
Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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As usual we will do the meditation first. We have already taken refuge and generated bodhicitta three times in order to remind us three times to ensure that we take refuge and generate bodhicitta in the beginning of our spiritual practice. The meditation we do here as usual is called Giving and Taking. To enhance or reinforce the focus of love we meditate on giving, and to enhance the focus of compassion we meditate on taking. Do you understand? Now cultivate the motivation 'I will seek the precious state of buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings and for this reason I shall study and practise Dharma well.

To return to the teaching, we have learnt under the section on Relying upon the Collection that there are some favourable causes that we must gather to achieve calm abiding. These causes are four in number according to the *Lamp for the Path*. We must recognise these conditions well and gather them first in order to meditate to achieve the perfect state of concentration. There is nothing surprising about achieving an ability to rest or still the mind within us through meditation. In fact, we don't need to create many causes to simply rest the mind on the object; that is something anybody can achieve, and it is not that difficult at all. What is difficult is to engage in a form of meditation which can combat the mental afflictions; that is because we need to recognise the mental afflictions and their faults before we can do this.

How to meditate on calm abiding

With reference to the text we are now on the section How to Meditate on Calm Abiding, pertaining to which the root text says:

40. Place the mind on any one, Virtuous focal object.

The commentary text states,

As described before, having abiding in the favourable conditions of calm abiding, one chooses the object, but 'any one' doesn't literally mean anything, such as a piece of wood. Rather it should be one of the four objects as taught by the Buddha, namely pervasive objects, objects for abandoning engagement, scholarly objects, and objects for abandoning mental afflictions'.

As instructed here, initially it is important to focus on one particular object. Regarding the four types of objects of focus that were taught by the Buddha, Tsongkhapa's *Great Stages of the Lam-rim* provides a detailed explanation. That's why I have been recommending that you study *The Great Stages of the Lam-rim*.

Generally speaking, there are specific objects for achieving calm abiding; here we learn about four types of objects.

The first is called **the pervasive object**. The pervasive object can be further divided into two; one which is non-conceptualised reflection, and the other one, which is conceptualised reflection. The difference between the two is that the focus object of calm abiding is non-conceptualised reflection and the focus object of special insight is conceptualised reflection. The point here is that when you meditate you don't focus on the self-characteristic of the object but on the reflection or image of the object. Again, you should remember to refer to *The Great Stages of the Lam-rim* in which you will find further explanations about this. To make it clear, let's say you use this glass as an object of your meditation; in your meditation you don't directly have this actual glass or it's self-characteristic as the object. Rather you only have the reflection representing the actual object, referred to as a generic image in the classical texts, as the object of your meditation, depending upon which you develop your meditation. Hence, here we are saying that such objects can be two, namely, non-conceptualised reflection and conceptualised reflection.

Bearing in mind that the purpose of engaging in meditation here is to accomplish calm abiding, what you focus on is the conceptualised or non-conceptualised mental image or reflection of the actual object, which falls under the pervasive object. The next question is knowing what that object or focus of that reflection represents.

This is addressed under the next three objects.

The second is called **the object of abandoning engagement**. You should refer to *The Great Stages of the Lam-rim* because knowing about this is extremely important and recommended. What does the object of abandoning engagement mean? It means, for instance, that if someone is very habituated to, or experiences strong hatred, then he should *meditate on love* to overcome that; whereas if he experiences strong desire, then he should *meditate on undesirability* of things to overcome desire; to dispel thick mental dullness he should *meditate on dependent origination*; and to overcome strong pride he should *meditate on the classifications of constituents*; and finally to overcome strong discursive thoughts he should undertake *breathing meditation*. These are the five types of the object for abandoning engagement.

In *The Great Stages of the Lam-rim* these objects are explained very clearly, whereas many other classics including *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand* simply list the four objects without much explanation. Understanding this object for abandoning engagement is particularly important for beginner practitioners. The word 'engagement' here means engagement with the object of desire, for instance. Someone who is so forcefully and perpetually engaged or involved in the object of desire has no chance of developing single-pointed concentration because the desire will attack the concentration and prevent it from arising. Likewise, until and unless we are able to manage controlling the mental afflictions, it is impossible for us to undertake any virtuous activities. People who have strong desire can't observe the practice of morality for even a single day. For instance, I observed some people who took precepts such as four root precepts as part of the Nyung-ne practice,

but they couldn't keep the precept of refraining from sexual activity, for instance, for even a day. Attachment is a big problem for a lot of people; even a monk said to me that he couldn't enjoy life without attachment. Of different types of attachment, sexual desire is the most difficult to overcome. There are five layperson's vows – the first is refraining from killing which refers to killing a person, second is refraining from taking what is not given, third is refraining from sexual misconduct, fourth is refraining from lying which again refers to the great forms of lies, and last is refraining from intoxicating drinks etc.

