
The Middle Length Lamrim

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Check thought before action

Whatever activity we undertake is driven by a thought or an intention. Whether that activity is something constructive or destructive, positive or negative, very much depends on the nature or type of our thought and intention. Therefore, it is important before starting any activity that we check our mind and motivation for engaging in that activity.

If the mind driving our action is influenced by a positive motivation such as having a sense of care, love, kindness and respect towards others, we can then be sure that our action will be positive and will reflect those same positive qualities of the mind itself. However, if our mind is overpowered by afflictive emotions such as jealousy, arrogance, pride, hatred or anger, the result will be that any action we undertake will have similar negative qualities. Based on this observation of our mind, we decide whether to go ahead with the action or not.

We all have a brain or what we call a 'mind'. In addition, we also have something called a 'self' which is the 'I' - and we have a body. Of these three entities, our mind, our self (or the 'I') and our body, the self or the 'I' is the most precious and important to all of us. If we check, we will discover a close relationship or a link between our mind and our body. For example, our bodily actions of uttering words to others or moving our limbs are predetermined by the preceding thoughts. Shantideva said:

*Whenever I have the desire
To move my body or to say something,
First of all, I should examine my mind
And then, with steadiness, act in the proper way.*

*O you who wish to guard your minds,
I beseech you with folded hands;
Always exert yourselves to guard
Mindfulness and alertness!*

If our intention or thought is bad, wrong, and negative, then we should not act. We should act only if our mental attitude, our thoughts or impulse is right, good, positive, and beneficial. We do have a sense of what's right and wrong and harmful and what's beneficial to us, but we can be absentminded about our thoughts and actions relating to what we say and do to others. For example, if we are not careful, sometimes even a small wrong word that we say to others can cause a lot of harm or damage to them and to our self as well.

So, we need to be more mindful and aware of our thoughts and deeds, especially our thoughts because by correcting our thoughts, we are naturally correcting our deeds. For example, if our thoughts are overpowered by hatred or

jealousy, we should correct it, otherwise our actions will reflect the same and won't be pleasant for others. So, by conversing with our minds we can control our actions and our lives.

We are led by our mind. If the mind is misled by any wrong thoughts and emotions, rather than simply following it with any verbal or bodily actions, we should say to it, 'it is time to rest' and exert effort in doing nothing. This is important because what we say and do matters to us and others. It effects our relationships with others, including with loved ones who are important people in our lives. It is a fact that for many of you, the relationship with your partner, family and work colleagues is important for the satisfaction and stability of your life.

Right mental attitude is the key to a happy life

The most important supporting factor for building, sustaining, and developing a good relationship with others is having a right mental attitude towards them, such as true love and compassion for them. Love is a mental attitude of wanting to give happiness to others, while compassion is a mental attitude of wanting to free them from suffering or solving their problems. Therefore, it is crystal clear to our discriminating wisdom that if we ensure whatever we say or do to others, if it is out of a good mental attitude of loving kindness, compassion and respect, then it will be wholesome and beneficial, and definitely not harmful.

Conversely, if it is stained by any mental afflictions such as hatred, bitterness, jealousy and pride etc., then our actions will be negative. We can prevent such negative actions by recognising the fault within our mental intention and by putting in some effort in restraining our behaviour or conduct.

It is possible to correct our mental attitudes. We normally get irritated and annoyed when people, including our loved ones, show us an unwelcome, unpleasant, or undesirable gesture. We then react to them negatively by speaking to them harshly or behaving in an unpleasant way. This of course simply aggravates the situation between us and brings more tension and stress to both of us and for others nearby. If the other person is close to us and living with us, it will have an even more detrimental impact.

Instead of always reacting to adverse situations, we should try to understand them from a more holistic and realistic approach and respond in a more constructive and beneficial way. For example, if our friends or others seem to be angry with us, we must acknowledge that they are unhappy or under stress. The fact is that when people are happy and not troubled by anything they don't get tense or angry. Therefore, when being confronted by others who criticize or get on our nerves, we can be more considerate in understanding their situation and be helpful to them, instead of just thinking of our own self or ego. In a way, being kind and helpful to others also serves us best.

