
The Middle Length Lamrim

༄༅། །ལམ་རིམ་འབྲིང་། ། བྱང་སེམས་སྤྱོད་བའི་རིམ་པ།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

12 September 2023

Motivation

Let's all generate the motivation to achieve the highest and complete enlightenment, the state of buddhahood, to benefit all sentient beings. For this purpose, we will listen to the teaching and put it into practice.

Four essential points to integrate into daily Dharma practice

As part of our daily Dharma practice, we should contemplate these four essential points: I must practise the Dharma; I have the capacity to practise the Dharma; I must practise the Dharma in this life; and I must practise the Dharma now.

Why must I practise the Dharma?

The reason is simply because we want happiness and never want suffering. To achieve happiness and eliminate suffering, we must practise the Dharma because Dharma practice creates virtue which is the cause of happiness and it helps us to abandon non-virtue which is the cause of suffering. So, it is important to recognise that virtue results in happiness and non-virtue results in suffering, and that Dharma practice is all about creating virtue and abandoning non-virtue. Having recognised this, we come to realise, 'I must practise the Dharma.'

I have the capacity to practise the Dharma

The second question is, do I have the capacity to practise the Dharma? If we meditate on the preciousness or value of the human life of leisure and endowment as instructed by many great lamas, we realise, 'I can practise the Dharma' as we then recognise the full potential of our life and the situation we are in.

I must practise the Dharma in this life

However, we have a tendency to think that we can practise the Dharma later, and hence we never find time to actually engage in practising the Dharma. Therefore, realising the third essential point, 'I must practise Dharma in this life', is critical, otherwise even though we know we have the capacity, we will think, 'I will practise it later' and never practise Dharma. We therefore need to contemplate the fact that finding a similar human life of leisure, such as the one we have found now, is extremely difficult. Therefore, we must practise the Dharma in this life as we won't have another conducive and precious life such as this to practise the Dharma in the future.

I must practise the Dharma now

Finally, the fourth point is to realise, 'I must practise Dharma now'. Death can strike us at any moment. So, to realise why we need to practice Dharma now, we must meditate on death and impermanence. We could lose this

life of leisure and endowment, which is said to be difficult to find, and having found it, is of great meaning, and it is unknown when death will come. So, before it is too late, we must practise Dharma right now.

We engage in Dharma practice because we want happiness and do not want suffering

It is very important to integrate these four essential points into our daily Dharma practice. We all have an innate sense of 'I' within us. Because of this, we naturally want happiness and do not want suffering. We don't have to look for any reason for this wish to have happiness and no suffering. Wishing for happiness and not wanting suffering arises spontaneously because of having the I within us. So, it is clear to us: what I want is happiness and what I do not want is suffering.

By the way, what is happiness? We can talk about happiness on different levels and degrees. If someone asks us whether we would like to have a good rebirth such as a human or godly being, we would say 'yes'. We must therefore think about the true cause of finding a good rebirth, which is to practise the Dharma. When we realise this, we would think it is worthwhile to invest our time and effort into Dharma practice, even if it is only for an hour, or just for a few minutes.

Dharma makes the mind positive

Engaging in Dharma practice means engaging in a practice where we direct our focus to our mental continuum. What the practice of Dharma is all about is making our mental attitude positive and wholesome, such as being kind and caring towards others. If our mind becomes positive, then we become a good, kind, loving and caring person.

To make progress in our Dharma practice, we must make consistent effort, such as practising for twenty minutes each day. Then, after some time, we can assess our progress by looking at how we are as a person after starting Dharma practice – we will see that we have definitely become a better, more stable and happier person.

So, not only in future lives but even in this life we receive benefits from Dharma practice, such as being a better person and improving our relationships with others.

The purpose of human life

Right now we have been born as human beings with a human body. But we do not know how long this human life will last. We know that each day we are distancing ourselves from our current life and getting closer to a future life. We also know that when this life comes to an end, our self or I and our mind go with us into the subsequent life, but not our body.

Furthermore, if we have a choice of what sort of life the I wants in the future, then surely the I wants to be born as a human being or a godly being, and definitely not in any of the bad migrations. As a matter of fact, right now we can choose to take a good rebirth because we can create the cause for it. This is why our current life of a human rebirth is called a life with great meaning and purpose.

