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# The Middle Length Lamrim

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

29 October 2024

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Please generate the right motivation for listening to this teaching. Our motivation should be to achieve complete enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. With this purpose in mind, we should think that we are listening to this teaching and have the intention to follow it up by putting it into practice.

In this motivation we've generated, we aim to direct our intention so that, in our practice and whatever we do, we focus on benefiting other beings with an altruistic motivation. The question arises: why should we think of benefiting or helping others?

## All sentient beings are precious to us

We need to understand how precious all other beings are to us. When we think of the value of other beings to ourselves and recognise their importance, their great benefit to us, we will naturally take them into consideration.

In terms of how we depend on others for our wellbeing and happiness, the very fact that we are alive, breathing, and surviving now is due to other sentient beings. Even for our own needs, we rely heavily on others; our resources and support often come from them. Therefore, we can understand how important it is to develop this altruistic mental attitude—an attitude of wanting to help or benefit others—and how significant this is for us.

Once we develop this attitude in our minds, even if we cannot actively benefit or help others, we would never bring harm to other beings. This is important. As I often emphasise, from time to time, we need to reflect on what we want to achieve and what we want in life. When we think about this, we recognise that we seek happiness and satisfaction.

Of course, if we consider what happiness truly is, we are talking about both mental and physical happiness. On the physical level, good health brings physical happiness and is an advantage. However, the most important is happiness on the mental level. Typically, we lead very busy lives, always racing against time and facing endless things to do. Along the way, we may feel that we are achieving something—like making money or gaining wealth.

However, we should also ask ourselves: is what we are achieving, such as wealth and a busy, high-paced life, really bringing us the happiness we seek, mentally or physically? If it's not, then we must question why we live such a busy life. What is the purpose of all the wealth and money? When we reflect on this, it becomes clear what we truly want in life. At the same time, we realise

that achieving this happiness is in our own hands, and we can attain it.

## What does the 'I' really want?

Another way to look at this is to consider the 'I' within each of us. We all have a sense of 'I' or self. When we think about it, what does this 'I' truly want?

First of all, we must remember that this 'I' has a very close relationship with us—it's always present. The 'I' is constantly there. So, what does this 'I' want? And what does the 'I' not want? If we reflect on this, we can imagine the 'I' as a person, someone we can communicate with. When we experience discomfort or illness, we know this 'I' feels unhappy and undergoes suffering. This shows us how important our physical health and comfort are to the happiness of the 'I'.

Likewise, if our mind becomes disturbed, unhappy, or is in crisis, this too causes the 'I' to say, "I am not happy." It's important to understand, and it's clear, what this 'I' truly wants: happiness, and what it seeks to avoid: suffering. As we've noted, this 'I' is always with us, and it's clear that what 'I' wants is happiness and what it doesn't want is suffering.

These two—happiness and relief from immediate suffering—are ultimately within our own hands.

What I am saying is not something that I have heard from others; I am not saying that I heard it from someone else and am sharing it with you. Rather, what I am saying is something everyone can see in their own experience.

## Mental and physical happiness

Here, we are talking about happiness on both the mental and physical levels, and both of these are things we experience personally. When we are physically sick, we know what it feels like. Likewise, on a mental level, when we experience unhappiness, we directly feel it. We are not talking about something foreign to us; rather, it is something directly related to our own experience.

Therefore, on the basis of our own experience, we can derive some benefit by engaging in meditation practice. If we engage in meditation practice, it can benefit us by bringing peace and happiness to our minds. We all know that mental peace and happiness can also contribute to the health of our body. On a physical level, of course, if we are afflicted by certain illnesses, that is a different matter. We are familiar with what to do and where to seek help.

## Meditation brings peace and happiness to the mind

Now, if we look into meditation practice as a means to bring about peace and happiness in our minds, we see that meditation is a very effective tool for eliminating unwanted thoughts and emotions, which are responsible for mental disturbance and unhappiness. In other words, in meditation terms, what brings unhappiness and disturbance to the mind are afflictive emotions. Meditation practice is very effective in overcoming these because it offers training and discipline to the mind. Through meditation, we direct or train our mind to abide on certain virtuous objects. Placing our mind on those

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virtuous objects of meditation has the direct effect of preventing or eliminating disturbing thoughts and emotions.

