
The Middle Length Lamrim

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

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

8 October 2024

We need to ensure that we give rise to a bodhicitta motivation. You all have some sort of understanding of what bodhicitta is. It's the genuine thought or wish to achieve complete enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. This is the motivation we must generate to begin this teaching.

Along with this, we also need to generate an intention to engage in the six perfections.

Respecting other spiritual traditions

Acharya Vasubandhu said, 'Do not teach Dharma out of an afflictive emotion, and ensure what you teach accords with the words of the Buddha'. Therefore, it's very wrong to have a biased attitude when you teach Dharma. With a biased attitude, you despise the views of other traditions, while holding your view as the best and advocating or imposing it on others. If we're not careful, this can easily happen because of our habituation with attachment and hatred.

In fact, any Dharma practice we undertake should not be stained by any afflictive emotion, such as attachment and hatred. His Holiness the Dalai Lama is a strong advocate of mutual respect and religious harmony. Once, at a funeral service, I met a rabbi who said to me, 'You are very fortunate because you have a very good teacher, His Holiness the Dalai Lama.' Mutual respect and harmony are universally recognised. Many people around the world admire and recognise His Holiness because of his consistent stand on promoting world peace, humanity and religious harmony.

Just as those who follow Buddhism find the Buddhist teachings beneficial, others who follow different schools find benefits in their individual belief systems. So, even though the views held by others differ from, or even contradict, the view of our tradition, we should not criticise or undermine them. Rather, we should learn to respect them and recognise their value and benefits to other adherents. This is very important.

It's crucial that whatever we do benefits others in finding happiness and eliminating suffering. We must understand that benefiting others also means benefiting ourselves, in terms of bringing us happiness and getting rid of our suffering. We can achieve happiness and avoid suffering for ourselves and others because we have the potential and capacity as a human being. In Sanskrit, a human being is called *puruka*, meaning one with potential.

Meditation and mental peace

As spiritual practitioners, whether we teach or listen to Dharma or in any Dharma practice we do, we should be

aiming to counteract the three poisonous minds, which are desire, hatred and ignorance. How do we counteract the three poisonous minds? Not by hitting them with a stick or other external means! But by employing our mind. They arise due to a certain state of mind. But, by cultivating a different state of mind, we can finish them off.

We want to counteract these three poisonous minds because they are the main source of all our problems and sufferings. Attachment inflicts much suffering on us, not to mention the suffering brought on us by hatred, which we obviously know as a destructive mind. The moment an afflictive emotion arises, we automatically lose peace and joy in our mind.

Ignorance is the root cause of all the afflictive emotions. Here, ignorance means not knowing, or having confusion in our mind. We suffer as a result of the wrong actions we create due to this ignorance or bewildered state of mind.

On the other hand, if we free ourselves from the bondage of the three poisonous minds, we will achieve genuine peace and happiness. To effectively counteract these poisonous minds, we need to do meditation practice. Through this, we can train and direct the mind towards virtuous thoughts and objects.

When our mind focuses on or abides in virtue, there's no cause for afflictive emotions to arise; hence, all our mental turmoil and unhappiness ceases, and inner joy, peace and happiness arise within us. This inner joy and peace are not contingent upon favourable external conditions.

To summarise, the main cause of our mind being disturbed, restless and unhappy is the afflictive emotions, which lie within us. We employ meditation practice as the inner remedy to these afflictive emotions. Meditation is the most effective means to remedy the afflictive emotions because it directly deals with them and enhances our peace and happiness from within.

Applying the Dharma to our own mind

We must always relate Dharma knowledge and practice to our mind. The Dharma is an effective means to bring about change in our mind.

Change in our mind is necessary because our unhappiness results from a certain way of thinking or thought pattern, whereas another way of thinking results in peace and happiness. So, by changing our mind, we can bring happiness and eliminate suffering. If happiness or suffering is just a mental state, it seems quite easy to achieve happiness and shun suffering, for we need do nothing other than train and transform our mind. That's all it takes.

If one way of thinking is a cause of unhappiness, that means cultivating a different way of thinking opposing that will bring happiness. Indeed, this is true and we can easily understand it through using our common sense or discriminating wisdom.

Self-responsibility

The question now is how to change our mind and how to implement that change.