Small, middling and great purpose of human life

By relying on or utilising our human life we can ensure a good future rebirth. How can we do that? First, we must generate a wish or an aspiration to find a good future rebirth. Then, as we check, we realise that the Dharma is the only effective means to realising our goal of finding a good rebirth. Hence, we put aside our strong concern and attraction to worldly affairs and pleasure and integrate Dharma practice into our lives.

For our Dharma practice to be a cause to secure a good rebirth we must conjoin it with the motivation to find a good rebirth, and not taint it with concerns about, and then grasping at, this worldly life. If, through this motivation, we engage in a spiritual practice such as refraining from the ten non-virtuous actions, this practice will truly serve as a cause to prevent a lower rebirth and to finding a good rebirth. If we create the cause to find a good rebirth, we achieve a *small purpose of the precious human life*.

But by infusing a sense of renunciation or an aspiration to achieve liberation from cyclic existence in our motivation for practising Dharma, we render our practice as a cause to achieve liberation, which is the *middling purpose of the precious human life*.

Furthermore, by infusing our motivation with bodhicitta, we make our Dharma practice a cause to achieve the omniscient state of buddhahood, which is the *great purpose of the precious human life*.

Thus, this precious human life has the full potential to realise all our temporary and ultimate goals. When we engage in meditation or Dharma practice, we must ensure that we are clear about what goal we are endeavouring to achieve, and generate a strong motivation as we pray, 'may I achieve that goal'. At the end of our practice, we dedicate that practice towards achieving our goal.

Achieving the purpose of life

As to achieving the purpose of our precious human life, we are referring to the purpose beyond this life. Is there a life after? We need to ask this question in our practice. The teaching of all the major religions in the world is based on the belief of either a good or a bad destination after this life. According to the theistic religions, if you believe in God, you go to heaven, or else to hell. So, your future is in the hands of God, and hence having faith in God is critical.

As followers of Buddhism, we need to think as follows: we believe in the existence of future lives; this means that when we leave this life we go to a future life. There are only two future destinations; either we go to a good rebirth or a bad rebirth. We all want to take a good rebirth and do not want to take any bad rebirth. Is it possible to take a good rebirth? Is it possible to prevent a bad rebirth? It is possible.

We must recognise that we all want happiness and do not want suffering, as well as understand that we have the capacity to achieve happiness and avoid suffering. Our future is in our own hands. We need to understand that virtues result in happiness and non-virtues result in

suffering. So, if we want happiness, we must create virtues and if we do not want suffering, we must stop non-virtues.

To eliminate suffering permanently or from its root, we must counteract the root cause of suffering, which is the ignorance that grasps at the inherent self. If we annihilate that ignorance of self-grasping, we see the end of suffering – liberation from suffering.

Hence, we must gain the wisdom realising selflessness which is an antidote to the ignorance of self-grasping. Even if we don't gain the realisation of selflessness, simply thinking about it is a great cause to gather wisdom and purify an immeasurable amount of non-virtue.

We are very fortunate to be born as human beings because this offers a unique opportunity and potential to achieve whatever we want to achieve, be it finding a good rebirth or achieving liberation from cyclic existence or complete enlightenment. We must make the best of this life as it will be extremely difficult to find the same kind of life again.

What does Dharma mean?

In a nutshell, Dharma practice means adopting virtue and avoiding non-virtue. That's it. That is what we must do if we wish to follow the Dharma. Virtue refers to a state of mind which has the capacity to bring happiness. Non-virtue refers to a state of mind with the capacity to bring suffering. Here, we are not talking about something that is foreign to us, rather we are talking about realising something that we already possess. For example, love and compassion are virtuous states of mind and putting an effort into developing those is a true Dharma practice and a cause to bring about happiness for ourselves and others. And we all already possess, at least to some degree, some sort of feeling of love and compassion towards others.

So, as part of our Dharma practice, first we must recognise that cultivating and developing love and compassion, which is a genuine sense of care and altruism from the depth of our heart, is a Dharma practice. Then, we live with it and practise as much as possible being helpful, kind, and beneficial to others, and not causing others any trouble or harm.

Even if they don't benefit others, anyone who sincerely practises love and compassion will not harm them. People will admire them as being warm and kind-hearted. They would feel safe and peaceful, and it would be pleasant being with them; people would want to become their friends. Most people would find it very easy to befriend and enjoy being around such a person!

The essence of Buddhist practice is based on compassion and non-violence.

What does Mahayana Dharma mean?

