
Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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26 September 2017

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

We can now generate the motivation for receiving the teachings, based on the bodhicitta intention.

Accumulating merit

In our last session, we covered the seven limb practice, which explained how each limb also serves as an antidote to overcome a particular fault or affliction. I don't think we covered dedication, which is said to be an antidote to overcome wrong views. For someone who holds wrong views – for example, holding the view that the karmic law of cause and effect does not apply – there would be no inclination for them to actually dedicate merits.

The commentary mentions that:

These seven are well known in Mahayana, however in Hinayana there is only a mentioning of three ...

When the seven limb practice, as presented in the King of Prayers, is accompanied by the motivation of bodhicitta, and the practice of the six perfections, then it becomes a unique practice of the Mahayana. Take for example the practice of prostration. While engaging in the practice of prostrations oneself, if one exhorts others to also engage in the practice of prostration, then the practice of prostration is accompanied with generosity. When one's practice of prostration is not stained by self-interest, it is a practice of morality. To bear the effort required by the prostration, and not to become discouraged, is the practice of patience. To engage in the practice joyfully becomes the practice of prostration accompanied with joyous effort. To focus on the practice with an unwavering mind is the practice of concentration. Finally, incorporating the understanding of the three circles, i.e. that the agent, activity, and the goal are all empty of any inherent existence, becomes the practice of prostration accompanied with wisdom.

The commentary says:

These seven are well known in Mahayana.

This is not to say that the Hinayana Vehicle doesn't have these practices; rather, a practice becomes a unique Mahayana practice when it is adorned with bodhicitta and the six perfections.

The commentary continues:

However, in Hinayana there is only a mentioning of three daily practices of prostration in the beginning, chanting sutra in the middle and dedication at the end.

This practice is also incorporated in our tradition, as we begin every practice with salutations, followed by the actual practice, and then do the dedications at the end. This is called the three practices of the beginning, middle and end.

The core practice of chanting the sutras and dedicating at the end is incorporated in many of our traditions. In many monasteries, for example, during a puja when the sangha partake in a meal (or tea) that is served, there is a tradition of reciting the *Heart Sutra* afterwards as a means of dedication to the sponsors who offered the meal. This is part of the traditional practice.

Taking extraordinary refuge

The commentary then explains:

The second is Taking Extraordinary Refuge. "In the *Definitive Collection of Essence* it is said, "those with Mahayana nature shall take refuge first in order to protect those who are unprotected, and then generate an aspirational mind.

Extraordinary refuge refers to taking refuge not merely as a means to seek protection for oneself, but going for refuge specifically to request the objects of refuge to guide and protect all sentient beings, by leading them out of suffering and guiding them to the ultimate state of happiness. Taking refuge with that intention then becomes **extraordinary refuge**, which is all the more powerful when it is accompanied with bodhicitta.

Causal and resultant refuge¹

Taking or going for refuge implies that one completely trusts the objects of refuge to be able to protect oneself and all living beings. When one takes refuge as a means to obtain that ultimate state of refuge oneself – i.e. enlightenment – this is called reliance on the **resultant refuge**. Whereas reliance on the **causal refuge** is when one relies on the objects of refuge as an external entity of guidance and protection.

When one relies on the causal refuge, it is essential to understand the implication that, by taking refuge in objects of refuge already established in another's continuum – such as the Buddha – one is seeking refuge from a supreme being to protect oneself and others from all fears, and lead one and others to that ultimate state. Hence, by relying on the **causal refuge**, the reliance on the **resultant refuge** is also implied. One needs to understand that going for refuge is a reminder of one's own potential to obtain the ultimate states of the objects of refuge.

