
The Middle Length Lamrim

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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Power of motivation

To begin with, we should check our motivation. We need to make sure that whatever activity we undertake is driven by the correct mental attitude, so that regardless of what we do, we accumulate some virtue by the merit of our motivation. Bodhicitta, which is an altruistic aspiration to achieve complete enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings, is the best the motivation. We may not have bodhicitta mind now, but we have within us some degree of loving kindness and compassion towards some beings, and this resembles bodhicitta. We must know that sharing love and compassion to even a few, or just one sentient being is of great meaning and benefit. Therefore, before undertaking any activity, we must generate a motivation that is to benefit others, even if it is just one sentient being, then automatically our activity will become beneficial.

By habituating ourselves with getting our mental attitude or motivation right before engaging in any activity, such as to benefit and help others, we are training our mind to be kind, compassionate and benevolent toward others. As a result, we will be able develop love and compassion. If we hold a benevolent thought, we will benefit others. It is evident that if we don't have the thought of helping others, we will not reach out to them.

Virtues and non-virtues and their results

If we utilise or tap into our sense of discrimination and check the pattern of the various thoughts or states of mind we generate, we can see them as clear as the reflection of a form in a mirror: they fall into two types - virtuous and non-virtuous states of mind. Virtuous minds have a positive influence over us, and non-virtuous minds have a negative influence. For example, a virtuous or non-virtuous mind will predetermine the nature of our verbal or bodily actions, be that good or bad, beneficial or harmful. Virtues result in happiness and non-virtues result in suffering. This underpins what we go through in life.

We are born as a human being, which is a happy rebirth. We enjoy a sound mind and body and favourable living conditions. The happiness we seek and the suffering we do not want do not arise without causes and conditions, of which there are many. As believers of a life before and after, we must recognise that we currently enjoy a good life because we have created the causes in this and the past life. Thinkers in the past, in their desperate attempt to demystify the cause or source of everything, came up with the idea of an all-creator God. I am not disrespectful to their view, but it doesn't seem right to say that God created the suffering in the world.

We say that the main cause for finding a good rebirth is adhering to the practice of morality. This means that the main cause for our current life as a human being is our past life's practice of morality. There are other people who are born or live in a very poor country where people are suffering because of malnutrition, starvation and other unfavourable situations. However, we live in a developed country where there is an abundance of food and support. The main cause for us to find good living conditions is our past practice of giving or generosity.

When we think of our body, our physical appearance, if it is attractive looking then that is considered to be the result of the practice of patience in the past.

Many of us have the wish to follow the Dharma, to follow virtue and to live a virtuous and wholesome life. In my country - Tibet - the culture is greatly influenced by the Dharma, so we can see that the wish to follow the Dharma can be influenced by our upbringing, from our parents and so on; but there is also a cause for that. The cause for having even the thought of engaging in the practice of virtue is the result of having practiced joyous effort in our past life.

Less desire, more contentment

It is important to understand and be aware of how things are dependent upon other factors and causes and effects. If we want happiness then we must create virtue, as virtue is the cause of happiness. Likewise, if we do not want suffering, then we must abandon non-virtue which is the cause of suffering. In fact, the practice of Dharma is about creating virtue and abandoning non-virtue.

To integrate Dharma practice into our life we must see its benefits, not only for the future but more importantly for our current life, in terms of bringing happiness and eliminating suffering. Through Dharma practice we can achieve a higher rebirth, liberation from cyclic existence, and the complete enlightenment of Buddhahood. Dharma practice entails overcoming attachment to things and cultivating a sense of contentment. Understanding Dharma practice is critical for applying it in practice.

For example, overcoming attachment doesn't mean physically throwing away what we possess or not having anything. Rather, the key is mentally not getting attached to and obsessed with things. We should instead try to be content with what we possess. In this way, as we reduce attachment and cultivate contentment, we will find satisfaction in what we possess and have less concern or worry over what we do not possess.

Conversely, if we crave and desire more and lack satisfaction, we won't get satisfaction from our possessions and will suffer because of our possessions and for the things we do not possess. Strong attachment will bring great suffering when we become separated from the object of attachment. However, if we don't have a strong attachment then we won't suffer that much.

Dharma practice enhances inner peace and happiness

Since we all want happiness and do not want suffering, and Dharma practice is all about bringing happiness and eliminating suffering, we must think about it and integrate

it into our life. As to the happiness we want, it refers to both mental and physical happiness. Dharma practice is a cause to achieve happiness because it means creating virtue, which is the cause of happiness, and abandoning non-virtue, which is the cause of suffering. We measure the outcome of Dharma or meditation practice based on achieving happiness.

Through practising Dharma, we should find more peace and happiness than by not practising Dharma. However, if we don't understand or practise meditation properly, then it becomes true what someone said to me once: 'More happiness and joy arises when you freely let the mind wander off or indulge in distraction than when you meditate and try to control the mind.'

