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# Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

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As usual, let us engage in our meditation practice.  
*[Meditation]*

Now we can generate the motivation for receiving the teaching along these lines: 'For the sake of all mother sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment. So for that purpose I will engage in listening to these Mahayana teachings, and put them into practice well'.

As I regularly mention, we must not underestimate the importance of generating a positive motivation. When we think about it, there are only really three possible states of mind that one can be in at any given moment: virtuous, non-virtuous, or neutral. There are no states of mind other than these three. So if we don't intentionally generate a positive state of mind, then that means our state of mind will either be a neutral or a negative one. Reciting the Refuge and Generating Bodhicitta Prayer is a means to cultivate a most positive mind.

You are all aware that taking refuge ensures that one's practice of Dharma becomes a pure practice, unsullied by any worldly stains, while generating the bodhicitta motivation ensures that one's Dharma practice becomes a Mahayana practice. One needs to understand that the Refuge and Generating Bodhicitta Prayer encompasses the entire path. We should not underestimate the value of the practice of taking refuge and generating bodhicitta whole heartedly; indeed, when we take this to heart its value is quite phenomenal. We might recite the prayer regularly, but if we don't make that extra effort to bring its meaning to mind and take it to heart, then they will just be empty words. If we are not careful we may form the habit of merely reciting the words without reflecting on their intended meaning.

His Holiness regularly emphasises that the preliminaries to a teaching are very important. He says that he considers the preliminary as being even more important than the actual teaching. When we take this advice to heart it becomes a very profound personal instruction.

Indeed, our practices can only become meaningful and fruitful if they are based on preliminary practices. Without ensuring a good basis with the preliminary practices the actual practice will be compromised. In brief, our motivation ensures that the practice of teaching the Dharma and listening to the Dharma actually becomes a Dharma practice. A pure practice of Dharma is dependent on the pure motivation that precedes it.

This is true from both the teacher's side and the students' side. Whether the material the teacher is presenting is a pure Dharma practice for the teacher is dependent on the motivation generated from the teacher's side; for the listeners, whether the Dharma that they hear actually becomes a pure Dharma practice is dependent on their

motivation. That is why we need to pay attention to our motivation.

As the great master Atisha said, 'We must ensure that the teaching of Dharma does not become a means for the delusions to increase; rather we must ensure that it becomes a means for the sutra and its intended meaning to be relayed accurately'. From the teacher's side the specific instruction is to ensure that the presentation of the Dharma does not cause delusions to increase. One should bear in mind that the main purpose is to convey the sutras – the Buddha's teachings – and their intended meaning accurately. The ultimate purpose and intention of all the Buddha's teachings is said to be to lead sentient beings to the ultimate state of enlightenment.

Further, it is said that the purpose of practising the teachings is to acquire all positive qualities and remove all faults, which includes the defilements and all obscurations. That is the ultimate purpose of practising the teachings. We all long for good qualities – there is no one who does not want to achieve the best qualities. So we are all naturally inclined to want to achieve them. Likewise, there's no one who wouldn't want to get rid of faults – we all want to get rid of faults. As we all aspire towards that ultimate goal, we need to ensure that our practice actually meets that end.

I take the initiative of spending a significant amount of time generating a positive state of mind and really contemplating the teaching I am about to present. I spend most of the day preparing in that way before I come down. It benefits my mind and it is really one of the best meditation practices. Some say that it benefits their mind and if it does then it is a benefit for others. What I can definitely say, however, is that it really benefits my own mind.

When I come down to actually present the teaching then I feel that it goes well because of the preparation I have done. If you listen with a positive motivation then, to that extent, it will definitely benefit your mind.

Some have asked me, 'How can Dharma practice benefit me in my everyday life situations? How can these practices help? How can they be of benefit in my work situation?' I don't blame them for asking these questions because their time is mostly spent in the work environment. Everyone has to acquire the means to sustain themselves and their families, so a lot of time has to be spent at work.

