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# The Middle Length Lamrim

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Let's do a bit of meditation together.

## The purpose of Dharma practice

When we engage in meditation practice, we should relax physically, direct our mind inward, and understand that we are engaging in this meditation practice to subdue and control our mind. If our mind is not subdued or controlled, it becomes scattered and distracted, just like the current in a river that loses its force when it breaks into different branches. Similarly, when our mind is scattered, we lack mental focus, energy and capacity.

Sometimes we find that because of stress related to our work or some other element in our life, our mind is preoccupied with that problem, and we cannot even sleep. These are the negative detrimental effects of a scattered, distracted mind that affects what we do in our life. On the other hand, we need to understand the benefits of having a calm and positive mind. The best mind we can have is a mind of loving kindness and compassion, a mind with a sense of care and a good heart towards others.

As Dharma practitioners, we should understand the difference between the positive and negative two states of mind. The main goal of our Dharma practice is to familiarise our mind with a virtuous state of mind, which means making an effort to habituate our mind with virtue so that it arises easily and comfortably. However, in our case, negative states of mind arise very easily – it only takes a very small cause for negative thoughts to surface. This indicates that our mind is habituated with negative states of mind and afflictive emotions. So, we must recognise that these negative and afflictive emotions are the main source of our problems, unhappiness and restlessness.

## Suffering arises from mental afflictions

When we check on situations where we feel a bit unhappy and restless we can see that the cause is mental afflictions. In Tibetan, these afflictions are called *nyon-mong*, which connotes something not being peaceful and worthwhile. As these mental afflictions are the cause of our problems you do not need to look for any external factors as the source of our problems or blame for our problems. Rather, our unhappiness and restlessness are signs of the impact of afflictive emotions. If the causes or reasons for unhappiness are not identifiable, then we can say it is because of some sort of negative property, called *nay ngen-len* in Tibetan, which accompanies our aggregates, or *skandhas* in Sanskrit. We are bound to our life due to the force of these mental afflictions and karma. All of us are the same in terms of wanting happiness and not wanting to suffer. We don't need any reason to prove this – it is a deep, innate feeling. So, the reason we engage in Dharma practice is to achieve more happiness and less suffering or problems.

As followers of the Dharma, we believe in the existence of life before and after, not just this present life. We also believe in the possibility of achieving, over a series of lives, the everlasting happiness of liberation from cyclic existence and

the complete enlightenment of the state of buddhahood. But in the end, what counts most is our own practice: we must know how to practise properly, engage in the practice, and every now and then assess our progress.

We can assess that by observing our actions through the three doors of body, speech and mind. What differences do we see in our actions of body, speech, and mind before and after engaging in Dharma practice? For example, what was our mental attitude or view of life before we began following the Dharma, and what is it like now? Are the daily actions we create through body, speech and mind more virtuous or not? By asking these sorts of questions, we can gain a clearer idea as to whether we are making progress or not. Ultimately, when it comes to changing and developing ourselves, the most important factor to consider is our mind, because our verbal and bodily actions follow the direction of our mind.

## The importance of our mental attitude

Dharma practice is not just about gaining knowledge but also about what we do with it and get out of it. Lama Tsongkhapa said that when engaging in Dharma practice, we should feel positive and joyful. So, our attitude to the practice is important. If we force ourselves to engage in a practice, we may end up hating that practice and abandoning it. We need to have the skills and experience to practise continuously. Then, not only will our practice bring happiness, but the practice becomes a happy experience in itself.

From another angle, we can understand the importance of our mind just by recognising its indelible relationship with the 'I' or 'myself'. Unlike our body or any other objects, our mind always accompanies or goes with 'I', or 'myself'. The relationship between the mind and the 'I' is enduring and inseparable. Therefore, the type of mind that accompanies the 'I' is an important factor for the wellbeing of the 'I'.

In other words, the type of mind that accompanies 'I' or 'myself' pretty much predetermines the experience of the I or the self. If the mind accompanies the I is a joyful, happy one, then automatically we can say 'I am happy'. Next to the mind, perhaps our body enjoys the closest relationship with 'I', or 'myself' but the relationship between the two is not eternal. When we die, we must leave this body behind and it disintegrates but we, or our 'self', goes to the next life. Even the Buddha who came to this world didn't leave his body as we cannot see it anywhere now.

Our mind, however, goes with this 'I' onto the next life and the life after that and so on. So, if we develop a mind which is positive and peaceful and we become habituated to it, we not only have peace and happiness in this life, but we will also have it in future lives because the mind continues into the future life. If we engage in Dharma practice in this life, then not only will we find a good rebirth in the next life, for instance as a human being, but also, because of our past habituation with the Dharma, we will be able to make quicker progress with our Dharma practice. It is even possible that in the future life, simply hearing Dharma words will be enough to have a very profound and extensive understanding of the Dharma within us.

