
The Middle Length Lamrim

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Translated by Sandup Tsering

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Why meditate?

Sit in a comfortable posture with your back straight and your body relaxed. Keeping our body straight will help keep our mind straight and clear too.

Here, 'straight' on the mental level means our mind not being swayed by any distracting thoughts or afflictive emotions. In fact, to meditate means to focus our mind single-pointedly on a virtuous object. A long time ago I was conversing with a new geshe at a public teaching event. The geshe asked me 'What does it mean to meditate?' I said to him that it means to acquaint our mind with a virtuous object with which it is not acquainted. He said to me, 'Geshe-la, that was a pith instruction for me'.

We are here to learn about meditation practice. We must understand that meditation practice is primarily about keeping the focus of our mind on a virtuous object. If we do this, we will develop our ability to keep our mind on virtuous objects with ease, and then we can easily control and transform our mind. As a benefit, we can enhance our inner peace and joy easily.

When I was in hospital last time, I met a Chinese woman from Hong Kong. Assuming that she was a Buddhist, I said to her, 'I am a monk.' But she didn't understand that. So, I said to her, 'Buddha'. As soon as she heard the word 'Buddha' she raised her hands above her head and joined together in the gesture of prayer and bowed down. She was used to showing respect to the Buddha and recognising the Buddha as a noble being worthy of veneration.

When you are used to or habituated with a certain thing, it will come to you naturally, just as the woman remembered the excellence of the Buddha and venerated the Buddha simply by hearing the word 'Buddha'. That is a wonderful thing. So, if a dying person is a Dharma practitioner, just saying out loud the words 'Dharma' or 'Buddha' can be very beneficial. Through meditation practice, we will develop habituation with virtues and then virtues will arise easily.

Benefits of reflecting on the Buddha's qualities and praying

We should remind ourselves how fortunate we are to be born as a perfect human being at a time when the Buddha Shakyamuni has appeared in this world. We also have the wonderful opportunity to hear and practise the Buddha's teachings. Finding such an opportunity is extremely rare. So, we should recognise and make the best use of the opportunity we have now and pray from the depths of our hearts every day that we continuously find similar excellent conditions until we achieve complete enlightenment or the state of buddhahood.

In fact, what we must pray is contained in the refuge prayer that we recite all the time. The refuge prayer says, 'I go for refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha until I achieve complete enlightenment'. One version of the refuge prayer says, 'Until I achieve the essence of enlightenment in the Buddha's pure realm of Akashnishta'. Whatever variation

of the refuge prayer you use, when reciting it we must think about its meaning and remember the sublime qualities of the Three Jewels and how fortunate we are to be under their guidance and protection. At the same time, you should pray that you are never separated from the Buddha and his flawless teaching or the Dharma and pray that you are eternally under the care and refuge of the Buddha. You should also affirm to apply yourself to all the teachings taught by the Buddha as best you can. In this way, you rejoice in the perfect conditions you have found now and motivate yourself to make them meaningful, as well as create the cause to continuously find a perfect human rebirth and meet with the Buddha's teaching in the future, or until you achieve complete enlightenment. Including the place where one will achieve enlightenment in the refuge prayer adds a special impetus to one's refuge practice. Just as the Lord Buddha achieved complete enlightenment in the aspect of the supreme Nirmanakaya body at Bodhgaya in India, or in the aspect of the sambhogakaya in the Buddha pure realm of Akashnishta, you should pray to achieve the supreme enlightenment in the same spot.

We often go to Bodhgaya on a pilgrimage. At the spot where the Buddha achieved enlightenment, we should take refuge and generate bodhicitta and pray that we will continue to do so until we achieve complete enlightenment. When circumambulating holy places such as the Bodhgaya stupa, you should not think you are just walking around a historical monument; rather you imagine that there is an actual buddha in the stupa.

You also imagine that along with you, all other sentient beings are circumambulating in human form and engaging in the nectar light purification visualisation. As you walk around you imagine that brilliant rays of light and nectars emanate from the Buddha's heart to you and all sentient beings from all directions. This causes all sentient beings to receive blessings and purifies them of negativities and obstructions. That's how, from each round of the circumambulation, we can effectively accumulate enormous merit, purify negativities and create a cause to achieve buddhahood. Although we are benefiting other sentient beings on an imaginary level, our practice becomes a cause to achieve the actual state of buddhahood and activities of a buddha, just as a single ray of light emanating from the Buddha benefits an infinite number of sentient beings.

Loving kindness and compassion as the heart of the Buddha's teachings

We should particularly pay attention to some of the main teachings of the Lord Buddha. The Buddha's teaching on non-violence, compassion and loving kindness towards all sentient beings is very important. All the major religions and ordinary people recognise and promote the value of kindness and compassion for other beings. But the Lord Buddha advocated and extended the value of loving kindness and compassion equally to all sentient beings without any discrimination of race, colour, belief, gender and so forth. The Buddha emphasised that love and compassion should be completely impartial and unconditional. This is reflected, for instance, in the four immeasurables meditation where we need to cultivate the thought of wishing all sentient beings to have happiness, be free from suffering, not be separated from happiness and to abide in the state of equanimity, free of both attachment and hatred, holding some close and others distant. Through cultivating the four immeasurables, we can

achieve stable inner peace and happiness and develop a good heart and altruism towards all beings.