My advice has been to spend some time before going to work in the morning generating a positive motivation such as: 'Today when I go to work may I not be under the influence of negative states of mind such as jealousy, competitiveness, or disparaging other colleagues and so forth. I will do my work honestly and truthfully. As I'm being paid for it, may my work actually fulfil the purposes of my employer'. When one sets one's motivation in such a positive manner, then the time spent at work will be beneficial and more virtuous.

I've given more lengthy examples and explanations on this previously, however in brief the main point is to have a positive motivation before going out and about with our daily activities.

The commentary on *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* includes a discussion confirming that the auto-commentary on *Lamp* was actually composed by Atisha. It goes on to explain that Lama Tsong Khapa mentions that it was indeed composed by Atisha but with a few later annotations. Further, the commentary explains that:

In brief by composing the *Lamp for the Path*, Atisha captured the essence of the teachings of all the buddhas of the three times. He composed the text in this format as requested by his heart disciple Dromtonpa, who then introduced Lama Atisha's teaching on the *Lamp for the Path*, and the three Kadampa brothers further spread it throughout Tibet, and it has remained unsullied up to this day. Thus, those who have the time must not miss the opportunity to study this text and put into practice.

The *three Kadampa brothers* refers to Geshe Potawa, Geshe Chengawa, and Geshe Phuchungwa who were the heart sons of the great master Dromtonpa. Here 'heart sons' means that they were very close disciples, who were entrusted with specific teachings and instructions, like a king will trust his crown prince to reign over the kingdom.

Bodhisattvas are also referred to as the children or sons of the buddhas. As explained in the *Commentary on Bodhicitta*, that is because bodhisattvas are like the representatives of the Buddha. The *Madhyamakavatara* text explains that bodhisattvas are known as the children of the Buddha because they are born as the result of the teachings of the Buddha. This means all their qualities and realisations are obtained as a result of the Buddha's teachings, so they are like sons, or children of the Buddha.

**How does *Lamp for the Path* illuminate the Buddha's teachings?**

This a hypothetical question raised in the commentary, which then goes on to explain.

The great master Atisha definitely illuminates the Buddha's teachings and is able to illuminate the Buddha's teachings clearly, because he possesses all the excellent causes such as having received the unmistakable personal instructions from previous lamas, having seen the tutelary deities directly, and also being a great master and scholar of the five sciences.

The five major sciences are:

- Arts & crafts
- Medicine
- Grammar
- Logic
- Philosophy

There are also five minor sciences which are:

- Poetry
- Synonyms
- Lexicography
- Astrology
- Dance and drama

In the commentary there is a supporting quote in verse form from a treatise called *Be'u-bum ngon-po*, [or *Blue Scripture*], which is a compilation of the Kadampa sayings of Geshe Potawa and other Kadampa masters like Sherab Gyatso.

Having been endowed with all the instructions from the lamas  
And having seen the mind-seal deities

The Tibetan word for the tutelary deities is *yi-dam*, the literal translation of which is 'mind seal'. Basically, a *yi-dam* is a deity who is close to one's mind or heart, and the 'seal' means that it is an immutable connection. As many biographies of Atisha mention, Atisha had a direct connection with the deity Tara, and there are many accounts of him having received direct advice from Tara.

The next lines quoted in the commentary are:

A master of all the five arts  
Therefore he was able to clearly illuminate the path.

The commentary goes on to say that the *Lamp* possesses four features that establish its authenticity.

1. It has a quintessential purpose
2. It has a specific purpose
3. It contains valid subject matter; and
4. There is a connection between the previous three features and the text.

#### 4. PRESENTING THE ACTUAL TREATISE

This has two subdivisions:

- Presenting the three types of beings in brief; and
- Presenting the specific characteristics of three types of beings

The actual distinction between the three types of beings will be presented later. Here it specifically refers to the distinction made on the basis of the capacity of the mind.

##### Presenting the three types of beings in brief

The next verse is:

2. *Understand there are three kinds of persons  
Because of their small, middling and supreme capacities.  
I shall write clearly distinguishing  
Their individual characteristics.*

Verse 1 said *I shall illuminate the lamp for the path to enlightenment*. So right from the beginning, the very premise of this whole text is made clear – it illuminates the path to enlightenment. This is a very concise state of intent.