However, our knowledge-wisdom can tell that the happiness that arises from external causes and conditions or distracted thoughts is not sustainable, reliable and is not in our hands. If the happiness we seek primarily depends on external favourable conditions, then there is not much we can do as we do not have much control over external events, things and people. When we go up and down or experience happiness and suffering, if we closely examine the primary and direct cause, we will find that it is more related to our own mental attitude and way of thinking than external factors.

The good news is that the peace and happiness that arises from within us through our own way of thinking is not only more sustainable but is also in our own hands. Hence, one who is used to meditation and Dharma practice finds a stable form of peace and happiness, regardless of changing external circumstances.

What is happiness?

We need to think: 'What is the happiness that I seek in my life? What is that?' We want happiness but if we do not recognise it properly or get confused about it, then this will result in much conflict, frustration and so forth. Deep down we are looking for a lasting happiness. Unless we delve deep into ourselves, we won't even be able to recognise that happiness.

We are usually confined to the sensory world and experience, and to our own neurotic mind. In fact, the happiness we seek and the suffering we do not want depends more on our own mental attitude than on external factors. For example, a positive or wholesome mental attitude is very beneficial for us and for those around us. It is the most important factor for fostering harmony in our relationship with others.

Subduing the mind

To maintain a positive state of mind, we need to subdue mental afflictions such as strong anger, jealousy, pride and so on, because, when our mind is overpowered by mental afflictions, we lose inner peace and happiness and undergo turmoil and suffering. So, we need to subdue our mind, in terms of safeguarding our mind, which in Tibetan is *sem sungwa*, as a preventative measure against mental afflictions and stop the mind from going out from the beginning, or restrain our mind, which in Tibetan is *sem*

dom-pa, as a measurement of bringing the mind back after losing it.

Some people think, 'I can't subdue the mind, it is too hard.' So, they give up and won't even try. We should not think like this. We need to think positively by saying 'I can do it, I have the capacity, the opportunity and the right to do it, like anyone else.' There are other people who are good at controlling their thoughts and emotions and maintaining a positive demeanour. So, we must think, 'if any person can do it, I can too because I am also a human being, and we are all the same. We all have the same potential and rights.'

Changing mental habits

We generate a state of mind depending on whichever one we are most habituated with. If we are not habituated, then it takes effort to generate that state of mind. If we are habituated, it will arise easily, even if we do not want it to arise. So, we need to exert a concerted effort; over time that will break down a mental habit.

For example, to eradicate the influence of afflictive emotions such as desire, hatred, pride and so on, we need to put in a great deal of effort due to our strong habituation with these afflictions. Therefore, we must be consistent and diligent with our meditation practice before we see these mental afflictions gradually diminish and positive states of mind arise. We would then be able to see how our mind - feeling happy or unhappy, and going up or down - is in our own hands.

The primary cause for all of these is our own mind. Hence, the benefits we can derive from knowing the mind and subduing it is not only in terms of the efficacy of our Dharma practice, but in achieving inner peace and stability, which is a must for any activity we engage in. For example, if our mind is very agitated by thoughts, then we will find it challenging to meditate effectively, and we will easily get frustrated. Therefore, prior to engaging in meditation, we must ensure we get rid of all the distracting thoughts and that our mind is fully settled and at rest.

We want the mind under control, rather than the mind being controlled by distracting thoughts. If our mind is not settled or lacks focus, then we cannot even do mundane activities properly. It is only by subduing or controlling our mind that we can control our life and situation and in this way be less vulnerable to external changing conditions.

To quote Lama Tsongkhapa; 'If our mind is positive then whatever action follows will also be positive. Whereas if our mind is negative, then whatever action follows, that would also be negative. Therefore, everything depends on our state of mind'.

By utilising our intelligent mind, and observing our thoughts and deeds, we can clearly see that a negative state of mind results in bringing both ourselves and others harm and is unwholesome and destructive. Whereas if our mind is positive, then our action becomes positive and brings benefit to ourselves and others.

It is important to see that both happiness and suffering are primarily rooted in mind. Based on that, we should put effort into cultivating a virtuous, positive state of mind, such as a good heart and loving kindness towards others.

When we say 'others', it doesn't necessarily have to be those we know, or those close to us; they can be strangers, even enemies we hate. Rather than retaliating or harming our enemies, if we do things to please or benefit them then they will become close to us as our friend.

Shantideva said that we can win over outer enemies by doing things in accord with what they want, such as giving them material objects and so on; then they will come closer to us and become our friends. However, we mustn't do the same with the inner enemies. If we do the same, by being very gentle and nice to them, they will cause us more harm and suffering. So, we must fight hard and eliminate the inner enemies to win them over. This is what meditation and Dharma practice is all about - disconnecting or separating our mind from the inner enemies of mental afflictions, such as anger, attachment, pride and so on.

Buddha nature within us

We must think that we can eliminate mental afflictions, which are like stains in our mind, because these stains are not an intrinsic part or in the nature of our mind; they are adventitious. On the ground of the reason that the mental stains are adventitious, and are not polluting the nature of the mind, we say we all have the 'buddha nature' or the 'buddha lineage', a potential within us to become a buddha, a fully awakened being perfected with all the excellent qualities and free of all faults.