Compassion and knowledge

We must understand the value of cultivating loving kindness and compassion within us to find happiness for

ourselves and to benefit others. One of the most important factors to a happy life is the harmony in our relationships with others. When there is harmony in our relationships with our loved ones and with other people whom we interact and socialise with, we are usually happy and feel well supported. With joy and happiness inside us, we do not think of our work as a burden, so we can be happy at work, and if we face any hardships, we have more courage and can handle it better.

As we consider ourselves spiritual practitioners, the principle of love and compassion underpins the basis of all our practices. Not only Buddhism but all other major religions emphasise the value of love and compassion.

Even though I am lecturing here about what you should and should not think and do, I am not bragging about myself nor am I telling you what to do. It is out of a motivation to benefit others that I am sharing my own life experiences. However, whether it is relevant or beneficial to you or not is up to you. It is best that you utilise your rational intelligence and sense of discrimination to investigate things and then gain knowledge about what is right and what is wrong, what is beneficial or harmful and what is not.

When we talk about taking refuge, the true object of refuge lies within our mind. For example, we can say that the love and compassion that we generate towards other beings is the true refuge or protection. We must practise love and compassion, not only to those beings with whom we share a close relationship - we usually already have love for them anyway - but we should also try to extend our love and compassion to outside beings.

For as long as we sustain love and compassion for other beings, we will sustain peace and happiness in our life. Whereas when we lose it by feeling jealousy and competitiveness and so on, we will lose our inner peace and happiness and bring disharmony in our relationships with others or lose our friendship with them. This in turn will bring misery in our lives.

Once I was conversing with a person and said to him, 'your true and most reliable friend is inside you'. That person really liked hearing that and said to me, 'that was great advice, and I had never thought in that way before.' So, understanding and tapping into your own inner wisdom is like opening a door to all knowledge.

Cultivating love and compassion

Cultivating love and compassion for others and abandoning the self-cherishing mind does not mean we need to forsake our own interests, needs, and goals or purpose. Rather, the most effective way to fulfil our own interests, needs and goals is through cultivating love and compassion for other beings.

To further develop love and compassion we need to think of extending it to those for who we have not yet cultivated it. As to those who are close to us, like as a parent who loves their children, it is natural. But we must safeguard, nurture and further develop that intimate feeling of love. However, we need to put extra effort into extending our love and compassion to other beings outside our lives and

to whom we have not yet shown love and compassion. We can cultivate this through training our mind and engaging in meditation practice.

You see, there is a lot to find out about our own mind. To understand it better we need to think and contemplate about it a lot. We need to closely observe our various states of mind, the train of thoughts and emotions that we continuously generate in our mind.

You can consider yourself as a researcher and the theme of your analysis is your own mind. We will find out that we can classify all of our thoughts and emotions into two - positive and constructive states of mind, and negative and destructive states of mind; or in other words, beneficial and harmful minds.

Just sitting in a relaxed posture and having removed all distracting thoughts, letting the mind fully settling inwards, as we watch our mind, we can see how certain patterns of thoughts and emotions or having a certain object in our mind brings negative experiences of sadness, worries, fear, insecurity, loneliness and impulses to do negative actions. Whereas some other patterns of thoughts and emotions or objects in our mind bring positive experiences of happiness, peace and satisfaction and impulses to do positive actions.

Finding out that our mind is the primary source of all our actions and experiences in life is an opener for us. We must know that we can train and change our mind in a way that we want and that suits us.

The most beneficial mind is that of loving kindness and compassion towards others. Love and compassion benefits others and establishes a close bond between ourselves and others. Even pets, like dogs and cats who cannot communicate like humans do, sense when their owners look after them with love. They express their love and friendship by wagging their tails or coming close to us. When the owners come home, they show great excitement and jump all over them. All these behaviours where pets express their fondness and joy, brings joy to their owners and the owners appreciate and get a lot from their pets as their companion.

