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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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As usual, we should ensure that we have the correct motivation. The most important motivation is the thought of benefiting all other beings. It would be great for you to have this motivation—the intention to benefit other sentient beings—behind whatever activities you undertake. This benefits both ourselves and others.

We all have the potential to benefit other beings. It is to enhance that potential that we generate and put effort into developing the thought of benefiting others, training our minds to cultivate it. In fact, what is Dharma? We can say that it is the practice that benefits other beings. Besides that, there are other meanings of Dharma.

Dharma is a general term that is very encompassing: it holds the nature of things. From this perspective, all objects that exist and all knowledge are Dharma because everything has its own nature and identity, which make it unique from other objects.

However, if we take Dharma to mean the practices that hold us back from falling into lower rebirth, we can see how Dharma also helps us transform and change our minds.

## Levels of Dharma practice

In terms of levels of Dharma or spiritual practice, there are three levels according to the teachings on the stages of the path: the stages of the path for small-scope persons, middling-scope persons, and great-scope persons. When we engage in Dharma practice, we must ensure that we are following one of these three levels of practice.

These three stages of the path are not completely unrelated; in fact, to enter the stage of the great-scope path, one must progress through the middling-scope path, which is preceded by the small-scope path. These three stages represent our gradual progress on the path to achieving the ultimate spiritual goal of enlightenment.

## Small scope

Starting with the small-scope path - the graduated path followed by a person of small scope - the main practices include taking refuge in the Three Jewels and establishing a good understanding of karma and its results. By engaging in these practices, small-scope practitioners overcome challenges on their path, such as attachment or obsession with this current life and temporary existence. Through following the required practices found in the *lamrim* teachings, small-scope practitioners eventually overcome all attachments, concerns, or worries about the temporary world, aspiring instead to achieve long-term, higher goals that extend beyond this life.

There may arise questions about whether focusing on future-life goals means sacrificing happiness, joy, and satisfaction in this life. However, when we reflect deeply, we see that much of what we do in life results in unending suffering and dissatisfaction. The underlying cause of this suffering is our attachment to this current life. Reducing this attachment creates space in our minds for greater peace and happiness.

In a conversation with someone who was not particularly religious, we agreed on this: attachment is detrimental to enjoyment in this current life. Therefore, someone practicing Dharma at the level of the small-scope path finds greater satisfaction in this life, while also ensuring a good future life. If there is a future life, this approach is holistic, as it maximises peace and happiness in the present while preparing for the future.

On the other hand, if our minds are completely attached to this temporary world, not only does it fail to bring peace and satisfaction, but it also risks future suffering if a future life exists. A person of small scope practices taking refuge and developing an understanding of cause and effect to ensure a good future life.

## The middling scope

When we examine the stages of the path for middling-scope persons, their main practice involves the threefold training. By effectively engaging in the threefold training, they generate the motivation to liberate themselves from the suffering of existence.

## The great scope

Finally, the stages of the path for great-scope persons focus on benefiting all sentient beings. Great-scope practitioners aim to diminish every trace of self-centeredness and ego by destroying the self-cherishing mind. They cultivate the mind that cherishes all other beings, generating the mind of enlightenment, or bodhicitta. This ultimately leads them to complete enlightenment, enabling them to benefit all sentient beings.

## Dharma is about transforming the mind

From one angle, what Dharma practice means is directing our mind from a wrong path or wrong object to the right object. From this point of view, we can also understand that Dharma practice has nothing to do with anything external but is about our mind—changing our mind, transforming our mind. The benefit we receive in this way is to change or transform our mind.

Suppose we are under the control of anger or any other afflictive emotions. If we are under the control of anger or any other afflictive emotions, as a result, we experience suffering. On the other hand, if we apply Dharma practice, getting rid of or replacing the angry mind with a virtuous mind, a kind-hearted mind, or compassion, when we do that—engaging in Dharma practice and generating a virtuous mind of love and compassion—then we overcome or get rid of the destructive state of mind, which harms us.

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If we do not do anything or apply any remedy to counteract anger, we can see how anger completely takes over and overpowers our mind. The anger overpowers our mind so much that the way the person behaves or acts almost becomes the same as the anger. When we look at the person, we do not see any difference between the person and anger, and we see the suffering and harm the person experiences. Therefore, we must also understand that whenever we engage in or apply Dharma practice, it must have some effect on our mind. The effect of Dharma practice means a change from a negative state of mind to a positive state of mind, attitude, and so on.

