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# The Middle Length Lamrim

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Please cultivate a motivation by thinking, 'I wish to achieve complete enlightenment to benefit all sentient beings. For this reason, I shall listen to the teaching and put into practice what I have learnt'.

## How to set a proper motivation

In your motivation you aspire to achieve complete enlightenment to benefit all other sentient beings. You clearly stipulate that the reason you wish to achieve complete enlightenment is to benefit all beings. How you achieve that is through studying, contemplating, and meditating on the Dharma. Accordingly, it is crucial that your Dharma practice, such as listening to the teachings, is wholeheartedly for the benefit other sentient beings.

To achieve complete enlightenment, you must listen to or study the Dharma. You must gain knowledge of the Dharma which is like opening the eye of discriminating wisdom. Applying the Dharma in practice eliminates all the faults within the mind and leads to the state of Buddhahood or complete enlightenment.

## Discard the biased attitude!

Normally our mental attitude towards other beings is attachment, hatred or ignorance, depending on whether they are our friends, enemies, or strangers to us. In the mandala offering prayer it says: 'My body, enemies, friends and strangers, and all possessions which are the objects of my greed, ignorance and hatred.' Through our knowledge of the Dharma, we must recognise that holding a biased attitude of attachment, hatred, and ignorance is the primary cause of our suffering, problems, and troubles.

We need to keep developing our Dharma knowledge until it is ready to produce true inner realisations within us. Initially we gain knowledge which is based upon listening to or studying the Dharma to clear away doubts and confusion. Then we refine that knowledge through contemplating on it, by utilising our own reasoning and discriminating wisdom of knowing what is right and wrong. This makes our knowledge firm and stable since it arises through the force of our own reasoning and findings, rather than simply depending on what we have learnt from others. Relying on this definitive knowledge provides a good ground for engaging in meditation, and through it, gaining valid inner realisations.

## Remedying three poisonous afflictive emotions

We practise the Dharma to reduce and eliminate attachment, hatred, and ignorance and achieve inner peace and happiness. If our mind is overpowered by these three poisonous afflictive emotions - attachment, hatred, and ignorance - then we cannot find lasting peace and

happiness. No matter what we do and accomplish, we will end up inflicted with dissatisfaction, misery, and suffering. Therefore, we must consider remedying these three poisonous emotions by recognising their downfalls, based on our own experience of how they are the main source of all our sufferings.

Check the difference in our experience of the level of inner peace when our mind is under the influence of desire and when it is not under the influence of desire. We will find that our mind is more peaceful and stable when there is no desire. With desire or attachment, since the object appears to be desirable in terms of satisfying our needs, it is hard to recognise its shortcomings. Nonetheless, upon scrutiny, desire harms us the most and binds us mostly to worldly existence.

The shortcomings or faults of anger or hatred are quite apparent to us, and it doesn't take much thinking for us to recognise them. Yet we must put effort into trying to eliminate and reduce anger as we are very easily prone to being angry.

Ignorance, which in Tibetan is called *ma-rig-pa*, literally means not knowing - ignorance is the opposite to knowing. It is also called *mong-pa* in Tibetan, which means mental dullness. Ignorance is the root cause of all the mental afflictions and suffering. Here, ignorance specifically refers to the ignorance of self-grasping, an ignorance which grasps at the inherently existent self or things having intrinsic existence. Therefore, ignorance here refers to the ignorance of the ultimate reality of things, which is the absence of inherent existence.

It would be very useful to observe and examine our own mental continuum and experience to identify the three poisonous minds and their effects on us. We should check our mental state of being when there is strong, little or no presence of any of the three poisonous minds. If we do check, we will find we do not have the influence of these mental afflictions - our mind is more peaceful, clear and happy than when we are influenced by them.

## Recognising the shortcomings of mental afflictions

By recognising the shortcomings of mental afflictions, based on our own experience, we would be more likely to apply Dharma practice to combat them. The Dharma is like medicine for curing the mental diseases of afflictive emotions. We must use medicine to cure us from disease, and in the same way, we practise the Dharma to cure us from the mental afflictions.

Instead of taking the medicine, if a patient used the medicine as a pillow to rest their head, he wouldn't get better, and he couldn't blame the medicine nor the doctor or nurse for not getting better, but only himself. We have learned about the Dharma but if we don't practice it, it is of no benefit to us, just like the patient who uses the medicine as a pillow.

## Love or hatred?

In short, having recognised the faults or disadvantages of afflictive emotions such as attachment and hatred, we then must find the antidote for them. The antidotes are meditation or spiritual practices. We must be sure and

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have faith in the meditation and Dharma as the means to eliminate mental afflictions. This is to say that if we integrate the Dharma practice in our life, we can reduce and counteract mental afflictions. We should have clear understanding of and faith in the benefits of the Dharma and meditation.