The text mentions here that:

Accordingly, it is indicated that prior to cultivating mind generation it is necessary to take an extraordinary refuge,

What is being explained here is that, for it to be an **extraordinary refuge**, one must first generate the bodhicitta motivation. We can see from this explanation that the prayers we recite before every practice, with refuge and generating bodhicitta, followed by the seven limb prayer, is a profound way of engaging in practice. Thus, the root text explicitly presents that before taking extraordinary refuge one needs to cultivate the mind generation of bodhicitta. The line indicating this is:

8d. *Till you gain ultimate enlightenment.*

9. *And with strong faith in the Three Jewels, Kneeling with one knee on the ground*

¹ This and subsequent headings have been introduced for ease of reference.

*And your hands pressed together,
First of all take refuge three times.*

Verse 9 is a clear presentation of how to engage in the practice of taking refuge. Of course, if we don't engage in the practice, then it will not have much effect on ourselves.

Duration of taking refuge

The next explanation is presented with a question:

For how long does one take refuge?

The commentary explains:

In the common path, it is for as long as one lives

This means that in the teachings that relate commonly to both the Lower Vehicle and Great Vehicle paths, it is until the end of one's life.

Here the duration is until reaching the ultimate essence of enlightenment.

Here indicates that the duration of exceptional refuge, or the Mahayana refuge, is until reaching the ultimate essence of enlightenment.

...or in other words, until achieving the Truth body (Dharmakaya).

The essence of enlightenment refers to two - with respect to the place as an essence of enlightenment or to the realisation as an essence of enlightenment. The first has two types - for example Bodhgaya as a place, an essence of enlightenment of emanation body and Akanishta pure land as a place, an essence of enlightenment of a Perfect Resource Body.

What is to be understood here is that taking refuge until...the essence of enlightenment can refer to going for refuge until attaining enlightenment at a place like Bodhgaya in the form of a supreme emanation body, or in the Akanishta pure land in the form of the Perfect Resource body (also translated as the complete enjoyment body). The second refers to going for refuge until obtaining the 'the wisdom truth body', which is what we normally relate to when saying 'until achieving the complete state of enlightenment'.

The commentary then presents:

With respect to taking refuge, the points to consider are the types of motivation for taking refuge, the object, the thought and the action of taking refuge.

These four points are incorporated in verse 9.

The commentary explains:

The causal motivation is, out of great compassion for all sentient beings, to unwaveringly take refuge in Three Jewels until achieving the essence of enlightenment.

The **causal motivation** is when out of great compassion for all sentient beings, one unwaveringly, with a very steady focused state of mind, *takes refuge in the Three Jewels until achieving the essence of enlightenment*, which means until one achieves enlightenment.

The objects (of refuge) are Buddha, Dharma and uncommon Sangha of Irreversible Arya Bodhisattvas.

The object of refuge is the Buddha, which is the same for all vehicles, but the uniqueness is the Dharma, which encompasses the true path and true cessation according to the Mahayana path of cessation. The Sangha refers to the irreversible arya bodhisattvas.

The commentary continues:

The thought refers to remembrance of individual qualities of each of the Three Jewels and having strong and sincere faith and devotion coupled with joy.

Again here, *remembrance of individual qualities* is where we think about the qualities of each individual object of refuge: for example, with the Buddha Jewel, thinking about specific qualities of the Buddha's enlightened body, the qualities of his enlightened speech and the qualities of his enlightened mind. Remembering the qualities of the Buddha is a way to help generate the bodhicitta attitude, because that is what we are aspiring to achieve.

We need to understand that there is a correlation between these topics: thinking about the qualities of the Buddha; generating the mind of bodhicitta; thinking about the specific qualities of the true path and true cessation; and how practising the true path serves as an antidote for overcoming certain mental obscurations and defilements, which then allows one to obtain the cessation.

In going for refuge to the arya sangha - those who embody the true path and true cessation - we need to recall that those who actually possess the true path and true cessation are unimaginably valuable, as through them we receive instructions and teachings in such a way that we can engage in the practice ourselves. This is how we need to understand what was explained previously.

