
The Middle Length Lamrim

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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It is important to have a good heart, an altruistic mental attitude of cherishing other beings, which we do not have currently. Instead, what we have within us is the self-cherishing mind, always thinking of 'I and me,' and concerned and worrying only about our own needs; 'if I could find happiness and avoid suffering.' Of course, we all deserve to have happiness and not to have suffering. But the question is, does the self-cherishing mind best serve us in fulfilling our wishes? We must question this mind because that is what we have, the mind which always thinks about ourselves before all others and doesn't think about the welfare of other sentient beings.

Because this mind is thinking merely of the 'I' or 'self', it is very narrowminded. Whereas the mind of cherishing other beings is vast and broadminded because it is thinking of all other beings. It is an altruistic mental attitude which brings about benefits to other sentient beings. Therefore, through this mind we are effectively benefiting ourselves automatically. So, even for our own sake it is best we have the mind of cherishing other beings and strive to extend benefit to them. We will find that this mind will bring the lasting peace and happiness we seek.

Bodhicitta, love and compassion

We should try to cultivate the bodhicitta motivation by thinking that we are here to achieve complete enlightenment in order to benefit all sentient beings. For this reason, we are here to learn the Dharma and then put what we learn into practice. If our motivation behind whatever we do is that of an altruistic attitude of benefitting all sentient beings, it will accumulate merit and purify negativity equal to the number of sentient beings.

However, currently we lack such an altruistic attitude because our love and compassion for other beings is very biased as it is shown only to those we consider close to us, such as friends and family, and not to others who we consider strangers and enemies. However, we can acquire an altruistic attitude of benefitting all sentient beings by slowly habituating and training our minds by meditating on impartial love and compassion.

Meditation or mental training is the most effective means of enhancing love and compassion for others. We generate and develop this love and compassion for all other beings slowly and step by step. For example, it is recommended that we begin by meditating on love and compassion with respect to our loved ones which is much easier than generating it for strangers and enemies. Having habituated our minds with love and compassion for loved ones, we slowly try to do the same with respect to strangers and after that to enemies. That's how we can generate an impartial and strong love and compassion for all other sentient beings.

Love and compassion are the driving force for generating and sustaining an altruistic attitude of benefitting all beings in terms of bringing them happiness and relieving them of suffering. We must first cultivate and develop true unconditional love and compassion for those beings who are already connected with us before we can extend the same to strangers and enemies.

Engage in meditation and train our mind

It is natural for parents to spontaneously feel love and compassion for their children - they don't need to train or make an effort to feel love and affection for their children. It is possible for us to generate the same kind of loving and caring feeling towards all other sentient beings through meditation and training our minds. If we train our minds over time, we can gradually develop a love that is a wholehearted, selfless thought of giving happiness to other sentient beings, and compassion, which is a selfless thought of freeing them from suffering.

It is even possible to generate love and compassion so that they arise spontaneously and naturally, whereby we wish the perfect and complete enlightenment - the state free of all faults and endowed with all the excellent qualities - for other sentient beings. For this to arise we must engage in meditation practice and train our minds.

When meditating on the truth of suffering in respect to ourselves, such as reflecting on the shortcomings of samsara, we realise that all our experiences in cyclic existence are in the nature of suffering. When we realise that, we can produce renunciation, which is a wish to achieve liberation from samsara. Having done that, then as we broaden our mental scope and meditate on the truth of suffering with respect to other sentient beings, we will wish all other beings to be free from suffering and to achieve liberation. This wish is called the love and compassion that arises by meditating on the suffering of other sentient beings. Renunciation, on the other hand, arises by meditating on our own suffering.

It is important that meditation brightens our minds with more knowledge and broadens our mental scope. For example, here we see how our meditation on renunciation helps us enhance our love and compassion for other beings. If meditation is just about sitting somewhere quietly to find peace and relaxation, then its benefit is very limited.

I think meditating effectively should bring more knowledge and develop a broader way of thinking. For example, I hear people saying that if they sit in meditation for too long their mind becomes dull. Meditation is also about self-development, and for that accumulating knowledge and skills is crucial. The Lord Buddha said, 'You should not just simply believe in what I say out of your veneration towards me, but you must thoroughly examine what I say by yourself'. So, the Buddha emphasised the importance of utilising our own intelligence and developing discriminating wisdom.