Therefore, we can see that through meditation practice, it is possible to enhance or bring about peace and happiness in our mind and to overcome disturbing thoughts and emotions.

On the mental level, once we experience peace and happiness, this 'I'—our sense of self—can remain at ease no matter where we are, whether in a pleasant place or not. When we have inner peace, external conditions matter less, and this 'I' can still be at peace and happy.

To find and sustain peace and happiness in our lives, meditation practice is not strictly necessary; there are more secular methods. For instance, we can focus on being a good human being by being kind, close to others, sharing love, being friendly, and maintaining harmonious relationships. We understand that having a supportive network of people who show us love, friendship, and help makes a huge difference and eases life's challenges.

### **Enjoying maximum physical and mental happiness**

Whether it's meditation or another effective practice, we all know that no matter how many years we live—80, 90, or more—we have to cope with life every day. If we find a way to enjoy maximum physical and mental happiness, and we engage in effective methods to bring peace and happiness into our lives, then as the years go by and we age, we will find increasing stability, peace, and happiness.

This isn't a statement of pride, but rather something I can tell you from my own experience. Since my youth, through my practice, I have noticed that as I age, there is more peace and happiness. It's possible for anyone to find ways to ensure peace and happiness without depending on external circumstances. You can discover your own way, whether through meditation or other means, to live a life of peace and happiness.

### **Using our intelligence and discernment is essential**

As much as possible, we should use our own intelligence and sense of discernment. Discernment is essential for us. If we can see for ourselves what is beneficial and what is harmful, then naturally, we'll try to avoid what is harmful. We have a natural tendency to seek what benefits us and to dislike or avoid what harms us.

In daily life, we need to apply this sense of discernment to everything we do. We should check how we speak to others and the way we communicate—is it beneficial or harmful? Likewise, we should observe our physical gestures, facial expressions, and general demeanour toward others. Simultaneously, we should watch our mind and thoughts, because not all our actions—whether physical, verbal, or mental—are desirable or positive. As I mentioned before, we naturally seek what is beneficial and reject what is harmful. By examining our speech, if we notice that certain words are damaging, destructive, or harmful to ourselves, we won't continue saying them because we don't wish harm for ourselves.

However, when we are not aware of this, we may act in ways that later damage our relationships with others. It is important to try to, on one hand, undertake many altruistic actions, inspired by the example of the bodhisattva's deeds, such as devoting our lives to benefiting others. But if we really think about it, that may not be practical or applicable for most of us as ordinary beings. Therefore, as ordinary people, what is important is our own wellbeing—our mental health and happiness, or our physical health and happiness, as this is what matters most to us.

### **Harmony brings satisfaction**

What also matters to us is our everyday life experience, whether at home or at work. In our everyday life, it's very clear that when there is harmony, with more people who support us and show friendship, this brings us more satisfaction.

In our everyday life, when we talk about physical health, we are very aware of what we put in our mouths. When we know that what we are consuming is harmful to our health, we will avoid it—even if it's something we enjoy. On the other hand, when we see something that has tremendous benefits to our health, we may eat it even if, taste-wise, it's not very enjoyable, like something sour.

We can see how certain people who have health issues, like diabetes and other conditions, are fully informed about their health and control themselves so that they do not eat what they like; rather, they are always focusing on their health. This is something we should be careful about in our everyday life regarding what we eat and what we do in order to maintain good health of the body.

### **Watching our actions of body, speech and mind**

Then, as I have said before, imagine if we are always watchful of our own actions—through speech, thought, and body. Through this, we make a conscious effort to ensure that our actions are pleasant and pleasing to others or beneficial to others. We know the positive effect this brings, not only to others but that it also bounces back to ourselves.

