
The Middle Length Lamrim

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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Try to cultivate the proper motivation: the reason why we listen to this lamrim teaching is to achieve complete enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. We must have this altruistic motivation from the bottom of our hearts. Along with this motivation, we should make the commitment to put this teaching into practice after studying.

The importance of an altruistic motivation

How effectively we engage in practice and how much benefit we derive very much depends on the extent of our knowledge and experience of the Dharma. We can't expect sudden progress in our practice – there is no shortcut by which we can suddenly jump to a high path.

So, it's important to start the practice from where one is, at a foundation level. We should have a good understanding of the Dharma and do our practices well. For example, we should have a good understanding of how important it is to begin our practice with the right motivation. Motivation precedes any action or activity we undertake: a thought precedes that action. If the thought is afflicted or negative, the action that follows will be spoiled or stained by that thought; in other words, if the thought is wrong, it will be difficult to ensure that the following action will be right.

This is why, when we engage in practice, it is important to spend some time cultivating the right motivation. Each time we engage in our practice, the first thing we should focus on is correcting our motivation. By virtue of having the right motivation, whatever actions we subsequently engage in – regardless of how well we do those actions – will naturally accumulate virtue and bring us benefit.

It's important to engage in practice consistently because we must develop familiarity with it. For example, while the main objective of our practice is to benefit all other sentient beings materially or spiritually, we are not in a position right now to directly benefit them. For example, when we think about beings who don't have enough food to eat and are hungry or thirsty, if we are honest with ourselves, even the thought of sharing our food and drink with others does not arise easily for us right now. Our selfish mind will think that if we share our food and drink with others, we will go hungry and thirsty.

We can see here that what prevents us from performing such a direct beneficial action is our lack of habituation with the practice of benefiting others and our strong self-centredness.

Here, we can see the importance of continually training our mind. For example, regarding the practice of giving, we have to generate the sincere thought of giving; but not only must we generate the thought, we should also ensure it is forceful enough to make us engage sincerely and wholeheartedly in the direct act of giving.

So, right now, what's important for us is that every time we engage in practice or in any action, we conjoin it with the bodhicitta motivation. When we engage in an activity, we

should think that we are doing it to fulfil the needs of others, whether that be their temporary or ultimate needs.

When we talk about fulfilling the temporary needs of sentient beings, in a spiritual sense, we're talking about causing them to find a good rebirth or higher status (in Tibetan *ngon-to*). To fulfil their long-term needs, our goal should be to benefit others by either placing them in a state of definite goodness (in Tibetan *nge-leg*), which is the state of liberation from cyclic existence, or the all-knowing state of Buddhahood.

The essence of the Buddha's teachings

It is important to pay attention to the Lord Buddha's fundamental teachings on the principles of compassion, non-violence, and loving kindness. These inner values or spiritual ethics, such as refraining from the ten non-virtues, are also taught by all other major religions of the world.

Nonetheless, there are some unique traits of the Lord Buddha's teaching on these fundamental principles. For example, the Buddha advocated showing compassion to all sentient beings equally, without discrimination. Among the ten non-virtues, the Buddha's explanation of wrong view is unique and includes the most subtle misconceptions. In fact, by studying the width and breadth of the Buddha's teaching enough, we can easily recognise him as a valid and authentic teacher.

Gaining knowledge about Dharma through studying and contemplating is very important because we don't want our practice to be like a ritual, just mumbling some prayers and not thinking about their meaning. We must ensure our outer practice, including reciting prayers, is also done within our mind. When reciting prayers, our mind is supposed to be reflecting on their meaning.

For example, we frequently say the prayers of taking refuge, generating bodhicitta, and the four immeasurables. The four immeasurables prayer is: 'May all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness', and so forth. Do we really understand the meaning of these prayers and think about them while reciting them?

With the four immeasurables prayer of immeasurable equanimity, we are mentally wishing all other sentient beings to have the state of equanimity, a mental state free of holding some close and others distant with attachment and hatred, respectively. So, in the four immeasurables meditation, we are praying and wishing for other beings to have happiness and be free from suffering, and so forth.

Whereas, when we meditate on love and compassion as part of the sevenfold cause and effect method to generate bodhicitta, we are cultivating love and compassion, causing the thought of wishing others to have happiness and be free from suffering to arise within ourselves. Once we have cultivated love and compassion for all other beings in the depths of our hearts, then the good heart, or altruistic thought of care and loving kindness for all other beings, will arise naturally within us.

This altruistic intention or good heart is the essence of the Buddha's teachings. If we recognise the benefits of a good heart and kindness towards other beings, we will be motivated to engage in the practice of cultivating it. We can then fully develop it in our mind.

On the other hand, we need to contemplate the disadvantages of not having a good heart towards others. The opposite to a good heart is harmful thought. So, we need to think about the

difference between the two by thinking about the consequences of each. Are there any benefits arising from ill-will? Of course not. With ill-will, instead of benefiting other beings, we will cause them harm and hold anger and resentment towards them. This results in more stress, unease, and unhappiness for us.

But, with a good heart, we will consider and benefit others. We won't have hatred and ill-will towards them, so it brings happiness and reduces suffering for ourselves and for others.

Ignorance of self-grasping

We must remember that we all seek happiness, and nobody wants suffering and problems. We don't need to think hard or apply any logic or reason to understand this, because we all naturally and innately seek happiness and not suffering.

Why do we all have this natural desire to have happiness and to not suffer? It's because we have this sense of 'I' deep within ourselves. Because of this I, we all have a natural tendency to wish for happiness and not wish for suffering.