So, we need to understand that engaging in virtuous actions in this life is not only a true source of joy and happiness in this life, but also a great investment in our future lives as well. Due to our past good karma we have been reborn as human beings, have met the perfect Dharma and teacher, and so on. Likewise, if we accumulate virtues in this life, we will find a good rebirth, meet with the Dharma, the teacher and all other

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suitable conditions for our spiritual practice in future lives. We need to understand that the practice we do now is not an end in itself. Rather, it serves as a cause to do further practices in future lives.

From this angle, if we practise the Dharma now and in the future life, then by the end of the future life we will be much closer to achieving our spiritual goals – be it the state of liberation from cyclic existence, or buddhahood. Therefore, we can see tremendous benefits in engaging in spiritual practice with the real hope that we will achieve our spiritual goals.

### Understanding taking refuge

In a previous teaching I said that just as Buddha Shakyamuni reached complete enlightenment under the bodhi tree in Bodhgaya, each one of us also has the same potential to reach complete enlightenment there. So, when taking refuge in the Three Jewels, we should pray to achieve complete enlightenment in the same spot under the bodhi tree in Bodhgaya. This makes our prayer stronger.

Whenever we engage in Dharma practice we need to make sure our motivation is bodhicitta - aspiring to achieve complete enlightenment to benefit all beings. This motivation shows our ultimate goal and why we want to achieve it. There are two types of refuge objects: causal refuge objects and resultant refuge objects. When we say 'aspiring to achieve complete enlightenment' the enlightenment we aspire to achieve is a *resultant refuge*. This resultant state of enlightenment doesn't refer to, for example, the enlightenment the Lord Buddha attained, because that refers to the excellence of Lord Buddha himself and no-one can actualise that. Therefore, the resultant refuge object only refers to the goal to be attained by individual beings. Attaining the resultant refuge object of the state of buddhahood marks the complete perfection of accomplishing our own purpose, as well as the purpose of all other beings. Shakyamuni Buddha can be our *causal refuge* object because he serves as an assisting cause or guidance for us to reach our resultant refuge object, which is our future state of buddhahood.

### Taming the wild elephant mind

Going back to where we started our talk tonight, I said the reason we need to bring our mind under control is to enhance its capacity and potential, otherwise, the force of our mind weakens like the current of a river weakens when it is dispersed in many different directions. So of course, the question is, how do we bring the mind under control?

In his text *Essence of the Middle Way*, the great Indian master Bhavaviveka used the analogy of taming a wild elephant to explain disciplining and controlling the mind. To tame such an elephant we need a strong and firm pole, a chain to tie the elephant's leg to the pole, and the discipline of a metal hook to bring it under control. This is a powerful analogy. We can see a number of parallels in this analogy of taming the elephant and the mind. If an untamed wild elephant is allowed to roam freely it can bring much destruction; so can the untamed mind if we let it loose.

When the elephant is tamed and trained it can become a very loyal servant and accomplish a lot of tasks under the command of its master. Similarly, if our mind is tamed and subdued it will become loyal to us, and we can easily engage it to undertake virtuous activities. As to the means of disciplining and controlling our mind, we need a focussing object of meditation, which is likened to the pole to which the

elephant is tied, and a mindfulness or memory likened to the chain used to tie the elephant to the pole. Then, to monitor and discipline the mind so it remains on the object of focus, we need to apply alertness or introspection which is likened to the metal hook used to discipline the elephant if it doesn't obey.

### Overcoming laxity and excitement

In meditation practice, our goal is not just to achieve stability and the perfect concentration of the mind on the object, but we also want to achieve mental clarity and vividness. The two main obstacles to achieving that clarity and stability are, respectively, *laxity* or mental sinking and excitement or distraction. *Laxity* prevents clarity, and in order to prevent laxity it is helpful to think of the object as being bright and vivid. Whereas *distraction* or *excitement* prevents mental stability. To prevent the distractions that cause the mind to lose its focus on the object, it is useful to think of the focussing object as having a bit of weight. Mentally thinking of the object as being heavy or having weight or, if you like, thinking of the mind as being covered by a hat, may help the mind to settle, making it difficult to move. Use whatever works to prevent excitement or distractions, where the mind easily leaves the object, and to prevent laxity or sinking, which causes dullness or cloudiness.