### **What is Dharma practice?**

We focus on what Dharma practice means and what practice we should be doing in our everyday life. We talked about what Dharma practice means and how it can counteract our afflictive emotions. It also means abandoning non-virtues and adopting virtues. That's what Dharma practice means.

What is virtuous and what is non-virtuous? The common explanation, which anyone can understand easily, is the ten virtues. Opposite to this are the ten non-virtues. We can easily remember these ten virtues or non-virtues. From this point of view, if we think about not knowing what practice we should do, the practice is very clear: adopt the ten virtues and abandon the ten non-virtues.

### **Adopt the ten virtues and abandon the ten non-virtues**

To ensure we do well in adopting the ten virtues and abandoning the ten non-virtues, we have to train our minds, educate ourselves, or develop knowledge in our minds about this—why we practice the ten virtues and abandon the ten non-virtues.

Thinking about this, we can come to the clear conclusion that all the happiness we have now or in the future is the result of virtue, and all suffering results from non-virtue. We have to say to ourselves: *Why do I practice virtue?* Because I always want happiness. If you want happiness, you need to create the cause, which is virtue. *Why do I abandon non-virtue?* Because it is the cause of suffering, which we do not want. We understand we must abandon non-virtue to abandon suffering. Otherwise, without abandoning the cause of suffering, we cannot prevent suffering.

Therefore, to do well in this practice, to adopt virtue and abandon non-virtue, we should always train our mind, reminding ourselves of the causal relationship between virtue and happiness and non-virtue and suffering. By reminding ourselves of this knowledge and training our minds, we generate a strong thought of abandoning non-virtue and adopting virtue. We have to develop this. When we happen to create non-virtues, it is because we are not aware of that. When we create an action, we are not clearly aware of this causal relationship between suffering and what we are doing—the result of it.

Imagine if we had clear recognition, not just on a theoretical level but on a practical level. When we develop knowledge, some faith, and some conviction

about this, if we do non-virtuous actions, the result is suffering. If we do virtuous actions, the result is happiness. It then becomes natural to always have awareness of adopting virtues and abandoning non-virtues.

In other words, if we habituate our mind with adopting virtue and abandoning non-virtue, then it becomes very strong in our mind, so much so that when we happen to create non-virtue, we have a sense of remorse, a sense of regret. We realise we made a mistake, did something wrong, and feel regretful. This sense of regret will motivate us to remedy it. One benefit of virtue in terms of results in a future life is a happy or good rebirth, whereas non-virtue will result in a bad rebirth.

Again, when we develop the knowledge about how virtue results in a good rebirth and non-virtue results in a bad rebirth, such knowledge, such strong faith or conviction, will inspire us to always do virtues and minimise non-virtues. Throughout our life, we accumulate virtue and minimise non-virtue. With this faith and conviction, there comes a point when we leave this life and go to the next life where there is nothing to worry about. We gain confidence in ourselves that our future life will be a good one.

When we have that, as a result of our faith in Dharma practice, it gives us peace and happiness in our mind. So, as far as the existence of life before and after this one, we will have something in the future after this life. It is not just Buddhism—there are other religions that also say the same thing. However, other religions only talk about when we leave this life, we either go to heaven or hell—nothing else. If you look at the teachings of Hinduism and Buddhism, their definitions are different.

### **Redirecting our mind to practice virtue**

If we have a good understanding of the law of karma and its results, and we recognise that suffering arises from non-virtuous actions, we reach a point where, let alone experiencing or confronting suffering ourselves, even just hearing about suffering—such as the suffering of lower rebirth—instils dread or fear in our mind. This serves to redirect or motivate our mind toward improving our practice. In fact, it is said that one way to measure whether we are progressing well in Dharma practice is to observe whether we are developing more faith and conviction in the law of karma and its results. Likewise, if there is an increase in one's faith in gurus and buddhas, this is a sign of good Dharma practice.

We can understand why we easily commit certain non-virtuous or negative actions. However, at the same time, we are also capable of having virtuous thoughts (even small insects can have virtuous thoughts), especially when considering the virtuous thoughts of the bodhicitta mind. In fact, a single instance of such a virtuous thought or engagement in virtuous actions can be enough to result in 500 instances of attaining a good human life. That's the power of focusing on the positive aspects of our actions, whether they occur at the mental or physical level.

