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# The Middle Length Lamrim

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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It will be good for us to cultivate the right motivation by thinking, 'I wish to achieve complete enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings and for that purpose I will listen to this teaching, and make a strong effort to put it into practice'.

## The aims and objectives of a Dharma practitioner

It is very important to have an objective for any activity we engage in. So, what are the aims and objectives of a Dharma practitioner? Normally the aims and objectives driving our various activities, whether studying or working, are mainly to make a living for our survival.

Our objective is quite narrow if our purpose is to just solve our immediate problems, suffering or difficulties. In fact, if you observe animals, they too have the capacity to fulfil their temporary purpose. When they are hungry, they know where to find food; when they feel thirsty, they know where to get water; when they feel too hot, they can find shade and when they feel extreme cold, they know where to go to get warmer. So, in light of this, it is really important to seek a higher aim or objective.

I have repeatedly said in the past that we need to recognise the fact that, as human beings, we currently enjoy pleasures such as food and drink, clothing, and shelter. Compared to other, lesser forms of life, human life offers more advantages and favourable conditions. Having these favourable circumstances provides us with a rare opportunity and capacity to accomplish our goals.

We need to reflect on how best to develop this unique opportunity, capacity, and potential. We must also recognise that all these wonderful conditions, which we now enjoy as human beings, do not come together without causes and conditions.

## Causes and conditions

We may ask: "What are these causes and conditions?" If we wish to experience a similar kind of human life with all its favourable circumstances, we must understand that we need to create the same causes and conditions that have led to what we currently have. Our present life is the outcome of our past actions and the causes we created in a previous life. For example, if this human life is the result of practicing morality, then the wealth and good material conditions we enjoy may be the result of the practice of generosity in our former life.

Through meditation, our mind has the capacity to focus on an object, enabling us to develop discrimination, wisdom, and knowledge. The ability to engage in meditation practice and maintain focus on an object is the result of our previous practice, such as the cultivation of concentration.

When considering future lives, we must understand that we cannot keep this life forever. We need to acknowledge how quickly time passes, and if we don't take serious action to make the most of this life, we will soon realise that we have wasted it.

## Virtue and non-virtue

Depending on what we seek in our future life, there are things we desire and things we wish to avoid. For example, we do not want to be born into a state of suffering or experience a lower rebirth in any of the lower realms. Committing non-virtuous actions, such as the ten non-virtuous deeds, can lead us to such lower realms.

On the other hand, if we make an effort in this lifetime to avoid those ten non-virtuous actions, we need not worry about being reborn in the lower realms when we leave this life. Instead, we will have the opportunity and capacity to secure a good rebirth and eventually attain liberation from cyclic existence. The path to achieving liberation is through the threefold training.

We can learn about the threefold training and engage in those practices to make progress. We also have the potential to achieve supreme or complete enlightenment, which is the state of buddhahood. The root cause of this is the development of bodhicitta and practicing the six perfections. Therefore, we should reflect on the goals we wish to achieve, as the choice and opportunity are in our hands. So we must engage in the Dharma to seize that opportunity.

It is only through Dharma practice that we can achieve our objectives, not just to fulfil the temporary needs of this current life, but to achieve our needs beyond this life, such as finding a good rebirth or attaining liberation or full enlightenment. For any of those long-term goals, Dharma practice is the only means and path to engage in.

## Making our life meaningful

Engaging in Dharma practice is the way to make our life and time more meaningful. Depending on the goal we wish to achieve, there are three levels or types of Dharma practitioners: those on the small spiritual scope, who engage in practices of the small scope; those on the middling scope, who engage in middling spiritual practices; and those on the great spiritual path, who engage in great practices. We should strive to follow the great spiritual path and aspire to be great spiritual practitioners.

This is why, when cultivating our motivation for engaging in Dharma practice, we generate the aspiration to achieve complete enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. As spiritual practitioners of the great scope our primary goal is complete enlightenment to benefit all sentient beings and the main or root cause to achieve that is bodhicitta or the altruistic mind of enlightenment.

Our motivation is to achieve complete enlightenment to benefit all sentient beings. If we go into detail and unpack this bodhicitta mind, then it has two main elements or aspirations: one for the purpose of other sentient beings; and the other to achieve one's own purpose, which is complete enlightenment.

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In the cultivation and process of generating a bodhicitta mind, we need to first cultivate the aspirations to benefit or achieve full enlightenment for all other sentient beings. This is followed by a bodhicitta mind which is the aspiration to achieve complete enlightenment. So it refers to the future state of enlightenment we are going to achieve.