Reduce the attitude of the closeness of attachment and the distant feeling of hatred

Normally our attitude toward others is very biased. It is based on attachment and hatred, feeling close to some, recognising them as friends, and feeling distant to others, recognising them as enemies. As a result, we have no hesitation engaging in non-virtues to protect our friends or defeat our enemies. Having this sort of biased attitude of love and hate is a continuous source of the struggles and problems we endure in our lives. If we could cultivate a balanced and equal attitude toward all other beings we would find more peace, less stress, and less conflict. So, we should try as much as possible to minimise the biased attitude of strong love and hatred and the classification into friends and enemies. When we cultivate a more equal and impartial mental attitude, we can find more stability and more peace in our life.

The state of equanimity is crucial to produce a good and pure heart and engage in pure altruistic deeds. Otherwise, even our altruistic deeds will get spoiled by the selfish mind. For example, our acts of helping others will be confined to those who we regard as our friends. Helping friends is good and there is nothing wrong with that, except that it is associated with our sense of I, me and mine. Can we help others without association with the 'I'? Yes, we can.

How to cultivate a pure altruistic mental attitude

What we need to do to make our help to others a pure altruistic deed is to consider the needs of the other beings as the main reason for reaching out to them. Our reason or cause for helping them is not because they are our friends, our family members, our fellow country people, sharing the same organisation or being of the same religion. Of course, we can say that any act of benefitting others is wonderful, but to be a pure altruistic act, it must be completely based on the needs and merits of other beings and not associated with our sense of 'I'. For example, we wholeheartedly go to help others because we recognise that they are helpless and in a desperate situation and we help them without any preconditions of receiving a reward or consideration of who they are to us. I am certainly not discouraging you from supporting your friends and family, but what I am trying to say here is that who you help does not always have to be someone you know or like, or that you don't help others because you don't like them or you don't know them. Rather, try to help others purely on the grounds of their needs and merits.

From time to time, we should remind ourselves that this is not the only life that we have; when we die, we take a future rebirth and after that another rebirth and so on. Therefore, the spiritual practice that we do to train our minds not only benefits us in this life, but it also benefits and has an effect in our future lives. So, if in this life we engage in the practice of training our minds to be compassionate and kind towards others, and consistently and repeatedly pray, 'May I be a cause to benefit but not harm others at any cost,' we will become habituated with the practice of pure altruism – benefitting others purely on the grounds of their needs and situations. You give them what they want and free them from the suffering they do not want.

After you have become habituated to the practice, as soon as you see someone in need, you will be inclined to help that person. A thought of relieving that person from suffering will naturally arise, and you won't think of who he or she is, or what you will gain from helping that person. As a benefit of

our spiritual training in this life, you will have the same tendency and thought to reach out to others in the next life. Hence, your altruistic thought and deeds will further increase in the next life. Similarly, it will keep continuously developing in the next life and the one after that. Over a number of life cycles, you will be benefitting an immeasurable number of other sentient beings and accumulating immeasurable merit. Thus, in each life, you will be heading closer to achieving complete enlightenment.

An altruistic mental attitude is the very essence of Mahayana. If you conjoin with this mind, your practice will become a Mahayana practice. If you don't conjoin with this mind, then even if the Dharma that you are practising is Mahayana, you are not a Mahayanist or a follower of Mahayana. So, you need to ensure that whatever you practise and do is, from the depths of your heart, to benefit other beings. By habituating yourself with love and compassion for other beings and bodhicitta, whatever practices you engage in is to achieve complete enlightenment for the sake of other sentient beings. Then our practice will bring more happiness and peace in the immediate timeframe and supreme enlightenment in the long run.

How to direct your Dharma practices towards the path

In short, all your practices or meditations go towards the path. Infusing love and compassion for others in your practice will do just that. Likewise, we can say that your practice will go towards the path if there is an increase in your faith in the Dharma and in your spiritual teachers and an increase in your virtuous states of mind. In a way, Dharma practice is for cultivating virtuous states of mind such as loving kindness and compassion for other beings. On the other hand, it is for eradicating non-virtuous states of mind such as harmful thoughts towards others. In other words, Dharma practice is self-development in terms of achieving all the excellent qualities and eliminating all faults.

At the moment our mental attitude is biased because we feel love and care only for those who are close to us but not for those who we see as distant from us. If our friends face problems, we feel empathy and want to help. This is good. However, there are others who we hate so much that, if they face problems and suffer, we feel good and think that they deserve it. Such a biased attitude is bad and brings us a lot of problems.

