
The Middle Length Lamrim

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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Right motivation

Make sure that we begin with the right motivation, ensuring it is not spoiled by self-cherishing or self-centeredness. Instead of the self-cherishing mind, our motivation for any activity that we engage in should be the mind of cherishing others, aimed at benefiting them with happiness and not harming them. The mind of cherishing others remedies or opposes the self-cherishing and self-centred mind. We want to get rid of the self-cherishing mind because it is the source of all our ongoing troubles and problems that bring suffering into our life.

Cherishing others even for our own benefit

Technically, we don't say a self-cherishing mind is an afflictive emotion, which in Tibetan is *ngon-mong*. With self-cherishing, we seek happiness and want to avoid suffering merely for ourselves alone. There is nothing wrong with seeking happiness and wanting to avoid suffering for ourselves, for we do deserve happiness and no suffering. But the problem is, with the self-cherishing mind, we only care and think about the welfare of ourselves and totally lack any consideration towards other beings. Hence, self-cherishing is very narrow-minded.

When we say 'self,' we are talking about just one sentient being, whereas when we say 'others,' it refers to countless sentient beings. If this doesn't help us understand and recognise the fault of the self-cherishing mind, ask ourselves, what do we think of someone who is very selfish and self-centred? We would clearly think they are not likable people. So, there is an implication that nobody likes the self-cherishing mind and can see it is with faults. Even when we say the word 'selfish,' it has a negative connotation.

On the other hand, the mind of cherishing other beings is a positive mental attitude that brings benefit to ourselves and others. We recognise and admire those who hold this mind as a noble being. Because the mind of cherishing other beings cares for and is concerned about the well-being of other beings, instead of only oneself, it is a vast and broad-minded attitude.

With the mind of cherishing others, we are automatically taking care of our needs and welfare. In a way, it is the most effective and best way of taking care of all our needs and wishes. What we all want is happiness and no suffering. The mind of cherishing other beings is the most effective means to achieve that. Even for the sake of our own self, we must get rid of self-cherishing and generate the mind of cherishing others.

Why focus inward?

When we look into the causes of suffering that we do not want and the causes of happiness that we do want, the primary cause lies within us rather than out there externally. Therefore, in our pursuit of finding happiness and eliminating suffering, we should mainly focus inwardly and then try to create the causes of happiness and eliminate the causes of suffering. If we focus only on external things, we won't be able to achieve much, or whatever we do accomplish will be ineffective.

What brings peace and happiness is positive states of mind. For example, when we have the mind of cherishing others and feeling love and compassion for other beings, we would experience a true sense of peace and joy. Self-cherishing doesn't give us similar positive experiences. We do talk about and keep ourselves busy all the time to bring more happiness and reduce suffering in our lives. But we need to ask and know the precise cause of what makes us happy and unhappy. In our case, the main cause is our mind and not so much or nothing to do with any external things.

If we were facing the problem of not meeting the necessities of life such as food, clothing, housing and health care, etc., then we do need external support to improve our situation. But if we check, most of the time we are feeling down and unhappy because of certain thoughts in our mind.

So, if the happiness that we seek and the suffering that we do not want mainly arise from our mind, then how and where can we learn more about our mind and how to manage it? The Dharma teaching is our best and in fact our only resource. Worldly education primarily focuses on external factors and not the internal factors that bring happiness and free us from suffering.

Changing our way of thinking

The fact is, whether we are happy or unhappy and what we do to achieve this very much depends on our mental attitude and way of thinking. As mentioned earlier, for example, if we have the mind of cherishing others, truly wishing them to have happiness and goodness, then when we see them happy and doing well, this will bring joy and rejoicing in one's mind. Whereas if we hold a self-cherishing or a strong self-centred mind, instead of joy, we will feel jealousy, hatred, and competitiveness with respect to their beauty, wealth, skills, and knowledge, and unnecessarily suffer, feel pain, and get disturbed as a result.

We know it is ridiculous when we feel that way, yet such painful experiences arise without control. This shows the lack of control and training of our mind. It shows how habituated our mind is with self-cherishing and how it is not used to wishing others to have happiness. We can, however, change our mind, our mental attitude, through training our mind, for example, to realise that just as for ourselves, all other beings are the same in also wanting happiness and goodness, and they too deserve it and have the right to happiness.

We should train until we realise this from the bottom of our heart, sincerely wishing others to have happiness and goodness. In this way, we can understand how through training or tuning our mind, we can get rid of all the unwanted problems of feeling jealousy, pride, hatred, and so on that might otherwise arise.

Be pragmatic about the Dharma practice

In the Dharma teachings, we hear a lot about finding a good rebirth, achieving liberation from samsara, and complete enlightenment. All these relate to future life goals. If we ask ourselves whether we believe in the existence of future lives, the honest answer is we don't, or we don't know. Indeed, it is not easy to establish the existence of future lives because we can't see them, and anything that we can't see is hard to prove. Therefore, when we hear about the benefits of the Dharma in terms of finding a good rebirth and so forth, we are talking about the long-term benefits of Dharma in future lives, and we aren't even sure if there is a future life.

So how are we going to understand the benefits of Dharma and generate faith in it? For this, we have to ask what is important for us now. What are we looking for now? In short, we all want to find happiness and eliminate suffering. So, it is important that we relate our Dharma knowledge and practice to what we go through now and in this life.

From this perspective, we should ask, does the Dharma make sense? It should make sense, and if we apply it in practice, we will yield tremendous benefits in terms of bringing more happiness and lessening suffering. Once we find the Dharma beneficial and it totally makes sense to our current experiences, we can easily infer from this that what we find in the Dharma about achieving long-term goals of finding a good rebirth and liberation are also true.

