
Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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28 November 2017

As usual, let us spend some time on our regular meditation practice. [*Tong-len meditation*]

I will have to bring you out of meditative equipoise now, as the only one who can teach or listen to the Dharma in meditative equipoise is the Buddha! This is a unique feature of the Buddha. No-one else could listen to a teaching while at the same time meditating or engaging in single-pointed concentration.

Correctly taking the vow (cont.)

As explained previously, when one makes a pledge when generating aspirational bodhicitta, one is not actually receiving the bodhisattva vows. Similarly, the pledge to practise the morality of benefiting sentient beings is simply a pledge, and is not referred to as 'taking a vow'. As also explained earlier, the extensive ritual of taking the engaging bodhisattva vows is by reciting Verses 26 to 31.

The pledge of the morality of benefitting sentient beings

The commentary further explains:

The second is the pledge of morality of benefiting sentient beings, which means to generate a determined spirit to remain for a limitless time or for as long as samsara remains to benefit even one single sentient being; ...

From this explanation we need to understand that there is a system for generating bodhicitta with the aspiration of achieving enlightenment quickly in this very lifetime, which is presented specifically in the tantric system. In the sutra system, generating bodhicitta generally involves engaging in the bodhisattva deeds over many lifetimes and accumulating merit and purification over many eons. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has commented that making a pledge to benefit sentient beings, even if it takes many lifetimes, seems to show a much stronger determination.

Generating the aspiration to achieve enlightenment very quickly, possibly in this very lifetime, is said to be a unique feature of the tantric system. For example, in the Tara sadhana, having generated strong determination to achieve enlightenment very quickly, one engages in the practice of Tara in that spirit. Saying 'I will engage in the practice of Tara' (meaning to visualise Tara and recite the mantras etc.) is the unique feature.

The wording itself says, 'I will enter into the meditation and recitation of the Tara practice. 'Meditation' here refers to the self-generation (or prime generation) of Tara and 'recitation' refers to the recitation of the mantra.

Here the commentary notes that:

... there should not be any sense of impatience or expectation to swiftly achieve enlightenment whatsoever.

Developing very strong determination, 'for the sake of liberating all sentient beings from samsara, I will remain in samsara' represents a very strong determination to free sentient beings and work for their welfare. There are different ways of benefiting sentient beings, such as the eleven different ways that I touched on last week. One engages in these different methods of benefitting sentient beings and working for their welfare while still in samsara. This is a very strong altruistic state of mind, which requires the development of a level of determination in order to benefit sentient beings.

Similarly, as a verse in the *Guru Puja* says:

Even if I must remain for an ocean of eons in the fiery
hells of Avici
For the sake of even one sentient being,
I seek your blessings to complete the perfection of
joyous effort,
To strive with compassion for supreme
enlightenment and not be discouraged.

I bring in these points from other teachings so that you can incorporate them into your understanding. When you get an understanding from one source it's easier to relate it to other instances where a similar topic is mentioned.

What one needs to understand here is that someone with a strong self-interest cannot develop the kind of altruistic mind that seeks to benefit other sentient beings to such a great extent. Only someone who has overcome the self-cherishing mind and self-interest is capable of developing such a determination to work for other sentient beings. Understand here that working towards developing this determination is a means to combat the self-cherishing mind.

Here one also needs to understand that until and unless one overcomes a self-cherishing mind, the doorway to the Mahayana will not open for oneself - it will be blocked. Blockage to the door of the Mahayana path does not refer to physical blocks like a passageway blocked by obstructions. Rather it means that for as long as one harbors a self-cherishing and self-interested mind, the doorway to the Mahayana will forever be blocked. However, as soon as one overcomes the self-cherishing and self-interest mind, one's personal doorway to the Mahayana will open.

As explained in our last session, there are three types of morality. According to the lam-rim, the first morality of refraining from misdeeds is an explicit morality according to the definition, which is to refrain from misdeeds. As the lam rim explains, when one's practice of gathering virtues and benefiting sentient beings is based or conjoined with morality, then it is referred to as 'the morality of gathering virtues and benefiting other sentient beings'. However, some other texts explain that there is a particular morality of gathering virtues and a particular morality of benefiting sentient beings.

