
The Middle Length Lamrim

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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Right motivation

Please make sure your motivation for listening to this teaching is for the benefit of all sentient beings. In other words, we should generate bodhicitta as our motivation. When we begin our practice, we must check that we are engaging in the practice in order to benefit other sentient beings. This attitude of wishing to benefit all sentient beings is a mind rooted in pure love and compassion. In a sense, the practice we are engaging in is really about further developing and perfecting the mental qualities of love and compassion we already possess; this should be the main focus of our spiritual practice.

Benefitting other beings in thought and deed

In our everyday life, cultivating and maintaining love and compassion is something we should keep at the front of our mind. Of course, everyone has some level of love and compassion, however, if we have a closer look we will find that our love and compassion is currently under the influence of the self-cherishing mind where we only show love and compassion towards those we consider close to us, such as our friends, relatives, children, parents and so on. Our love and compassion for other beings is linked with the interest of the 'I'. Through our spiritual practice we must try to extend it beyond the boundary of the 'I and mine'.

First we want to ensure that our loving kindness to those who are close to us is directed to them as purely as possible, and that it is unconditional and not linked with the 'I and mine'. After that, we cultivate it and direct it to all other sentient beings. Essentially, the best Dharma practice in our everyday life is to benefit other beings in thought and deed. For this, we must ground ourselves in good ethical practices such as refraining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct and so on. These ethical practices are in common with all the major religions of the world, as their fundamental teaching is the cultivation of love and compassion.

In short, the basis of benefitting all sentient beings, including ourselves, is on the one hand to abandon what we ought to abandon - which mainly refers to the ten non-virtues of killing, stealing and so on - and on the other hand to adopt what we ought to adopt, which mainly refers to the ten virtues of not killing, not stealing and so forth. This basic moral practice goes with the value of loving kindness, compassion and non-violence, as advocated by the major religions.

Cultivating love and compassion to benefit other beings

We must cultivate love and compassion in order to benefit other sentient beings because love means wishing them happiness and compassion means wishing them to be free of suffering. All sentient beings, equally and innately, have a wish to have happiness and to avoid suffering, and we have the capacity to fulfil this innate wish. However, we must cultivate love and compassion to be able to fulfil it. Therefore,

we can see how both love and compassion are essential mental factors that we must cultivate if we want to benefit other sentient beings. Within all of us, as I have said previously, there is the feeling of love and compassion for others. What we will find is that the more we develop that, the more we will feel close to others and intimate feelings towards others will arise; in other words, the mind of cherishing other beings will arise.

For love and compassion for others to be unbiased and unconditional, we must make it arise by basing it on the recognition that all sentient beings, like ourselves, are equal in wanting happiness and not wanting suffering. Thinking in this way, if we cultivate or feel love and compassion for others it would be unbiased and pure, and through this we would naturally want to benefit them, or if we can't benefit them at least we won't harm them. Love and compassion bring about genuine peace, happiness, and freedom for us, and for the community. For example, we can observe that in places where people are more loving and caring, there is more peace and less violence. Hence, going to these places makes us feel safer, more secure and free. This is all due to the practice of love and compassion in these places. Whereas in places where people are more unlawful and reckless, more violence and crime take place. Going to those places makes us feel unsafe, especially if we are carrying a lot of money, we will worry someone might rob us.

Kindness and gratitude of the mother

Having love and compassion for others means taking care of them. We can observe how even animals look after their offspring, to the point of risking their own lives to protect them; this is because of their strong love. Once when I was doing a retreat in Tasmania, I saw a peacock with two babies. One day, as a predator bird approached, the mother quickly secured both babies under her wings. She saved the babies but put her own life at great risk. If she didn't take that instinctive compassionate act of protection, the predator would have easily taken the babies.

Generally speaking, all mothers have an inborn love and affection for their children. We should therefore recognise and feel a sense of gratitude towards our mothers for showing unconditional love and affection for us. We can see for ourselves how much mothers can sacrifice their own welfare and interest to support their children and make them happy. It is quite amazing. Having said that, once someone said to me that her mother was a horrible person. So, I could only say that overall, the mother is one of the kindest to us and the one who we should feel the most gratitude.

Love and compassion in action

Love and compassion also drive us to reach out and benefit others by deed. For example, if we see someone in danger of their life, if we have love and compassion for that person then we cannot simply sit there and watch, we want to do something to protect and save the life of that being.

Love and compassion as mental factors are closely linked. With love we wish other beings to be happy, hence if they are inflicted with suffering then naturally compassion arises within us. Likewise, with compassion we do not want to see others suffering because we care about them and wish them happiness; so, compassion is based on love. I saw in the news some philanthropists who devote their whole life helping to relieve the suffering of those in poor countries. Their deeds

resemble love and compassion for those in need. One time I saw in the news someone who helped two sick children from Bhutan come here and receive treatment. We too must follow such examples of kindness and put our love and compassion into action. Even in a small way, if we can bring joy to others and relieve their problems and suffering it can go a long way towards developing our love and compassion and can thereby benefit others.