So, we engage in Dharma practice to further develop whatever qualities we possess, such as love and compassion for other beings, and then perfect them. As I said before, we should love and show kindness and support for other beings based purely on their interests or based on the reasons associated with them, rather than their association with us. If we continuously practise and strive to destroy our biased mental attitude, we can slowly develop wisdom and knowledge and through that, we will become a better and wiser person.

Inner contentment

We are always thinking about our own wellbeing – how to be happier and how to avoid suffering and problems. But as followers of the Dharma, we should be seriously thinking about our wellbeing, not just in terms of this current life, but also our future lives. That is very important. Thinking of our wellbeing in our future lives or of our long-term needs will reduce our attachment to the affairs of this life, and our concerns and worries about immediate things and events. We often undergo a lot of suffering and worry about things, but for no apparent reason. The Indian pandit Ashvaghosha said

that there is no way to achieve satisfaction without diminishing desire. This advice emphasises the cultivation of inner contentment to achieve satisfaction. Without inner contentment, we will never be satisfied, no matter how rich we are and how good our living conditions are or what we accomplish in our lives.

Considering our situation, we can see a lot of reasons for feeling how fortunate we are. We are very fortunate to be born into a good human life, in a good country and having good living conditions. In order to reduce the amount of stress, tension and frustration about something, sometimes it is important to ask ourselves 'Why am I worrying about this?'

Even if there are some problems, we should never forget the positive aspects of our life, or if we forget, then we should try to remember them by directing our attention to those positive aspects. In this way, we will have a sense of contentment with what we have, and not be completely overwhelmed by the adversities we face in life.

In fact, we can cultivate inner contentment that is independent of external factors. Contentment is not something we can buy with wealth or any external values, rather a sense of joy and peace arises from within ourselves. We can mentally live a very happy and contented life, even if we lack the external comforts of life.

Awareness of cause and effect and benefit of Dharma practice now and later

As spiritual practitioners, we should always be aware that happiness and suffering, the good and bad things we experience, are happening due to causes and conditions. For example, the good life we have found now is the result of causes and conditions; it does not happen without causes and conditions. So, we must have knowledge and a belief in the cause and effect of things. We enjoy a good life now because in the past life we created the respective causes for it. Therefore, if we want to find a good life in our future lives, we have a responsibility to create the causes for it, which is engaging in Dharma practice. The Dharma teaching clearly explains and guides us on what to practice, and what to do and what not to do.

Although there are three objects of refuge, the refuge object of the Dharma is our actual or direct refuge object, because it is our Dharma practice that saves us from falling into lower rebirth and samsara or leads us to find a good rebirth and liberation. We can receive benefits and protection from the refuge object of the Lord Buddha but only as a guide, while the refuge object Sangha only assists us. So, the actual refuge object is the Dharma.

Technically, the Dharma Jewel that gives direct protection refers to the inner qualities, the *truth of cessation* or the truth of path within the continuum of aryas or superior beings. So, if we were to regard these spiritual qualities, or the Dharma refuge object of aryas, So that doesn't apply to us. because we don't have those qualities and we are far away from developing those qualities.

Therefore, we must recognise that the actual refuge object Dharma that protects us is our Dharma practices which are like a medicine that helps us to get well. For example, taking vows like the pratimoksha vows, bodhisattva vows, and tantric vows – which many of you have taken – supports our practice of observing morality.

We can also speak of morality as being good ethics that you can apply in your everyday life. The fundamental teaching of the Lord Buddha is the morality of refraining from the ten

non-virtuous actions. We should be thinking of this every day. Every morning when we get up, we should think, 'I will do my best to try to refrain from the ten non-virtuous actions and engage in the ten virtuous actions.'

The opposite to the ten non-virtues are the ten virtues. Practising these ten virtues in our life is very beneficial. It doesn't require much study, and they are not too difficult to remember, and we can apply each one of them at a personal level. For example, the first one is refraining from killing, the worst of which is killing another human being, and the next is refraining from stealing, which we don't need to engage in as we have what we need. We can also refrain from sexual misconduct, remembering that it is not about abstaining from sexual conduct, it is refraining from sexual misconduct. Engaging in the morality of refraining from the ten non-virtuous actions will guarantee a good future rebirth. Not only in future lives but even in this life and right now, practising morality and Dharma daily will benefit us in terms of more stable peace and happiness.

From another angle, we must understand that the Dharma as the actual refuge object refers to the positive quality within our mind, regardless of whether we speak of the Dharma refuge object as the truth of the cessation of suffering or the truth of the path to the cessation or as our practice of refraining from the ten non-virtues.

Therefore, the Dharma refers to the quality cultivated within our mindstream which serves as a cause to save us from falling into bad rebirths or samsara. By engaging in the practice of the morality of refraining from the ten non-virtues we are leaving a positive imprint and cultivating positive qualities within our mental continuum. That, we can say, is the Dharma and actual refuge object or protection for us.

When we leave this life, we must leave behind our material possessions, friends and even our body but our mental continuum goes on with us to future lives. So, if we have invested in developing a virtuous propensity in our continuum through our practice of morality then, at the time of death, we will be at peace and have no need to worry about falling into a bad rebirth.

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