Talking about the workplace, if you are someone in a higher position and there are many people working under you, if you practice always being careful about how you talk to your staff and how you show gestures to your staff, not only in terms of speech and body language but also in terms of mental attitude, that is also very important. People can sense that. Therefore, if you show that kind of positive behaviour through your actions and create a very good impression on others, then this has a practical benefit for everyone at work.

In this way, if we think about it, there is no doubt that we all want to be good people. Again, what we find in a good person is their conduct through speech, bodily actions, and mental activities. These are very important. We have to ensure that our conduct—through body, speech, and mind—is positive and pleasant. Not only do these actions bring benefits to ourselves and others, but they are also exactly in accord with the teachings of Dharma. This is what Dharma is all about.

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## What is Dharma?

As we say, what is Dharma? It is the practice that will help us overcome all the wrong actions or misdeeds, directing us to undertake good actions and good conduct.

In a way, if we are very conscious and mindful of our own thoughts and deeds, and based on that, we will know what to do. For example, on a mental level, if we observe a strong influence of anger, we know that anger can be very destructive—not only to our own experience but also to others. How can we overcome that? In order to remedy this anger, we need to try to do the opposite.

The opposite of anger or hatred is love, fostering love and compassion towards others. Through this, we can completely transform our minds; by transforming our minds, we are transforming ourselves.

As said before, as ordinary beings, these things are important. In everyday life, we experience our own feelings, and we see the experiences that other people are also having. This is something we have to focus on rather than concentrating, as ordinary beings, on achieving a better life or a better rebirth, like taking a good rebirth in the future and becoming godly beings.

I am sure that not only Buddhism but also many other religious systems talk about heavenly realms and other realms. Sure, they do exist, but as ordinary beings, we don't know for sure what they are. We cannot really relate to that. However, what we can relate to and what can make a difference to us—and what is beneficial to us—are our everyday experiences, such as the good health of our bodies, mental peace, and happiness. These are things we experience in our daily lives, and all we have to do is try to understand cause and effect. Then we should think about what the causes are.

### Focus on beneficial things

If we think about what causes harm to our physical health or the health of our mind, as well as what brings good health to our mind and body, we can then work on something that brings benefit. As we focus on beneficial things, we also need to consider not only temporary benefits but also the long term.

In some cases, there may be something that temporarily benefits us and brings us some pleasure or enjoyment; however, in the long run, it may damage our mental or physical health, such as addictions to alcohol and so on.

Our best tool is our own inner wisdom and sense of discrimination. By applying that, we can use what we understand through our inner wisdom as a guide to living our lives.

### Utilising our own inner wisdom and discrimination

As mentioned earlier, when we utilise our own sense of discrimination or inner wisdom, we can recognise our weaknesses and faults, as well as where we are doing well and our strengths. We can also identify what we need to do and what we need to stop doing.

It is best to know all of this through our own experience. Of course, I am not saying that we should not consult or

seek help from others or discuss our problems with other people. However, there may be some individuals who, if they have enough life experience and a good background, can provide advice that might be beneficial. Still, the best approach is to utilise and assess our own intelligence. As human beings, we have to understand that we are gifted with a very powerful and special sense of discrimination.

On the basis of that, in our everyday life, we face many situations where we need to know what to do and what not to do, what we should do, and what we should not do. We have to make decisions based on what is most beneficial for ourselves, thoroughly checking our own judgments by utilising our own intelligence.

It is also important, after thoroughly checking, if we find something beneficial, to consider how we are going to accomplish that—how we will achieve what we want to achieve. Again, we need to check thoroughly, but if we find that we are unsure whether we would be able to complete the task at hand, it is said that it is better not to start. Otherwise, we might start something and then leave it unfinished, only to start something else which we may also leave unfinished.

According to Lama Tsongkhapa, building the habit of always not completing what you started can have the effect of making it difficult to complete whatever you begin in future lives. We can see examples of this in some people who are unsure about their future careers. They may start a certain course and then realise halfway through that it is not for them, or for whatever reason, they may be unable to finish it, and then they start another one. The same pattern often occurs again. Such people may struggle to complete anything. We need to consider this.

