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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 spend some time for our regular meditation practice. [*Tong-len meditation*]

We can now generate the bodhicitta motivation for receiving the teachings.

For those who weren't sure about the meaning of the word 'bodhicitta', it was explained in the last session that the literal translation is 'mind of enlightenment'.

It's important that we integrate the Dharma teachings into our practice. The main thing is to ensure we become more and more familiar with adopting a virtuous mind after listening to the teachings. Otherwise, putting our understanding of the Dharma on one side and our practice on the other, as if they were incompatible, would be the wrong approach and would not benefit us. This is how we receive the blessings of the Buddha. This point was discussed in last Wednesday's teaching when someone asked how one receives the blessings of the Buddha.

In terms of how the objects of refuge serve as a protection for us, we need to recall what the *actual* refuge is. As discussed previously, of the three objects of refuge – the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha – the actual refuge is the Dharma jewel. On a personal level, the Dharma jewel is whatever practice of morality one observes, such as engaging in the ten virtuous deeds and avoiding the ten non-virtuous ones. At a personal level, this would be one's actual refuge.

Of course, as presented in the teachings, the ultimate Dharma jewel is presented as true cessation [of suffering and its causes] and the true paths [to cessation]. But if one hasn't obtained true cessation and generated true paths within one's mental continuum yet, then it would be hard to understand them as being one's actual refuge. Therefore, we need to understand that it is our present practice, such as the morality of avoiding the ten non-virtues, that is our actual refuge.

Of the three objects of refuge, the teachings present the Dharma jewel in particular as the one that will protect us from being reborn in the lower realms. However, if the ultimate Dharma jewel were only true cessation and the true path, we might then develop the doubt that, since we have not yet obtained the true path and true cessation, how could the ultimate Dharma jewel protect us? So here we need to understand that it is one's practice of morality that actually protects us.

That initial doubt is reasonable, because the teachings explain that one's actual refuge or protection is the Dharma jewel, and the ultimate Dharma jewel is the true paths and true cessation. If we don't understand this in its proper context, we might think, 'How can the Dharma jewel protect me if I have not yet actualised it within my

own mental continuum?' But we can understand it as explained earlier – on our level, the actual refuge within our mental continuum is the practice of morality, such as abandoning the ten non-virtues, which will protect us from going to the lower realms. In this way, we can understand that we have the Dharma jewel within our own mental continuum, right now.

It is important to incorporate this understanding into our practice. Otherwise, if we relate to the objects of refuge, the Three Jewels, as something simply to be worshipped and have faith in – something separate from ourselves, out there high above us – we may wonder how these separate, distinct objects can actually protect us. We need to understand that the Dharma is our actual refuge, and that it is something that we need to cultivate and develop within our own mental continuum. We can then develop a clear understanding of how the objects of refuge actually protect us.

Of course, as objects of inspiration, the Buddha and Sangha jewels are also incredibly important for our development. By taking refuge in the Buddha, we generate inspiration and blessings can be received. As a source of inspiration, the Sangha jewel is particularly important, as we can directly relate to them.

As I suggested previously, we should look at the explanation of the three jewels in the lam-rim, which presents very succinct instructions about how to relate to the objects of refuge and how this practice will benefit us. As explained in the lam-rim, at the beginners' level, we need to start by adopting every single virtue and abandoning every single non-virtue or negativity that we can. This then leads us to achieving, and then being protected by, the ultimate refuge. This is how we need to understand it. This is an essential instruction to keep in mind, otherwise we may think that we have to try to reach a higher level and that until we reach that level we are not really getting anywhere. We need to understand that we begin our practice at our present level by adopting whatever virtues we can, and abandoning as many negativities as we can.

I have presented this previously many times. This is just a reminder that we need to understand this instruction about adopting virtue, or qualities, and avoiding non-virtue, or faults. Adopting every single quality, no matter how small, and avoiding even the smallest fault is the way to practise the Dharma. In that way, one's mind and practice become integrated with the Dharma. A mind that is not integrated with the Dharma is basically a mind that has non-virtuous thoughts, and that can influence one to engage in non-virtuous activities. If this occurs, the result is an unhappy mind, a mind that feels weighed down.

So the real cause of one's disturbance comes from within oneself and not from outside. By contrast, if one's mind is integrated with the Dharma, one's frame of mind will be virtuous, and the mind will naturally be much happier, much more at peace and at ease.

We can definitely see the benefit of integrating Dharma practice with one's mind. We see many who have not met with the Dharma. Once they have made that connection, then when they subsequently experience illness or disease, their minds remain quite calm and

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peaceful, despite the fact that they are physically suffering. This is a true mark or positive effect of Dharma practice on the mind. Those practitioners themselves recognise their calm mind as a benefit of their Dharma practice, and others too will see this positive effect.