In emphasising *by remembering the qualities of each of the Three Jewels and having strong and sincere faith and devotion coupled with joy*, the commentary goes over the **motivation** for taking refuge, the **object** of the refuge, and then the **thought**.

The **conduct** or **action** is explained next in the commentary.

As part of the physical conduct one kneels down on both knees or squats down, places ones cloak over the shoulder and have both hands folded together in prayer gesture and then takes refuge.

One either kneels on both knees or on the left knee. This is the respectful conduct for taking refuge. One should also fold the hands together, not with the palms flat, but with the thumbs tucked in to form a triangle shape.

The commentary raises this question:

At what occasions and how often does one take refuge? In the beginning of the ceremony to generate an aspirational bodhicitta, there is an actual formula of taking refuge, which is conducted or repeated three times. Upon the completion of the third repetition, one receives the Refuge vow.

Before taking the vow of aspirational bodhicitta, one should take refuge. The actual formula of taking refuge and generating aspirational bodhicitta is presented later in the text itself.

Many of you who have attended His Holiness's teachings would have been given textbooks that include the formula for taking refuge and generating the aspirational bodhicitta vow. To those who have those texts, refer to them and see how it is done.

A quotation from the *Ornament of Mahayana Sutras* by Maitreya reads:

The supreme refuge is a protection from all harms, bad migration, perverted path, transitory collection view and lesser vehicle.

The commentary explains the meaning:

As indicated here, the small scope refuge is to protect from receiving harms in this life time, falling into bad migration in future lives and from unskillful perverted paths;...

This has also been explained previously, that going for refuge for protection, is of the **small scope**.

...the middling scope refuge is to protect and liberate oneself from the suffering of samsara which in nature is constituted of the collection of contaminated conditioning aggregates;...

With the **middling path**, the main points are to incorporate going for refuge to the Three Jewels and understanding what samsara means and how the contaminated conditioning aggregates serve as a basis for it. Understanding this is a way to be free from samsara. This is what contributes to middling scope refuge.

The text further explains:

...the great scope refuge means to take refuge in the uncommon Three Jewels by fearing for lesser vehicle, in order to free all sentient beings from the fears of samsara.

Don't misinterpret this. When the commentary mentions *fearing for lesser vehicle*, this is not putting down the Hinayana Vehicle. Rather, if a bodhisattva were to adopt the Lesser Vehicle path, it would mean they were giving up the intention to work for all sentient beings and follow a path focused mainly on achieving liberation for one's own personal purpose. That would be the greatest obstacle to achieving the ultimate goal of serving all sentient beings, and it is for that reason that a bodhisattva fears the Lower Vehicle path.

Taking refuge and aspirational bodhicitta

The question presented next is in line with what I often emphasise:

Now the question is - is there any difference between taking extra-ordinary refuge and aspirational bodhicitta?

It may seem like focusing on all sentient beings for the sake of enlightenment, and aiming towards enlightenment for the purpose of all sentient beings are exactly the same. Therefore, it is reasonable to raise the question here of whether there is any difference between the exceptional, extraordinary refuge and aspirational bodhicitta.

Master Kamawa states that Extraordinary Refuge is a wish to achieve Buddhahood to free sentient beings from suffering, hence there is no difference to aspirational bodhicitta in terms of its entity except a different ceremonial prayer formula.

The explanation presented here is that as far as the wish to achieve buddhahood to free sentient beings from suffering is concerned, there is no difference between aspirational bodhicitta and extraordinary refuge. That is, there is no difference in its entity but there is a difference in the prayer formula.

From Potawa, the commentary explains:

Potawa makes a distinction by saying that aspirational bodhicitta is a wish to achieve Buddhahood for the sake of sentient beings but reflects a mental attitude similar to an attitude of a merchant who is self-guided, in that liberating sentient beings with the attainment of Buddhahood.

The aspirational bodhicitta explained here is where one aspires to achieve that state of enlightenment oneself for the sake of liberating all sentient beings from suffering.

