
The Middle Length Lamrim

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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Let's do a bit of meditation together. Now, adopt a sitting posture; if possible, one possessing the seven features of Vairocana Buddha. When meditating, we need to be clear about the object to focus on, which should be in our mind. If we use a painting or a statue, then the mental image of that is the 'focussing object' of our meditation which is called *gom-ki mik-ten* in Tibetan. So, by focussing on that internal object, we develop concentration and clarity within our mind.

We begin the meditation by getting rid of all distracting thoughts and we fully settle our mind inward by placing it on the focussing object. As the mind settles and remains on the object, we will find ourselves at peace and in quietness. Hence, it would be very beneficial to practise even a little meditation each day.

[Meditation]

Recognising benefit and harm

It is important to reflect and to recognise that there are things which can benefit and also harm us on the mental level. Based on this knowledge, on the mental level if we make an effort to eliminate what harms us, while trying to cultivate and develop what is beneficial for us, the outcome will be happiness and a clear mind that is very calm and relaxed.

We can have within us a very positive and beneficial state of mind and we can also have a very harmful and destructive state of mind, and through meditation practice, we can recognise and discern between those two states. So, it becomes clear to us that directing our meditation to counteract the very negative and harmful states of mind will help us subdue our mental continuum and transform ourselves. So, when engaging in the meditation practice, it is very important to always focus our mind and our thoughts towards ourselves.

When we talk about getting rid of harmful emotions like anger, attachment and jealousy, we should only focus on purging our own anger, our own attachment and our own jealousy. It is very wrong for our focus to be on other people, for example trying to determine or evaluate another person's short temper or jealousy. We must realise that our own state of mind within us can bring true happiness and true benefit but can also be the source of all the problems that we face in our life. With such knowledge about the purpose of the meditation practice and the purpose of our spirituality, whenever we engage in meditation, the focus is to bring peace and happiness to our mind.

We need to bring our mind completely or 100 percent within ourselves by ensuring that we don't allow our

focus to stray towards any external objects that can agitate our mind. By fixing or tying our mind to a virtuous object we will be allowing our mind to rest and find peace, which we can directly feel and experience. When we consider our progress in the meditation practice, it is important to take the experience that we have gained into account. Whether or not we find something enjoyable in that experience or even something unfavourable, it is on such a basis that we will experience something good or bad, and then we will need to consider how to move forward with our meditation practice.

We are all trying to follow our spiritual practice or the Dharma, and we must constantly remind ourselves that the purpose of meditation is to bring our mind under our own control, rather than it always being overpowered by the mental afflictions (which is why we undergo suffering). All our unwanted suffering and unwanted experiences reflect the shortcomings of the mental afflictions, and it requires an understanding of the meditation practice and a lot of experience to actually recognise that fact. Although we know that anger is a very negative state of mind, when we think more seriously about it, we don't tend to completely understand the destructiveness and disadvantages of having anger within us.

Counteracting mental afflictions

As we still don't understand all the shortcomings of the mental afflictions, whatever type of meditation practice we do must be able to counteract them. If we engage in our meditation properly and effectively, we will have a greater understanding of these shortcomings, and with more experience, we will be able to counteract the mental afflictions. If we meditate on cultivating loving-kindness and tolerance, we must be counteracting anger and hatred, which must happen - the meditation must do that. There is no doubt that training ourselves in this type of meditation will bring benefits, because we will be able to overcome the mental afflictions such as anger, or any other mental affliction which we will be able to recognise very clearly.

If we meditate and reflect on the mental afflictions, we can clearly recognise and understand how the various sufferings and harm that we ourselves experience and cause others, are all related and derived from these mental afflictions. Therefore, to make progress in our meditation practice, especially as a beginner, it is not a matter of how long we sit in meditation, but most importantly, how we engage in it. If our practice is effective, if only for a short period of time, even for one minute, it will yield a good result for us. Whereas if we don't engage in our meditation effectively, then even if we do it for a long period of time over and over, we are just simply repeating the same mistake in our practice, and we won't achieve any result.

Making our meditation practice effective

As I mentioned earlier, whenever we engage in meditation practice, we must make sure that our physical posture is correct and that we have the right frame of mind. We must make an effort to direct all our mental attention towards a virtuous object to ensure that our mind is free from the

influence of any of the mental afflictions. So, with effort, we can initially sit for a short time and try to focus on that virtuous object. In that way, as we become more familiar with the practice, we can extend the duration of our mental attention to an extra minute or two, which is how we can make our meditation practice more effective; we can then derive benefit from that.