Three types of wisdom

Regarding the development of wisdom, we find there are three stages of wisdom: the wisdom arising from listening,

the wisdom arising from contemplating, and the wisdom arising from meditating. Each stage leads to the next stage. Prior to gaining the wisdom arising from meditation, we must gain the wisdom arising from listening and the wisdom arising from contemplating. This indicates that without a good knowledge of what you meditate on you cannot meditate effectively and hence you can't develop the wisdom arising from meditation.

The wisdom arising from listening is acquired through listening to others or studying their books. Hence, it is based on and arises through the force of others and not from your own knowledge. You can take that understanding to the next level by contemplating and analysing it. Gaining the wisdom arising from contemplation reflects the knowledge or cognition based on your own reasoning. Finally, you translate that wisdom arising from contemplation into an inner realisation which is the wisdom arising from meditation because it arises by the force of your meditation practice.

Meditate effectively and in an orderly manner

By training our minds through meditation practice, we can develop love and compassion for all sentient beings to the point that it is impartial and unconditional. As an effect of that you establish a very close bond with all other sentient beings. Then, whenever you see or think of any other being, you will feel that sense of intimacy and pure love, which will fill your mind with joy and happiness. In this way, you are also accumulating tremendous virtue and merit. If we have enough virtue and merit, then we will experience favourable conditions and success.

As mentioned earlier, Lama Tsongkhapa instructed us to develop love and compassion for all sentient beings slowly and in sequential stages. First, we focus on cultivating love and compassion for those who are close to us, like our friends and family. After that, we extend our love and compassion to strangers and then our enemies. The moment we start practising love and compassion we will find it very beneficial because it improves our relationships with those with whom we live and interact in our everyday lives. When food tastes delicious the first time we eat it, we want to eat it more and more because it tastes great. Meditation is just like that. If we engage in it effectively it should bring joy and satisfaction to our life. Then we just want to meditate more and more.

Relationship between the 'I', mind and body

We all have a mind and a body as well as what we call the 'I'. These three have an inalienable relationship. When we leave this life, we have to leave this body behind but our 'I' and mind go beyond this life - they always accompany each other. So, we have the 'I' that is who we are. We know this deep sense of 'I', what it wants and what it doesn't want. Everyone who has the 'I' is the same - the 'I' wants happiness and doesn't want to suffer. Furthermore, this wish to have happiness and no suffering is innate. The great Indian master Shantideva said that all sentient beings are the same in wanting happiness and not wanting to suffer. So, in this regard, 'I' and all other sentient beings are equal. This equality is based on the fact that we all have the 'I' within us.

When we recognise the equality of all sentient beings on this basis, we become aware that all other sentient beings are just like ourselves in wanting happiness and not wanting to suffer. Because of this awareness, we will benefit others with happiness and not inflict harm on them. We all have the capacity to give happiness and not cause suffering to other beings.

Whether the 'I' is able to say 'I am happy' or 'I am not happy' has a lot to do with the health of our mind and body. For example, when someone asks us, 'How are you?' we would, depending on our physical health, usually reply, 'I am well' or 'I am not well'. But how we really feel is primarily dependent on the state of our mind or our mental health. On the mental level, if we feel happy with our life then regardless of any other factors, we are happy, and we can say 'I am happy'. If we are mentally unhappy, then even if we enjoy good physical health and everything else is good, we are not happy. The health of both our mind and our body is a very important factor for our wellbeing.

Mental and physical health

So, if we wish the 'I' to be happy, we must take good care of the health of both our mind and our body. We must therefore recognise and gather the favourable conditions for ensuring a healthy mind and body. As to the favourable conditions for the health of our body, or in other words, material conditions, we are very fortunate. We have good support services, for example, good social and livelihood support, hospitals, medicines, health professionals and so on.

However, the support resources for the health of the mind are not as good. People need to realise that taking responsibility for themselves is more important and effective than advice and support from counselling services and others. People need to understand how their mind works. The fact is that whether we are at peace and happy has a lot to do with what type of mind we have. If we have a mind that is subdued and happy, we are at peace and happy.

The cause of mental turmoil and unhappiness is afflictive emotions. So, we must find ways to diminish or counteract mental afflictions and disturbing thoughts. If we observe ourselves, we can understand that if we have a positive, calm, relaxed and clear mind, we naturally experience peace and happiness, and as a result, we enjoy better physical health as well. Mind and body have a relationship. If our mind is disturbed, our body becomes disturbed too. For example, if the elements of our body are disturbed, the result is we become physically ill with fevers, stress and tension. Therefore, it is important to really understand the benefits of meditation, and how to meditate and engage in meditation practice every day.