What is Dharma?

The term Dharma in Tibetan is *cho*, whose literal meaning in terms of practice is 'to change, amend, or transform.' This gives the notion of the Dharma as a means to change. This is to say that if we do not like something, for example, anger, we don't have to live with it because we can change it, or if we like or want to achieve something, we can. By applying the Dharma practice, we can recognise the true cause of anger and accordingly counteract anger through cultivating patience and compassion. Likewise, to counteract desire or attachment, the Dharma shows us the way of perceiving the desired object as undesirable.

Just as perceiving an object as desirable and attractive causes desire or attachment to arise in our mind, by perceiving the same object as undesirable and unattractive, desire will be diminished. Desire arises because of our mental perception, so to overcome it, we need to change our mental perspective. We need to change our mind but not the object per se. In other words, we don't need to throw away the object or complain about the object to change our mental perspective.

The Dharma shows us how to think holistically, logically, and broadly. This is how we can derive the benefit from the Dharma in opening our mind to various ways of thinking, which we need to train our mind in, and through this, keep our hope and courage. As said before, we can bring happiness, peace, and stability and diminish problems in our life just through changing or tuning our way of thinking.

Education about our own mind

When we talk of happiness, we are really referring to mental happiness and physical happiness, or happiness on a mental and physical level. In our case, we are mainly short of mental happiness. As to the physical or material happiness, I would say, because of living in such a good country as Australia, there is no good cause to complain about the external conditions. So, I think if people still complain, it could be because their living conditions are excessively good and not because they are bad.

In developed countries, what people are behind in with respect to the causes of peace and happiness is in mental development. I think people need more education to understand the value of enhancing positive mental attitudes and how this will make a significant contribution to bringing more happiness and reducing problems in society and in individuals' lives.

We are driven by our thoughts. Whether the thoughts we generate are good or bad, constructive or destructive depends upon whether we use positive or negative energy within us. Along with wrong states of mind, we have within us the ability to produce right states of mind.

Anger is a wrong or deluded state of mind because it is based on the wrong perception of the object. To counter this, we need to perceive the object contrary to the perception which causes anger; for example, cultivating the perception of the object which can cause us to practice patience and compassion. If we do not do that, then there is no other way to overcome anger or any other afflicted states of mind. Physically locking people in jail or beating them up is not a remedy to anger or to any other mental afflictions.

We have to understand that if a certain state of mind makes us too unhappy and agitated, then we do not have to have it, for we have a choice to get rid of it and there is a means to get rid of it. We should also be clear about what that means. It doesn't mean that if we adopt a certain belief system or religion or go to the temple and pray, we will automatically get rid of all the wrong mental attitudes and become a good person. But after following a religious tradition, we must learn what the founder of that religion has taught and, most importantly, apply it in practice. By applying the teaching into practice, we will be truly following that religion in the sense that we are emulating the teacher and hence we will get closer to them and achieve the same qualities that they have achieved.

We need to recognise that the arising of afflictive emotions, for example, anger or jealousy, brings unhappiness and emotional turbulence. People often say

they don't feel right, they are unhappy, feeling down, and restless. But sometimes they say they don't know what the cause is. However, if you direct your attention inwards and examine, you can recognise the cause is the influence or trace of any of the afflicted states of mind within us. All the afflicted states of mind underpin the incorrect, deluded, and wrong perception of things and events.

The primary cause of our mental and emotional experiences lies within us or within our mental continuum. As to the states of mind that we generate, they can be right or wrong, positive or negative. All the afflictive emotions are based on incorrect or wrong states of mind. For example, anger arises because of perceiving the object with exaggerated unpleasantness and undesirability. We can understand this by observing our mind when we feel anger and hatred. At that moment, the object appears to our mind as being undesirable. Why it appears that way is not because of what the object is, but because of our perceiving it that way, which triggers and feeds anger to arise within us.

Recently, neuroscience researchers concluded that, at the time of anger or hatred, 95% of why a person views an object as undesirable or unpleasant is due to the person's own mental projection of unpleasantness onto the object, and only 5% of the unpleasantness has to do with the object itself.

This finding supports that afflictive emotions arise within us because of following the wrong states of mind. Therefore, through having a subdued and transformed mind, we can achieve happiness and avoid suffering.

About meditation

Meditation is the most effective way to subdue and train our mind because it prevents our mind from wandering off or racing outward and it trains it to remain and focus on the object of meditation.

You may use any object, but the focal object is the mental image of the object in your mind. That's why when we have our mind focused on the object while meditating, our mind is abiding inward. Having the mind abiding inward for a prolonged period is difficult if we are not used to meditation. Therefore, as a beginner meditator, we won't be able to retain the mind on the object of focus for a long time and we won't have the clear recognition of the object.

It is important that we are contented with whatever degree of clarity and concentration we have of the object. We should not be trying too hard to improve the clarity and concentration because doing so will cause us to lose the object completely.

It is recommended to shorten the meditation duration, but when we resume, we should ensure that we use the same object of meditation. Not shifting the object is particularly important to achieve single-pointed concentration.

With meditation practice, we are stabilising and easing the mind inward, and we are also stabilising the physical elements. This helps with balancing and improving the

health of our body. On the other hand, if we are mentally or emotionally disturbed and restless, we can have health problems with our body because this results in the disruption of the four elements and our body is dependent on these.

In other words, the health of our body is dependent on the balance of the elements in our body. So from this perspective, we can say that meditation is a good cause to enjoy the good health of our body.

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