
The Middle Length Lamrim

༄༅། །ལམ་རིམ་འབྲིང་། ། བྱང་སེམས་སྐྱོང་བའི་རིམ་པ།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

23 April 2024

Motivation

The refuge prayer is recited when taking refuge and when generating a bodhicitta motivation. It is important to ensure that we have the correct frame of mind and motivation when we undertake any action. Lama Tsongkhapa said ‘if you have good thoughts, even the paths and grounds are good, if you have bad thoughts, even the paths and grounds are bad, all depends on your mind.’ So, both good and bad actions are directed by our mind. If the mind presiding over our action is good, the action will be good, and if our mind is in a negative state, our action will also be negative.

This quotation is a very important lesson that will help us to decide what to do and what not to do in order for our actions to be beneficial, rather than harmful. Before beginning any activity, we should always check our reasons for wanting to undertake any action. If we find our intention is good and positive, then our action will result in benefitting ourselves and others. However, we should not proceed with an action if we recognise any faults in our thoughts or if we have negative intentions, otherwise we could harm ourselves and others

Verbal and physical actions are dictated by our mind

From this perspective, we don’t have control over what we do because we are controlled by our mind. This is very important to understand in order to recognise the true cause of suffering and to be able to apply the Dharma practice, for example, practising patience.

When we lose our temper we are unable to practice patience because of our confusion over the cause of the suffering and hardship we face. Patience is a state of mind that is not disturbed or shaken by the harm we receive from others, or by the various hardships and suffering we encounter in our life. Patience enables us to tolerate and cope with suffering and hardship.

Usually, hurtful speech, negative gestures, or even physical aggression directed at us by another person causes anger to arise in us because we perceive that person as the source of hostility. However, the main cause of their actions is not the person themselves but their own deluded mind, and as such they lack freedom because they are enslaved and overpowered by their own mind. So, we can recognise that the minds of others are the true cause of their actions which will help us to further understand the underlying reasons, rather than blaming them altogether.

The Lord Buddha stated in the Dhammapada:

*All phenomena are of the nature of mind;
Mind is their thief and precedes them all.*

*If with the impure mind, a person speaks or acts,
Suffering follows him like the shadow that follows the man.
All phenomena are of the nature of mind;
Mind is their thief and precedes them all.
If with the pure mind, a person speaks or acts,
Happiness follows him like the shadow that follows the man.*

A person and their behaviour are two separate things

We need to understand that a person and their mind are two separate entities and their behaviour is controlled by the mind. If their mind is deluded, irrational and negative, then all of their actions will be the same. Lama Tsongkhapa said, “a person is overpowered by their mind, and their mind is overpowered by afflicted minds which are the cause for that person engaging in misdeeds. Therefore the person will suffer due to the faults of their afflicted minds”. This clearly indicates that any harm we receive from others is a result of their afflictive states of mind and not from the person themselves. Consequently we should neither lay blame nor retaliate against them, but rather empathise with them and understand that they are under the influence of afflictive emotions such as anger or attachment and are lacking free will.

Our own experience of the afflicted states of mind are feelings of unhappiness and disturbance, even to the point of questioning our sanity and our choice to do certain things. Under the influence of an afflicted mind we will become vulnerable and will indulge in harmful and destructive actions. So, through recognising the true cause of suffering, we can apply the practice of patience and compassion towards others and focus on overcoming our own mental afflictions.

There is no fortitude like patience

In order to foster a better and more sustainable relationship, especially with our loved ones, it would be beneficial to understand how another person is controlled by their mind. For example, their behaviour is sometimes happy, relaxed and positive but at other times they behave negatively and may frown or speak harshly or even throw things! All of these outer expressions and behaviours are not that of the person themselves, but of the type of mind prevailing within them at the time.

If a person is controlled by a mind that is afflicted with confusion and delusion, they cannot be happy or be at peace. So, when in a situation where we receive harm from others, we should apply the knowledge of a person and their behaviour as being two separate things and refrain from blaming them for their negative behaviour or conduct. In other words, we should try to be kind and patient with others. Practising patience and showing more understanding is the most important cause to improving a relationship problem.

I often advise people that problems in a relationship can be significantly reduced if we show patience. For example, if you recognise that your friend or partner is tense or in a bad mood, it is better to not ask why, but to just say something positive. Unless you have something positive to say, it is best not to say anything and just remain calm and give them some space. It would be good however to indicate your care and support by saying to

them, 'would you like a cup of tea? Why don't you have a shower? I will take care of cooking dinner etc.' So, in the long run, when we practice patience and show our love to others, we will not only benefit them, but we will also benefit ourselves.

There is no evil like anger

The Lord Buddha advised us to be gentle, kind and generous when giving food, drink and clothes to angry sangha, but not so to the lustful sangha. This infers that we need to be gentle, kind and considerate to people who are predisposed to anger, and it should be understood that when a person is in an angry state, they can cause harm to both themselves and to others. Even with our close friends we need to be careful to not provoke or react to them when they are angry. Being our friend doesn't preclude them from retaliating or reacting adversely towards us, even to the extent of physically lashing out and hurting us. Under the influence of anger, they may not see us as their friend or partner.

When I was in Varanasi I knew two Tibetan brothers. The younger brother was successful in his studies but the older brother was not really into studying and was a bit sluggish. One day the younger brother tried to give his brother some advice about his studies, but the older brother took great offence to this and exclaimed that it was none of his concern or business, after which he poked his two fingers into the eyes of his brother. I noticed the bruises under the eyes of the younger sibling and when he told me what had happened I was shocked and couldn't believe that his brother was capable of doing that. He could have been blinded! These two brothers were normally very close and amiable towards each other.

