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# The Middle Length Lamrim

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## Bodhicitta Motivation

Let us all cultivate a bodhicitta motivation by thinking, 'I wish to achieve complete enlightenment to benefit all sentient beings, and for that purpose I will listen to this profound teaching and put it into practice'. Any activity we engage in will become very meaningful if it is conjoined with and driven by the bodhicitta motivation.

## The value of human life

We have now found a precious human rebirth, offering us a great opportunity to fully realise all our potential, so we must make it meaningful.

Regarding the contemplation on the precious human rebirth, Lama Tsongkhapa says in his *Songs of Spiritual Experience*:

*This life of leisure is even more precious than a wish-granting jewel;*

*That I have found such an existence is only this once;*

*So hard to find yet like a flash of lightning it is easy to vanish;*

*Contemplating this situation it's vital to realise that all mundane pursuits*

*Are like the empty grain husks floating in the winds*

*And that we must extract the essence of human existence.*

*I, a yogi, have practiced in this manner;*

*You, who aspire for liberation, too should do likewise.*

When we reflect on the line, *this life of leisure is even more precious than a wish-granting jewel* it inspires and urges us to make our life meaningful. A mystic wish-granting jewel can only fulfil our temporary wishes and needs, but not our ultimate wishes. But by relying on this human life, we can live our current life happily and feel secure about a happy rebirth in the future, as well as uprooting all the mental afflictions. We can achieve liberation from cyclic existence and ultimately achieve the perfect and complete state of enlightenment or buddhahood, which is free of all faults and endowed with all excellent qualities.

In other words, as a human being we have an opportunity to actualise the goals of all three stages of the path, corresponding to the three levels of spiritual beings. At best we should aim to qualify ourselves as 'a great spiritual being' whose main goal is to achieve complete enlightenment or the state of buddhahood to benefit all sentient beings. If this is not feasible, then we should aim to become a 'middling or a mediocre spiritual being' whose goal is to achieve liberation from cyclic existence for themselves. At the very least we should become a 'small spiritual being' whose goal is to find a happy rebirth in the future.

If we consider ourselves Dharma practitioners, we are deemed to be one of those three spiritual beings. We can ask ourselves, 'which type of spiritual being do I want to

become?'. Because we recite some prayers or do some sort of meditation, we may think we are Dharma practitioners. We may also think that we fit into the category of a great spiritual being. However, if we check, 'do I fulfill the definition or description of a great spiritual being?', the answer will most likely be that we do not.

To be a great spiritual being, we must complete all the shared practices relating to beings of the middling path and beings of the small spiritual path. Both are prerequisites for commencing the stages of the path of the great spiritual being. However, these shared practices of the middling and small beings are not the actual stages of the path of the great beings. In our case, we have not trained ourselves enough in the shared practices of the middling and small stages of the path.

## The meaning of life

Regarding the quotation where it says, *That I have found such an existence is only this once*, we are reminded of the rarity of human life. We understand here that the human life we have taken now is precious and valuable and we must consider that this may be the only time we have found such a life.

Where it says, *yet like a flash of lightning*, we think of the impermanence, uncertainty and transience of this rare life. If this life had a fixed period such as 100, 200 or 300 years, we could initially rest and enjoy ourselves and practise the Dharma later, but our lifespan is uncertain and has no fixed period. The line that reads, *it is easy to vanish ...* indicates that life is very short and can easily come to an end at any moment. We need to cultivate an awareness of the preciousness, rarity and impermanence of this life to instil the thought of making the most of it by engaging in Dharma practice. If we honestly ask ourselves, 'Am I practising Dharma?' or 'Is what I am doing Dharma practice?' for most of us the answer perhaps is 'no'.

## The future is in our hands

Strictly speaking, it is not Dharma practice if whatever we do is driven by our concern for the pleasures of this life alone. The purpose of Dharma practice is to go beyond this life, to at least secure a good rebirth in a future life. We may have several questions: 'Will Dharma practice secure a happy rebirth in the future?', 'Do we have the capacity to practise Dharma?'. Yes, we can practise Dharma through which we can secure a happy rebirth in the future.