We develop mental concentration or mental stabilisation through meditation practice. As Lama Tsongkhapa said, with mental stabilisation, when we let the mind sit, it will sit unmoving like Mount Meru, and when we let the mind go, it can go after any virtuous objects. It will induce mental and physical bliss, making both the mind and body functional and serviceable. So, as a benefit of meditation our mind will become as immovable as a mountain, indicating the perfect state of concentration that makes the mind sit with no distractions or agitated thoughts which can cause the mind to leave the object. Then, when the mind engages with its object, it can engage with any virtuous object very easily, while at the same time inducing the bliss of mental or physical pliancy.

### Combatting discursive thoughts

What really serves as the major source of problems and restlessness in our everyday life experiences are the discursive thoughts, called *nam-tok* in Tibetan, which we generate all the time. These thoughts bring worries, fears, confusion, stress, tension, anxiety and so on. So, it is important to try to reduce such thoughts, and for this reason we engage in meditation practice.

### Cultivating equanimity

Another major source of our problems is holding a biased attitude with respect to our relationship with other beings. In our mind we classify other people into three groups – friends, enemies and strangers. Because of this we have a biased mental attitude of closeness and distance, and attachment and hatred. This attitude is problematic.

Once, at His Holiness the Dalai Lama's teaching event, I had a chance to sit close to the front row, but I chose to sit at the back where some officials were sitting – it was also closer to the toilet. I met this young Tibetan who turned out to be a well-known Tibetan journalist and a former monk of Namgyal monastery. We started to converse. I did not know him but he seemed to know me. He said, 'Geshe-la, have you achieved the state of calm abiding or shamatha?' I replied, 'No, I have not, but mentally I am a happy person.' Then he said, 'That's wonderful! What's your secret to keeping the

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mind happy?' I said, 'Just have fewer thoughts.' He took a moment and said, 'That's great advice. Thank you'. I cannot say that I do not have discursive thoughts, but I can say that I hardly have any biased attitude of closeness and distance of attachment and hatred. You can have a biased attitude with regard to the monastery where you are from, the religion you follow, whether you are a lay person or ordained, or your gender. I can say I do not have these sorts of biased thoughts.

Overall, I enjoy an impartial mental attitude, holding a state of equanimity, and not discriminating on the basis of who others are. However, I do feel that by nature, and not by attachment, I have a closer affinity with women, in that their personal traits in general show more gentleness, organisational skills, thoroughness and comprehensiveness – all these appeal to me. Whereas men are a bit wilder or rougher and disorganised which doesn't accord with my nature. Women seem to be more thorough and comprehensive in their approach, which is probably why a lot of women do better with numbers. That's my view.

It is important to engage in meditation to cultivate equanimity, which I touched on in previous teachings. In terms of the four immeasurables, the state of equanimity is where we meditate on immeasurable equanimity, wishing all other sentient beings to have that state of equanimity, not holding some close with strong attachment, and others distant with hatred. When we engage in the seven-point cause and effect method to generate bodhicitta, we have to cultivate a state of equanimity before we meditate on cultivating love and compassion so that our minds have an equal attitude towards all beings, with no difference based on who they are to us.

Whether they are friends, enemies or strangers, you have an equal attitude towards everyone. To cultivate this state of equanimity we can focus on sequential order first - the friends who are close to us - and then strangers who are not friends or enemies, and finally enemies, in that order. Alternatively, as His Holiness the Dalai Lama's late tutor Trijang Dorje Chang emphasised, we imagine all three groups together in front of us and think about why we have different mental attitudes towards each one of them. The reason why we are attached to and feel close to friends is that they have benefitted us, whereas we hate and feel distant towards enemies because they have harmed us, and we are not attached to or hate strangers because they have neither benefitted nor harmed us.

We then continue by thinking how we view some people as our friends and feel close attachment to them because we remember them benefitting us. However, if we think of their actions towards us in countless past lives, then there were definitely times when they harmed us, just like those we view as our enemies at the moment. Thinking like this will invalidate our reason for thoughts of closeness and attachment to friends.

In the same way, by thinking of our current enemies as being our close friends in countless past lives we can invalidate the reason for holding them as enemies with hatred. Similarly, thinking that those we regard as strangers now have been both our friends and enemies in the past, we can overcome the attitude of holding other beings as strangers and not having any feelings at all for them.

Through this meditation we can equate our mental attitude towards all sentient beings. All sentient beings are equal to us. Hence, the equanimity meditation establishes a good

ground to cultivate impartial love and compassion for all sentient beings.

So, engage in this meditation to cultivate a sense of equanimity, at least to minimise our strong feeling of attachment to some people, and strong feeling of hatred towards others. Having this state of equanimity will completely change our mental attitude towards others, and significantly reduce problems in our lives.

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