Always watch the mind

As I said earlier, it is very beneficial to always watch our mind and learn about it as much as possible. If our thoughts are negative, we should not act on them, because any such action will reflect the negativity behind it. A negative action will lead to a negative result - but we always want a good result and a positive outcome in whatever we do. As we tend to prefer pleasant speech and good deeds from others, there is a lot to learn about ourselves, our thoughts and deeds, which can be very diverse.

If we take anger into account as a mental factor, we can understand it in terms of different stages of its development. Initially when anger arises it may not be very forceful and strong, but if we do not curb that anger and it remains steadfast, it will grow and become more forceful and destructive in the form of resentment or a grudge.

In Tibetan, anger is called *kon-tro* which is one of the six root mental afflictions or delusions. When anger grows inside of us it is called in Tibetan *kon-zin* which means resentment or belligerence which is part of the twenty secondary or auxiliary mental afflictions. Then another word in Tibetan is *tro-wa* which is a bit like 'hate'. My late guru, Geshe Ngawang Dhargye, specified that anger or *kon-tro* arises with respect to any sentient being, whereas

tro-wa or hate arises with respect to any inanimate object as well.

Our mind is the primary source of all action or conduct

Whether our action is positive or negative depends on the motivating mind for that action being either positive or negative. In relation to this, one of the lower Buddhist schools of tenets, the Vaibhashika, talks about our physical actions as being revelatory or non-revelatory. The revelatory physical actions reveal the intention of our mind. The type of mind someone possesses underpins their external conduct or behaviour, such as their speech, body language, and expressions - these will indicate a lot about their mind.

Become habituated with positive states of mind

If we engage in the practice to cultivate a positive state of mind and to eliminate a negative state of mind, as time goes by we will become more habituated with the positive state and less with the negative. There will be a change in the way we go about things and how we are as a person and our conduct and behaviour will indicate a more positive nature. As a result of this positive change, we will notice more happiness and stability in our overall life experience. As part of training our mind, it is beneficial to memorise and say out loud the quote mentioned earlier by Lama Tsongkhapa, '*if you have good thoughts, even the paths and grounds are good, if you have bad thoughts, even the paths and grounds are bad, all depends on your mind.*'

Without giving enough thought and consideration to our actions we will be unable to decide what the right action will be, whether that action can be accomplished or even if it is worthwhile. So, the mind that drives us to engage in an action is the single most important factor that determines the effectiveness and worthiness of the action.

As soon as we have a thought to undertake a certain action we should take a moment to check our mind to find out why, what and how to implement that action and the probable outcome. If we can't see a positive or favourable outcome or we lack the capacity or resources to proceed with the action, we will lose interest and won't pursue it any further. But if we find a good reason to engage in an action and we have the means to accomplish it, we will be motivated and encouraged to engage in it.

Making sure our motivation is not soiled with the afflictive emotions

As Dharma practitioners, we must ensure that our motivation or intention to engage in any action is not soiled with the afflictive emotions, so that it does not serve as a cause of suffering. Although it may be difficult to completely prevent the afflictive emotions from arising, it is manageable for us to not engage in an action that is influenced by an afflictive emotion (especially a strong afflictive emotion), which is very beneficial.

As mentioned earlier, after thoroughly considering our thoughts, we can determine whether an action is positive and will bring about great benefit. Following this assessment, we can undertake the task with great

enthusiasm and interest. Essentially, this is an effective way of overcoming 'laziness' which is the main obstructive cause preventing us from embarking on virtuous actions or seeing the completion of our action.

Thank you.

Inner contentment

Whether or not we are happy or satisfied primarily depends on what is in our mind, and not on external objects. If we are mentally happy, we will feel satisfied, even if externally we are not wealthy and have few possessions. But even if we are relatively wealthy, we can still be mentally unhappy because of the desire to possess more external things. So obviously having desire in our mind is a direct cause to feeling dissatisfaction, thereby displacing any joy and happiness within us.

If desire is left uncontrolled, for example, if we possess one object, we will then want to possess two, then one hundred and then one thousand and so on; we will never find satisfaction. So, in order to feel satisfied and happy we must calm our desirous mind and be mentally content with what we already have.

The great master Nagarjuna in his 'A Letter to a Friend' said:

*The teacher of gods and men declared that
Being satisfied was the greatest of all riches,
Remain satisfied always.
One knowing satisfaction is truly wealthy,
Even without much material possessions.'*

Attachment is laziness

Our whole life can be ruined if we do not control our attachment. Even in our everyday life experiences we can clearly recognise that attachment is a reason why we struggle to find happiness and satisfaction. Purely from the perspective of Dharma practice I would say that attachment or desire is a form of laziness because it impedes us from engaging in virtues.

The opposite to laziness (in Tibetan *le-lo*) is joyful effort (*tsun-du* in Tibetan). 'Joyful effort' means to experience joy by engaging in virtue. So, if we experience joyful effort we can achieve all of our goals, especially the goal of our Dharma practice, which is to find happiness, not only in this life but also in future lives, and furthermore, liberation from cyclic existence and complete enlightenment.

It is evident from our own experience that we tend to lack interest in the Dharma and that our Dharma practice is ineffective. We don't take it seriously because we are too attached to this ephemeral sensual world of pleasures and goals. Since attachment is the direct cause that prevents us from engaging in virtue, I would say it is a form of laziness.

'Laziness' is defined as the state of mind lacking interest in virtue. So essentially, the worst obstruction to Dharma practice is laziness. Dharma practice means, precisely, anything that we do which serves as a cause to benefit us in a future life. There is a type of laziness or indolence called the laziness of being attracted to meaningless activities.

*Transcript prepared by Chelsea Shi
Edit 1 by Bernii Wright
Edit 2 by Sandup Tsering
Edited Version*

© Tara Institute