If you contemplate these points you will see there is a lot to be gained from understanding them. Those who truly integrate Dharma with their practice will have a happy mind, making it easier for those who nurse or help them. Apparently, it is much easier to help and assist patients who do not exhibit much anger. By contrast, it is much harder to help those who exhibit anger and it is particularly hard to continue offering them assistance.

The main point is that practising the Dharma will help one during both good health and illness; furthermore, it offers benefits to others as well as oneself at all times.

### Suitable life-form for taking vows (cont.)

In our last session, as presented in the text, we covered the 'suitable life-form' or basis for receiving bodhisattva vows.

The most suitable basis is any individual who has taken any of the seven categories of self-liberation vows. Within those seven categories, the later ones are more supreme than the earlier ones. Thus, the full ordination vows are the most supreme of all. It was also explained that observing morality – such as avoiding the ten non-virtues – is the fundamental basis for receiving the bodhisattva vows.

There are four root vows and we need to understand what it means to break them. For example, the *root vow* 'not killing' specifically refers to refraining from taking the life of a human being; if one were to kill a human being then this would break the root vow of 'not killing'. It is not the same as the *non-virtue* of killing, which relates to all forms of life. Likewise, breaking the root vow of 'lying' would not involve just any kind of lie, but specifically a lie proclaiming that one has obtained superhuman qualities, when in fact one hasn't obtained any. This is not the same as the lying referred to in the ten non-virtues, which is any kind of lie. It is good to understand this distinction.

The main point is that an individual who practises morality is a suitable basis for receiving the bodhisattva vows; so the observance of morality is the actual basis. Among those who observe morality, the supreme basis for bodhisattva vows would be one who has taken self-liberation vows. This makes the basis very firm and stable, which is considered as a suitable basis.

We can now understand why His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, in granting bodhisattva vows, usually precedes this by offering the laypersons' vows for those who may not have taken them before. Within the audience there would be those who are already ordained, so of course, they already have the self-liberation vows. But there would also be laypeople who might not have taken laypersons' vows. For these people, His Holiness gives those vows so that they can become a suitable basis for receiving the bodhisattva vows.

### The qualities of the object bestowing the vows

Now we come to the second subdivision here, which says:

The second is Object from whom one is receiving it (Bodhisattva vow).

The verse then quoted is:

23. *Understand that a good spiritual teacher  
Is one skilled in the vow ceremony,  
Who lives by the vow and has  
The confidence and compassion to bestow it.*

The commentary explains that:

In order to make the presentation more sensible this is addressed prior to verse 22 - "The chapter on discipline in the *Bodhisattva Stages* ..."

So the commentary explains that verse 23 is addressed before verse 22 as it enhances the presentation. In explaining the meaning of verse 23, the commentary raises this rhetorical question:

Now, what type of an object or the Lama from whom one should be receiving bodhisattva vow?

Then it gives this answer:

An excellent lama as presented here should be understood and is defined as an excellent lama who is skilled in bestowing bodhisattva vow and endowed with four excellent qualities. The four excellent qualities are:

- Excellent knowledge with respect to the ritual ceremony procedure concerning perfect receiving of vows, safe guarding those from being deteriorated and renewing those which have been deteriorated
- Adherence to excellent moral discipline of bodhisattva
- Excellent endurance or confidence in bestowing bodhisattva vows
- Excellent thought of compassion

The **first quality** is *excellent knowledge with respect to the ritual*. Then the verse itself says: *who lives by the vows*. Therefore, the **second quality** referred to in the commentary is *adherence to excellent moral discipline of bodhisattva*. In order to bestow the bodhisattva vows on others, one has to observe them oneself perfectly. The **third quality** presented here is *excellent endurance or confidence in bestowing the bodhisattva vows*. In order to confer the bodhisattva vows, one needs to also have the endurance of observing the vows oneself, thus having the confidence to bestow them on others. The **fourth quality** is *excellent thought of compassion*. Indeed, when conferring the bodhisattva vows, it would have to be with incredible compassion for other sentient beings and particularly for those taking the vows. With great compassion, one then confers the vows on others. That quality of compassion definitely has to be present.

The commentary further explains:

Of the four, the first two are regarded as the main one by Shangrom and Lagsorwa; this is very true as 'A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life' by Shantideva also says, "A spiritual guide is one, who is well versed in Mahayana matter, and always displays supreme austerity of bodhisattva."

