
Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

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13 February 2018

Based on the refuge and bodhicitta prayer that we have just generated, we can now engage in our regular meditation practice.

If whatever virtuous activity we may wish to engage in is preceded by taking refuge in the Three Jewels, and then without any self-interest dedicated wholeheartedly to the welfare of all sentient beings, then that virtuous activity will definitely bring great results.

The Mahayana refuge consists of taking refuge in the Three Jewels out of the motivation of wishing all sentient beings to be free from all the sufferings of the lower realms in particular, and cyclic existence in general. With that intention, we go for refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. When the Buddha is recognised as a valid and supreme teacher, then the Dharma will naturally be accepted as a flawless method leading to the ultimate goal of enlightenment. The third jewel is the Sangha Jewel – those who have gained the realisations on the path, and are thus the supreme assembly who assist us to achieve those goals.

The focus of the Mahayana refuge is extremely expansive. Our wish for happiness and to avoid suffering is used as a basis for recognising that all other living beings equally do not wish to experience any suffering and wish to achieve the ultimate state of happiness. So, the scope of the Mahayana refuge is the wellbeing of all sentient beings. The aim is also extremely expansive as it is the ultimate state of enlightenment, which is a state that is free from all faults, and which has acquired all possible qualities. Because it consists of these two elements, it is regarded as a Mahayana or Great Vehicle practice.

We need to recognise that this altruistic mind of bodhicitta does not come about spontaneously. Rather it depends on many causes and conditions, and the immediately preceding cause is the superior intention of taking personal responsibility for freeing all beings from suffering, and leading them to the ultimate state of happiness.

One of the methods to cultivate this superior intention is the practice of giving and taking based on equalising and exchanging self with others. This practice utilises the mind of compassion in the practice of taking, and the mind of love in the practice of giving.

Before we can engage in the actual practice of giving and taking we need to train our minds. First, we must generate the wish to benefit others, and this is dependent on having a genuine love and compassion for others.

Without that genuine sense of love and compassion, the wish to truly benefit others cannot possibly arise.

Cultivating this mind of love and compassion requires us to really contemplate the plight of sentient beings. Although they wish for happiness they are deprived of it, and although they do not wish to experience any suffering, they constantly encounter various sufferings. By contemplating this again and again, one reaches the point of really not being able to bear to see other sentient beings being deprived of happiness and encountering suffering. Then the wish to relieve them of their suffering and place them into the state of happiness will begin to develop quite spontaneously.

Training in the *tong-len* practice is dependent on cultivating that thought. We begin to first familiarise our minds with it by contemplating it with reasoning, and by thinking about it again and again. Then we can begin to feel those sentiments arising. When we reach that stage of really wishing to relieve the sufferings of other sentient beings, and place them in a state of happiness, then we can comfortably give our virtues to other sentient beings.

There are various visualisations we can do. For example, we can imagine giving all our virtues, which transform into the conditions that can bring about every happiness for all sentient beings that then pervades their minds. Then we can contemplate relieving all sentient beings of their suffering by taking all their sufferings upon ourselves. In this way, we train our minds to actually incorporate a true practice of giving and taking.

If we can make a genuine effort to engage in this practice as a form of meditation, we will soon see the results. The obvious benefit is the positive transformation in our attitudes. We have all probably had occasions of feeling glad when we see a particular person suffering, and feeling uncomfortable when they're experiencing happiness.

If we were to maintain such a negative attitude, then the end result is that it will actually make us feel constantly unsettled, restless and unhappy, and we will end up feeling empty inside. Harboring such an attitude only brings lack of joy. In contrast, by sincerely engaging in the *tong-len* practice, the earlier negative attitude will start to transform into wanting others to be free from suffering, and be endowed with happiness. When that occurs, then we will start to experience a true sense of happiness and joy.

As we become more and more familiar with cultivating love and compassion, and it becomes more and more stable, then it will definitely counteract negative attitudes such as jealousy, competitiveness, anger and so forth, which only cause us turmoil and unhappiness. As these states of mind begin to gradually decrease, we will be endowed with a happier and a more peaceful state of mind.

Then, as a consequence of having a genuinely happier and more peaceful mind, we will enjoy a greater strength of mind. The Tibetan term for this, *sems-shugs*, has the connotation of mental resilience, encompassing courage,

self esteem, and the determination to achieve what one wishes to achieve.