Firstly, and most importantly, we must assume the responsibility of achieving what we want to achieve. It's our responsibility to enjoy a healthy mind and healthy body, if that's what we want. Our happiness in this life and happiness in our future life is our responsibility.

With this sense of self-responsibility, we need to achieve the happiness we want and avoid the suffering we don't want in this life or in our future life. We do this by, on the one hand, adopting right actions and thoughts, and on the other hand, avoiding wrong thoughts and deeds.

Generally, the main reason we lack happiness and face problems is not because externally we lack suitable conditions. Rather, it's because of our mind falling under the control of afflictive emotions, such as attachment, anger and jealousy. We suffer and lack peace and joy because of these afflictions within us.

Managing our emotions and mental attitude

Therefore, to bring about peace and happiness in our life and eradicate suffering, we need to manage our emotions or mental attitude – we need to establish the right inner conditions, more so than worrying about external conditions. Without inner peace, we can't find sustainable happiness. By overcoming and minimising afflictive emotions, such as desire and anger, we can bring about sustained peace and happiness.

For example, if we don't control our desirous mind then, regardless of how much we succeed externally, in terms of gaining wealth and so on, internally we'd feel unhappy and discontented, because if we had one thing, we'd want two, and so on. If you are unable to control your desire, eventually it will grow and be beyond your control. The result will be unending suffering.

It's the same for anger – if we don't take any countermeasures to diminish it when it arises, it will increase. And if, instead of counteracting the anger, we keep feeding it, it will develop to the point where it will be beyond our control.

Therefore, it's really important to see that whatever meditation or Dharma practice we do should be aimed at cleansing our mind of the afflictive emotions. With Dharma and meditation practice, we are utilising an inner resource to achieve happiness and avoid suffering. This is what's really important.

With our Dharma practice, we focus on achieving bigger, more long-term goals – not just the goals of this life, but those of the life after this, and the one after that. This wider concern or perspective on life directly counteracts narrow concerns, such as attachment to this life's affairs. If we think about it, most of our problems and suffering are related to our excessive concern with this life. So, by loosening our grasping to this life, we'll find more peace, satisfaction and happiness, even in the current moment.

Maybe if any of you have a question, I will take a question.

Student: I recently had to give euthanasia to a dog, which I did not want to do. So, there are two questions: one is that we've been told by Rinpoche that it's best that when we part with a being, we don't part with euthanasia; that it's best to experience the pain of death so one doesn't experience that pain after death. So, if we commit euthanasia to an animal, is it better for the animal to have a calm abiding mind, whereas pain gives them anxiety... a calmer mind at death or an anxious mind at death?

Other students further clarify: It's the mental state when passing. What is more important, the calm abiding mental state or to experience pain so that you don't have that karma?... If the dog is suffering before it dies, if it has an anxious mental state, if it gets killed [euthanased], then that will stop it from having pain and suffering?... Taking drugs, giving the dog drugs at the time of death or let it die naturally?

Geshe Doga: Your question is very difficult to answer. Generally, people say that euthanasia is based on the suffering or discomfort the animal is going through as they perceive it. But the question is, do we know everything the dying being goes through? Our usual decision is based on what we can see and understand. But there are a lot of other experiences that beings go through but which are beyond our knowledge.

Student: If the dog is in a calm state of mind, is it better for the dog itself?

Geshe Doga: But when you say 'calm state of mind', that's what the question is here. We may see the animal as being calm, but we don't know its inner state, and this is where the dilemma is.

In around 1983–84, a fellow asked a similar question of me at Chenrezig Centre. In fact, this fellow came to Chenrezig to see me, because he said he'd had a dream of a monk, so he looked around for a monk and a temple and he found out about Chenrezig Centre. He said to me, 'You must be the monk in my dream'. Anyway, after receiving some teachings, he said to me that one of the things he felt bad about was helping his friend euthanise a horse. Then he said, 'But one good thing I did in my life was that I paid tax to the government'. I agreed with him because your tax contribution goes towards supporting the welfare of all others.

It's a difficult question to handle because we, as Buddhists, believe in life after death, such as in lower rebirths, or even the hell realm. Based on this life-after-death belief, suppose a dying being is going to the hell realm immediately after death; then, if we help them die quickly, it's like helping them reach the hell realm quicker. That's why euthanasia is a dilemma.

