
The Middle Length Lamrim

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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We should generate a correct motivation by thinking we are listening to the teaching to achieve complete enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. We are currently studying bodhicitta, so it is good to ensure that our motivation is bodhicitta and also that it is accompanied by the thought to practise what we study.

GUARDING ONE'S BODHICITTA

We will continue the teaching from where we left it last time, which is the section concerning the importance of maintaining our commitment by thought and deed to serve or benefit other sentient beings.

Training in not mentally abandoning any sentient being for whose welfare the mind has been generated

This section defines the meaning of mentally abandoning or forsaking other sentient beings. By mentally abandoning any sentient beings, we lose our commitment to benefit all other sentient beings, and thereby lose the bodhisattva vows.

For example, when we face certain difficult and intolerable situations with other beings, if we lose all our caring and loving thoughts towards them and generate the thought that, from this moment on, 'I will not work for other sentient beings,' we are mentally abandoning sentient beings. This also means we lose our commitment or pledge to benefit sentient beings.

Training in accumulating the accumulations of merit and wisdom

The next section reads: *Having taken aspiring bodhicitta through a ritual, you should put effort into accumulating the accumulations through daily offerings to the Jewels and so forth as the cause for increasing bodhicitta.*

Training in the cause of not being separated from the mind generation again in future lives

The text then proceeds to the section showing how to protect the thought of benefiting others, not just in this life, but in future lives.

This subheading has two points: 1. *Training in abandoning the four non-virtuous practices that cause it to degenerate* and 2. *Training in adopting the four virtuous practices that do not allow it to degenerate.*

1. Training in abandoning the four non-virtuous practices that cause it to degenerate

Under the first sub-heading, the text goes over the four types of non-virtuous practices, which are literally called the four black dharmas.

- i. Deceiving one's abbot, master, guru, or those worthy of offerings
- ii. Causing others to regret virtues that they do not regret

- iii. Saying something uncomplimentary and the like about a sentient being who has entered the Mahāyāna
- iv. Acting out of deceit and shiftiness but without the extraordinary attitude

i. Deceiving one's abbot, master, guru, or those worthy of offerings

The first one here – *deceiving one's abbot, master, guru, or those worthy of offerings* – is explained by identifying the *objects* and *actions*.

The objects towards whom you commit the first black action include *one's abbot, master, guru, or those worthy of offerings*. The text states that *the objects that are one's abbot and master are easy to understand*. The abbots and masters are those from whom one receives spiritual vows, such as pratimoksha and tantric vows.

Your guru is someone who wants to benefit you. Here the text specifies one of the qualities of your guru – someone with the quality of wishing to benefit you. So, when you think about who is your guru, you have to check whether that person has a genuine wish to help and benefit you.

Then the text says *those worthy of offerings are those endowed with excellent qualities even if they do not belong to the previous two*. But who are *those worthy of offerings*? The text says they are *those endowed with excellent qualities*. So, anyone with excellent qualities qualifies as the third object worthy of offering of veneration.

When we think about this description of someone worthy of offering, we can understand that all other beings fit into this category, because every being possesses worthy qualities. Therefore, the most effective way to prevent this black action is by getting used to the perception of pure vision with respect to all other beings: no matter who they are, or how they look, everyone possesses certain excellent qualities and therefore becomes a worthy object of offering and veneration.

In the monastic hierarchy, the sangha should respect other sangha members who have taken ordination before them, regardless of their level of qualification, and whether or not they are senior monks by Vinaya tradition. However, some monks don't observe this – for instance, I knew one Australian monk who had an issue with this advice because of the pride he had in his level of knowledge.

The text continues: *If you wonder about what action becomes a non-virtuous practice with respect to them, to knowingly cheat them by any means is a non-virtuous practice*. This clearly explains the action aspect of committing this black action in relation to the above objects, which is cheating them through lying to them.

Not cheating others is very important, even in the mundane world. Honesty is a virtue. We all must be honest and never cheat each other. If we are honest and never cheat others, we will win their trust, and they will admire us for being a trustworthy and reliable person.

Regarding the morality of abandoning the ten non-virtues, the first is abandoning killing. Here, the principle of compassion is that of not causing harm to other beings through any means, representing the first moral advice of the Lord Buddha. This moral practice underpins the fundamental teachings of the Lord Buddha.

Because not cheating other beings or being honest with them is strongly emphasised in Buddhism, when outsiders know you are Buddhist, they will expect you to be honest and trustworthy. I knew of a friend with a niece who was not Buddhist, but knowing that her neighbour was a Buddhist from Thailand, she said she felt secure.