Mental stains such as afflictive emotions of anger are not polluting the basic nature of our mind because they are not always there in our mind, rather they come and go. For example, there is a time we generate anger and a time when we do not have anger in our mind. Therefore, if we put in effort to get rid of faults or negativities, one by one, and gather excellent qualities or positivity, one by one, we can eventually be rid of all the faults and complete all the excellent qualities and achieve perfect and complete enlightenment or Buddhahood.

You become an arhat or foe-destroyer when you achieve liberation from cyclic existence upon completely eliminating all mental afflictions, together with their seed. When you fully eliminate all the mistaken appearances in the mind, you achieve the state of omniscience or Buddhahood.

Create the cause to see the result!

To achieve the state of liberation or complete enlightenment we must gather all the necessary causes and conditions for it, otherwise we can't achieve it. If any causes are missing, we will not yield the result. With our Dharma practice, as we are gathering merit and virtue, we are gathering the causes to achieve our spiritual goal. For example, if we engage in the Mahayana or the Great Vehicle, then we must cultivate an intention to benefit all other sentient beings and aspire to achieve complete enlightenment. In this way, what we practise becomes

maha or great, it becomes great in terms of our mental intention or for whose purpose we practise, which is to benefit all sentient beings, rather than merely for our own sake. And in terms of the goal, we are aspiring to achieve complete enlightenment. Even if at the moment we cannot produce a genuine or a true thought of benefiting others, it is beneficial to mentally imagine giving rise to such a benevolent thought and to try our best to habituate our mind towards altruism.

Love and compassion

Every day when we get up in the morning we should think, 'I will be kind and beneficial to all other sentient beings, regardless of whether they are friends or enemies or strangers. If I can't be of benefit, I won't harm them.' This is how we can cultivate loving kindness and compassion. Loving kindness is the thought of wishing others to have happiness, while compassion is the thought of wishing them to be free of suffering. Love and compassion will arise if we consistently meditate on it.

Lama Tsongkhapa instructed that first we meditate on love and compassion with respect to those who are close to us because it is easier to cultivate love and compassion for them than for strangers or enemies. Through holding love and compassion for others we will become a happier and better person and our deeds and demeanour will become praiseworthy too.

Often the outer conduct of people indicates their mental attitude. For example, unpleasant and aggressive behaviour indicates anger. As part of our daily practice, we should try to nurture love and compassion within ourselves and implement it by being more pleasant, helpful and kind to others. By deeds, we should make a conscious effort to say positive things to others, such as 'You are a good person. You are a special friend to me. You are helpful and kind to me', etc. This is how we mentally and physically train and habituate ourselves to be better people.

All these positive mental attitudes, positive words and positive body gestures that we show to others are tremendously important factors in benefitting ourselves and others. And through this we can avoid a great deal of unnecessary problems, especially in our relationships.

Dharma in action

Before we see the long-term benefit of the Dharma, we must see its immediate benefit. First, what is Dharma? Dharma is an effective means to build a positive and wholesome mental attitude within us.

How do we practice Dharma? For the practice of Dharma, we must direct our attention to our thoughts and deeds. We need to check up, observe and investigate our thoughts and deeds and the relationship between the two. The Dharma is a handy tool for fixing a lot of everyday problems. We can apply the Dharma to fix problems at home. If there is disharmony in our relationships, the result is a stressful and tense atmosphere at home. In such an unpleasant atmosphere, even if you and your partner are living under the same roof, neither of you will feel that way if there is no intimacy. Both of you will undergo

unease, unhappiness and stress as a result. Conversely, a harmonious and pleasant atmosphere at home will bring joy to everyone; if there are only two people, they will enjoy each other's company very much.

The primary cause of conflict, stress, distrust and tension in our relationship with others is harbouring negative mental attitudes. So, to foster a good relationship we must foster a positive and warm-hearted mental attitude towards others which will then create a positive atmosphere at home or wherever we are. We cultivate positive mental attitudes by developing love and compassion towards each other, being more respectful, understanding, helpful, and caring towards each other.

We need to be more mindful and vigilant of our thoughts and deeds so that we can prevent negative and destructive thoughts and deeds before they arise, and manage wisely and effectively those that have already arisen. Through this practice of mind training and self-discipline and correction, we can reduce problems and bring more happiness and meaning to our lives.

It is an integral part of our Dharma practice to always be aware of what we think, say and do, and as much as possible, mentally and physically benefit others and ourselves in terms of bringing joy and happiness.

Geshe-la said that once he met a football player at a swimming pool. He can't remember his name. The football player wore his footy uniform. As he came near him, Geshe-la said to him, 'You look great', and they had a bit of chat, which the man appreciated very much. Recently he passed away, so Geshe-la said a prayer for him. Geshe-la said that, clearly, he must have had some connection with him.

Sometimes a small, good gesture towards others means a lot to them. To do that we must first have the right frame of mind. Thus, we can understand the value of cultivating love, a good heart, and compassion for other beings.

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