Of these, people most readily break the third precept of sexual misconduct, which shows how desire is the most difficult one to overcome. Relating to the fifth precept, sometimes when bestowing the lay person's precepts His Holiness the Dalai Lama allows a small exemption by saying that a little drink is OK.

In terms of overcoming attachment, we should meditate on recognising the faults of the desired object or reflect upon the undesirable aspects of the desired object from the depths of our heart. The fact that some people say that they experience an eruption of desire when they apply the meditation to counteract desire, such as the meditation of seeing the desired object as being unattractive, indicates that their meditation is not integrated into the depths of their hearts. In fact, deep at the bottom of their heart they are still craving for, and are not able to give up the desired object; that's the problem.

Next is **the objects for scholars**. This consists of five types, namely mastery over the subjects of the five aggregates, the twelve sources, the eighteen constituents, the twelve dependent originations, what is and what is not.

There are two **objects for abandoning mental afflictions** in terms of that which weakens mental afflictions and that which uproots the mental afflictions.

The first one refers to the meditation practices where you progressively observe coarseness and subtlety with respect to, or between the lower and higher realms, and then transcend yourself from the desire level up to the peak of cyclic existence. In this meditation process, individuals only suppress or prevent manifested mental afflictions from arising, without striking at the root of the afflictions.

The second type refers to meditating on four noble truths with their sixteen characteristics. Through this process individuals can uproot the mental afflictions and achieve the state of liberation.

This is enough for tonight. You should study these four objects of meditation as described in the sutra under the section on calm abiding in *The Great Stages of the Lam-rim*.

We have learnt here that the kind Buddha taught four types of meditation objects. However, all objects are included within the last three types of object, meaning there is no phenomena that is not included in these three. So, from this angle we can say it is not necessary to mention the first object separately. This also means that all the phenomena can be the object of calm abiding.cd

I hope and anticipate you will study the topic of calm abiding in *The Great Stages of the Lam-rim*. I also advise

you to hold discussion sessions because you should never forget what you already know. If you keep forgetting what you already know then you won't make any progress and will be like a yeti catching marmots. After catching one he holds it under his arm and then extends the same arm to catch the next one.

Question: Why is meditating on the object of impermanence, for example, not a distraction to calm abiding, because it is not focusing on a particular object. Understanding of subtle impermanence requires analysis so how it can be an object of calm abiding?

Geshe-la: Impermanence means a momentary change. One needs to understand and contemplate this and then it becomes possible to simply focus on that meaning or the cognition of impermanence that things are subject to momentary changes. Generally speaking, meditating on gross impermanence such as death impermanence is not all that difficult, but meditating on subtle impermanence is extremely difficult. In fact, it can be more difficult than meditating on emptiness. I said this to a Gaden Jangtse monk who sat behind me at the His Holiness' lam-rim teaching in Gaden Monastery. I had also met him in the past at a winter pramana debate gathering. The monk is from an area near my home town in Tibet. He is very learned and has become the abbot of the Gyuto Monastery. At that time as I was sitting on the platform of the teaching stage, he teased me by saying, you must be a learned one to sit here. Anyway, later he informed me that next day at 9 am, His Holiness would confer the Goddess Palden Lhamo empowerment and prior to that there would be the preparation ritual at 8am, and as part of the commitment for taking the empowerment we needed to meditate on emptiness. I replied to the monk that it is not hard to meditate on emptiness but much more difficult is to meditate on subtle impermanence. Thinking deeply about what I had said, the monk acknowledged my comment with appreciation and said to me, 'Yes, yes, you are absolutely right, absolutely right'. Meditating on impermanence is very beneficial, even meditating upon a gross form of impermanence is very beneficial in terms of cultivating spiritual qualities such as renunciation. We can generally say that there is no object that cannot be realised by calm abiding or special insight. When we talk about the object of calm abiding, we don't necessarily have to talk about newly accomplished calm abiding. There was another monk who I knew from Buxa and who is now quite old. At one point His Holiness took a walk around and when he reached where we were standing, as has happened previously His Holiness blessed me by holding me with his hand, and at the same time the monk in front also received the hand touch blessing. This made him so happy and he said to me with a great sense of joy and achievement, 'Inside this great venue today nobody has received a better blessing than us, absolutely no-one, and I am just so happy'. This monk is also from Eastern Tibet. He has two cousins who have both now become geshe. The weather was quite cold that day, but the monk had forgotten to take out his warm upper robe from the bag, so his cousin came over to remind him of the robe and suggested that he put it on.

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