
The Middle Length Lamrim

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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We should cultivate a good motivation by thinking that, for the sake of all other sentient beings, I wish to achieve complete enlightenment, so for this reason I shall listen to this teaching and put it into practice as best I can.

Overcoming the three poisonous minds

Whenever we engage in Dharma practice, of course, we must always make sure we have the right motivation. To discern whether the practice we engage in is actual Dharma practice, we can refer to the inner mandala prayer that we recite before the teachings. This verse clearly points out the purpose of Dharma practice. The actual translation of this prayer from the original Tibetan says:

*I bounteously offer you without any stinginess,
The objects of my attachment, hatred and ignorance,
Friends, enemies and strangers, as well as my body and wealth.
Please happily accept and bless me
To be released from the three poisonous minds in their own place.*

It is important to ensure that when we engage in Dharma practice we direct our attention towards ourselves. This prayer reminds us that our aim is to counteract *the three poisonous states of mind*, which are to be eliminated *in their own place*.

The three poisonous states of mind of attachment, hatred and ignorance arise because of our different mental attitudes towards other beings and objects. We generate attachment to friends and objects that seem desirable to our mind; hatred towards enemies and anything that seems undesirable; and ignorance towards neutral objects that seem neither desirable nor undesirable to us.

These afflicted states of mind that arise within us are negativities within our own mind. So, to counteract them, we must focus inwards and overcome them right there, within our mind.

In Tibetan, the prayer says, *d'ug-sum rang-sah drol.wa jin-gi lob*, meaning 'Bless me to be released from the three poisonous minds in their own place'. If we direct our attention outside and try to make external changes, it's not going to help us get rid of these afflicted minds. Rather, the prayer stresses that we focus inwards and counteract or release the afflicted states of mind *in their own place*.

If we do anything other than this – like thinking the afflicted minds arise from outside, directing our attention there, and trying to remedy them in that way – it won't work. Rather, we must recognise that the poisonous minds arise from within us and, correspondingly, apply the remedy from within. This is what's meant by 'to be

released from the three poisonous minds in their own place' – to eliminate the poisonous minds from where they arise, or in their own place.

Whenever any of these three – attachment, hatred or ignorance – are present in our mind, they result in unhappiness and unease. Since we don't want unhappiness, we have to rely on the respective antidotes to counteract these states of mind. If we don't, they'll keep arising within us and bring us further suffering.

For example, if hatred arises and we don't do anything, it may even become stronger. The main cause of hatred is mentally perceiving the object as undesirable and then disliking it. If we don't do anything to change this negative mental outlook, the hatred will grow into resentment, even belligerence, and then we could actually harm the other being by retaliating.

The antidotes to the poisonous minds

We need to apply the respective remedy or antidote to the poisonous minds, such as meditation, which serves as an antidote to attachment or desire. This involves contemplating the object of attachment in the opposite way. Attachment arises when we perceive or see the object as pleasant, desirable or beautiful. To overcome this, we engage in a meditation focusing on the undesirable or unpleasant aspects of the object, not just from one angle, but identifying as many reasons as possible. This has the effect of counteracting desire.

Likewise, anger and hatred arise in our mind when we have a negative perspective of an object, perceiving it as undesirable. To counteract this, we need to view the object in the opposite way, thinking of its positive aspects. For example, to overcome hatred towards another being, we need to think of reasons that will give rise to a feeling of compassion towards them. We do that by observing the misery and suffering afflicting other beings.

In relation to neutral objects, where we generate mental dullness and ignorance, we need to apply the appropriate meditation to overcome that state of mind.

When we recite the above prayer, we're mentally offering the visualised objects of our bodies, enemies, friends, strangers and wealth, rather than the actual objects. We're not talking about offering the actual objects because we don't own the bodies of other beings, so we can't offer them, and we don't have the capacity to offer our own bodies. So offering actual bodies – even our own – is impractical!

Since we frequently recite this prayer, it's good to know its meaning and to reflect on it. The point of offering the three objects here is to overcome the three afflictive emotions we generate when relating to them. The line that says, 'without stinginess or attachment,' means to ensure that in making the offering, there's no influence of attachment or stinginess, because the sole purpose of offering is to delight or please those to whom we are offering. In fact, the Sanskrit word 'puja' means to delight.

Then, when we say ‘please happily accept’, we imagine that our offering is graciously accepted. If you are offering to Buddha, it causes uncontaminated bliss to arise.

Reting Rinpoches and the Dalai Lamas

One of the Ganden throne-holders and great lamas, Trichen Tenpa Rabgye, maintained that within the continuum of a buddha, new realisations can arise, but no new attainment of realisations. This is because, as a buddha, they have attained all the possible excellent qualities to be attained.

