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# Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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As usual let us spend some time in our meditation practice. Since we can all consider ourselves meditators here, we rightly need to engage in meditation. [*Tong-len meditation*]

Let us now generate the bodhicitta motivation for receiving the teachings.

## The meaning of the pledge

In our last session, we covered the pledge that accompanies aspiring bodhicitta.

In the ritual of taking the aspiring bodhicitta pledge, as mentioned in the text, one says:

I pledge to ferry sentient beings who are stranded, release those who are bound, revive those who are breathless, and lead those who have not yet gone, to the state beyond sorrow.

By reciting this three times, the pledge is made.

Different texts, such as Nagarjuna's *Commentary on Bodhicitta*, have different explanations for the meaning of these words. Here, the text gives yet another explanation. One needs to understand that these different explanations apply in different contexts. This understanding will protect one from thinking, 'This explanation must be wrong, because I saw different explanations in another text'.

In fact, this should be generally understood in regard to different explanations in various texts and teachings. We often find certain people are adamant that they have understood something, or have found an explanation in a text that they think should be the only way, and then refuse to accept other explanations. When other explanations are presented, they are adamant about their own point of view, saying, 'Oh, your way of explaining it is wrong'. This would be a wrong approach, because it is possible that one might have seen a certain explanation, but not seen another, and so feel unable to accept the other – just because one has not seen it!

Also explained in our last session was this passage:

If you do not find a preceptor, then you should make prostrations and offerings to the holy objects (on the altar), and then skip the word "preceptor" ...

As mentioned earlier, this is a ritual where one makes pledges to generate aspiring bodhicitta. Now the commentary goes on to explain the meaning of the four different pledges.

Regarding the meaning of the four pledges (in conjunction with generating aspiring bodhicitta) such as ferrying those who are stranded etc., the Great Geshe Sharawa explained these from the point of view of the four fruits of the Sravakayana (Hearer's vehicle)

The first explanation is in relation to *the four fruits of the Sravakayana* or the *Hearer's vehicle*.

As explained here:

From the point of view of Sravakayana, the four pledges correspond to the four fruits subsequently, ...

The *four fruits* presented here relate to what is called 'going beyond the mundane', which refers to the arya stage. Once hearers, for example, attain the path of seeing – thus becoming hearer aryas – from then on they are 'beyond the mundane' world.

## The four fruits of the hearer grounds

As I have also explained previously, the word 'arya' is from the Tibetan word *phak-pa* which literally means to surpass, the connotation being that once the state of an arya has been attained, henceforth these noble beings surpass mundane or ordinary existence. What is being presented here relates to the *four fruits* obtained on the hearers' grounds, which are stream enterers, once returners, never-returners, and arhats or foe-destroyers.

As explained here:

... the attainment of the fruit of Stream Abiding/Enterer signifies ferrying beings to the other shore of all the mundane worlds, then the attainment of the state of Returner signifies release from almost all of the desire realm defilements ...

The term *desire realm defilements* here refers to the six root delusions within the beings of the desire realm. So, the six root delusions within us are called *desire realm defilements* because we abide in the desire realms.

The term *the state of Returner* means an arya being at that level will not attain arhatship or reach the goal of a foe-destroyer in that life, but will have to be reborn again in cyclic existence. That is why he or she is called a 'once returner'.

Then the attainment of the Non-Returner state signifies the reviving of the breath of having abandoned all the defilements of the desire realm, ...

Here, the term *Non-Returner* applies to aryas who will definitely attain arhatship in that very lifetime, and so will not have to return again. The *reviving of the breath* refers to being placed in the state of a non-returner. The last of the four fruits is:

... the attainment of liberation signifies the state beyond the sorrow of the defilements of the three realms.

This explanation is in relation to the hearers' vehicle.

## The four Mahayana pledges

As the commentary further explains:

From the point of view of the bhumis of the Mahayana, the attainment of the first bhumi signifies ferrying beings to the other shore of the world, ...

This has been explained previously. Then:

... the attainment of the seventh bhumi signifies release from the bondage of the sign, the attainment of the three pure bhumis signifies being able to breathe having attained the state of signlessness and spontaneity, and the attainment of Buddhahood signifies the attainment of the state beyond sorrow of all the objects of abandonment.

Here there is another citation from the *All-Knower Chim*, which refers to Master Chim, who had great knowledge of all the treatises. This particular master composed a widely renowned commentary to the Abhidharma, and many refer to that commentary.

According to the *All-Knower Chim*, these four pledges relate to the four noble truths. As the commentary explains:

... the All-Knower Chim, related (the four pledges) to four noble truths, namely ferrying those stranded in

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the river of suffering to the other shore, releasing beings from the bondage of the true Origin (of suffering), ...