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## Karma increases

When we talk about karma, one of its characteristics is that it increases. Therefore, there is tremendous benefit even in accumulating a small amount of virtue. Of course, if we can, whenever we engage in virtue, we should get it right. At the start of the practice, we begin with the bodhicitta mind—the mind of enlightenment—which is of great benefit. If we start with that, then when we commence the actual action, even if the mind is not fully present, the initial intention influences or impacts our actions, making them more beneficial.

If we can, we should not only get it right at the beginning but also in the middle. When we engage in the actual practice, we should remember bodhicitta. At the end, we dedicate the merit, thus getting it right all the way from beginning to end. In this way, we gain the full benefit of our practice.

One more thing left here: in terms of what we should practice, the best approach is to practice what we already know. In many cases, we ignore the things we know, looking for something seemingly impossible, higher, more profound, or deeper, without truly practicing. When we have this kind of approach, we waste our life and time, missing the opportunity to practice Dharma.

## Practising the fundamentals is crucial

My late teacher Geshe Ngawang Dhargye said that people often leave behind simple practices they can do and instead try to practice something they do not fully grasp or understand, like the highest tantric completion stage. This is like building a house on ice. It is important to remember what is fundamental, like taking refuge in the Three Jewels, which is incredibly beneficial and very important as well.

Of course, in the end, we must ensure that our practice is transforming our mind. If there are any negative or non-virtuous states of mind, we must transform them into positive and virtuous states of mind. When we talk about finding joy and happiness, it is largely connected to our mental state. If our state of mind is peaceful and virtuous, then naturally we will be happy. If our mind is happy and peaceful, it will bring us happiness wherever we go, as our mind accompanies us wherever we are.

Geshe-la says he is not sure if you are using the topic of emptiness for your discussion in the Discussion Group. *The Golden Light Sutra* already contains the meaning of emptiness. Geshe-la suggests reading *The Golden Light Sutra* and to promote that night to other people. After reading it, if there is time left and if you are interested, you can discuss emptiness.

When meditating on emptiness, what do you meditate on? Does it mean you cannot think of anything? Is that what emptiness means—nothingness? I suggest you base your discussion on Lama Tsongkhapa's explanation of emptiness—particularly the four essential points of analysis. Going through each of these points, you will find something unique.

These four points are not found in many other important texts, such as *The Sublime Continuum*, the

*Bodhicharyavatara*, or even *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*. It is a unique explanation of emptiness offered by Lama Tsongkhapa. So perhaps use that for your discussion.

Before we stop, first, Geshe-la thanks everyone for attending the teachings throughout the year; it has gone well. After hearing or gaining an understanding of the Dharma, we must follow through by contemplating what we have heard and learned, and then meditating on it. This is the great tradition of Lama Tsongkhapa—combining hearing, contemplating, and meditating together.

What combining means is that without hearing and understanding the meaning, there is nothing to contemplate, nothing to think about, and therefore nothing to meditate on. Keeping this in mind, we have to understand that many of you here have heard a lot of Dharma and gained a reasonably good understanding of it. What you should do now is, after hearing and learning, is to really use your mind and intelligence to think about what you have learned. Reflect on whether it makes sense to your mind or not, whether it is true or not, based on your own reasoning.

Mentally improve what you have heard through contemplation. After that, engage in meditation on what you have thoroughly understood based on your reasoning and contemplation. This is exactly what we meditate on.

So, understand the combining of these three together. When we meditate, what we should meditate on is what we are thinking—not something other than that. What we contemplate should be based on what we have learned and what we have heard about the Dharma. That is the very thing we should be contemplating and thinking about.

We can also see this idea reflected in the supplication prayer to Lama Tsongkhapa. One line says: "Lama Tsongkhapa, in the beginning, you sought much learning; in the middle, what you learned all appeared to you as instructions, as personal advice—something to put into practice. At the end, day in and day out, you always strove with great diligence to practice, and you dedicated all your efforts in learning, contemplating, and meditating to the flourishing of Dharma."

As followers of Lama Tsongkhapa, we should try to emulate how Lama Tsongkhapa himself practiced Dharma, which is summarised in this prayer.

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