For example, we can determine for ourselves that meditation on loving kindness can help us overcome feelings of hatred towards others. Then, to motivate ourselves to engage in the practice, we can ask ourselves whether showing love to others or showing anger or hatred is more beneficial? Of course, showing love is more beneficial for others and for us as well. Not only that, but usually the people we mostly interact with and show our feelings to are the ones who are close to us, such as close friends and family members.

Therefore, it is important to realise that showing them any hostile feelings like anger results in hurting and upsetting them. Then we ask ourselves, 'is this worthwhile or not?' No, it is not worthwhile at all. It will only bring harm to the peace and joy of ourselves and others and to our relationships. On the other hand, showing close feelings of love and compassion results in helping and delighting others, bringing them closer to us, and deepening our relationship etc.

Sometimes we feel lonely and isolated, the cause of which is not necessarily because there is no other person with us, but because we don't feel connected and close with them, or they don't show their intimacy and friendship with us. So, if we wish others to be friendly, loving, close, and respectful towards us, we should show the same towards them. If we genuinely show love and compassion towards others, they would love us back and then there would be no reason for us to suffer from loneliness.

In a nutshell, the Dharma teaching is a guideline for us in this life and in future lives, showing us the right course of action to live our life meaningfully, and ultimately achieving complete enlightenment.

### **Applying the Dharma in practice**

We must apply the Dharma in our life. We must keep studying and contemplating the Dharma, such as contemplating the disadvantages of afflictive emotions, so that we are better equipped to meditate effectively. We can then become more aware and alert to the arising of afflictive emotions and their shortcomings.

Even if we cannot completely stop mental afflictions from arising now, at least, when they arise, we will know they have arisen and be cautious about their shortcomings. In this way, we can minimise the influence that mental afflictions have on us. We can do this because of our Dharma knowledge.

The sole purpose of Dharma or meditation practice is to train our mind and overcome negative habits and build positive habits by thought and deed and more importantly, to subdue our mind. Our experiences that show whether we feel calm, peaceful, happy or not, primarily depend on what sort of mind we have within.

Through meditation, we know more about our mind and its functioning. Meditation helps us by preventing any afflictive emotions from arising, or if they have arisen, by minimising their detrimental effects on us. Through meditation practice we will become habituated with the virtuous mental attitude so that a virtuous thought will easily arise, and not always require much effort, even when we face any critical life incident, such as the death process.

### **Considering our future lives**

As a believer of life before and after, we need to consider our future life's fate. If we have a choice between taking a happy rebirth and unhappy rebirth, of course we will all want a happy rebirth. The immediate cause for a happy rebirth is a virtuous state of mind. Therefore, having a virtuous state of mind when dying is a critical factor for our future rebirth. Hence, it is important to habituate ourselves with a virtuous state of mind: this is the reason we engage in meditation practice.

It is evident that a person who is used to Dharma and meditation practice, especially on loving kindness and compassion for other beings, has more steady peace and happiness in their lifetime. They would also have a sense of confidence about their future life, that it would be a good one and they wouldn't be afraid or feel insecure about the future.

A number of people have shared their positive experiences of the Dharma in their lives and when going through critical phases of their life. One family mentioned to me how their deceased mother benefited tremendously from the Dharma in her life and how the Dharma helped her pass away peacefully and happily at the end. The family is not Buddhist but has been very grateful to us.

We must realise that right now the type of rebirth we would like to take after this life is in our hands. We all have the capacity or potential within us to achieve whatever we want to achieve. Not only that, in our case we have met with and learned the Dharma and know that engaging in Dharma practice will guarantee a good rebirth, liberation from cyclic existence and complete enlightenment.

For example, the practice of pure morality is a cause for a happy rebirth and the practice of giving is a cause to complement that rebirth with favourable material conditions. Patience is a cause for good looks and the courage to face adversaries. Joyful effort is a cause for success, and concentration and wisdom are causes for eliminating mental afflictions. We try our best to put into practice the Dharma we all already know.

### **Mahayana Dharma**

If we follow the Mahayana or Great Vehicle Dharma, then as we understand from the meaning of the word 'maha' or great, our practice becomes more profound, great and beneficial. The word 'maha' or great, in the context of the Mahayana or Great Vehicle, connotes the greatness of our practice with respect to the purpose for which we follow the practice – which is for the sake of an infinite number of sentient beings, rather than merely for our own sake. The greatness with respect to the goal of our practice in the

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Mahayana path, is due to our goal to achieve the unsurpassed perfect and complete state of enlightenment, free of all faults and possessing all excellent qualities.

In following the Mahayana Dharma, the essence is cultivating bodhicitta mind and to produce it we must cultivate love and compassion for all other sentient beings. You have heard about it a lot. When we meditate on love and compassion what does it mean? Love means wishing others to have happiness and compassion means wishing others to be free of suffering.