The kind of future rebirth we will have is in our own hands as we now have an opportunity to create the causes for taking another human rebirth after this life. The primary cause for a human life is the practice of pure morality which we can all do.

However, it is not enough just to be reborn as a human being. We also need good conditions and resources, the primary cause for which is the practice of *generosity*. So, we can create the cause to return as a human being endowed with good living conditions. We can also create the cause to find good friends through the practice of *patience*. Just as we are now in a very fortunate situation with a precious human rebirth conducive for Dharma practice, if we wish to have the same in the future, we

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must create the right causes and conditions, which we all have the capacity to do.

### **The Six Perfections**

In other words, we must study and practise the six perfections, each of which offers specific benefits. The perfection of *morality* is to ensure that we continuously take a happy rebirth, for example, a human life (which we all wish for). The perfection of *giving* is to bring wealth and good material conditions, which is also very important for us. Even if we are reborn as a human being, if we are subject to very harsh conditions or poverty, then we will have no opportunity to make the most out of that life. A lot of people in other parts of the world are very poor and live in harsh conditions and do not receive any support from others. They are human beings as we are, but they do not have the same quality of life, and we do not want to end up in such a situation. So, taking on a human life alone is not sufficient without being surrounded by good living conditions. Hence, we can understand that, in addition to the practice of morality, we must engage in the practice of giving.

We must also engage in the perfection of *patience* which will result in finding good and reliable friends and companions in a future life. If we have found a human life enjoying health and an abundance of wealth, we may not be happy if we don't have good friends and companions. So, to win friendship and companionship in the future, we need to practice the perfection of *patience*.

Patience is described as an undisturbed state of mind when faced with adversities. The three types of patience are the patience of non-retaliation or that of not being disturbed by harm, accepting suffering and definitely thinking of Dharma. If we have patience then we have an ability or courage to face any hardship, which is so important for success in whatever we do. Whatever activity we engage in, whether it be mundane or Dharma practice - for example when engaging in meditation practice - we will face obstacles such as having an unsettled and restless mind and wandering thoughts. So, we must have enough patience to continuously engage in the practice to counter such obstacles.

Likewise, we must practise the perfection of *joyous effort* or enthusiasm to accomplish our goals in life. Exerting effort to achieve that is essential. Furthermore, the perfections of *concentration* and *wisdom* are also essential to uproot the mental afflictions and achieve liberation or freedom from those mental afflictions. To achieve liberation, we need the combination of single-pointed concentration and special insight or wisdom. So, it is important to get some idea of the meaning and benefits of the six perfections, and then try to incorporate all six into our practice.

### **Less desire and more contentment**

Contemplating the line quoted above about how easily we can lose this life helps us generate some awareness of death and impermanence. This awareness will inspire, motivate and drive our mind towards engaging in Dharma practice. This also helps us to minimise attachment to body, people, wealth and so forth.

Our overall life experience, and whether we are happy and content with our life depends on our mental attitude or perspective. Having less attachment to our life and possessions is the key to living a peaceful and satisfying life. Decreasing or abandoning attachment doesn't necessarily mean having fewer possessions, rather having less attachment to them. By overcoming attachment, we can find satisfaction (which is the purpose of wealth) otherwise we will have no sense of contentment, no matter what we possess.

Nagarjuna says in his *A Letter to a Friend*:

*Of all great wealth, contentment is supreme,  
Said he who taught and guided gods and men.  
So always be content; if you know this  
Yet have no wealth, true riches you'll have found.*

It is important to train our mind to be content with whatever we possess, whether it be material wealth or our life situation, simply saying to ourselves 'I have enough and what I have is good enough'. We should be happy and content with our friends and wealth. Once our mind is contented with material things through overcoming attachment and desire, we can then find a time to direct our energy to Dharma practice. If our mind is not contented, we will not find satisfaction and we will continue to struggle and cause ourselves stress. Wealth is supposed to support our life and bring us satisfaction. But if we are obsessed and become too attached to it, not only can it enslave and make us suffer, but it can also drive us to take our own life.