In relation to *true Origin*, we have already gone into some detail explaining how true origin encompasses karma and delusions, so we don't have to go into any further detail on that now.

The third truth is:

... reviving those suffocated with self-grasping with the breath of the true Path ...

Then the fourth is:

... leading those who have not gone beyond sorrow due to conceptual thoughts to the state beyond sorrow through true Cessation.

This refers to the 'four pledges', previously explained as ... *to ferry sentient beings who are stranded, release those who are bound, revive those who are breathless, and lead those who have not yet gone to the state beyond sorrow.* These are the four pledges that correspond to the explanation.

A key point to note is that one does not need to take these pledges when engaging in the ritual of generating aspiring bodhicitta, the mere aspiration to achieve enlightenment. However, if one generates aspiring bodhicitta with the ritual of making these pledges, then one has to actually observe them. These are points to remember at all times.

Just to further clarify, the pledge one makes with aspiring bodhicitta is not to be considered as a vow. It is not called a 'vow'. Rather, it is a state of mind that is likened to a 'non-vow' state. Nevertheless, one does make a pledge. That needs to be understood, so that one doesn't get confused. For example, if we have made a pledge with aspiring bodhicitta, we may think, 'Oh, now I've received bodhisattva vows'. We need to understand that distinction.

### Conclusion<sup>1</sup>

Here, in the third section, the commentary explains observing the five precepts in relation to making the pledge:

The third section is the conclusion, which is presented under five sub-headings.

**The first sub-heading is the instruction on remembering the benefits.**

*Remembering the benefits* refers to remembering the benefits of bodhicitta. One needs to recall these after having made the pledges. Even for those who have taken bodhisattva vows, the way to uphold these pledges and vows is by remembering the benefits of bodhicitta again and again. The teachings explain the benefits in great detail; we need to try to bring the benefits of bodhicitta to mind and then constantly recall them as a way to restore our aspiration to achieve bodhicitta and revive our bodhisattva vows.

In a teaching at Bodhgaya some years ago, His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, explained it in a way that I have found to be extremely beneficial for my own mind. We simply recall that: 'I will not intentionally engage in harming sentient beings, in any way, and I will only engage in the means to benefit them'. As His Holiness mentioned, at our ordinary level this would be a good substitute for actual bodhicitta. It is manageable for our minds to generate, and is not too complicated. So these are two really important lines to remember on a daily basis.

At our level, while we may not have yet generated bodhicitta, many of us have already taken the pledge of aspiring bodhicitta, and have also taken the bodhisattva vows. In relation to upholding and increasing our bodhicitta mind at our level, we should remember the benefits of bodhicitta. Reciting these two lines, as mentioned earlier, is a way to remind ourselves of the bodhicitta attitude on a daily basis.

At our level, we need to relate to what we might call the 'seed' of bodhicitta, whereby we aspire to achieve enlightenment, and along with that aspiration, we generate the thought: 'I will not intentionally harm any sentient beings, and I will benefit them as best as I can'. These three things - the aspiration we developed earlier, the pledges we've made, and the vows we've taken - together become the seed of actually developing bodhicitta. It is this state of mind which, when further developed and increased, will then transform into actual bodhicitta.

We need to keep that in mind, lest we have the doubt: 'Why would I need to uphold bodhicitta if I haven't even developed it yet?' or 'How can I even think about increasing bodhicitta if I haven't even developed it yet?' These are unnecessary doubts that can prevent us from further development and hinder our practice; they are irrelevant and not conducive to our practice. They can be removed by thinking: 'I *do* have the seed of bodhicitta, which is what I need to practice on further developing'.

Although we may not have actually developed bodhicitta yet, we do have the wish to benefit others. Based on that, we can develop the strong mind of determining that we will put all of our energy into benefiting others and not hurting them. That, as mentioned earlier, is the seed-cause for developing bodhicitta in the future. As we bring that to mind and really practise it to the best of our ability on a daily basis, we will come to notice for ourselves that our mind will naturally become gentler and happier. It definitely helps to transform one's unhappy and unruly mind into a more joyous and happy one. I regularly emphasise that we can all manage to generate the intention to benefit others and show kindness towards them. We have the ability to generate this state of mind, which is why we must work on it and remember it.

We should also note that the teachings don't explicitly mention the benefits that we could experience now, in this life; instead, they mostly emphasise the benefits that we could gain in future lives. This is because the benefits in this life would be experienced 'on the side'. They do not have to be mentioned specifically, because we will experience them as we practise. Through our own experience, we will be able to gauge the benefits.