The pledge of the morality of gathering virtue

The commentary highlights the heading:

The third is the pledge of morality of gathering virtue

When bodhisattvas engage in the means to acquire virtues which have not been accumulated in the past, establish the virtues that have already been created, and further increase those virtues, the understanding of the morality in this context would be that acquiring or gathering virtues is the basis of having morality.

The commentary explains that the morality of gathering virtue:

... relates to the question of what Bodhisattvas will do if they choose to remain (until the end of samsara).

And further:

During that time Bodhisattvas thoroughly purify flaws such as prickles and cliffs and so forth of countless Buddha's fields possessing inconceivable qualities.

This may seem a bit ambiguous, but it is actually referring to the 'pure lands'. So *thoroughly purify flaws such as prickles and cliffs*, is a contrast to the impure lands, which refers to the impurity of being contaminated and in the nature of suffering. An environment which is in the nature of suffering has objects which cause suffering, such as thorns and pebbles and uneven grounds. In fact, every contaminated object in the impure lands is an object that causes suffering in one way or another. By contrast, in the pure lands everything is said to be only pleasurable – even the ground is explained as being very soft and spongy, i.e. when you take a step it sinks a bit and reforms its shape when you lift your foot up. I guess it is like those mattresses which conform to your shape as you lie down.

To *thoroughly purify* means to purify the impure lands and the impure objects through one's practice to establish oneself and others into the pure lands which have no causes for suffering. That is how we need to understand it.

So, 'thoroughly purify' means to purify the truth of suffering i.e. transform the contaminated objects which are in the nature of suffering into uncontaminated pure objects, which are only a cause for happiness.

As the commentary further explains:

Bodhisattvas wish sentient beings to be benefited simply by hearing or remembering their names, or simply by seeing, hearing, recognising or touching them. As Bodhisattvas' names spread and remain throughout the ten directions, they also purify the world of sentient beings.

This is the extent of the bodhisattvas' aspirations to benefit beings, where even *by hearing* about them, and *seeing them*, can alleviate the sufferings of sentient beings.

On a personal level, these instructions serve as a means for us to pay heed to generating such aspirations. Whenever one engages in a practice of accumulating merit and purifying negativities, one needs to make strong aspirations such as, 'May the merits that I accumulate in this way serve as a cause to benefit sentient beings through various different means'. This means that besides giving teachings and leading others

on the path where one is actually helping to liberate them, when they merely see and hear about one it becomes a cause to alleviate their suffering.

This is how we should understand that just reciting the incomparably kind buddhas' names becomes a cause to purify a lot of negative karmas. This is possible, not because of some sort of miracle, but because the buddhas themselves (whose names we recite), had themselves accumulated extensive merits and purified all negativities in the past when training on the path, and dedicated their merits entirely for the benefit of sentient beings. Now that they are enlightened beings, when sentient beings merely hear and recite their names it becomes a cause for happiness.

Particular enlightened beings are said to be extremely powerful for removing obstacles and generating compassion, such as Tara and Chenrezig or Avalokiteshvara. When we make strong and sincere prayers to them we experience a positive effect. This is because when they were training on the paths they had developed an intensely strong altruistic mind of love and compassion and made very powerful aspirational prayers. Thus, when sentient beings pray to them they swiftly receive spontaneous benefit. When we incorporate this understanding into our practice now, it shows us the immense benefit of developing an altruistic mind and making strong aspirations.

The commentary further explains:

Hence, the former one purifies the environment and the latter one purifies sentient beings. The beginners should particularly focus on practising the morality of refraining from negativities.

The emphasis here is that *beginners* need to *focus* on the practice of *morality*. As explained previously, *the morality of refraining from negativities* refers particularly to the seven negativities of the body and speech within the ten non-virtues. On the level of the physical body, refraining from killing, stealing and sexual misconduct and on the level of speech, refraining from lying, divisive speech, harsh words and idle gossip. When one makes a strong commitment to refrain from these seven misdeeds, it serves as a profound basis to protect one from a host of other downfalls of the bodhisattva vows and tantric vows. Hence, observing these seven also becomes the basis of observing the tantric vows. It is in this way that we need to understand that a lot of misdeeds can be avoided by observing these seven very well.