However, we also have a misconception or ignorance about the way this 'I' and all other things exist. With this ignorance, we perceive the I and other phenomena to exist inherently, and thus grasp at them. As a result of this confused or ignorant view, we generate afflictive emotions, such as attachment and hatred and so forth, resulting in suffering for us.

Counteracting afflictive emotions

We need to know how the afflictive emotions arise, as well as the detrimental effects they have on us and on others.

In fact, these afflictive emotions are our true enemies, and the means to eradicate them is the Dharma or spiritual practice. Our main aim as Dharma practitioners should be to overwhelm these afflictive emotions and not be overpowered by them. Ultimately, our spiritual goal is to achieve liberation – the state of an arhat or foe destroyer, which in Tibetan is *dra chom pa*: *dra* means enemy and *chom pa* means to destroy. So, liberation is the state of victory over the enemy.

We must direct our Dharma practice to combating the mental afflictions within us. To do this, we need to recognise how they arise, and the immense harm they bring to us and to others so that we will become highly motivated and know how to effectively tackle afflictive emotions.

It is said that the Dharma is like a mirror that enables us to discern our inner 'face' and develop the intelligent wisdom of recognising our faults and qualities. We use a mirror to locate spots or blemishes on our face, then immediately think of removing them, because they're unpleasant and we don't want them there. In the same way, through our understanding of Dharma, we can recognise our faults or shortcomings relating to our mental and physical actions and, since we don't want them, we will cultivate the thought of getting rid of them.

So, through our understanding of Dharma, we must try, as much as possible, to get rid of our faults on the one hand, and on the other hand, to develop the excellent qualities that bring tremendous benefit for us and for others. Many experienced past masters practised the Dharma in this way and advised others to do the same. We must have the strong motivation to get rid of shortcomings and develop excellent qualities, and then make the effort to put the Dharma – the true means to achieve that – into practice.

Encouraging ourselves to practise

Wherever we can, we must implement the teachings by putting them into practice. However, if we can't put them into practise now, the advice is to pray that one day we will.

From his life story, we know the excellent qualities the Lord Buddha achieved, so we should pray, 'May I too be able to achieve the same qualities as the Lord Buddha himself'. We should especially make an effort to practise the essence of the Buddha's teachings – cultivating compassion and loving kindness for others. We should never feel that we can't develop these inner qualities or feel discouraged about getting rid of our flaws or faults. It is said that our mind is flexible and not static. This means that we can train our mind and change its habitual impulses: we can habituate our mind with positive thoughts.

There is a saying that sinful actions have one good quality – they can be purified. All sins or negativities can be completely purified. So, we should try to put the teachings into practice wherever we can. If that's not possible, at least on a mental level, we should try to generate the wish to practise, and make prayers to be able to practise all the teachings in the future.

Whatever meditation or spiritual practice we engage in must have an effect, in terms of transforming our mind. Otherwise, we will not have been practising properly. When we engage in Dharma practice, we can't have the Dharma here and our mind over there, separate from each other. Dharma practice must be applied to our mind. Through meditation and Dharma practice, we should see a decrease in our mental afflictions, which are the main source of all our problems and the suffering that we experience and cause to others. Our practice should help us increase our inner positive qualities, such as a good heart and altruistic motivation.

Therefore, as part of our practice, and to motivate ourselves in cultivating a good heart or altruistic attitude, we should recognise the benefits of the good heart, and the disadvantages of not having it. The opposite of the altruistic mind or good heart is the self-centred or self-cherishing mind. When we have a self-cherishing mind, we become narrow-minded and short-sighted. On the other hand, if we have a good heart that is inclined towards others, our heart will feel open, and our mental outlook broadened.

Rejoicing in our progress

I've been giving teachings here for nearly 40 years, and many of you know me through having come to the teachings and studying the Dharma for a long period of time.

So, we all have made some progress and gained some knowledge and experience of the Dharma that we have learned. For example, we know that cultivating virtue is positive, while non-virtue is negative and something we don't want.

At least we have this sense of discernment about what is right and wrong. If we focus on the important teaching topics, such as the three principal aspects of the path, we will have some understanding of what renunciation, bodhicitta, and the view of emptiness mean. Over a long period of time, we have been putting some effort into cultivating renunciation, bodhicitta, and the view of emptiness. There is no doubt that from all the time and effort we have invested in learning and practising Dharma, we will have gained great benefit. We can be assured that the time we have spent on Dharma was not wasted. All the effort and time we have expended on Dharma practice has left a good imprint or latency in our mind. This

will bear good results and make our Dharma progress easier in the future.

As far as continuing in our practice, we want to make more progress and go deeper by looking at what we must do to make our practice more effective and engage in it consistently, every day. To make our practice effective, we must directly relate it to our thoughts and actions.

All our practices encompass the **threefold trainings**: of moral ethics, concentration and wisdom. The main benefit of **moral practice** is overcoming external distractions and bad influences, allowing the mind to abide within us and achieve calmness and peace.

The training of **concentration** then enables us to overcome internal obstacles, such as the two obstacles to meditation: excitement and mental sinking. In the training of concentration, we can achieve a perfect state of concentration by applying mindfulness and introspection and eliminating the most subtle obstacles or forms of excitement and sinking.

Through the trainings of morality and concentration, we will be in a good position to engage in the training of **wisdom**, through which we can remedy the ignorance that is the root cause of all the afflictive emotions. This ignorance is a misconception and confused view of grasping at an inherent self. The power of wisdom will dispel this ignorance.

We will leave tonight's teaching here.

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