This verse from the *Bodhisattva's Way of Life* is quoted to back up the point that, of the four qualities, *the first two are regarded as the main points*. We need to understand from Atisha's meticulous presentation that those who

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wish to receive the bodhisattva vows should receive them from a very compassionate and kind lama who has these four qualities. It is important for us to understand that if we wish to take the bodhisattva vows, we should ensure we are receiving them from a qualified teacher, as advised here.

Even if we have the qualities to receive the bodhisattva vows, that in itself is not sufficient, because we need to also ensure that we are receiving the bodhisattva vows from someone who is suitable to bestow them. That is a significant point. Even if one is a suitable base to receive the vows, if the object conferring the vows is not suitable, the ritual will not be intact. Of course, there is no need to mention the situation where both the recipient and the one bestowing the vows lack the necessary qualities.

As specified here, the first quality, *excellent knowledge with respect to the ritual ceremony procedure concerning a perfect receiving of vows*, is not enough; the lama must also have been *safe guarding those vows from deteriorating and renewing those which have deteriorated*. These are important points.

### The ritual of taking the vows

The third is the ritual of taking the vows. As the commentary states:

The third is the Ritual of taking the vow, which has two sub-headings - Ritual with Lama and Ritual without lama.

So, as mentioned earlier, for those wishing to take the bodhisattva vows, when the ritual is performed by a lama, the lama needs to be a suitable lama, having all the qualities intact. However, if one is unable to find a suitable lama who has all the qualities, then it is possible to take the bodhisattva vows oneself.

### The ritual of taking the vows with a lama

The next verse quoted here is:

22. *According to the ritual described in  
The chapter on discipline in the Bodhisattva  
Stages,  
Take the vow from a good  
And well qualified spiritual teacher.*

The commentary further explains:

Regarding this, the Self-Commentary says that it follows the tradition of Acharya Asanga and Master Shantirakshita. Further down then it says that the Ritual with lama is presented by relying upon the morality chapter (in the Bodhisattva Bhumi by Asanga) whereas Ritual without lama is presented by relying upon the Compendium of Trainings (Shikhsamuccaya - by Shantideva.) Jowo possesses the instruction of the three Great Chariots and of the three, he relied upon Asanga and Shantideva's tradition on the subject of engaging vow.

Hence, aside from some differences, there is no practical difference in the ritual system of the two Great Chariots. To say that they have different views in relation with the Object of receiving, ritual procedure and root downfalls on the pretext of being the followers of Madhyamika and Cittamātra is very thoughtless.

*The Bodhisattva Bhumi by Asanga* is actually presented from the Cittamātra point of view, while the instructions presented in the *Compendium of Training* are from the

Madhyamika viewpoint. While there is a premise for each of these approaches, to say that these ritual systems are completely distinct and different is mistaken. So although there is a premise for making a distinction, this would not validate one saying that there is a distinction between the *object of receiving, ritual procedure and root downfalls*: that would be a mistake.

The commentary further explains:

In here, the word 'Take the vow' indicates the basis of discussion, and then the word 'vow' indicates what to engage in, then the word 'well qualified spiritual teacher' indicates from whom to receive or take the vow which refers to an excellent lama endowed with perfect excellent qualities; and to indicate the source of the ritual to take the (vow) it says here that it is the ritual described in the chapter on morality in 'Bodhisattva Bhumi' by Arya Asanga.

Presenting all these sources in such a detailed manner indicates that this presentation of the vows themselves and how they are to be received comes from an authentic source. This presentation is not derived from just anywhere, but from authentic sources.

Up to this point, the text has been presenting how to take the ritual from a lama.

In this (ritual) there are three sections - Preliminary, Actual and Conclusion. The preliminary comprises of seven namely - supplication, rejoicing, accumulating merits, requesting, generating special thought, enquiring about common obstacles and briefly explaining the precepts.

These are the **seven preliminaries**. The commentary further explains:

The Actual section is taking upon a pledge three times of the precepts of all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the past, present and future dwelling in the ten directions.

So the **actual** taking of the vows is when one recites the pledge of taking the vows. This is followed by the five concluding aspects:

The end section of ritual comprises of five namely - drawing attention, benefits of receiving the attention of sublime wisdom, not recklessly proclaiming the vow, briefly explaining the precept and thanksgiving offering.

The commentary concludes on this point by saying:

The details about these can be found in the Jowo's Explanation of ritual vows and of the chapter on morality.

To understand more about this topic, we need to refer to these teachings. There is a commentary on the chapter on morality composed by Lama Tsong Khapa which has very detailed explanations. As mentioned previously, the ritual of the bestowing of the vows is presented in the extensive lam-rim clearly and in detail. You can read about the actual bestowing of the vows, as the *Great Treatise on the Graduated Path to Enlightenment* has been translated into English. The section on how the vows are bestowed, as the lam-rim itself mentions, is extracted from the *Bodhisattva Bhumi* or the *Stages of the Bodhisattva*. This will be the topic of discussion for you on Tuesday the 19<sup>th</sup> of December as I will not be here to teach.

