
The Middle Length Lamrim

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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Motivation

Please try to generate the motivation wishing to achieve complete enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. To fulfil this wish of the altruistic mind of enlightenment one should think: I am listening to this profound teaching to benefit all sentient beings.

Why should we adopt virtues and abandon non-virtues?

We should continuously listen to the Dharma to increase our knowledge, but at the same time consider putting the Dharma into practice, which is most important. If we are not really practising enough or not practising at all, it is not because we do not know what to practice. If you think about it, there are plenty of Dharma practices we already know we should be practising; for example, we already know we should abandon the ten non-virtues and adopt the ten virtues.

We all want happiness and do not want suffering so we know why we must practise the Dharma. We should not be just saying it, but thinking and knowing in the depths of our hearts that what we want is happiness and what we do not want is suffering. The next question is how to achieve happiness and avoid suffering. To answer this question we think about the causes and conditions for achieving happiness and avoiding suffering.

Both happiness and suffering are dependent upon their causes – they cannot arise without causes and conditions. So, what are the causes and conditions? We should also ask ourselves, do we currently have more reasons for happiness or for suffering? If we think about our current situation, I think we have more reasons for happiness. For example, we have found an excellent human life and enjoy favourable living conditions. We must however recognise that the good life that we have found at the moment is the result of the good karma we created in past lives. If we want to see a similar good life in future lives, then we must create the causes for that, which we can do now.

Virtues result in happiness and non-virtues result in suffering. We should not engage in non-virtue because we do not want suffering. That's it. Therefore it is important that we generate strong thoughts of adopting virtues and abandoning non-virtues. There are many different methods and ways to adopt virtues and avoid adopting non-virtues. We can find out about that through continuously studying the Dharma.

How to practise virtues and abandon non-virtues

The problem is we are too bogged down in our immediate situation because of which we end up being

vulnerable, volatile and impatient. Instead, we should always hold a wider mental perspective which will give us more resilience and a better future. For example, we should be concerned not only with the benefit and happiness of this life but also that of future lives. When we take into account our long-term future needs, we realise that we must create virtues and abandon non-virtues. By doing that we bring more happiness and benefit now as well as securing happiness and preventing suffering in future.

Dharma practice means adopting virtue and abandoning non-virtue and so it is an essential means to achieve happiness and avoid suffering. If we live our lives by practising virtues and abandoning non-virtues each day, then naturally as we age, we find happiness keeps increasing while suffering keeps decreasing. Hence, ageing and dying don't worry us or make us feel frightened or depressed. The way we have lived our lives gives us a sense of contentment and purpose because we have done well with the accumulation of merit and the purification of negativities.

Putting effort into habituating ourselves with virtue

Most importantly in our everyday lives, we should familiarise ourselves with virtue by always maintaining a virtuous state of mind. Then that virtuous state of mind will easily or even automatically arise in the face of any life crisis. A virtuous mind will keep our mind happy and at peace. With a peaceful and happy mind, we can cope and support ourselves much better. It is said that if we have a virtuous mind at the time of death we will definitely not go to the lower realms. So, we should put an effort into habituating ourselves with a virtuous mind.

If we do not consider practicing virtue for the sake of our future life or this life, then what will protect and give us strength and hope if we suddenly confront hardship? For example, if we are struck with a life-threatening illness, we would be shocked and devastated, not knowing what to do and experiencing fear of death. Since external things, including our body, are failing, we need help. We find that in an inner strength, which is a virtuous state of mind. However, this won't arise naturally unless we habituate ourselves to it by engaging in the practice of adopting the ten virtues and abandoning the ten non-virtues now.

By the law of karma, the natural course of cause and effect, virtue results in happiness, and non-virtue results in suffering. We must practice this while we can – we have the freedom to practice now and nothing impeding us from doing so. If we don't engage now, the chance of us practicing when we face hardship is very unlikely or may come too late.

I practise virtue every day. As a Buddhist, I keep reminding myself of the Lord Shakyamuni Buddha. I recite the Buddha's mantra, thinking of his excellent qualities. Each and every minute I try to remember the Lord Buddha, remember my root guru, the Wish Fulfilling Jewel, His Holiness the Dalai Lama. If we habituate ourselves with the practice of virtue, with virtuous states of mind and avoid non-virtues, then

eventually the virtuous state of mind will arise naturally and the non-virtuous mind will cease. As I think of the Lord Buddha, and recite his mantra frequently every day, I now do it naturally and habitually. Even in my dreams, I notice I am doing the same.