Many of you are familiar with the Mahayana teaching and consider yourselves followers of Mahayana. We must understand that the word *maha* means 'great', the meaning of which lies in the purpose for which we engage in our practice, or our motivation for engaging in practice, which is to benefit all sentient beings. Practising for all sentient beings makes our practice or path a great one.

Our practice also becomes great in terms of the result we aspire to achieve, which in Mahayana is the unsurpassed, perfect, and complete enlightenment. So, the Mahayana path offers the tremendous benefit of accomplishing all our wishes.

For example, it is said that meditating on loving kindness and compassion is the supreme means for achieving the longevity we all wish for. The key is to ensure that our motivation for engaging in the practice is to benefit all sentient beings out of heartfelt loving kindness and compassion for them.

Guru Shakyamuni Buddha meditation

As for the practice of benefitting all sentient beings, we can, for example, meditate on Guru Shakyamuni Buddha, recite the Buddha's mantra, and incorporate the visualisation of receiving the nectar-light blessing. This practice is an effective way of purifying negativities, accumulating merit and benefitting all sentient beings.

You can find the details in the meditation manual which should be available at the centre. Beginning with a proper sitting posture and motivation, you meditate on the Buddha by either visualising yourself as the Buddha or visualising the Buddha above the crown of your head.

The Buddha sits upon the cushion of lotus, sun, and moon discs. His body is brilliant golden light, and he is wearing the three saffron robes of a monk. Envisage all other sentient beings, including your own countless past life beings, all in the form of human beings for the sake of this practice of purifying negativities and receiving blessings.

At the heart of the Buddha, upon the moon disc, is the syllable HUNG surrounded by the garland of the Buddha's mantra. You focus your mind on the mantra as you recite it and imagine the nectar-light streaming forth from the Buddha, entering all beings, purifying their negativities and filling them with blessings and spiritual qualities. This, in brief, is the meditation on the Buddha.

When we visualise all other sentient beings, sometimes it is important to include specific beings in our meditation and focus on a group of beings for this nectar purification.

So, the effect of this meditation, in terms of our real life, is to remember to be kinder to more people. If you are not normally very kind or very friendly you can be more kind and remember to not harm others, even other beings who you normally might be holding some sort of resentment towards. Remember that you are trying to forget about your resentment.

If we don't focus on our practice of generating loving kindness and compassion in our mind, without thinking of any specific being, we could do this practice, but as soon as we step out of the practice our mind just goes back to normal. You start to hate those people you always hate and hold that same hatred.

It is good to include this meditation on the Buddha as part of our regular practice, as a way to cultivate loving kindness and compassion, because right now our mental attitude is very biased. We hold love or close feelings for the people we call friends, but for others we have only

hatred, and we only have neutral feelings for those who are neither friend nor enemy. For us this mental attitude is an obstacle to cultivating love for all other sentient beings.

There is an instruction where, instead of thinking of all sentient beings in our meditation, we first focus just on those who are close to our heart, such as our friends and relatives, and then neutral beings, and finally our enemies. In this way, we train our mind, step by step, and gradually develop it.

For example, you first meditate on a state of equanimity and loving kindness with respect to your friends by overcoming attachment to them, and then meditating with respect to the neutral beings with whom you have no attachment or hatred. After that, meditate on your enemies.

If you are meditating on loving kindness and compassion with respect to all sentient beings together, you think of all of them together, whether they are your friends, enemies or neither. Different mental attitudes will arise, such as attachment to friends, animosity toward enemies, and neutral feelings towards strangers. You then think about why you have these different attitudes.

You come to realise that the main reason you feel close and are attached to friends is because they help you and are nice to you. However, ask yourself whether they are always good to you. They are not, and in the timeframe of your past life's relationship with them, then of course there are times they have been enemies who harmed you. Thinking in this way, you lose grounds for liking and calling them your friend.

Likewise, by thinking about how your enemies could have been your friend and benefitted you in the past, you lose reason for hating them and calling them enemies. You can also see that those you see as neutral could have been your friend or enemy in the past.

Thus, by thinking that all other beings are equal to us, regardless of whether they are a friend, enemy, or a neutral being, and by overcoming the biased attitude of attachment, animosity and indifference, we cultivate the perfect state of equanimity. Following that we meditate on love and compassion in order to generate bodhicitta.

*Transcript prepared by Su Lan Foo
Edit 1 by Judy Mayne
Edit 2 by Sandup Tsering
Edited Version*

© **Tara Institute**