That will in turn have a positive effect on our physical body: the bodily fluids of blood and so forth will flow well within our own body, and the four elements will be harmonised. This will rejuvenate and strengthen the vital physical energy within us, naturally bringing about good physical health.

Securing the combination of positive mental energy and mental health, and good physical health naturally leads to a healthy long life. Indeed, it has been medically proven that a sound body and mind definitely contribute to having a healthy and good long life.

Since many of you have already been practising the *tong-len* meditation for a long time, I'm sure you will have had some very positive experiences thus far. With this understanding, we can now engage in the giving and taking practice.

[tong-len meditation]

This is our first Tuesday evening study group class for the year, and we can rejoice in this incredible opportunity to study and practise, and as mentioned earlier, to cultivate love and compassion.

A practical way of thinking about the value of this on a personal level is to realise that we are responsible for establishing our own happiness, and that we have to take the initiative to remove our suffering. Seeing that we have both the opportunity and the ability to do that will encourage us to take that initiative.

We can establish ourselves in happiness and remove unwanted suffering through training our minds in establishing positive ways of looking at things, positive attitudes and so forth. In short, a lot of our happiness and suffering is very much dependent on the state of our own mind. We all strive to be happy and wish to remove suffering, and that's what keeps us so busy in life. If we ask ourselves why are we so busy we will find that it is ultimately because we wish to be happy and do not wish to experience suffering.

However, on a worldly level, the main aim seems to be achieving some sort of temporary physical happiness, and removing physical suffering. Do we achieve those goals? Yes, we do. Our endeavours are usually successful to a certain degree. On a physical level, we do acquire a certain amount of physical happiness and remove physical suffering. Hunger and thirst for example, and many other similar forms of suffering are definitely alleviated through our physical efforts.

Yet while we have acquired the conditions for our physical wellbeing and happiness, what seems to be really difficult to establish are the conditions for mental happiness and wellbeing. Despite all our efforts we still seem to be deprived of genuine mental happiness and continue to experience misery.

If we really contemplate this, it will dawn on us that it is very difficult to achieve inner happiness and alleviate mental suffering by relying on external means. For

example, when we have physical ailments we can utilise our money, or whatever that we have acquired, to go and see a doctor and get the appropriate treatment. However, when we start experiencing mental agony, then we find that it's very difficult to find any external means to alleviate that.

So we have to look into the main causes for our mental agony. If we were to really scrutinise our minds looking for the immediate causes, we will definitely identify the disturbing discursive thoughts that are the source of our problem. The Tibetan word *rnam-rtog*, sometimes translated as superstitious mind, basically encompasses all disturbing and discursive concepts that cast a negative light on our ways of thinking and attitudes. According to the teachings there are of course more subtle causes that we can identify, but the main contributing factor for a lot of our mental agony is these disturbing discursive conceptual thoughts.

Just as a lot of mental turmoil and agony is caused by the negative attitudes that are based on these disturbing ways of thinking, so too adopting a positive way of thinking can alleviate a lot of unwanted mental agony.

We have all had the experience of feeling the negative emotion of anger. Do we feel happy when we are angry? Is our mind peaceful? If we really look within and ask ourselves those questions, the answer is always no, we didn't feel happy at all. The greater the anger we feel, the more our mind is disturbed and agitated.

When anger escalates it can even be seen on a physical level. The face of a very angry person can be quite disfigured: they look quite ferocious and their face becomes red. Then they are likely to do anything in the immediate moment, even using sticks or stones and the like to harm someone in the vicinity. These are all consequences of the state of the mind of anger.

When we see these negative consequences arising from anger in others, then that is when we need to feel compassion, because of the agony and the suffering that such an individual is going through.

When we experience anger, the more intense the anger, the more unpleasant or even repulsive the object of our anger will appear to us. The greater the anger the greater the extent of seeing the object as being unpleasant and repulsive. If this intense anger is not addressed and measures to lessen that anger are not applied then there will be no opportunity for real happiness.

You can't address, and overcome, or even lessen that anger by harming the object of that anger. Getting rid of the external object of the anger, or attacking it with stones or sticks and so forth, will do nothing to help to lessen that anger.

Through contemplating the disadvantages and negative consequences of anger we see how it brings such great harm to others, as well as mental trauma to ourselves. We see how physically attacking the object of that anger does nothing to alleviate the anger. So, the question

arises: what methods can we use to alleviate this illness of anger?