First the commentary explains the meaning of the person who is striving to achieve enlightenment. It explains that in general 'person' refers to all beings or individuals. As the other texts also explain, 'person', 'I', and 'being' are synonymous, i.e. they have the same meaning. This is a quote that I will never forget, because when I was studying in the monastery as a young monk, our teacher would make us repeat it many times.

As the commentary further explains, the person identified here is in accordance to the meaning of the Sanskrit word *puruka*, which means a being with ability, or capable of performing an activity. This is a point I've also mentioned previously; it is a very important point to know what 'person' actually means, as way to understand one's own potential and capabilities.

As the commentary further explains,

Being able to perform a function with an ability,  
refers to being able to achieve a purpose for the life

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beyond this life. Such a person is a Dharma practitioner who has one of three capacities.

The specific quality of a person with ability is quite clearly identified in the commentary as someone who is able to achieve a purpose beyond this life.

Generally, the definition of human that is given in the texts is someone who is able to utter speech and understand meaning. But being a human in this context refers to someone who is able to achieve a purpose beyond this lifetime. These are individuals who are not focussed on this life's affairs but who look beyond to the next life and onwards. That is the meaning of a human being – a person with capacity. So, if we were to fully utilise the value of our human life, then it means we need to be focused on achieving goals beyond this life.

At this point the commentary again quotes from the text *Be'u-bum ngon-po*:

Because of fear of the lower realms in the future life,  
One refrains from negativity.  
By recollecting the faults of cyclic existence, and thus longing to achieve liberation,  
They engage in the four noble truths and the three trainings.

The first two lines relate to the person of the least capacity or the small scope who, driven by fear of the lower realms in the next life, refrains from negativity. The last two lines explain the person of medium scope.

The *Be'u-bum* then refers to the person of great scope:

By fearing the lower vehicle, they generate bodhicitta.  
Such individuals would be known as humans,  
Otherwise what purpose does a human serve,  
How could you call them a person?

Then the commentary explains:

These three types of beings are the three persons that are explained here. There are three types of paths leading to their individual goals. Those of least capacity strive to achieve a good status in the next life and those with intermediate capacity will focus on achieving liberation. This is the common path. Those who are of supreme capacity strive to achieve the ultimate state of enlightenment, i.e. become a buddha. These are the three paths.

The paths of these three beings are illuminated in this treatise in a very concise, clear and easy to understand manner.

First there has been a presentation of the characteristics of these three paths in general, and now the distinctive elements of each of the paths are presented.

### The three paths

The three paths are:

1. The path of those striving for the higher status, which refers to the methods to achieve high status in the next life.
2. The path leading to liberation, so-called because it presents the methods and means to achieve liberation.
3. The path to enlightenment or buddhahood presents the ways to achieve enlightenment.

In brief, as presented in the text itself, the beings of the three scopes are presented in relation to the paths which lead to their ultimate goals. Thus, the goal of those of the least capacity is to achieve high status in the next life; the goal of the intermediate capacity is to achieve liberation; and the goal of those of greatest capacity is to achieve enlightenment.

This is the presentation of the three scopes in brief. It is good to have this clear and concise understanding from the very start, which then serves as the basis for the more elaborate explanations that follow. Even reciting the verses with that understanding will leave very good imprints in our mind.

From this very clear presentation one gains an understanding of the three scopes or how the three types of beings are distinguished in relation to their mental capacity.

### Presenting the specific characteristics of three types of beings

This is subdivided into three:

- Presenting the characteristics of the being of the small scope
- Presenting the characteristics of the being of the medium scope
- Presenting the characteristics of the being of the great scope

### Presenting the characteristics of the being of the small scope

3. *Know that those who by whatever means  
Seek for themselves no more  
Than the pleasures of cyclic existence  
Are persons of the least capacity.*

The author of the commentary Lobsang Choekyi Gyaltsan<sup>1</sup>, was renowned not only as a master of many different treatises but also for his non-sectarian approach and genuine interest in all of the four traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. Because he was well versed in all of them, he is praised by many of the masters of the other traditions, such as the great Sakya Pandita.