Meditation practice is about preventing any mental afflictions, disturbing thoughts or non-virtuous states of mind from arising within us. We do this by focusing our minds on a virtuous object. Meditation works because our mind can only be on one object at a time, so when it is on a virtuous object, it cannot be on a non-virtuous object which serves as a condition for mental afflictions and disturbing thoughts to arise. Through meditation, we habituate our mind with virtuous objects and break its

habituation with non-virtuous objects and thoughts. Thus, meditation is a very effective tool to enhance mental peace and happiness.

Essentially, we are talking about how to take care of our own mental and physical health and how the main responsibility for this lies with us. Dealing with the various situations we get into, and what we want to achieve in our life all depends upon our own decisions and effort.

Discriminating wisdom is our best resource

As I always say, our own discriminating knowledge is our best resource and as human beings, we are all gifted with that knowledge. We must utilise it to achieve the best physical and mental health. To utilise our discriminating knowledge, we need to gain a better understanding of the health of both our mind and body, knowing what harms it and what benefits it. Through this, we will be able to avoid things that are harmful to us right at the outset, rather than regretting our actions later. Before undertaking any activity, we should apply our discriminating mind to check whether the activity is worthwhile to undertake or not. If it is worthwhile to undertake, then the next question is whether it is achievable or not. If it is not achievable or we don't feel confident enough, then perhaps it is better not to undertake it because we don't want to waste our time and end up as a failure. Of course, if the activity is not going to bring us any benefit, what's the point of undertaking it?

The bottom line is we must understand everything is cause and effect. We see the cause and effect with respect to the occurrence of the external world, for example, plants and trees grow because of their causes. Without the right cause, there is no result. Likewise, our future depends on a cause. If the future is already fixed or will happen independently or inherently, then we have no control over it. However, nothing exists independently or inherently; rather, things and events depend on other causes and conditions.

If things are going wrong in our life, we must understand that there is a cause for that. Sometimes we get frustrated because we are unable to change a situation, despite our efforts regardless of what we do. Sometimes we are unable to remedy a problem – we must realise there are multiple causal factors. The problem we are facing is not only caused by external circumstances, but it might also be caused by internal factors.

The way we think and our mental attitude can also be a cause, and in fact, it can be the primary cause. Sometimes we suffer because we have low self-esteem, thinking of ourselves as being hopeless, weak and incapable. When we think like this, especially in the face of a difficult situation, then we will suffer even more because we have given in and surrendered to the adverse situation. Then we will feel buried by the situation. But by thinking positively and broadly and saying, 'It is not just me; everyone goes through hardships and adversities as they are pretty much part of the life that we have been subjected to' we experience less suffering, just because of our different mental attitude. Rather than adopting an attitude of not surrendering we get on top of the adversity.

So, here we can see how boosting our courage and determination can help us transform adversity into favourable conditions. Our own intelligent wisdom and sense of discrimination is our best tool for adopting a holistic picture of things and events, and their causes and effects. This enables us to maintain and manage the right mental attitude to cope with our lives and to live a meaningful life.

Instead of utilising our wisdom, we tend to plan and decide things in a rush and because of this we are not able to complete the work or fail to achieve our goals. Developing the habit of starting something and not completing it is the worst outcome. For example, there are students who keep changing their courses and as a result they are unable to complete one course. Obviously, they have not given proper thought to choosing the right course in the first place. Hence, they start with one course but later find it boring or too difficult. So, they choose to do another course in the same way as the first one – not checking thoroughly in the first place. And then they change that as well. So, they are unable to complete any course. This habit of not completing what we have started is not only bad in this life, but it is also bad for our success in future lives.

To summarise, the main point that we covered in this teaching is to recognise all other beings as being the same as ourselves in wanting happiness and not wanting suffering. Based on this recognition we should try our best to benefit other beings, and if we can't benefit, then at least don't harm them. By being kind and helpful to others, being considerate of them and not causing them problems, we will be admired by others as being kind-hearted and good. Indeed, this practice will turn us into such a good person.

Of course, we can't gain all the benefits of meditation that we are talking about unless we start meditation and practising Dharma. In the end, it is our Dharma practice, and ensuring that we apply our practice to changing or subduing our mind, that is most important. When we do this, we will find happiness, peace, and a meaningful life. If we are calm and happy, then whatever we do will be more enjoyable and productive. So, what brings and sustains our peace and happiness lies within our mind, and hence our Dharma practice is to work to create our own peace and happiness. That is very important.

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Edited Version

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