
The Middle Length Lamrim

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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Motivation

As usual, please cultivate the bodhicitta motivation, which is, 'I am listening to this profound teaching and I shall put it into practice because I aspire to achieve complete enlightenment to benefit all sentient beings'.

Happiness and its causes

Think of how we are mentally and physically endowed with the potential or capacity to accomplish all our goals. Here, there are a number of questions to address. For example, what is our goal? How can we best realise that goal by tapping into our potential? In a nutshell, our primary goal is to find peace and happiness in this current life or in future lifetimes - that's if you believe in future lives.

It is very apparent to us that we all want a happy life. Happiness is dependent upon causes and conditions. We therefore must find out these causes and conditions because we must meet them to achieve happiness.

The next question is: does happiness arise primarily from external or internal factors? External factors refer to favourable material and physical causes and conditions. Do these external factors guarantee the happiness that we seek? They don't. Happiness is an internal experience and arises internally within our minds. This means that happiness lies in our own hands. If we want happiness, we must create the causes ourselves and take on the responsibility to achieve what we seek.

The propensity of the mind

Of all the causes and conditions, the most important one is the internal cause in the form of some sort of positive mental energy, capacity, propensity or imprint. Happiness arises when this internal propensity meets with the right conditions. So, it serves as the direct or immediate cause to bring about the experience of happiness. Without this propensity, no matter what other conditions come together, there is no happiness. Usually, we say happiness arises by depending on the virtuous actions that we create. But virtuous actions alone are not the direct causes of happiness because they cease to exist in their second moment. For example, when we generate a positive thought, we create a positive mental action. But the continuation of this thought ceases in the immediate moment after it arises. Hence, that thought can't be a direct cause of happiness. Rather, the direct cause is the imprint or propensity left by it on our mindstream.

Subduing the mind

We have a habit or tendency to think that external objects will secure the happiness and success that we are looking for. Due to this, we see that our mind is always

preoccupied with and chasing after external objects. As a result, our mind becomes filled with mental afflictions and distractions, which only bring anxiety, stress and dissatisfaction. Even if we achieve a lot externally, internally we will lack inner peace, a sense of fulfilment and happiness.

Regardless of our future lives, it is imperative that whatever we do, including Dharma practice and meditation, must help us by making our current life happy and peaceful. I can testify from my own life experience that whether we are happy or not in life has more to do with our state of mind than the external factors surrounding our lives.

When we first came into exile into India from Tibet, all the monks were relocated to a remote and rough area called Buxa Duar in North East India. The living conditions were very bad. We didn't have much clothing, shoes to wear or food. At night we slept on the ground on piles of grass. Despite this, I remember, as do many of my friends, those were the happiest times of our lives. This is because we were all mentally immersed in the teachings, debate, and other spiritual programs with so much enthusiasm and devotion. We also felt so fortunate just being with all our teachers and many great lamas and masters. So, if you are happy on a mental level, you can be happy, even if your external life situation is very bad.

Having studied and found out about your mind as being the main source of what you can do, achieve, and go through in your life, you will clearly see the benefit of meditation practice. Meditation practice is about bringing an abiding mind inward, rather than being under the influence of wandering off outside, going after external things. How does meditation help us abide inwardly on the mind? Because it involves directing our mental attention onto the meditative object, which refers to a mental image of whatever we are meditating on.

Joyful effort

If we engage in meditation with joyful effort, we will enjoy and understand the benefits of meditation through experience. This is important to retain our interest and feel positive about the practice. Without genuine interest, we will neither engage in the practice nor take it seriously. Someone even said to me, 'I don't have time to practise meditation'. But that person had plenty of time to watch TV!

Joyful effort or *tsun-du* in Tibetan is defined as taking joy or being enthusiastic about engaging in virtue. Once I raised the question at a debate session as to whether the opposite of joyful effort should be laziness which in Tibetan is *le-lo*. Laziness doesn't simply mean being inactive or not doing anything, it also encompasses engaging in meaningless or unwholesome actions. In fact, there is a type of laziness called the laziness of clinging to unwholesome actions.

If we engage in meditation practice with joyful effort, then it should bring us joy and delight. In other words, we know it brings us benefits. When you meditate well then you will find more advantages, and an increase of benefits

of meditation, including increased mental concentration, bliss and so on.

For example, achieving the perfect single-pointed concentration of shamatha or calm abiding brings the tremendous mental and physical bliss of pliancy. This makes the meditation a blissful, effortless experience, encouraging us to stay in the meditation all the time, and the increased concentration supports the development of all other inner realisations and qualities. As we recognize these benefits, our interest and enthusiasm will increase. We will then realise that meditation is the best thing we can do and accordingly prioritise our time.

The right approach to meditation

First, we need to make sure we have a good understanding of meditation practice and its benefits. Then, as we engage in the practice, we make sure that we are relaxed and at ease. We should engage in meditation according to our capacity and progress. For example, when we begin to engage in meditation practice it is good to keep each session short, only one or two minutes, and then slowly extend the length of time while reducing the number of sessions.

Essentially, the purpose of meditation is to tap into inner peace and happiness, and to achieve that, we must counteract afflictive emotions such as attachment or desire. A sense of satisfaction or contentment primarily arises from within us, rather than from external wealth and success. Without counteracting attachment, no matter how much wealth you possess, it won't satisfy you.

Cultivating a sense of contentment is about getting rid of or lessening desires in our mind; it doesn't mean you need to physically get rid of your material possessions.

Happiness and suffering both depend on our mental outlook

In short, we wish to have mental and physical happiness. Both arise by depending on their respective causes and conditions. The main cause of physical happiness is the favourable external causes and conditions, while mental happiness is the favourable internal causes and conditions. Being inwardly happy and relaxed is crucial to our wellbeing, even to our physical health. Therefore, we need to ensure we always have mental peace and happiness.