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The specific explanations about the *benefits of receiving the attention of sublime wisdom*, and also generating joy have been covered in detail. For those who attended the Kalachakra initiation, His Holiness also explained all of this in some detail.

It is good to read more details and become more familiar with the presentation of the taking of the vows as explained here and in the lam-rim. While the vows themselves are the same, there are differences in the ritual of bestowing the vows – the ritual of taking the vows as presented in the *Bodhisattva Bhumi* is slightly different to that in the *Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, which we covered in detail when we studied the text. There is yet another slightly different presentation in the other text mentioned here: *The Compendium of Trainings*. It is good to know these different presentations.

### The ritual of taking the vows without a lama

The verse relating to this is the next verse which reads:

24. *However, in case you try but cannot  
Find such a spiritual teacher,  
I shall explain another  
Correct procedure for taking the vow.*

The commentary explains the meaning of the verse:

General promise to explain it is expressed here. Despite one's great effort in finding a qualified lama as described here to take vow, if one completely fails to find such a lama due to one's location and circumstances, what should one do?

If one is keen to take the bodhisattva vows, one needs to attempt to find a suitable lama to bestow the vows – a lama who, as mentioned earlier, has all of the qualities intact. If one has tried to seek a lama who has these qualities and has not been able to find one due to circumstances or location then, in order to present the next point, a rhetorical question is asked, *what should one do?* The commentary answers:

There is also a ritual ceremony which is specially designed to take the vow oneself, without requiring a lama, this is correctly explained here.

So there is a ritual ceremony of taking the vows which is *specially designed* for taking the vows oneself in the event that one does not find a qualified lama to receive them from.

These are important points for us to understand and incorporate into our practice. We can learn this from the example of the great Atisha himself. When he first went to Indonesia to meet with Lama Suvarnavipa (Lama Serlingpa), Atisha did not immediately take the vows from Lama Serlingpa. He first received teachings as a way to check out the lama. Of course, there was no need from Atisha's side to really check him out, because he would have known the qualities right away. However, he practised like this as a way for future disciples to understand how to receive vows and so forth from a lama. One should not take a lama in the same way a hungry dog finds a piece of meat and gobbles it up. Rather, one needs to investigate and check, and once one sees the qualities of the lama, that is when one commits oneself to being a disciple of that lama.

From the examples of the past masters, we can see that this was indeed how they practised. Some masters have

explained that, even if the lama has certain qualities, one of the main reasons one should further check the lama is that, on a personal level, one would find whether one could generate strong faith in this particular lama. That is why one should investigate or check the lama.

Also, there are occasions where the lama would check out the disciple before actually giving a teaching. This is shown in the life story of Milarepa. Marpa did not readily give teachings to Milarepa, and gave him many tasks as a way to check whether he was really keen and would be able to put the Dharma into practice or not. So there are occasions where the disciple takes time to check the lama, and there are occasions where the lama checks out the disciple before giving a teaching. These practices were followed by the earlier masters. However, in this time and age, we find that these practices tend to be ignored, or are too difficult to follow perhaps.

Then the commentary explains that the ritual for taking the bodhisattva vows without a lama comes from an authentic source, and it is not just something made up recently.

Now, if one asks what is the scriptural source for the ritual without a lama?

This is to reassure us that it is possible to take the vows; even when there is no qualified lama to be found, there is the possibility to take that vow oneself.

We can conclude here for this evening. We will recite *The King of Prayers* and we can dedicate specifically for Venerable Tsepal's late mum, who passed away last Thursday. Venerable Tsepal herself is an old student of Tara Institute who is very dedicated. Prior to becoming a nun, she was of a kind and gentle nature, and after becoming a nun she has continuously engaged in the practice of Dharma and became gentler. So she is a good-natured student of Tara Institute. Thus we can keep her mum in mind when we dedicate this practice. Her mum seemed very joyful and happy in her later years and was perhaps 92 when she passed away. Venerable Tsepal herself looked after her mum very well. So that is also a great source of virtue and inspiration.

It seems that all her sisters and Tom, her brother, were all able to come to see their mum before her passing. I think many of them were there together when their mum actually passed away. So it appears that her mum passed away in good circumstances surrounded by her loving family.

As I have mentioned previously, to dedicate we do the visualisations and generate the thought that, just as the dedication is made here, may it actually be so. [*Recitation of The King of Prayers*]

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 Sandup Tsering.

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Edited Version*

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