His presentation of the characteristics of beings of the small scope begins with:

I'm now going to explain the meaning of the small scope. This is someone who doesn't have the slightest attachment to this life, and who has the ability to seek the means to achieve a purpose for future lifetimes.

On that basis they focus on achieving the highest excellence of the human realms, or further, the desire god realms of Indra, the god of love and so forth and, even higher, the gods of the form and formless realms such as Brahma and so forth.

Furthermore, the methods that are employed are based on having a profound and convinced faith in cause and effect. Based on that they observe the morality of avoiding the ten non-virtues, which becomes the cause for obtaining the excellence of a human rebirth.

They further strive to obtain the four contaminated meditative concentrations and the formless absorptions as means to obtain the desire god realms

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<sup>1</sup> Fourth Panchen Lama, 1570 -1662

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and the realm of Brahma respectively. Employing these methods, such a being who strives to achieve this for their own purpose is a being of the least capacity.

The first point is the necessity of having *a convinced faith in cause and effect*. This is a point that we really need to keep in mind. As the teachings emphasise again and again, the basis for practice is having a convinced faith in karma, the law of cause and effect. Without such a convinced faith there would be nothing to prevent one from engaging in negativity. What prevents one from engaging in negativity, and if one does engage in negativity, what encourages one to immediately to regret and purify that negativity is a convinced faith in the law of cause and effect. As presented here, abiding by the law of cause and effect is the specific cause to be born with *the excellence of a human rebirth*. This is something that we have the ability to do right now.

The second point refers to the methods and causes that are needed to be reborn in the form realms. The **four contaminated concentrations** are four types of meditative absorptions that serve as the cause to be reborn in the form realms. In order to obtain the four levels of concentrations progressively, one needs to have first developed calm abiding, followed by cultivating the preparatory stage, which is a preparatory virtuous state of concentration within the sphere of the form and formless realm that directly generates an actual state of meditative concentration of either form or formless absorption.

There are **four formless absorptions** that one needs to achieve as causes to take rebirth in the formless realms.

Also, it is important to take note that when the commentary explains that, *such a being who strives to achieve this for their own purpose is a being of the least capacity*, there is a reason why it doesn't mention that such a being is striving to achieve this **merely** or **solely** for their own purpose. This indicates that the practices presented here are also followed by beings who are ultimately striving to achieve enlightenment; the practices in the small scope are presented as preliminary practices for developing bodhicitta. Thus, it is said that the being of the small scope needs to engage in the practices with, at very least, an effort based bodhicitta motivation.

Adopting the methods to be reborn in the form and formless realms may be beyond our immediate reach now. However, the main point to be emphasised here in relation to our own capacity at present, is that it is essential to engage in the practice of adopting the ten virtues and avoiding the ten non-virtues, which is practised on the basis of having a convinced faith in the law of cause and effect. Based on that we further engage in the practices of generosity and so forth. Then we are acquiring all the causes and conditions to achieve a human rebirth in the next lifetime with all the excellences, which means having sufficient sustenance and so forth.

We can take this up as a personal practice, making the commitment, 'I will not engage in the ten non-virtues of taking life, taking the possessions of others, engaging in sexual misconduct, lying, uttering harsh words, divisive

words, or idle gossip, having covetous thoughts, harmful thoughts and intentions, or harbouring wrong views. By avoiding these and adopting their opposite, the ten virtues, I will engage in the practice of abiding by the law of cause and effect, which will secure my future'. In this way, we are making a personal commitment to engage in practice.

Making that commitment is a form of taking a vow. There's a difference between avoiding non-virtue without having made any commitment, and taking a vow and actually practising morality based upon **commitment and promise**. One accumulates much greater virtue when one observes the ten virtues after having made the commitment to avoid the ten non-virtues.

Next week we will discuss the particular terminology of *skyes bu chung ngu*, the small scope.

Transcript prepared by Mark Emerson  
Edit 1 by Adair Bunnett  
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe  
Edited Version

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