So, when we meditate on love and compassion, we are transforming our mind into love and compassion. In another words, our mind arises as love and compassion, wishing others to have happiness and be free of suffering.

When we meditate on impermanence and emptiness, we take the meaning of impermanence and emptiness as an object of our mind in the meditation practice, contemplating and analysing, rather than our mind arising in the form of impermanence and emptiness, which makes no sense anyway.

When we meditate on love and compassion it is not like we are trying to cultivate something we do not already possess, or which is completely foreign to us. We all already possess some degree of love and compassion within us. For example, we love and feel empathy to those who are close to us. As a parent you have a natural flow of love for your children and because of this you always wish them happiness and to be free from suffering.

Regarding the meaning of love, I remember once the topic came into a debate session. When I stated that the mother's love for her only child reflects the meaning of love, the late Lati Rinpoche nodded his head in acknowledgement.

With the practice of love and compassion, we focus on recognising its value, further developing and extending it to all other sentient beings, not just for those who are already connected with us. We must understand that through training our mind, it is possible to extend love, even to our enemies who we hate.

### **Taking responsibility for benefitting others**

When our mind becomes habituated with love and compassion towards all sentient beings, then love and compassion will arise spontaneously and effortlessly. Simply feeling love and compassion is not enough, we must also fully take upon ourselves the responsibility of benefitting other beings, to place them into happiness and free them from suffering.

You already know about all these things, but you must continuously make an effort to apply it in practice, and further develop faith and conviction in the value of the practice based on your own experience.

### **Courage and right view**

There is no need to rush in your practice to achieve the result quickly, such as subduing your mind. Take your time but be consistent with your practice. You can gradually see your progress of being able to understand the mind better and your ability to discipline it.

We cannot expect our mind to be always calm and happy. However, it is not that hard to ensure that, overall, we enjoy a mind which is relaxed and happy and has a positive outlook about things. As our mind gets used to or habituated with a virtuous thought, then we can easily generate a virtuous thought without requiring much effort, allowing us to generate virtuous thoughts even in the face of adversaries. In this way adversaries are transformed into favourable causes for developing strength and for achieving our goal.

For example, if we are inflicted with great suffering, rather than complaining and pitying ourselves in that situation, we use the situation to enhance compassion by thinking of other sentient beings who are also inflicted with the same suffering, and even a lot worse than ours, and then wishing and praying that 'by me bearing this suffering, may all other sentient beings be free of suffering'. This has the great benefit of accumulating an enormous amount of merit and purifies negativities.

### **Use discriminating wisdom-knowledge**

Lord Buddha said, "Just as a goldsmith would test his gold by burning, cutting, and rubbing it, so must you examine my words and accept them, not merely out of reverence for me."

The most important tool in our spiritual journey is to fully utilise our own discriminating wisdom to understand and practise the Dharma. Rather than simply believing in the Buddha's words or the words of any other beings, we must investigate things with our own reasoning mind and decide to believe or not. We can apply the three modes of analysis to ensure that:

- Manifested phenomena are not contradicted by a direct valid cogniser;
- Slightly hidden phenomena are not contradicted by an inferential valid cogniser and;
- Very hidden phenomena are not contradicted by the valid oral teaching.

In this way, if the thing under analysis is something which is very obvious or directly perceivable, then we make sure it is tenable or does not contradict the direct valid cogniser.

For example, we cannot reject something which is directly perceived by a direct sense consciousness. If the subject matter is slightly hidden or not obvious or directly cognisable, we ensure it is tenable or does not contradict the inferential valid cogniser.

For example, if we take our body as being the truth of suffering, impermanent and lacking inherent existence as the subject of analysis, we are dealing with a slightly hidden phenomena that we cannot directly understand except through inferential reasoning. Therefore, we ensure that if that subject matter is a slightly hidden phenomena, it does not contradict the cognition of the inferential valid cogniser.

There are other subject matters which are categorised as very hidden phenomena: for example, giving results in wealth. The precise causal link between giving and wealth cannot be proven by a reason nor by our direct cogniser. So, we must rely on the valid oral source, and our belief of

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very hidden phenomena should not contradict valid scripture, such as the words of Buddha.

**The time to practice the Dharma is now**

Thus, training our own mind is the key to cultivating positive or wholesome states of mind and eliminating mental afflictions. We must pay special attention to strong attachment or clinging to this life, this world.

Attachment is the main cause of bringing suffering, such as dissatisfaction, frustration, stress, anxiety, fears, worries and depression. As a way to let go of things and cultivate a sense of contentment, we should say to ourselves that whatever we possess - friends, wealth and so forth - are adequate. We don't need to look for different ones, and we don't need to chase after things now.

We should say to ourselves, "I have already done enough pursuing of worldly things: I must stop. And now I must focus on my Dharma practice - developing virtuous states of mind and subduing my mind". At the same time, we should reinforce that we must make more effort in our Dharma practice and practice as best we can.

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