The commentary mentions:

To summarise again, it is vitally important to purify all negative actions of body, speech and mind, and to resolve that until achieving enlightenment, at any cost not commit any negative actions through the three doors.

As an after-note the commentary says:

Some scholars consider this as the summary of the above mentioned.

This is quite clear.

The presentation on training in the precepts after taking vow¹

This third subdivision has three subheadings:

- Training in the precept of morality
- Training in the precept of the mind
- Training in the precept of wisdom.

The presentation here is of the three higher trainings and, in this context, this is to be understood as the *morality* that specifically relies on observing the bodhisattva vows one has taken. *Training in the precept of the mind* specifically refers to developing the calm abiding, while *training in the precept of wisdom* refers particularly to developing special insight.

Training in the precept of morality

This has two subheadings:

- Actual
- Its characteristics

Actual

Now the commentary further presents:

The first one relates to the previous statement that one should purify body, speech and mind. Now the question is what is the cause of purifying (them)?

We can see here how meticulously the teaching is presented. Earlier it said that in summary, *it is important to purify all negative actions of body, speech and mind*, and having mentioned this it now says:

Now the question is what is the cause of purifying (them)?

Having said one needs to purify them, it goes further and asks, 'What are the causes of purifying them?'. Here we can see how the very presentation teaches us to use a systematic and logical approach to help us increase our own logic and intellect for reasoning.

The commentary now presents the verse in the text which presents the trainings.

32. *When those observing the vow
Of the active intention have trained well
In the three forms of discipline, their respect
For these three forms of discipline grows,
Which causes purity of body, speech and mind.*

From the understanding that we gain from these lines, we can see how meticulously it has been explained.

As I have mentioned previously, when reading texts such as this one, it is important not to just skim over it. Rather spend time reading each line and try to derive the meaning and contemplate it. That in itself is really a meditation! It becomes a good meditation because when we focus on these words, and contemplate on their meaning, it keeps our mind in virtue.

The commentary now explains the meaning of this verse:

It is said that this verse shows how through training, one's morality practice and respect for it will grow; ...

This is a precise sort of instruction saying that as one engages in the training of *morality*, one's natural respect

for the morality *will* naturally *grow*. Also, as part of the actual training, observing the morality will also increase naturally. This is a very significant point.

The commentary explains this again profoundly:

... while the next verse then shows how the growth of morality will result in quickly completing the accumulation which is the cause of the Complete enlightenment.

The emphasis here is that when one's morality increases the *result* will be to *quickly* complete *the accumulation which is the cause of complete enlightenment*.

The commentary goes on to explain that:

Furthermore, the word "trained" is the basis of the presentation here. If you ask what it is that one trains in? The answer is the three precepts of morality.

It then says:

Who is training? It is the bodhisattvas who are abiding in the vow which reflects the nature of the engaging mind.

Next, comes another question:

For what purpose do the bodhisattvas undergo training?

Again, we can see how meticulously and logically the meaning of the text is presented. The text presents this answer to that hypothetical question:

The bodhisattvas undergo the training in order to purify their own body, speech and mind of moral downfalls as well as to greatly benefit sentient beings.

Incorporate this as a personal instruction. If one asks the question, 'What purpose does it serve to train in morality?', the answer is to create the causes to achieve enlightenment by purifying one's own body, speech and mind, as a way to benefit sentient beings. This is how we can relate it to our own personal practice. Ultimately the purpose is to create the causes for achieving enlightenment as a way to benefit sentient beings.

The commentary now explains the training:

In relation with how to train, as the text says "trained well" the implication of which is to train well or in accordance with (the precepts) of morality.

The next hypothetical question asks what one is achieving:

Having thus trained in it, what will one achieve?

As an answer, the commentary explains:

If one trained well in those three moralities with effort, and then due to the force of acquaintance one would later on cherish and develop respect with a deep sense of regard for them.

The commentary further explains:

The word "well" here refers to 'trained well' and conveys three meanings - to become pure, irreversible and fully complete.