Trichen Tenpa Rabgye’s teachers included great lamas such as Trichen Ngawang Chodrak and Yongzin Yeshe Gyaltsen. His previous reincarnation, Trichen Ngawang Chokdhen, was also a renowned master and a spiritual teacher to the seventh Dalai Lama, Gyalwa Kelsang Gyatso. His Holiness, the current Dalai Lama, often recounts the long and close guru-disciple relationship between Trichen Tenpa Rabgye and the seventh Dalai Lama, Gyalwa Kelsang Gyatso, saying that every time Gyalwa Kelsang spotted Trichen Ngawang Chokdhen, he would stop and bow his head.

As head of the Tibetan government, His Holiness Gyalwa Kelsang Gyatso, offered Reting Monastery to Trichen Tenpa Rabgye who became the second Reting Rinpoche after his predecessor, Trichen Ngawang Chokdhen, the first Reting Rinpoche. At that time, Reting monastery had about 300 monks. As you know, Reting Monastery was one of the oldest monasteries in Tibet and the first Kadampa monastery founded by the Kadampa teacher Dromtonpa himself.

The fifth Reting Rinpoche, Jamphel Yeshe Gyaltsen, became regent of Tibet after the passing away of His Holiness, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama. His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, acknowledges the fifth Reting Rinpoche’s significant role in recognising him as the fourteenth Dalai Lama.

At that time, another faction in the old Tibetan government claimed a child from a noble ministerial family as the potential candidate for the Dalai Lama. However, Reting Rinpoche observed the three letters AH, KA and MA in the Lhamo Lhatso (Shridevi) Lake. This became the key to the recognition of His Holiness as the fourteenth Dalai Lama.

It was recorded that when Reting Rinpoche first arrived at the lake, the surface was frozen. Then, as the fog started to lift and the ice broke, Reting Rinpoche clearly saw the three letters and an image of a small three-storey house with a turquoise and gold roof and strangely shaped guttering.

This observation clearly indicated to the search party where to locate the next Dalai Lama. The letters indicated the initial letters of the province, the local area, and his birthplace. The AH was for Amdo in north-eastern Tibet; the KA was for the local Kumbum Monastery; and MA is said to have been associated with the names of the village monastery of Karma Rolpai Dorje and a local spiritual guardian in Taktser, the birthplace of His Holiness.

Mentally transforming the objects of offering

As we began to discuss earlier, when we mentally offer our body, it doesn’t necessarily mean giving our actual body. Rather, we think of our body as a wish-fulfilling jewel from which emanates various objects, according to the needs of the recipients. The objects of giving must be appropriate and suitable to be given.

In fact, when we recite this prayer, we’re offering a mandala to the gurus, buddhas, and so forth. The prayer says we offer our body, wealth, friends, and enemies; however, it makes no sense for us to offer our contaminated bodies, which are produced by karma and delusions. Rather, what is required in offering this mandala is to mentally transform the objects of offering into the most beautiful and pleasing objects, such as wish-fulfilling jewels, or whatever most pleases the gurus and buddhas.

Attachment, hatred and ignorance are called poisonous states of mind. Poisons are usually deadly. What prevents us from achieving liberation from samsara or complete enlightenment are the ignorance of self-grasping, which is the root cause of samsara; and attachment, hatred and other afflictive emotions, which are like the servants or assisting causes. Therefore, ignorance, attachment and hatred are called the three poisonous states of mind because they kill the life of liberation for us.

To counteract an afflictive emotion like attachment or desire, we need to know how it arises in our mind, and what sort of object it has. The cause of the desire for that object has more to do with the way we mentally perceive it than the features of the object itself. Because we perceive the object as attractive, desirable and pleasant, desire and attachment arise. So, when we counteract desire, we mainly focus on recognising how we perceive the object and how to change that perception.

With this meditation, we are not de-beautifying or devaluing the object, but eliminating our mistaken view that *exaggerates* the object’s beauty, value and pleasantness. This mistaken view initially arouses desire and attachment, which later causes disappointment, frustration, and unhappiness. To achieve the aim of the meditation and diminish that desire and attachment, we meditate on the unpleasantness or undesirable aspects of the object, even if it means imagining the object as ugly, undesirable and repugnant.

Similarly, anger and hatred are based more on our *perception* of the object as undesirable and negative than on the actual qualities of the object. Therefore, to change our mental attitude of hatred, we meditate on showing loving-kindness and patience towards the object. Trying to recognise the other person’s situation, such as thinking about the problems and suffering they are undergoing, will also help us overcome that feeling of hatred.