The commentary continues:

Whereas with an extra ordinary Refuge one wishes to liberate sentient beings from sufferings but relies on Three Jewels by recognising them as having the capacity (to liberate sentient beings) hence one is like a merchant who relies on others' support.

Therefore, extraordinary refuge is where one relies on the external factor, the objects of refuge themselves, to liberate sentient beings from all suffering and lead them to the ultimate state of happiness.

Next the commentary quotes from Maitreya's *Ornament of Mahayana Sutra*:

Maitreya's Ornament of Mahayana Sutras also says, "Because of wishing the object (Buddhahood), taking the vow (refuge) and this too is dependent on compassion." It is mentioned here that because of wishing to achieve Buddhahood, one is vowing to go for the refuge. The well-versed scholars should do further study and analysis on this.

The commentary further mentions that:

As to the causes of taking refuge, the object, nature, precepts and benefits of taking refuge, should be studied from the presentation on the stages of the path.

Here we can recall the topics presented in the small scope, beginning with death and impermanence, then the sufferings of the lower realms, and then going for refuge. These points are specifically presented in the lam-rim under the topic of refuge.

The commentary explains

To imply that the necessity of mind-training prior to the actual ceremony of mind generation (bodhicitta), the text goes,

The next verses read:

10. *Next, beginning with an attitude
Of love for all living creatures,
Consider beings, excluding none,
Suffering in the three bad rebirths,
Suffering birth, death and so forth.*
11. *Then, since you want to free these beings
From the suffering of pain,
From suffering and the cause of suffering,
Arouse immutably the resolve
To attain enlightenment.*

This is a presentation of the seven-point cause and effect sequence of training in bodhicitta. The source of the presentation of this in the lam-rim teachings is none other than these teachings of the *Lamp on the Path* by Atisha. This is the point we need to understand.

You need to remember what each of the seven specifically represent. That is for you to remember and understand, and bring to class next time.

We can conclude the teachings here tonight with a recitation of King of Prayers. The seven limb practice is presented in the King of Prayers, so it is good for us to do that practice.

Maybe Damien would recall, there was an old lady I used to go and have meals with in the past, and about last Tuesday, I started to wonder where she was and whether she was still around. She has a daughter called Barbara who came here twice. Her friend also knew Geshe Tangye, a geshe from France, and when he visited Melbourne, she brought him along to visit me twice.

A few days ago, Llysse came up with an envelope saying it was from Geshe Tangye. The message was that if I could hand it to Barbara, to do so, but if not then I could keep it myself. There was no address on it.

I knew Barbara used to live in Moonee Ponds, so then I had to find out her address. Without really having the means to look for Barbara, on the following Friday I got a message from her saying that her mother (who is 96 years old) was in a nursing home, physically very frail but mentally still very clear

Anyway, it was such a coincidence when Barbara contacted me. It seems there is definitely some sort of karmic link between us, because I got the letter from Geshe Tangye asking me to give it to Barbara. But in my attempt to find her, she contacted me about her mother and requested prayers, saying she might pass away soon. I feel she came to teachings here for a year or two, so that might have definitely helped her.

What I noticed about that family is that the mother had never drank alcohol or smoked and her daughter doesn't smoke or drink. I found it very remarkable that a whole generation had this good conduct of refraining from these substances. Her very good state of mind also relates to that I think.

The prayers we do this evening can be dedicated to Barbara's mother. I don't know her name, but also dedicate it for all other sentient beings, as presented here in the teachings. We make dedications for all beings who are experiencing particular sufferings and difficulties, and for them to be free from all their ailments and led to happiness. In this way, all beings with whom we have a connection, directly or indirectly, who equally want to be happy and be free from sufferings, can actually engage in the practice of doing these prayers and we dedicate them for that purpose.

The translation of the commentary on *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* called *Joy of the Blossomed Excellent* by Panchen Lobsang Choekyi Gyaltsen is used with the kind permission of Samdup Tsering.

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