Statistics from research show that the suicide rate of people living in affluent and developed countries is much higher than those living in poor and underdeveloped countries. This clearly shows that true happiness comes from within us, from alleviating our desire and attachment and not through material success. Without a calm and contented mind, material success can result in more stress and tension, which if not managed properly can lead to depression and even suicide.

For example, if you don't control your desirous mind, then as soon as you have one hundred, you will wish to have one thousand, after that you will wish to have ten thousand, then one million and so on. You will keep desiring more and more until you reach the point where your goal realistically becomes impossible or too difficult to achieve. At that point, instead of realising and appreciating your own success, you consider yourself a failure or worthless, resulting in great suffering which leads some people to commit suicide.

### **The cause of suffering lies within us**

We must realise that the true cause of suffering and unhappiness comes from within us and not from the external environment. It is due to our untamed and unsubdued mind, such as when we experience anger, that we feel unhappy. We can understand this by observing our own experience; for example, how we feel at the time we are angry - we feel both unhappy and disturbed. We sometimes feel jealous towards others for no reason, and it is an unhappy experience. Jealousy arises when you observe another person, possibly someone you know,

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having more or something better than what you have yourself. It makes you feel uneasy, and you may resent that other person. Such negative states of mind are totally useless and unnecessary and inflict a lot of suffering on us.

So, we need to think of the remedy to overcome these and all other types of mental afflictions. If we do not apply the remedy, these mental afflictions will become habituated in our mind and will easily arise, resulting in us losing any peace and happiness in our mind. Therefore, we must apply the remedy or mind training teaching to counteract the mental afflictions.

For example, for desire and attachment, we need to cultivate a way of thinking to soothe our mind with reassurance for being satisfied with what we have by saying, 'whatever I possess is sufficient and is good enough'. If we don't calm our mind by saying that, we will never find satisfaction and happiness. Once we free our mind from the trap of desire and other mental afflictions, we will find ourselves at peace and ease, which will enable us to use our life and our time more meaningfully and effectively, such as engaging in Dharma practice.

As it is said, mindfulness and introspection are our two best friends. This is saying that if we rely on these two inner friends, they will never let us down and we will find their support most beneficial. Once I said this to a guy who was just an ordinary person and not a scholar. He appreciated it very much and took it as a profound advice. Not too long after that, he followed the Buddha Dharma. Unfortunately, I found out that he passed away, but in a very peaceful and virtuous way.

In my casual conversations with a lot of people in varying age groups I have been sharing my Dharma understanding and experiences. Many of those people and their families have been writing to me to thank me and acknowledge the benefits of the Dharma in their life.

### **Why must I practise Dharma?**

This Dharma which brings a lot of benefit to so many people originated from Lord Buddha. The Buddha's doctrine is based on the principles of non-violence, compassion and altruism. There is no doubt that following the path of non-violence and compassion, as taught by the Buddha, will not only benefit us but will also benefit others, as we are contributing to the peace, stability and happiness of the world.

We should frequently reflect or meditate on the above citation, *This life of leisure is even more precious than a wish-granting jewel. That I have found such an existence is only this once; So hard to find yet like a flash of lightning it is easy to vanish.* We should meditate until it has some sort of effect on our mind in terms of motivating us to engage in Dharma. Simply just sitting quietly somewhere in a meditative posture does not mean it is a meditation practice.

If we reflect on this line, we are meditating because it brings about a wholesome change in our mind. For example, we can realise that we must practise Dharma and why we need to practice it and our self-potential. In the first line where it says, *This life of leisure is even more precious*

*than a wish-granting jewel,* it indicates this life's potential, in terms of finding a happy rebirth and preventing a bad rebirth, or achieving liberation from samsara or even the highest enlightenment. So, this life offers one such an opportunity and hence it becomes precious and of great value. We must realise how important it is to take care of this life and make the best out of it. Why? Because this life has such potential.