That is another point we need to keep in mind; otherwise, we may think, 'There may not be any benefits for us now, as the teachings don't really mention that. The benefits emphasised are mainly for future lifetimes.' Again, we need to remove that doubt.

Whatever practice we do with the intention to benefit our future lives will naturally become a cause for gaining benefit in this life as well. Naturally, when our practice is focused on benefit for a future life, that strong intent for a future life will naturally reduce strong grasping to this life's affairs. And when strong grasping and attachment to this life's affairs is reduced, one's life now will naturally become much more at ease, and much more relaxed. This is how we need to understand it.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the third part of the section Aspirational Instructions that was introduced on 12 September 2017.

The next verse is Verse 12:

*The qualities of developing  
Such an aspiration are  
Fully explained by Maitreya  
In the Array of Trunks Sutra.*

Where the verse says *fully explained*, the commentary tells us:

What is “Fully explained” here is the quality or benefit of an aspirational mind of enlightenment which is mentioned earlier, generated through the ritual ceremony.

Where is it (fully explained)?

The Intelligent Maitreya explained the infinite benefit to Norsang (Sudhana) in the *Array of Trunks Sutra (Gandavyuha-sutra)*. The sutra says, “Noble One, bodhicitta is like the seed of all the Dharmas of enlightenment and the ground for growing the wholesome Dharma of all the migrating beings.” The Sutra described the benefits through over two hundred analogies.

“Labtu” (Compendium of Training, Shikshasamucchaya) by Shantideva uses sixteen analogies.

#### Four benefits

Now, we are at the explanation from the commentary, which says:

According to Sharawa these benefits are subsumed into four.

As the commentary explains:

The analogies of the ‘seed’ and ‘ground’ respectively indicate the qualities for self-purpose and others’ purpose. Saying that bodhicitta is like a ‘short spear’ is to indicate the counter force of the remedy, and then saying it is like the ‘jewel of all the jewels’ is to indicate the quality of all-wish-fulfilment.

In short, Great Drolungpa said that even all the immeasurable and inconceivable resultant qualities of a Buddha also reflect the qualities of (bodhicitta) for this is the primary cause (of Buddha’s qualities).

As presented here, the *Great Drolungpa* was a great master who also composed a great treasury or encyclopaedia of Buddhist terms. This great master very succinctly presents the main point, which is that the *resultant qualities of a Buddha also reflect the qualities of (bodhicitta) for this is the primary cause (of Buddha’s qualities)*. This is a very succinct presentation of the benefits of bodhicitta.

#### The second sub-heading is the instruction of training in bodhicitta.

The related verse, Verse 13, reads:

*Having learned about the infinite benefits  
Of the intention to gain full enlightenment  
By reading the sutra or listening to a teacher,  
Arouse it repeatedly to make it steadfast.*

The commentary explains:

Hence, bodhicitta is what one needs to generate. How does one generate it? One generates it through: ...

The emphasis here is on *how to generate bodhicitta*. As mentioned here, one might generate that mind, and then wonder, *how does one generate it?* As presented in the root text, ‘*Arouse it repeatedly to make it steadfast*’, which means one has to think of the benefits and generate the mind of awakening again and again. As the commentary presents:

- engaging in the ritual ceremony

- reading them oneself or thoroughly listening to a lama explain sutras ...

We previously explained *engaging in the ritual ceremony*. Then, in relation to the benefits of that, *reading it oneself thoroughly*, or *thoroughly listening to a lama explain it from the sutras* such as the following:

- sutras such as *Gandavyuhasutra*, and their commentaries such as *Jangsa* (Grounds of Bodhisattva) by Asanga relating to the infinite and inconceivable qualities of an aspirational bodhicitta aimed at complete enlightenment.

We can see here that the *Grounds of the Bodhisattva* is a text that is referred to repeatedly as a reference on ways of developing and maintaining bodhicitta.

The commentary further explains:

Having gained a decisive understanding (of the infinite qualities of bodhicitta), generate it over and over again, or generate it at least three times each during the day and at night so that the Bodhi-mind within one’s continuum sustains; never to decline but to increase further more.

As mentioned in Maitreya’s teachings, the infinite and inconceivable qualities of an aspirational bodhicitta aimed at complete enlightenment is what one refers to as the benefits of enlightenment.

The instruction for training in bodhicitta explains how one needs to remember, again and again, the actual bodhicitta, the mind of enlightenment; one has to remember it again and again, reciting it thrice in the morning and thrice in the evening. The advice and instructions here are integrated into the six session guru yoga practice.