We must know our mind well enough to know what factors make it happy and calm, and what factors make it unhappy and agitated. It is said that the happiness we want and the suffering we do not want is dependent on our mental perspective of things and events.

So, by knowing and changing our mind through training we can change our situation and life experiences. When our mind goes after certain objects or thoughts, we feel disturbed and unhappy, while other objects and thoughts bring peace and happiness within. We can recognise this by being mindful and watchful of our thoughts, emotions, and experiences.

What shapes our mind is the objects and thoughts within it and meditation offers an effective tool to break our mind

from those thoughts and objects which result in harming our peace and happiness. The problems we face are mainly related to our minds and have hardly anything to do with our external life situation.

If we are starving, and someone says we should meditate, that's not helpful to us in practical terms, although it might still help us a bit. We can understand that most of the time the nature of the problems we go through here in a developed country such as ours is not related to adverse external living conditions, but to a lack of control over our mind.

Therefore, to achieve happiness and peace, we must calm our mind down, stopping it from always wandering outside due to desire, anger, jealousy and so forth. We need to learn how to make our minds content with what we possess. We need to say to ourselves, 'My husband, wife, family and friends are good, I don't need to change them, I am lucky to have them, they are all great.' We need to learn to rest our minds on what we have and stop the discontented thoughts that look for better and more. Once we diminish distracting thoughts by being content and keeping the mind in the present, we will feel relaxed and have more mental clarity.

We then can direct our time and energy to something truly beneficial, such as studying the Dharma and engaging in meditation practice. The peace and happiness we seek lies within ourselves.

Meditation and its benefits

We can say there are two types of states of mind that we generate – positive and negative states of mind. The positive states of mind bring peace and happiness from within, giving us tremendous tolerance for external adversaries as well.

The negative states of mind are the mental attitudes or ways of thinking that result in mental turbulence making us feel down, sad, agitated and unhappy. We do not want these states of mind so we must do something to get rid of them. If we continuously hold and generate these minds, then we will never be able to get ourselves out of unhappiness.

So, how are we going to stop generating these negative mental attitudes? The quick answer is to simply forget those states of mind or divert our mental attention to something else. If they don't go away easily, then we follow meditation practice. Whatever it takes, we must try to counteract these states of mind. We need to recognise the causes of them and overcome them.

Thoughts arise with respect to objects such as a person or an inanimate thing or an event. So, to prevent a particular thought from arising, we stop our mind from going after the object of that thought. We can do that by engaging in meditation wherein we direct our mind onto the focussing object of the meditation. For example, breathing meditation is very effective in immediately overcoming all distractions and settling our minds. Breathing meditation is easy to do because we don't need to do much thinking or have much knowledge to do it. Anybody can do it.

To do it we simply relax in a comfortable posture and then fully focus our mind on the incoming and outgoing breath. If the mind slips away, we make a concerted effort to bring it back to the breathing. As we keep the mind on the breath, we are making it forget or stopping it from being occupied with any objects or thoughts which harm our inner peace and happiness. In this way, as we gently train our minds, and we will be able to transform our minds to be calmer and more focused rather than being overpowered by disturbing thoughts or emotions.

We can completely overcome any troubling thoughts or objects to the point where they won't come into our mind, and even if they do arise, they will no longer be a cause of disturbance to our inner peace and serenity. The benefits of meditation are indescribable.

Thought transformation

To overcome negative, harmful thought patterns, we should apply a thought transformation teaching such as Shantideva's text *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*. In the chapter on Patience, it says:

*Although it is their sticks that hurt me,
I am angry at the ones who wield them, striking me.
But they in turn are driven by their hatred;
Therefore with their hatred, I should take offence.*

This text provides guidelines for looking at things in a realistic and logical way and thus challenging our narrow and confused way of thinking that triggers afflictive emotions.

On the other hand, it enables us to transform all situations in our favour such as an opportunities to practice the patience of accepting harm. This verse makes us re-think how to handle situations in which we are harmed by another person. For example, if someone angrily strikes our head with a stick, we normally become angry with that person and retaliate in some way because we hold the person responsible for the cause of the pain.

Shantideva, however, questions why we don't get angry at the stick, for that is the direct cause of our pain. We can argue that the stick is controlled by the person and didn't strike our head on its own. By applying the same line of logic, Shantideva says that we should not be directing our anger at the person because the person has no choice because they are controlled by the afflictive emotion of anger. So, in this way, the true cause of our pain is the anger within the continuum of that person. We should therefore think of ways of countering that anger with patience and compassion.

Sometimes we must be a bit more broadminded and understanding about other people and the situations we face. We should bear in mind that, just like ourselves, others are also not perfect beings. Our friends can't always have a smiling face - they can also get angry. In fact, everyone is a unique being. Just as they have weaknesses and faults, they also have worthy qualities that we must acknowledge and admire.

When befriending others, make sure to only learn and acquire good qualities from them and not any negative

downsides to them. Then whether it lasts or not, the relationship will be beneficial to you.

Conversely, if you develop the negative influences or negative traits of the other person, then the relationship is not meaningful to you. The worst outcome is that when the relationship breaks down, the person leaves you with negative traits. For example, before meeting with others, you could have been very calm and patient but now you have become short-tempered.

As much as possible, we must learn the Dharma and apply it to train our mind to become a better, kinder, more compassionate, broadminded and understanding person. If we cultivate a good human nature and conduct, we are Buddhists following the teachings of the lord Buddha.

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Edited Version*

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