha's features, face, shape, body, colour, hand mudra and so forth. When you begin your meditation, whatever image or picture of the Buddha comes to mind is your object of meditation. In

the beginning, you are not expected to have a clear and vivid image of the object in your mind. Keep the size of the image small, about the size of your thumb. You direct your mind fully on that object to achieve calm abiding. By doing this you will be able to control and subdue your mind.

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Edited Version*

The benefits of meditation

How much effort we make in meditation practice depends on how much interest we have in meditation. How much interest we have depends on our conviction and understanding of the benefits of meditation. This understanding cannot be gained simply by reading and studying – it also requires engaging in the practice.

Lama Tsongkhapa's *Concise Meaning of the Stages of the Path*, says, 'Meditative stabilisation is the king that rules our mind. Through achieving it, when we let our mind rest it will rest as immovable as Mount Meru, and when we let it go it will go after any virtuous objects. It will bring great bliss and make the mind and body serviceable. Having understood this, the yogis continuously apply concentration to destroy the enemy of distraction.'

Meditation is the best way to overcome an uncalm mind and the afflictive emotions, such as anger, jealousy and so on that we generate in our mind – at the expense of our peace and joy. We know, intuitively, without needing any study, that anger and jealousy are harmful to us and others, and we must manage, minimise, and rid ourselves of them. The afflictive emotions of attachment or desire, on the other hand, don't seem to be harmful and destructive, yet in the long run and on a deeper level they are the main source of unending suffering. That's why we find desire among the twelve links showing the causal chain of birth, death and rebirth within samsara. The lamrim uses the analogy of a drop of oil on a few pages of paper, which is gradually absorbed into the paper and impossible to separate later. So, we must also counter desire and attachment.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama once said that the life story of a person summarises their good and bad states of mind. This indicates that because the mind is the source of all our actions and experiences, what we do throughout our life is the reflection of our minds. Meditation practice is a means to train, change and transform our minds. We can transform anger and hatred into love and compassion. We do that by changing our way of thinking. For example, if you look at the life circumstances of people you hate and find annoying and see how they are lacking happiness, and how they are living a difficult life, your hatred and anger for them will diminish.

But when your anger is overwhelmingly strong and forceful, you will find it too difficult to cultivate love and patience. At that time, if anyone advises you to show love and be patient, you might get even angrier. So, in that situation, the best meditation to calm your mind down is breathing meditation, just placing your mental attention on inhaling and exhaling. This is a simple technique but very effective in immediately calming our minds.

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