
The Middle Length Lamrim

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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Bodhicitta motivation

Let's begin with the cultivation of the bodhicitta motivation to achieve complete enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. For this purpose, one should think, 'I am listening to this teaching and I shall put it into practice'. Contemplate how the wish of all sentient beings, including ourselves, is to achieve happiness and to avoid suffering.

Therefore, anyone who holds such a mind wishing to benefit all sentient beings by leading them to happiness and eliminating their suffering is a truly great and noble being.

If we too try to put this into practice, if not for all sentient beings for now, but even just for those who are close to us, like our close friends, which is something we can do, then we will see the immediate result will culminate in a peaceful and happy environment.

The value of love and compassion

If we ask ourselves if we have this good heart, this kind and caring state of mind within us, we would know that we do. We all already have some degree of love and compassion towards some other beings, even if it is not for all other sentient beings. The problem is that we do not cherish the value of that warm and soft spot within us, that love and compassion that we already have for other beings, so we don't put effort into trying to nourish that love and compassion and develop it even further.

If we think about it, we can understand that the most effective means for achieving the peace and happiness we all want to achieve, and for eliminating the problems and sufferings that we all want to eliminate, is through cultivating love and compassion.

Therefore, we must value the loving and compassionate aspect of our mind and think of nurturing and developing it further. Love and compassion is a gentle, calm and peaceful state of mind.

However, instead of relying on and nurturing this positive state of mind, we usually follow a wild, disturbed, troublesome, and negative state of mind. So, we do have within us a positive state of mind which can bring mental peace and happiness. This means we have the capacity to achieve genuine peace and happiness.

On the other hand, a negative state of mind brings mental unhappiness and disturbance and it is crucial that we recognise all problems are derived from the negative and disturbed states of mind. The bottom line is, if we are mentally happy, we are happy and if we are mentally unhappy then we are unhappy, regardless of other life factors.

Tapping into our intelligence

If we simply tap into our intelligence, we will find out what makes us happy and unhappy. Here we are not talking about the cause of happiness in our future lives, but in our everyday life. This is very much dependent on the health and wellbeing of our mind and body. That is to say, if our mind and body are well, we can say, 'I am happy'. If not, we can't say we are happy.

The happiness of our mind is a leading factor in determining our feelings. Therefore, when we talk about living a happy life, the most important thing to consider is the health of our mind and body. Before we talk about finding happiness in future lives, we need to talk about finding happiness now and in this life.

Seeing the benefits of Dharma practice

If we are not happy now, or don't know what to do to find happiness now, there is not much point of talking about finding happiness in future lives. In another words, we have to see the benefit of Dharma practice now before we can see its benefit in the future, such as finding a good rebirth, liberation from samsara and even complete enlightenment. There is no question that we are all seeking a better and happier life.

So, as I said before, we must take good care of our mind and body and those who are close to us. This is what we have to focus our mind on. It is wrong to think that the happiness and joy that we are looking for is somewhere and something far away from us.

The next question we must ask ourselves is, do we have the capacity to achieve good health of mind and body? This is an important question because if we don't have the capacity, if it is something we cannot achieve, then of course there is no point in thinking about it. When we ask this question we will find that we do in fact have that capacity.

Each one of us however must fully take responsibility for our own life. We must think and utilise all our intelligence towards how we can best tackle the problems that we face in our life and how we can take care of ourselves. This is important. When I hear people complaining that there is nobody taking care of and looking after them, it makes me think, why are they asking this question when their life is their own responsibility. So, the question sounds a bit strange or out of context to me.

Having said that, I do understand that if our situation is such that physically we are so sick or so mentally unwell that we cannot take care of ourselves, then of course we have to seek help from others, and at least hope some others may come to help support us. Otherwise, we should first be doing our best to do whatever we need to do to fix our own problems before asking or expecting some others to help us.

We have to try hard enough, and should not make an excuse to avoid our own responsibility, such as saying "I don't know how to do it." Or "I am too busy."

It is most important that, in order to achieve what we want to achieve, we ourselves take full responsibility and ensure that we have enough courage and determination to realise our desired goals.

The next thing is we need to have good knowledge or ideas about what we need to do and how we can reach our goal. Basically, we need to consider all of the conditions needed for achieving our goals which can be put into two types.

There are favourable conditions which we must gather because they are conducive to achieving our goal. And there are unfavourable conditions which we must avoid or get over because they are obstructions to achieving our goal.

Turn unfavourable conditions into favourable conditions

There are various ways and means to gather the favourable conditions and overcome unfavourable conditions. For example, there are instructions and methods by which we can even turn unfavourable conditions into favourable conditions. In this way, all conditions will become an aid so that we can achieve our goals easily.

If our goal is to achieve good health of body, we know we can do this and how to achieve it. You probably don't need help from others or not much, but they can help anyway. The most important thing is you have to have a strong motivation and be clear about what you have to do and say to yourself, "I will commit to do this and I don't need any help from others".