This is where the practice of patience comes in. Here we purposely and intentionally cultivate a mind that counteracts that mind of anger, which is basically a mind of impatience. Anger occurs because we are not able to tolerate something that is caused by the object, such as inappropriate words, or gestures, or facial expressions. Because we are not able to tolerate that, we become impatient. Then the wish to act upon that impatience and to retaliate develops. It's when we act on that wish and actually retaliate that the negative consequences occur.

Practising patience means intentionally and purposely counteracting that reaction of irritation by thinking how these inappropriate gestures, words, and so forth are just mere words. Why should we take it personally? Why should we allow them to affect us? By thinking in this way, and not allowing those words or facial expressions to actually disturb your mind, you are implementing the practice of patience. Through this patience you will be able to bear those insults or whatever inappropriate gestures the other is making without anger. Then the mind of not being able to tolerate things and the wish to retaliate does not arise. That is how to practise patience as a way of counteracting anger.

The next remedy for anger is of course the practice of love. When we can counteract anger by really embracing the other out of love, then the more we feel love for the other, the more we can then definitely counteract the mind of anger within ourselves.

So, the real remedy to overcome the illness of anger that causes us so much pain and agony is implementing the practice of patience and generating love. These are the optimum ways to counteract anger.

Meditating on love definitely brings about personal benefit as well as benefitting others. It has a positive effect that permeates our surroundings as well as ourselves. When we take the initiative to practise cultivating love within ourselves then that is, in turn, implementing a real practice of the Dharma. If we are cultivating love we can safely say that we are practising the Dharma.

As this is the first session of the year we will not go into the material of the text right away. Rather, we can reflect upon some of these points that I've shared with you. I might have been rambling along a bit, but what I have shared with you are points that I regularly contemplate and think about myself. My mind has really benefitted from really taking this to heart, and that's why I'm compelled to share these points with you regularly. Since I've seen you paying good attention I thank you for listening.

Of course, these points that I share with you are all a part of training our minds. Adopting these positive qualities of love and compassion definitely has a positive effect. We can safely assume that with our ordinary minds we have a lot of faults, however at the same time we carry

the potential to develop those positive qualities within ourselves.

As we really pay attention and cultivate positive states of mind such as love and compassion, we will definitely begin to see positive effects taking place, such as feeling more at ease, having a more joyful mind, and being able to see others in a positive light. Others will also start to have a positive reaction to us and our interactions will be positive ones. That in turn further contributes to our own happiness. In this way we can definitely see the positive effects of this practice.

Before we end the session for this evening let us recite *The King of Prayers*, and dedicate it to Julie who passed away this morning. As some of you may know, she was not only a member of Tara Institute, but a very kind-hearted person, who was genuinely interested in the practice of Dharma.

We dedicate our own goodness combined with our prayers for her to have a good rebirth with all the conditions intact. She had faith in the Dharma and practised it in this life, so we dedicate our practice for her to have those conditions continuously to further her practice and develop in the Dharma in her future lives, with all the conditions intact. Of course, *The King of Prayers* also has very detailed dedications towards that end. So, we can think along those lines.

Last Thursday a Medicine Buddha puja was conducted on her behalf and I've heard that she actually had a very positive reaction after the puja was done for her. When she heard about it, it brought great joy to her.

I heard that before that puja she was not very responsive, but shortly after the puja she was able to make comments and seemed very joyful. It seems like it really helped her mind. So Julie benefitted from our gathering here and praying for her. We can use the same logic and reasoning to understand that even when she has departed from her physical body, doing prayers and dedicating them to her will definitely continue to benefit her mind.

Indeed, when like-minded people with a good intention gather together and do prayers on behalf of someone, it definitely seems to have very, very positive effects. When you are doing prayers for someone you have a particular connection with, then that makes the prayers that you dedicate to them even more powerful.

It would be good for Tara Institute to offer flowers or whatever is traditional as an act of condolence for her surviving husband and children.

[Recitation of *King of Prayers*]

Finally, we will recite the Tara Praises, and dedicate them to the success of the unfurling and exhibition of the Twenty-one Taras thangka on White Night on Saturday 17 February. May all the preparations for it go smoothly; may it serve its purpose of bringing positive imprints and great happiness and joy to everyone who comes and sees it. That can be our dedication.

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