If one were to strictly follow this practice of reciting the prayer as a way to generate bodhicitta three times each day and three times at night, this would mean generating it three times throughout the day and then three times throughout night. However, in the six session guru yoga practice, it is presented in a way that makes it manageable for you to generate bodhicitta: three times in the morning, when you do the six session guru yoga practice; then, when the six session guru practice is recited in the evening, as it is recited three times, it suffices for generating bodhicitta three times in the evening. That is how the practice is presented.

As explained here, we need not confine generating bodhicitta only to the morning and evening practice of six session guru yoga – throughout the day, we can repeatedly remind ourselves to recite that verse three times.

Then the commentary explains:

If one doesn’t rely [or does not have time to engage] in the ritual ceremony as described earlier (to generate aspirational bodhicitta), then one can recite the (Refuge prayer),

This prayer is one that we recite regularly:

I go for refuge until I am enlightened  
To the Buddha, the Dharma and the Supreme Assembly.  
By the merit I create by practicing giving and other perfections,  
May I become a buddha for the sake of all sentient beings.

As we recite it regularly, it is good to understand that this verse will suffice for actually generating the aspirational bodhicitta mind in our daily practice.

To go over the main points of the prayer: *I go for refuge until I am enlightened to the Buddha, the Dharma and Supreme Assembly* indicates the objects of refuge. When the prayer says, *I go for refuge ...* this refers to the individual person who is taking refuge.

The perfections referred to in *By the merit I create by practicing giving and other perfections* are morality, patience, meditation, and so forth. These practices are like the substance we need to generate bodhicitta. The substance we need is merit, and these are the means to generate merit. From the merit that one has thus generated, the aspiration here is: *May I become a buddha for the sake of all sentient beings.* This is presented as an aspiration or dedication. One needs to understand that this aspiration or dedication refers to generating the wish to achieve enlightenment oneself.

The commentary then specifies that:

This is found in the Jowo's own scripture.

Prior to Atisha coming to Tibet, this particular verse was not prevalent. However, after Atisha came to Tibet, this particular verse became common, and was used widely as part of the practice.

Further, the commentary explains:

Now, it is said in (Verse 13) "the infinite benefits of the intention to gain full enlightenment." If we ask, where is this mentioned? To answer this question the root text says ...

So the verse says that there's *infinite benefits of the intention* or the aspiration *to gain full enlightenment.* If one were to ask, 'Where is this mentioned?' the root text answers that question by citing from *The Sutra requested by Viradatta.*

The root verse reads:

(Verses 14-17)

*The Sutra Requested by Viradatta  
Fully explains the merit therein.  
At this point, in summary,  
I will cite just three verses.*

The three verses are:

*If it possessed physical form,  
The merit of the altruistic intention  
Would completely fill the whole of space  
And exceed even that.  
If someone were to fill with jewels  
As many Buddha fields, as there are grains  
Of sand in the Ganges,  
To offer to the Protector of the World,  
This would be surpassed by  
The gift of folding one's hands  
And inclining one's mind to enlightenment,  
For such is limitless.*

The commentary then explains that:

The text summarises the infinite merits and benefits of bodhicitta spirit by citing three verses from *the Sutra requested by Viradatta*, and thereby creating a scriptural link (to the sutra).

It then raises this hypothetical question:

... what kinds of benefits are mentioned in the sutra?

The commentary explains:

The benefits of bodhicitta as presented here are enormously great. Obviously, these benefits are not physical form but suppose if they were physical forms and we fill up the entire space within ten directions with them, we would run out of the space

for the space is not enough to contain them. These (verse 14-15) show the extensiveness and the latter two (verse 16-17) show the immeasurable and limitlessness (of the merit of generating the bodhicitta mind).

The commentary further explains that:

Furthermore, the extent of merit in generating bodhicitta is limitless and beyond measurement.

The analogy used here is:

Imagine a special environment - numbers of pure lands of Buddha as many as there are grains on the banks of Ganges river or grains of sand equal to the numbers of water atoms of Ganges river. If a faithful devotee filled it up with special offering substances of heavenly precious jewels, the best of all jewels, and offered this to the special object (of veneration), Lord of the World, Bhagawan Buddha. Greater merits than this is the merit created by a Mahayana follower who, out of faith, holds his/her hands in prayer gesture and makes an offering through cultivating Bodhi-mind in front of the Refuge Objects or lamas. This illustrates the surpassing quality of the offering of generating Bodhi-mind.

Next is the third sub-heading:

### **Instruction of training in accumulating two accumulations.**

So the first and second sub-headings were explained earlier, then the third and the fourth explain the means to sustain the aspiring bodhicitta that has now been developed. The fifth sub-division is about abandoning the four dark black dharmas and absorbing the four white dharmas. These are the means for our aspiring bodhicitta not to decline in the future.

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

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