If we keep practising virtue and abandoning non-virtues, we needn't worry about the future. That will take care of itself. The Lord Buddha taught us to practise the ten virtues and abandon the ten non-virtues because the practice of compassion and non-violence is fundamental to Buddhism. In fact, it is also the fundamental practice of all other major religions.

You can find the details of this moral practice in the lamrim teaching on the small stages of the path. I would say that the teachings on the small stages of the path, such as the ten virtues and the ten non-virtues, are common to other major religions. However, the teachings on the middling stage of the path and above are unique to Buddhism.

The teaching on the ten virtues and abandoning the ten non-virtues is the fundamental practice - it is not complicated and it is a commonly accepted practice. The practice of the virtue of abandoning killing means avoiding killing any other beings by thought, in the sense of not having thoughts of killing and of course no killing by deed. Likewise abandoning stealing (and each of the other ten virtues) is an essential practice to benefit others and stop harming them.

Taking refuge in the Three Jewels

Among the many practices of abandoning evil actions and adopting virtues, we recite the refuge prayer and go for refuge to the Three Jewels. This is called the force of the basis, which is one of the four forces of antidotes. So, taking refuge is an effective means of purifying negativities and evils as well as an important cause to prevent a bad future rebirth.

Once in a conversation I asked someone who didn't normally come to my Dharma discourses, 'What meditations do you do? He replied to me, 'I meditate on *The Heart Sutra*.' I was quite amazed by his reply and had nothing to say. *The Heart Sutra* contains very profound topics and meditating on it is not an ordinary practice.

The Buddha is the perfect object of refuge because the Buddha possesses four excellent qualities: the Buddha himself is free from all fears; perfectly skilled in freeing others from fears; endowed with impartial compassion towards all beings not favouring some over others; and benefitting all beings whether others benefit him or not. These four unique qualities make the Buddha the perfect object of refuge to rely on, and a fully qualified being to benefit all beings.

The Buddha is free of all fears

If we look at the first quality - Buddha himself is free from all fears - we can see how it is essential that whoever we rely on has to be able to rescue us from fear and suffering. This shows that if you are not free, you cannot free others. For example, if the child of a mother with no arms is drowning, she can't rescue them even

though she loves them dearly. So whoever you rely on in taking refuge must be free from all fear and suffering themselves, if they are to help free you from fear.

The Buddha has the skill to benefit others

The Buddha himself is free from all fear but if he lacks the skill to free others, there is no guarantee that he can in fact free others.

The Buddha is impartial

The Buddha is liberated and possesses the necessary skills, but if he lacked the third quality of impartial compassion, there is no guarantee that he will benefit you.

The Buddha is willing to help all sentient beings

If the Buddha lacks the fourth quality of willingness to benefit all beings equally, regardless of whether others benefit him or not, you can't be sure he will help you.

All buddhas or fully awakened beings and are endowed with these four amazing qualities. We should remember these qualities when we think about the qualities of the Lord Buddha. So, the Buddha is a source of inspiration for us to aspire to the state of buddhahood, and therefore a cause for bodhicitta - an altruistic aspiration to achieve complete enlightenment to benefit all sentient beings - to arise within us, as well as to develop faith in the Buddha.

Through reflecting on the qualities of the Buddha, we can also naturally develop faith in the Sangha, because the Buddha was once a Sangha striving on the path to complete enlightenment. In other words, where does the Buddha come from? The Buddha comes from the Sangha and through developing faith in Buddha's qualities, we generate faith in the Sangha too. Faith and trust in the object of refuge, as a saviour or protector for us to achieve liberation from fear and suffering are very important elements of our refuge practice.

We must ensure we go for refuge to the Three Jewels - the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha - from the bottom of our hearts with unshakable trust and faith. The other important element or factor to take refuge properly is a strong sense of fear and insecurity about being subject to samsara or falling into lower rebirths. This sense of fear forces us to seek help, protection and refuge. With faith in the Three Jewels we place ourselves completely under the protection or guidance of the Three Jewels. This faith is cultivated and developed through fully recognising the excellent qualities of the Three Jewels such as the above four qualities of the Buddha. Taking refuge in the Three Jewels means completely trusting, from the depth of our hearts, the Three Jewels as the perfect protection, having all the power and qualities to liberate us from samsara in general and lower rebirths in particular.

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