Meditation on emptiness

To counteract ignorance, we meditate on how all things are dependent-arising and hence lack inherent existence. Since the meditation on selflessness serves as an antidote

to ignorance, which is the root of all afflictive emotions, it counteracts all the mental afflictions. In contrast, the meditation on loving-kindness counteracts only anger, but not any other mental afflictions.

There are two types of selflessness: the selflessness of a person and the selflessness of other phenomena. Each Buddhist school of tenets has its own views of the two selflessnesses. Within the Madhyamika Middle Way school, there are two schools: the Svatantrika Madhyamika and the Prasangika Madhyamika. Each has a different presentation of the view of selflessness.

According to the Prasangika Madhyamika, there is no difference between the two selflessnesses, in terms of what is being negated; rather, the two are differentiated with respect to the *bases* of the negation of the self. The base of the negation of the selflessness of the person is the person, whereas the base of negation of the selflessness of other phenomena is all other phenomena.

The Svatantrika Madhyamika, however, posits the two selflessnesses as being two different views, and says there is a difference between the two, in terms of their subtlety and coarseness. However, according to the Prasangika Madhyamika, there is no difference between the two, in terms of their subtlety and coarseness. Having said that, it is mentioned that it's easier to meditate on and realise the selflessness of a person than that of other phenomena. This is because the base of the negation for the selflessness of a person is the person, which relates to our own identity or oneself.

Hence, it's easier to meditate by using our self as the basis of analysis and investigating how it exists. As we meditate, we can understand that the person or oneself is something designated, or dependent, upon the five aggregates, and cannot exist independently by itself.

Different problems, different meditations

Which meditation is the best one to engage in depends on the individual. We all know that meditation is beneficial, but we also want to know what to meditate on. The answer depends on why we want to meditate, which will differ from person to person due to the different situations we are in. If the reason is to overcome strong attachment because it's causing us a lot of suffering, it's important to engage in a meditation specifically designed to counteract that attachment, which can have a chronic, detrimental effect on us – for example, it may affect our sleep, work, study and meditation.

Completely eliminating attachment from the root is probably an unrealistic expectation, as it's a difficult task for us at the moment. It is, however, possible for us to reduce the force of our attachment, thereby reducing the extent of the problems it causes us.

As mentioned earlier, to overcome attachment, we must recognise the main cause, which lies within us – our perception of the object as desirable. We need to change the mental perception that arouses the attachment that causes us to suffer. We're not talking about outwardly changing how we react to the actual object, for example,

saying to a person, 'you are ugly'! We must always ensure our Dharma practice is focused inward.

To remedy attachment, we meditate on *mi-dukpa* in Tibetan, which translates as the unpleasantness or unattractive aspect of the desired object. In this meditation, we train or habituate our mind to perceive the object in an undesirable or unattractive aspect, regardless of what the object is. This has the effect of diminishing desire and attachment.

Our mind tends to generate the thoughts and emotions it is most habituated with. However, it is possible to change those habits of mind through training. Just as negative states of mind arise easily due to certain familiar thought patterns or ways of thinking, we can cause different states of mind to arise by changing our way of thinking to the contrary. This is how we can subdue our mind and bring about more peaceful and happier mind states.

For example, a quick way to get rid of attachment is to simply divert our mind to a different object so that it momentarily forgets the object of attachment. At least this will give us a momentary break from attachment, providing us with some peace, space and time during which it will be easier to focus on other things we need to do, such as meditation practice, without being agitated by attachment.

Likewise, some people have a problem controlling their anger or temper; because of strong anger, they are restless and unhappy and can't focus on anything. First, they must apply a meditation to specifically counteract anger because, without remedying the anger, they won't be able to function properly. So, they should meditate on generating compassion, loving kindness and patience which directly oppose anger and hatred. Even if we're unable to eliminate the anger from its root, reducing the force of anger will benefit us tremendously.

To remedy ignorance, we meditate on the view of dependent origination and emptiness.

Once we've overcome any afflictive emotion that's hindering us from doing the things we want to do, we'll find some mental ease, peace and joy, which will make it much easier for us to turn to other things, including Dharma practice.

The breathing meditation is highly recommended for those whose mind is overcrowded with disturbing thoughts, or for those whose minds don't have much energy to engage in reason and logic. This makes sense because, with the breathing meditation, we don't need to think too much or apply logic and reasoning. All we need do is simply focus our mind on the incoming and outgoing breath. That's all it takes. It's easy, but very effective in immediately clearing the mind of overwhelming, distracting thoughts.

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Edited Version*

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