Assessing our meditation practice

We can expect that the result and benefit of our meditation practice will be a reduction of the mental afflictions within us, which is a sign of increasing our virtuous states of mind. But we must make an assessment of our meditation practice. If we have been practising meditation over several years, a comparison should be made based on our mental attitude or mental habits that prevailed before we started practising meditation, and whether there are any differences or changes after having practised. After years of engaging in the meditation practice, have our mental afflictions diminished or not? Has there been an increase of a feeling of love and compassion and an increase in our faith in the Dharma and our motivation towards the Dharma? Does it arise very easily or not? It is important to check these points.

Otherwise, after trying to practice meditation for say 15 or 20 years, if we look within ourselves and there is no change to whatever mental attitude we had before (in terms of the levels of anger, desire, jealousy or our ignorance etc.), then we really need to question the validity of our practice; whether we are adopting some sort of posture and just sitting there with little purpose - if it is a worthwhile practice or not.

When engaging in meditation we must take into account that by the force of the meditation practice itself, the mental afflictions will be reduced. As I have also mentioned, having practised meditation properly, on one hand there should be an indication of a lessening of the mental afflictions, and on the other hand an increase of the positive states of mind such as faith in the Dharma. As a sign of our years of practice, our interest in Dharma would be increasing evermore, and our mind will incline towards the practice very naturally and easily. These are the positive signs that we must recognise.

Meditation overcomes the mental afflictions

As I have said, meditation is a spiritual practice that subdues our mental continuum which means that it counteracts or overcomes the mental afflictions. We need to overcome the mental afflictions because they are the true source of all our troubles and unhappiness. If we are not influenced by them then our mind can exist in perfect peace and happiness, which is why we must always make sure to apply our practice of meditation to counteract these mental afflictions within us. Then, by creating genuine peace in our mind, wisdom and clear thinking will arise.

Integrating listening, contemplating and meditation

Engaging in our meditation properly also involves some knowledge and understanding of what we need to apply and do in our practice. It is said that, as part of our spiritual

practice, we need to integrate listening, contemplating and meditation. Firstly, we must acquire wisdom or the knowledge through listening which means through learning, from reading texts and listening to the teachings and so on.

Through learning, we can deduce what is beneficial and what is harmful and then consider what we need to do. In this we need to refine and deepen our wisdom knowledge by progressively developing the wisdom arisen from hearing, contemplating, and meditating.

The hearing wisdom gives us a comprehensive theoretical knowledge providing a good ground to actualise a contemplation wisdom which is a cognition, or a definitive realisation based on our own analysis and reason. We then further refine and develop it through meditating and gaining an inner or experiential realisation.

Hearing knowledge is necessary but is not enough and can be unreliable, as it is dependent on external sources. So, hearing something contrary to what we accept through listening and studying may easily compromise our beliefs and understanding. Therefore, we must take our hearing knowledge to a deeper level through contemplation by utilising our own intelligence and reasoning mind. In fact, the Lord Buddha himself said: 'Just as with testing gold, where you put it through a process of burning, cutting and rubbing, likewise you must thoroughly test my word and then decide to accept it, but not simply out of your veneration for me'.

Three modes of analysis

In a sense we need to ensure that all the things to be known can be validated by the three modes of analysis. We need to ensure that manifested phenomena or objects which are directly perceivable do not contradict the direct valid perceiver, slightly hidden phenomena do not contradict the valid inferential cogniser, and very hidden phenomena do not contradict the valid oral texts.

Being responsible for our own lives

We have talked about how we can eliminate all the negative states of mind and cultivate positive states of mind. Having a positive and happy state of mind is very important. Wherever we are and wherever we go, our mind is with us. If we have a good, peaceful and stable mind, it makes a tremendous difference to how we feel and what we do. In addition to having a peaceful, clear state of mind and required skills and knowledge, we must also have a sense of self-responsibility to achieve what we want to achieve. We must realise that we are responsible for our own life, and our best tool is our own wisdom. We must do things based on our wisdom of knowing what is most beneficial for us and also what is most harmful.

I am sharing with you what I have been practising my whole life. From a young age I have taken responsibility for my life. I left home at the age of sixteen and since then I can say that I have not really depended on anyone, including my relatives and friends. I have tried to stand on my own two feet and have not relied on others for my livelihood.

From my own experience of Dharma practice, I can say there is tremendous benefit in applying the thought transformation practice. I can also say that falling too much under the influence of attachment to some people and hatred or animosity toward some others really destabilises one's life.

Although it does seem to us that having a biased attitude of likes and dislikes is normal and we are all so used to it, in fact, when we have this kind of attitude of holding strong attachment and animosity, there is no end or no way to reduce the problems in our life. We are not necessarily talking about completely eliminating all attachments and hatred, but we need to put in some effort to minimise the biased attitude through meditating on equanimity for example, which will greatly benefit us.

Just try the meditation on equanimity, and what you can experience is amazingly relaxing and peaceful. This is what I find when I meditate.

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Edited Version*

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