When we reflect on all the potential of our life, we will come to realise that we must practise Dharma. The line, *That I have found such an existence is only this once,* urges us to practise the Dharma in this life while we are still living and breathing, because finding a similar life again is extremely difficult, therefore, we must think, 'I must practice Dharma, and practise it in this life'. Furthermore, it says, *So hard to find yet like a flash of lightning it is easy to vanish,* which means that we must practice right now because death can strike at any moment. I encourage you to meditate on this topic more so that you will become inspired and motivated to engage in Dharma practice.

### **Self-responsibility**

As I said before, right now we have an excellent opportunity to accomplish anything we want. I think the best thing we can accomplish is to create a cause to find a happy rebirth in order to continue following Dharma practice. Now, if this current life is the only life that we have and there is no life after this, then it is a different story, because we don't need to worry about a future life. But if there is a future life and we are going to take another rebirth, then we must consider whose responsibility it is to look after that person who is going to the next life. The person who goes to the future life is us, hence it is our responsibility to ensure we don't fall into a lower rebirth. We can prevent a bad rebirth. It is in our hands.

When we think of our current life situation, there are a lot of things we wish to have. For example, we want good living conditions, good friends and to have all the favourable conditions for Dharma practice and so on. Likewise, we would also wish to have all these good conditions in our future lives. If so, it is our responsibility to do something now for our future, for the person who will go to the future with all those good conditions.

In this way, if we do well in our Dharma practice in this life, then we can be assured that we will find a similar life in our next rebirth. It is even possible that we will find something better than what we have found now and not only meet with the Dharma with all the excellent teachers but be able to continue practising the Dharma. This means that we will be continuously progressing along our spiritual path from one life to the next, and even to the life after that! After the third, fourth, fifth, sixth or seventh lifetime, we might reach a very high level of our spiritual realisation.

There are some of you who follow the tantric practice, and as part of it, engage in the self-initiation practice and so on. These practices are incredibly beneficial for the future as well as beneficial in this very lifetime. Engaging in the self-initiation practice is very beneficial. It is said that if a person dies on the same day they take the self-initiation,

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they will definitely take a happy rebirth and won't fall into the lower realms. Not only that, they will meet with a qualified tantric teacher and teachings. This is by the virtue of their practice of keeping their vows and commitments free from the stains of root downfalls. With the self-initiation they are taking all the vows and commitments again and if they die while their vows and commitments are intact (meaning that they do not commit any root downfalls), they will have the cause to take a higher rebirth.

### **Moral ethics is essential**

To establish a good basis for our spiritual practice, in our everyday life we must engage in the ethical practice of adopting virtues and abandoning non-virtues. There are ten virtues. If we think of each one of these ten virtues, such as refraining from killing, stealing and sexual misconduct etc., we have the capacity to put them into practice.

Killing primarily refers to the killing of other people, which is also illegal and against the law. The next virtue is to refrain from stealing. In our situation there is no reason for us to steal from others. Refraining from sexual misconduct is not that hard to observe. We must also refrain from lying, divisive and harsh speech, harmful thoughts, covetousness, and wrong views. We have the capacity to abandon all these non-virtues.

Adopting the ten virtues and abandoning the ten non-virtues is the main cause to find a happy rebirth in the future which provides a sound basis to continuously progress on our spiritual path through a series of life cycles.

If we live our life practising Dharma, we will find peace and solace and will understand that death is not something to be feared and that it is a course of nature. The sense of peace a Dharma practitioner will find at the time of death is said to be an early sign of the ripening result of their virtue which will result in them finding a happy rebirth in the future life.

It is said that we cannot prevent death, but we can do something to prevent fear at the time of death. So, we must practice virtue and abandon non-virtue as much as possible and ensure we infuse our practice with the bodhicitta motivation.

As part of generating a bodhicitta motivation there is a standard line in Tibetan: '*ma-gen sem-chen tam-che-gi don-du*' meaning 'for the sake of all motherly sentient beings'. In Tibet when people engage in spiritual practice, they say this line at the top of their voices while closing their eyes.

So, at least whenever we do any Dharma practice, try to generate a bodhicitta motivation that we are doing the practice to achieve full enlightenment in order to benefit all sentient beings. Simply by the virtue of the bodhicitta motivation, whatever practice we do will yield a great result.

Thank you.

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