The text continues with a section called 'Clearing up doubt', which gives specific criteria for the black action of deceiving one's abbot, and so forth. It says, *However as the deceit and shiftiness that are not lies are indicated below, here it has to be cheating through lying.* This means cheating one's abbot and others must occur through intentionally lying to them.

The text continues: *This is because in the Compendium of Training it is taught that abandoning a non-virtuous practice constitutes a virtuous practice and the antidote of this non-virtue is the first of the four virtuous practices.*

Here, 'antidote' means that which purifies or abandons these negative actions, but not necessarily in the sense of abandoning them permanently by removing the root cause. Rather, when we say here we purify or abandon a negative action, it means we are preventing it from producing its result, or lessening that result. Whereas abandoning negativities from the root requires us to abandon their root cause, such as the conception of self-grasping.

Thus, the purification practice we do by applying the four means of purification means we are preventing our past accumulated negativities from producing their result - we are not necessarily eliminating the root cause of those negativities. For example, having purified a specific non-virtuous action of killing through a purification practice doesn't mean we won't commit the action of killing again, because we have not eliminated the root cause of killing, so there is the likelihood we will commit it again.

ii. Causing others to regret virtues that they do not regret

We move on to the second black action, which is also explained by identifying the object and then the action.

The text says, *With respect to causing others to regret virtues they do not regret, the object is another person without a regret about a virtue that he has done.* Thus, the object is someone who has created virtue and has no regret about having done that. As virtue is not an object of regret, the black action is intentionally causing them to regret such virtue. So, when a person who has created virtue has no regret, if you intentionally make them regret that virtue - for example, by saying to them, 'What a waste of your time doing that' - and they then generate regret, you have created the second non-virtuous or black action.

The point here is that we must never regret doing virtue, because regretting virtue is a non-virtue, whereas regretting non-virtues is a virtue.

It is said that, just through the power of regretting a non-virtue you have committed, you will purify half of that non-virtue. When it comes to virtues, instead of regretting them, we should rejoice, because rejoicing will cause the virtue to multiply. So, we should never let anything cause us to regret our virtue, even if someone tries to make us feel bad or feel regret about our virtue. Nor should we cause others to regret their virtue. Rather, we should regret our non-virtues.

It is said that creating any negative action is like swallowing a deadly poison. Just as a person who has swallowed a deadly poison will feel great fear and distress about the

imminent danger of losing their life, we too should fear any negative actions we have committed - to the point that our body trembles with fear - by thinking of their dire consequences.

The lamrim text gives an example of three people who have taken the same poison. The first person has died, and the second person is about to die. When we commit any negative action, we should imagine ourselves like the third person, who is experiencing a deep sense of regret and fear for having the poison inside their body.

On the other hand, as much as possible, we should be steadfast in trying to feel positive about whatever virtues we have created and feel that what we have done is truly beneficial.

The text continues: *In regard to these two, it is the same whether or not the person is deceived and whether or not the person has regret.* This means that when you commit either of the first two black actions, whether you succeed or not in completing them depends on whether or not you have managed to deceive the person, or make them feel regret about their virtues.

iii. Saying something uncomplimentary and the like about a sentient being who has entered the Mahāyāna

The third non-virtue or black action is *saying something uncomplimentary and the like about a sentient who has entered the Mahayana.*

The object here is someone who possesses bodhicitta: in others words, a bodhisattva. The action is saying unpleasant things out of hatred or anger and which disturbs their mind. From the perspective of our own practice of avoiding this black action, we should be very careful about what we say to any other being, making sure we don't use any harsh or abusive words that can upset and disturb them. Since we don't know who is a bodhisattva, we should be really careful with what we say to all other beings to prevent this black action of speaking harshly and negatively to a bodhisattva.

There is a saying that a person with noble qualities is like burning embers hidden under ashes. If you look at the surface, you don't know the embers are there, but if you put your hand in the ashes, you will burn yourself. So, we have to be careful about the words we use to communicate with others, and ensure that what we say is always gentle, pleasing and pleasant.

The *measure* of completing the action is when the object towards whom you have committed this black action hears your words and understands their content. So, the object or person to whom those words were said must have the capacity to understand what you say. If the person doesn't understand and hear what you say, this negative action does not occur.