So even though the aspiration to achieve your own purpose or complete enlightenment comes after or follows the aspiration to achieve the purpose for other beings, in terms of the cause and effect of achieving our own purpose first or for the purpose of all other sentient beings first, we must initially achieve the purpose for our own self, or our own enlightenment, because this is essential if we are to fulfil the purpose of all other sentient beings. Then, of course, as part of the bodhicitta practice, developing and generating bodhicitta, we also must try to develop love and compassion for all other sentient beings.

We can imagine the immense benefit of filling our minds with love and compassion, which will completely prevent any harmful thoughts toward other sentient beings. By practicing and cultivating such love and compassion, we will also experience greater peace within ourselves.

### **Equalising ourselves with others**

One of the key methods for generating bodhicitta, according to Shantideva, is the practice of equalizing and exchanging self with others. It's important to understand what we are equalising. This method doesn't simply focus on recognising that all beings, like ourselves, wish for happiness and seek to avoid suffering. Instead, it directly addresses our strong self-cherishing mind. By engaging in this training and applying the method of equalising and exchanging self with others, we replace our self-cherishing with a mind that cherishes others with the same intensity.

Thus, 'equalising' refers to the equality of the mind that cherishes others and the mind that cherishes ourselves. Since we naturally have a self-cherishing mind, the practice we need to engage in is to cultivate bodhicitta and strive to replace our self-cherishing with a mind that cherishes other beings.

We can engage in meditation practices to calm our minds and overcome the seemingly perpetual unhappiness and disturbances we experience. We can reach the point where we recognise that 'as far as my own needs are concerned, they are adequate,' and develop a sense of contentment with this thought, which can be very relaxing.

As Dharma practitioners, we should focus on the long-term goals of our lives rather than confining all our efforts and energy to merely meeting temporary needs and purposes. It is the long-term purpose that really matters.

### **The threefold training**

As I mentioned before, we can ensure that, even after we leave this life, we will find a good rebirth. To achieve this, we must practice abandoning the ten non-virtuous actions and adopting the ten virtuous ones. Additionally, we need to create the causes necessary to attain liberation by engaging in the threefold training of morality, concentration, and wisdom.

Morality is the fundamental basis of the three-fold training. Without morality, we cannot make progress or actualise the perfect state of concentration. Then, of course, without the perfect state of concentration, we cannot gain insight and wisdom. Therefore the practice of morality serves as a very important cause for our spiritual progress and development because morality completely settles our mind.

### **Morality calms our mind**

Through the practice of morality, we can completely calm our minds so no external distractions can disturb us or cause agitation. Therefore if we develop the practice of morality, we won't fall under the influence of any kind of gross or coarse conceptualised disturbing thoughts, which are the direct causes that bring about all sorts of mental afflictive emotions.

The practice of morality will bring actual mental peace which will then serve as a perfect cause to develop concentration. To do this we need to overcome the various gross and subtle levels of mental excitement and mental sinking or laxity. Then based on a very solid practice of morality we can overcome the influence of any external distractions and free ourselves from all gross and disturbing thoughts, and our mind becomes stabilised. In that state, we will be able to eradicate any obstacles to perfect concentration, such as excitement and laxity. Once we achieve perfect concentration we can rely on that, and apply analytical wisdom strongly and sharply enough to cut through or eliminate all of the afflictive emotions and we can then achieve the state of liberation.

### **Bodhicitta practice**

Bodhicitta practice or the threefold training serves as mental training and the only way is to train our mind. There are a lot of things that we have studied over time like training our mind to reflect on the truth of suffering, which includes the three types of suffering: the suffering of suffering, and the suffering of change, which are both not that difficult to understand. However, we need to apply more effort and focus to understanding the pervasive suffering of conditioning. This is important to recognise and only by realising this, will we be able to have renunciation.

### **Renunciation**

Renunciation is a definite thought to leave cyclic existence and to emerge from this suffering world. But we cannot generate a wish to leave cyclic existence when within us there is some attraction to it, for example, attraction to this body and this life.

If we look at our mind, we may notice that we might have habits that seem impossible to break but as Shantideva said, what is difficult and what is easy depends on the force of our familiarisation and we gain familiarity through training our mind to make it possible, even though difficult, to at least start to apply the various training so that we can bring change to our mind.

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