If animals which are relatively dull minded and lacking in communication skills can recognise the value of love and compassion, what need is there to mention human beings? Overall, if you are nice to and love people, they will love you and be nice to you. Therefore, cultivating love and compassion not only benefits others but also immediately benefits us.

It is important to recognise the benefits of our Dharma practice, meditation and adopting virtuous actions in this present time. Based on this we can then try to recognise the benefits in the future lives in terms of finding good rebirths, liberation from samsara and even complete enlightenment. Through recognising the benefits to ourselves and others, now and in the future, we can develop faith in the Dharma. As an effect of our faith, we will take our Dharma more seriously as we will be more motivated to pursue our practice.

A mental perspective

We must integrate Dharma practice because the main cause for feeling up or down, happy or unhappy, is our way of thinking or our mental perspective of things and events. A certain way of thinking makes us feel unhappy, down, tense, anxious, stressed and uneasy – a negative state of mind. While other ways of thinking bring about a positive experience, a positive state of mind.

The practice of Dharma is all about counteracting negative states of mind and cultivating positive states of mind. Whatever practice we do we must exert effort in it. For example, if our practice is to prevent a certain thought from arising because it brings unease and turmoil in our mind, we need to apply whatever it takes to stop or break that thought.

Initially we might find it hard to stop that thought from arising as we have become habituated with it by playing it over and over again. So, we need to be patient and exert a lot of effort and at the same time bear in mind that troubling thoughts may continuously arise, making us feel unhappy, down and frustrated. However, if we are persistent and diligent enough in training our mind, eventually we will win over that thought, either stopping it from arising or even if it arises in our mind or we are confronted with all the adverse circumstances and conditions, we are no longer affected by them. We have now inwardly become a stronger and more broad-minded, courageous and stable person because of our changed mental perspective or way of thinking.

Courage and a wide perspective

It is important that we have a broader perspective of things to reduce our suffering and problems. A narrow mental attitude will make us very vulnerable and easily feel a sense of hopelessness. With broadmindedness we can be more resilient, and even if we face great hardship, we know that it is not permanent, and we have more faith in being able to get over it.

Someone I know has two sons. One son was suffering because of a relationship breakdown with his girlfriend. The person was very concerned about his son. I said to him, 'is your worrying helping your son'. He replied, 'I worry because he is my child.' I then said to him, 'not to worry, you know he'll find another girlfriend!' Indeed, the next time I met him, the son had a new partner, and they even had a baby. So, I said to him 'remember what I said to you'. He just laughed. Anyway, it is important to have a broad view, willpower, courage and the determination to be able to overcome hardship and achieve success.

Acharya Ashvaghosha said that in the face of hardship, it is no time to lose hope and feel low self-esteem. But it is time to widen your outlook and heighten your mind, so that you will know that you can achieve your goal, for it is in your own hands.

Voluntarily accepting suffering

To overcome problems, we must accept them and face them by applying a type of patience called the patience of voluntarily accepting suffering. Running away from the problem is not the solution.

Breathing mediation

We will do a short breathing meditation together. I explained the benefits of breathing mediation and how we do it in last week's teaching. Nonetheless, a good thing about breathing meditation is that it is easy to do and anybody can do it because it doesn't require much thinking or applying reasoning, but it's very effective in immediately pacifying all the distracting thoughts.

Since our breathing, which is the object we use here, doesn't have any shape or colour, it makes it suitable to prevent distractions and for resting our mind. You start by sitting in the correct posture of either the full or half lotus posture.

Get the breathing right – outgoing and incoming breaths are natural, gentle and level in terms of the pace and the force. The breath is gentle so that you do not sense the inhalation and exhalation at your nostrils, if you are breathing through there. As to the mental focus, you should just be aware of inhaling and exhaling.

Alternatively, you will find it helpful to retain your focus on the breath if you mentally count the round of inhalation and exhalation – counting each round as 1, 2 and so on. This will help to maintain your concentration.

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Edited Version*

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