The text then explains 'How it is necessary to abandon this since it easily occurs and is a great fault', explicitly stating, *It is easy for this to occur and it is also a very great disadvantage. Furthermore, it is taught in the Sūtra of the Magic of the Complete Certainty of Total Peace that if a bodhisattva generates a mind of contempt towards a bodhisattva, he must remain in the hells for an aeon, and that apart from deprecating a bodhisattva, nothing can make a bodhisattva fall into the lower rebirths.*

Here, the text quotes a line from the sutra that mentions how grave and serious a crime it is for a bodhisattva to disparage, speak angrily to, or glower at another bodhisattva. As a consequence, the bodhisattva will remain in hell for as many aeons as the number of moments of anger generated. To indicate the action's severity, the sutra says that, apart from this, no other action can cause a bodhisattva to go to the hells. The implication here is that, if committing the third black action has such grave consequences of retribution for bodhisattvas, who are great noble beings, what need is there to mention the consequences for an ordinary person who doesn't have spiritual qualities committing these actions?

The next few lines read: *In the Verse Summary of the Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines, it also says that if a bodhisattva who has not yet obtained a prophecy argues out of anger with a bodhisattva who has obtained a prophecy, for however long a mind of anger arises, he will have to spend that many aeons longer on the path.*

The sutra explains that a bodhisattva can delay their progress on the path as a result of arguing with another bodhisattva out of anger. The delay will be as long as the number of times the anger arises: for that number of times the bodhisattva's progress on the path will be delayed by the same number of aeons, and whatever stage of the path the bodhisattva has reached, they will have to begin the path from the start.

Because of that, it is also taught in the same text that you need to put an end to anger in all its aspects and put effort into confessing it and restraining it immediately whenever it arises – the last line emphasises the importance of not losing control of our mind to anger or having a bad temper. We should try to integrate this into our daily practice and recognise how destructive anger can be to ourselves and others.

Neuroscientists say that anger can have the effect of destroying certain brain cells on one side of your brain, causing memory loss, as well as destroying good cells that regulate your immune system. Therefore, anger is bad for our physical health, as well as our relationships with others and our mental health.

Observing one's mind: the best instruction

We must take full responsibility for our health, especially our mental health and wellbeing. Being happy or not, or relaxed or not very much depends on the health of our mind and the type of mind we possess within us.

In fact, it is said that of all the instructions, the best instruction is observing one's mind. Knowing one's mind well is crucial to finding true peace, happiness and stability in our life. As we are continuously generating various states of mind, we have to know what types of mind are beneficial, and what types are harmful. Our experiences are immediate outcomes of the type of mind we generate within us.

Essentially, Dharma practice is about developing oneself by developing positive states of mind, because these benefit us and counteract the negative states of mind that harm us. To implement this practice, however, we must first know what the positive and negative states of mind are – what states of mind to keep and what to throw away, so to speak.

The most effective way to tap into this knowledge is by constantly observing our mind. After we have understood our mind, we can then engage in the practice of cultivating

the states of mind we wish to keep, and getting rid of the states of mind we want to eliminate. One way to do this is by identifying the objects of the mind, and understanding which ones cause positive thoughts and which cause negative thoughts. We then keep the beneficial objects in our mind and get rid of harmful ones; just as we do with external objects. Good objects bring happiness and bad objects bring suffering.

Relating to external objects, money is supposed to be a good object for bringing happiness into our life, but if we keep money in the bank and never use it, even when we really need it, like some people do, then really, what use is it? Money is there to help bring us happiness and alleviate suffering. At the same time, there's no guarantee that it will bring us happiness and lessen our problems. Having a positive state of mind, however, will definitely bring us peace and happiness, while getting rid of negative states of mind will definitely minimise our problems and suffering.

For example, if you go to bed with a virtuous state of mind, you will sleep better and wake up with a virtuous state of mind and a feeling of happiness. A virtuous state of mind brings calmness, which is akin to having a good sleep. Sleep is important for rejuvenating and refreshing our body. On the other hand, if you go to bed and your mind is undisciplined, wandering off to outer objects and worries then, even if you are lying in a comfortable bed, you'll feel overworked, stressed and disturbed because your mind is too busy and all over the place.

A simple practice is more beneficial

Most times, I do simple and small practices that I find to be most beneficial and effective. They help me stay happy and peaceful and sleep well. So, I share these small practices with others, because I know they will help them just as they help me. You should, however, try to practise these yourself, as they are easy to understand. The benefit from such practices is great and life-changing.

For example, I do a visualisation of the Buddha when I go to bed. I find this very beneficial. You imagine Shakyamuni Buddha near the head of your bed, in a form radiating light, which invites the blessings and excellent qualities of all the buddhas. These light rays merge with the Buddha. From the Buddha, a stream of blessings, in the form of light, come forth and dissolve into yourself, purifying all negativities and causing you to receive all the excellences.

If we apply this simple practice consistently, we will definitely see its effect in subduing our mind.

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Edited Version*

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