But if your goal is to achieve mental happiness and you were to ask me, "Geshe-la, it is very true; we cannot be happy if our mind is disturbed but controlling my mind is very difficult. How can I control my mind and achieve mental happiness?" Then I do have a lot of things to say.

The most important thing is utilising your prajna or discriminating wisdom, and being guided by that. For example, when we are not happy or don't feel right, through our wisdom we should check the causes. Let's say our physical health is good, and there is nothing externally we can point to as a cause of our unhappiness. But we are still mentally unhappy and are worrying about things. So, it is obvious here the cause is directly related to our mind.

Hence, to remedy the problem we must direct our focus inwardly on our mind, within ourselves, not anywhere else, not on anything external. We then ask ourselves the same question – what is going wrong in our mind that causes unhappiness? By focussing, observing and investigating within our own mind we can find the cause of our unhappiness.

For instance, why we feel unhappy and disturbed is because of some disturbing and overworked state of mind. The cause has got nothing to do with any other person or external objects and events. We, therefore, have to recognise that disturbed, agitated state of mind as the cause of our unhappiness.

Since we do not want unhappiness, we must decide to get rid of that mind. We must do whatever it takes to stop that mind, even if it means to suppress or prevent it from arising temporarily. This is what the Dharma and meditation practice is for and why we follow it, which is to subdue and transform our mind.

Taming the mind

We are not talking here about any vast and complex subject matter from the great treatises but something that is obvious, easy to understand and put into practice. We will however find this most relevant to us and practically beneficial.

We are talking about the benefits of getting rid of disturbing thoughts and emotions and cultivating calm and positive states of mind within us. In other words, we are talking about correcting our mental attitude.

One easy way to change the mind is through changing the object of mind because the object has a lot to do with shaping the mind. For example, a troubled and unhappy mind arises because of holding the object of that mind within us. This means that if we can replace that object of our mind with a different object or divert our mental attention to something else, we can stop the mind that is troubling us and bring peace and rest to our mind.

The question is – is it possible to replace the object of that troubled mind? Or we can also ask – is our mind bound to that object? Then of course, it is possible to change and choose any object for our mind.

Mind is fluid and not rigid

Through training we can change the mind. We can train our mind to forget certain objects and thoughts and remember and habituate ourselves with other objects and thoughts. To make the mind leave an object that brings disturbance and suffering, we train the mind to abide in a different object that brings peace and joy.

Like anything else, it does take time and effort to break the habits of mind. With diligence and consistent effort over a period of time, we can gradually see the change of mind such that the objects or thoughts that previously had a strong grip on our mind are no longer there in our mind. It is as if our mind-training has wiped it off from our memory. Especially, based on our experience of applying the Dharma, meditation or thought transformation into practice, understanding how happiness and suffering derive from our mind and how mind can be changed and brought under our control, we will really begin to see the benefits of practising Dharma in terms of bringing more happiness and lessening suffering in our everyday life.

Discriminating wisdom is our best guide

If we talk about training our mind, and knowing what to do to transform or change our mind, the most important tool or resource we have is our own discriminating wisdom or intelligence which can be our best guide. Our discriminating wisdom and everyday experiences will clearly show us which thoughts and deeds are harmful

and beneficial, and what we need to do to become a better and more successful and happier person.

For example, by applying our wisdom we can easily discern our actions of body, speech and mind, whether they are positive or negative, beneficial or harmful. Based on this understanding, we then make an effort as much as possible to habituate ourselves with doing positive actions and abandoning negative actions, like being kind and helpful to others, speaking pleasantly and not harshly, showing a good face and not a frowning face etc. In this way we can truly find what we want – peace, harmony, and happiness. Tapping into our wisdom makes it very clear; if we wish to see more happiness for ourselves and for others, our own wisdom shows us how we have to behave and what we have to do.

Don't expect quick progress

We must put in effort consistently but we cannot expect quick progress. Be clear about understanding what we should do and what we should not do. For example, we have certain mental attitudes which are positive and we must keep them and foster them, and we have other attitudes which are negative and we must throw them away.

Likewise, we have certain speech and physical deeds which are harsh and unpleasant that we must prevent, and other speech and deeds which are beneficial and pleasant that we must use. We must make sure that we gain this understanding of our thoughts and deeds, not just theoretically, but also based on the self-observation of our own experiences. Based on this knowledge, we should try to live our life by avoiding, as much as possible, destructive actions and we must adopt creative actions.

Have faith in our wisdom and our practice

As I said before, it doesn't matter if our practice doesn't yield its result immediately. Have faith in our wisdom and our practice. Keep practising. Be assured that our practice will bring good results. Sometimes we don't realise how our practice has benefitted us, but outside people like loved ones notice the benefits to us and admire us, and they are amazed with the positive change they see within us.

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