### Deciding what is beneficial or not beneficial

As I have said before, we are really talking about what is beneficial and what is not beneficial—something that we can relate to our everyday experience, something very simple. Sometimes, undertaking certain actions can be beneficial for ourselves, but we should also consider the impact of our actions on the outside world, including other people and so on. Even if something is beneficial to us, if it is going to cause a lot of harm to other beings, then we should consider not proceeding and instead stop that action.

In fact, sometimes I hear people saying, "Oh, you know, if I do this, this is something that I want to do, and I can see there is a great advantage there, but however, this is going to be bad for others." Then, on the basis of that, they stop. This kind of consideration really shows their good and caring nature. In this way, on one level, of course, we can talk about what is beneficial and what is harmful in our everyday life experience, which we all apply and consider in our daily lives.

But on a deeper level, when we talk about the causes of our unhappiness and dissatisfaction, we say that they lie within our mind, particularly in the form of afflictive emotions. We are referring to various unwanted, disturbing emotions, like anger, which we know can be

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very disturbing and destructive, not only to our own peace but also to others. Mentally, we recognise how a certain state of mind, such as anger, brings disturbance and turbulence. In contrast, when we generate other states of mind, like love, kindness, and compassion, we experience a sense of peace and pleasantness within.

### **Knowing our mind well**

To practice Dharma properly, we must know our mind very well, specifically understanding where our mind should go and where it should not go, based on the results of our thoughts—whether they are beneficial or harmful to us. Therefore, we can see how our thoughts truly control our actions, conduct, demeanour, and even our appearance.

For instance, when we are overwhelmed by strong afflictive emotions like anger, it can manifest as negative expressions on our face and an unpleasant outer appearance, affecting our speech, body language, and overall demeanour. Thus, we can observe the benefits of understanding how our state of mind influences not only our mood but also how we appear outwardly, whether we are in a good mood or a bad mood.

Likewise, we can understand that when we observe others, such as someone at home displaying an angry or unpleasant expression, we recognise that it is not just their face but an expression of some unwanted emotion within their mind. This recognition can be very helpful.

Based on our own experiences, we know how we feel when we are emotionally or mentally disturbed; we are not happy. In the same way, we can acknowledge what the other person is going through.

In relation to this, I often advise people that it is important to recognise our capacity to change our own mental attitude and conduct. We also have the ability to bring about change in others; in certain ways, we can have a positive or negative influence on their happiness or unhappiness.

Therefore, I often advise people that if a friend or family member, someone you live with, comes home from work looking very stressed and in a bad mood, you should acknowledge that. Then, without starting to ask questions about what's going on or what's happening, you can offer your time and engage in pleasant conversation. If possible, offer to make dinner and suggest they take a shower or do something relaxing. Sometimes, it works. You don't need to do much; even offering food or putting nice food on the table can help that other person relieve their stress and unhappiness.

### **Benefit others and avoid harming them**

Therefore, we can understand that as much as possible, we should try to benefit others and, at the very least, avoid causing harm to others. We have the capacity to stop harming others and show love to others, no matter who they are, understanding that sometimes there are people who, out of desperation, commit crimes like stealing. Understanding this is important. There are some people who understand that they have no choice; otherwise, they have to starve because they have no job,

no money, and therefore they have no food, so they are stealing. When we understand that, we can show our patience and even support them.

In our everyday life, it is important to create a very harmonious relationship with others, whether it is family or an organisation. This is so important because when there is peace and harmony wherever you are living, then you can cope with life much better. Even when you face some hardship, you can manage it.

I know from my own experience in the monastery that because of the good harmony that exists in the monastery environment, where everyone supports each other, there is mental joy. In my case, when I was living in the monastery, the late Geshe Norbu Dorje, who was incredibly supportive, was always thinking of the needs of all the monks. Whenever he had some food outside, he always brought home some drinks or something for me.

So when there is harmony, there is mental joy. In fact, Lord Buddha said that harmony in the spiritual community is bliss. So when bliss and joy are there, it is easier to cope, even when you face certain hardships and difficulties. For the sangha, such bliss and harmony are important; they support the sangha to do well in their study and practice.

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