However, if you don't believe in life after death, then helping a very stressed dying person in unbearable pain seems the right thing to do.

Student: Isn't that why, when you are dying, you want to be calm, so that you have a better chance for a better next life?

Geshe Doga: It's said that if a dying person dies with a virtuous state of mind, such as having the thought of loving kindness and compassion towards other beings,

that would be a very important cause to find a good rebirth.

Generally, it's extremely difficult to know the state of mind of a dying person at the last moment of life. Most likely, the person will have the type of the mind with which they are most habituated. If, during their lifetime, a person has been used to being kind to others and always thinking of helping others, this person will die with the same virtuous and peaceful state of mind. So, it's very important throughout our lifetime to familiarise ourselves with virtuous minds through the practice of Dharma.

Regarding the degree of pain, I think age is a determining factor. Older people are physically weaker, so their level of pain is lower. If a dying person is very old, their feelings are not as acute as that of a younger dying person. I'm sure there is a scientific explanation for that too.

Student: *I've recently seen that when someone dies, relatives may show anger. What sort of karma are you giving yourself because you get angry?*

Another student clarifies: *When someone is dying often the people around them get angry – what karma is produced by that anger?*

Geshe Doga: It's beneficial for the dying person to have a very peaceful environment. If there are people making a lot of noise and fighting, that would not be good and can be disturbing and upsetting for the dying person.

Once, I visited a dying 85-year-old man who was not a Buddhist. I recited some prayers for him. The man quietly responded to me by saying thank you and he understood the prayer. So reciting prayers is beneficial.

On another occasion, someone who was a Buddhist passed away in hospital, surrounded by some family and Buddhist friends who recited prayers. The hospital staff commented how pleasant it was to observe the prayer recitation.

For a dying person, it's good to make the room quiet and peaceful and make everything comfortable and relaxing. Depending on their faith, it would be good to place a holy image in the room to remind the person of their faith, such as having a Christian image for a Christian. This image may provide a sense of protection, and be a cause to generate the thought of the holy teachings.

Student: *What if you have been practising virtue as much as possible and then you are in a car accident or plane accident and your mind grasps? What will throw you to the next life, that grasping or the virtue?*

Geshe Doga: It's hard for us to know exactly the last moment of the mind of a dying person. When you talk of the 'last moment' it could be in a split second, or a very short timeframe. Therefore, even somebody dying in an accident could possibly have virtue arising in the last moment. If that person has a very strong habituation with virtue, there's a chance that could happen.

It's said that whether a dying person's last state of mind is virtuous, non-virtuous or neutral depends upon

certain factors. For example, of the two forces of a virtuous state of mind or a non-virtuous state of mind, whichever force is stronger will arise in the mind first. But if the two forces are equal, then of the virtuous and non-virtuous minds, whichever one had been created first will arise.

Student: *I'm just wondering if the desire in our western culture for euthanasia is based on a fear of death, fear of our own death, and when we look at something that is dying it reminds us of that. I am thinking about this because when I was in Dharmasala I went to an old friend of Katrina's who lived near an old peoples' community and on the ground in front of her house there was a dying dog. That dog had been eaten by maggots and it didn't look distressed and it had a bowl of water. She was completely calm with the process. Can it be a difference in our culture maybe, which is causing us to think about euthanasia out of ignorance of that moment, causing a lot of fear? Is the western idea of using euthanasia because of a fear of death?*

Geshe Doga: You have initiated a difficult question here. But for people who face that dilemma of whether to keep supporting a dying animal or not, Geshe-la has advised that, for as long as you can, you should support and keep the animal alive.

[Student question on the difference between love and compassion]

Geshe Doga: According to Buddhism, attachment is a mental factor or state of mind based on perceiving an object as overly desirable, pleasant or beautiful. Because of this perception of the object with an exaggerated attractiveness, you cling to the object. That is attachment.

Whereas when we talk about love in Buddhism, it's based on the needs of the other person. Your mental attitude towards the other person is one of wishing to give them what they're lacking or deprived of, and giving them anything they want, like joy and happiness. Similarly, compassion is based on wanting to help others overcome their suffering and problems.

*Transcript prepared by Bernii Wright
Edit 1 by Mary-Lou Considine
Edit 2 by Sandup Tsering
Edited Version*

© Tara Institute