We should start practising love and compassion for those we live with. For example, even if there are only two people at home, it makes a tremendous difference if they both demonstrate love and compassion towards each other so that their relationship is more mutually beneficial, supportive and connected. What brings two people closer and more connected is the shared love and compassion between them. They will support each other whenever the other person is in need. Through this their relationship becomes strong, reliable, and lasting.

We all know that there will be times when we face some hardship. At such a time, we hope and wish somebody comes to help and support us. Practically, the person who comes to support us or who we turn to are our friends or relatives. However, they will come to us and support us only if they care about us and share a true feeling of love and compassion towards us. If they lack love and compassion then they won't come to help, even if they have plenty of wealth and resources. So, if we want our relationship to be healthy and meaningful, regardless of whether we have any children or not, we must truly love each other, which means caring about each other.

Instead of thinking of our own needs and interests we think of the other person's feelings, needs and interests. We must support the other person with what they want and make them happy. We must help them get rid of problems or the things they don't want. Just as we would naturally feel loved, supported and trusted if someone did that for us, they will love us and come to our help when we are in need. In this way, if both partners in a relationship take good care of each other, fulfilling the needs of each other, then naturally there will be tremendous benefit for each of them and it will further deepen the intimacy in the relationship. They will have more faith and trust in the relationship and will value their friendship. They would know that when the time comes and they face difficulties and need help, somebody will be there to support them.

Practising love and compassion for our loved ones not only brings practical benefits to us, but it also goes well with the teaching on how to meditate on love and compassion. In the teaching we find that, in relation to the object of the meditation on love and compassion, we must first meditate on those who are closest to us, both in thought and deed. Once we have generated true love and compassion towards them, then we extend it to others, such as strangers, and then to enemies. This order makes it easier to cultivate love and compassion. So, first we focus on those beings who are close to us to generate and develop love and compassion.

As I said before, love means wishing happiness for other beings. If they lack happiness, then we sincerely wish for them to have happiness and we want to cause them to have it. So, when we have love, we won't feel jealousy in relation to others' happiness and we won't do anything to hurt them, such as saying harsh and abusive words or showing bad

bodily gestures. Likewise, if we have compassion towards our friend or partner then we would not want any misery or unhappiness to come to them. If we see any misery or any problem, then we would want to alleviate it. In the end, when people genuinely share love and compassion towards each other, they will have a good and mutually beneficial relationship which will be harmonious and long lasting.

In short, we all are seeking peace and happiness. One Christian friend of mine explained to me that the practice of renunciation is important in their faith. I understand that according to them the word renunciation connotes a sense of detachment, sacrificing personal comfort for the higher purpose of life, and living a simple life. We too must apply this practice to live a life peacefully and joyfully.

The most important thing for each one of us is to have a mind which is peaceful, relaxed and positive. The aim of our spiritual practice should be to achieve a peaceful, positive and relaxed mind. There are people who do not consider themselves as meditators or a religious practitioner, but by nature they are kind and generally very relaxed and will always put themselves forward to help and benefit others. When I see such people, I admire them and get inspired, as they exemplify my spiritual practice. In fact, simply being happy and calm ourselves is a great cause for others to experience the same. On the contrary, when we are around others, if we are unhappy, stressed and unsettled, then others will feel the same; they will feel our negative vibe.

With spiritual and meditation practice we are trying to cultivate or safeguard peaceful, joyful and relaxed states of mind. This is important; we have to appreciate the value of this. A good state of mind also brings benefit to our physical health. It has been proven that a sound mind can benefit the health of the body. On the other hand, we see cases where some people are physically healthy and materially well off but they suffer mentally, so their physical health and material wealth is of no use. Therefore, we can understand how essential it is to have peace and happiness on the mental level. For this purpose, we engage in meditation practice. We need to overcome or counteract mental afflictions within our mind which are the main source of the unhappiness and problems in our lives.

When we have mental afflictions, we can't have peace and happiness within us. For example, when mental afflictions such as anger and jealousy arise and overpower our mind, we lose our inner peace and happiness. Therefore, we have to understand that when we engage in meditation practice our aim is to achieve a peaceful, relaxed and joyful state of mind. To achieve such a state of mind, we need to let go of all these mental afflictions, all the disturbing thoughts, and in that way, we can bring peace to the mind.

Let's do a few minutes of meditation together. If it is possible, make sure that even the sitting posture you choose shows peace and serenity, such as the Vairocana Buddha posture with the seven features. Otherwise just choose the posture that most suits you and ensure that your body is completely relaxed. Let your mind completely abide or rest within. Whatever object you choose, think of the image of that object and hold onto it.

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