First the meaning of *pure* is explained:

One will become pure like a physically elegant person through the training of the morality of refraining (from negativities)

Next it explains the meaning of *irreversible*:

One will become irreversible or unperishable from the state of complete enlightenment through the training of the morality of benefiting sentient beings

¹ This heading was introduced on 31 October 2017. It is third part of the heading Engaging in bodhisattva precepts. The other two sub-headings were Taking Engaging Vows, and the section we have just finished, The Manner of Taking Engaging Vows

like a chronic disease which has been completely purged

Finally, the meaning of *fully complete*:

One will become fully complete (with virtues) through the training of the morality of gathering virtues like a well-filled vase.

The commentary continues:

The etymology of the term Bodhisattva (byang-chub sempa in Tibetan), a great Bodhisattva can be also interpreted from the perspective of above three.

The commentary explains quite specifically how the term 'bodhisattva', the 'great bodhisattva' relates to the three trainings of morality, particularly by using the Tibetan term for bodhisattva *jang-chub sempa*.

The word *jang* has the connotation of purifying, as explained here:

Through morality of refraining (from negativities) or a sense of moral restraints one can purify (byang in Tibetan) all faults or negativities.

The next word 'chub' has the connotation to acquire.

Through morality of gathering virtues one can accomplish or realise (chub in Tibetan) all the excellent qualities

That is the meaning of *jang chub*. The next words *sempa chenpo* literally mean 'great mind'.

Through morality of benefiting sentient beings one can become a great/noble being or Courageous/heroic one (*sempa chenpo* in Tibetan)

In taking these words literally, a great mind refers to taking on the *courageous* mind of benefiting all *sentient beings*. That is the meaning of *great* here. One can now see how the practice of the three moralities relates to what constitutes a bodhisattva, with the meaning of a bodhisattva ultimately meaning enlightenment, because *jang-chub* is also the term for enlightenment. While someone aspiring to achieve enlightenment is a bodhisattva, the actual state of enlightenment is the ultimate state. Understanding this we can recognise how by training in the three moralities one achieves the ultimate state of enlightenment.

The characteristics

The second is the characteristics (of training in the precept of morality), regarding which the text says ...

The following verse from the root text is quoted here:

33. *Therefore, through effort in the vow made by Bodhisattvas for pure, full enlightenment, The collections for complete enlightenment Will be thoroughly accomplished.*

The commentary explains the meaning:

Through training in the three moralities, one's body, speech and mind will be purified, and hence one can achieve the result, Enlightenment which is characterised by having thoroughly purified all that is to be abandoned and fully equipped with the remedial force.

This passage again uses *jang-chub*, the Tibetan words for enlightenment - becoming completely purified of all negativities and fully accomplishing all the qualities. Hence, having all the qualities that can be achieved through the results of the three trainings.

The commentary further explains:

Aimed at that (Enlightenment) for the sake of other beings, and through applying mindfulness and alertness with sincere great respect and effort, Bodhisattvas are able to fully gather two accumulations of merit and wisdom, the causes to achieve the unsurpassed complete enlightenment.

This second part explains that when aiming at *enlightenment for the sake of other sentient beings*, aided by *applying mindfulness and alertness with a sincere great respect and effort*, this is expressing the means by which *bodhisattvas gather the two accumulations of merit and wisdom* which are *the causes to achieve the two bodies of the Buddha; the form body and wisdom truth body*. These establish *the causes to achieve complete enlightenment*.

Training in the precepts of the mind

The second is training in the precept of the mind which has two: Training in Calm Abiding in order to gain clairvoyance and How to train in Calm Abiding.

Training in the precepts of the mind is subdivided into two:

- Training in calm abiding in order to gain clairvoyance (or 'higher perceptions')
- How to train in calm abiding.

If you can just read the text a bit and familiarise yourself with it prior to the next presentation, then when we go through it the meanings will dawn upon you more clearly and it will be quite easy to follow. So, do some reading and preparation for our next sessions. For example, when it mentions 'certain categories' you should know what those categories are and be able to list them out.

As the text presents the topic on calm abiding, I will be asking you what the nine stages of calm abiding are, what are the five faults and six powers etc. and you will have to be able to list them correctly!

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 Sandup Tsering.

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