
Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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We begin with our usual meditation.

As contained in the meaning of the Refuge and Generating Bodhicitta prayer, which we have just recited, ensure that we all cultivate bodhicitta motivation.

All the religious traditions have some form of prayer to begin the day or practice with; Christians begin by saying, 'In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen'. In Buddhism, we take refuge in the Three Jewels at the beginning of our practice to signify that the practice we are following is a Buddhist practice. In addition to that, generating the bodhicitta mind signifies that not only are we following the Buddhist path, but also within the Buddhist path, the practice that we follow belongs to the Mahayana or Great Vehicle path.

In one sentence, bodhicitta is simply a wish or an aspiration to achieve full enlightenment in order to benefit all sentient beings. When we reflect on the meaning of this statement we are implanting in our mind the seed to achieve the state of buddhahood. Rather than simply saying the words, it is important that we think about the meaning of those words and then cultivate that aspiration of enlightenment within ourselves.

Although the true bodhicitta mind is an uncontrived and spontaneous wish to full enlightenment to benefit all sentient beings, a similitude of that wish or thought is a concern for the wellbeing of other sentient beings, even a single sentient being, and is equivalent to having true bodhicitta within us. Therefore, we should cherish that mind within us as something very precious, and do our best to safeguard and enhance it by engaging in acts of benefiting sentient beings and preventing harm to even one sentient being. It is vitally important that whenever we engage in any spiritual practice we make sure we cultivate bodhicitta, an altruistic mind of enlightenment, so that our practice becomes a Mahayana practice.

We all want to know what to meditate on and the most beneficial meditation is cultivating an altruistic thought of benefiting other beings. Whenever this altruistic thought arises, even if it is a contrived one, try to recognise its preciousness and think of sustaining it. You often hear that 'meditation' means 'to become familiar with'. Therefore, when you cultivate that mind of enlightenment you are meditating because you are familiarising yourself with it. In fact, it is a most beneficial meditation and Dharma practice, and the most effective way to bring happiness for yourself and all other beings, as well as contributing to the flourishing of the Buddhadharmas.

We all say we practise meditation and are following Dharma practice. The question is 'Is it really benefiting

us?'. If it is not, then what is the point of doing it? Is Dharma practice helping us to develop ourselves? The answer to all these questions very much depends upon our integration of and approach to Dharma practice in our life, and where our practice is aimed at. No matter what form of meditation or spiritual practices we undertake, the best is at the end we direct or combine it to enhance an altruistic mental attitude or good heart within us. If you do this then there is no doubt that you will be able to reap the benefits of Dharma in terms of bringing more positive states of mind, and through this realising true self potential and development.

At this point we can recall the advice of the great Kadampa master, Geshe Potawa. He said that Dharma practice is a remedy to mental afflictions. If whatever practice you do is not remedying mental afflictions, then it is not a Dharma practice. As we presume ourselves to be followers of Dharma practice, it is very important that our Dharma practice is aimed at subduing mental afflictions within us. In this way, over a period of time, we can see a decrease in our mental afflictions, or at least we are able to better manage and cope with mental afflictions such as anger, pride, jealousy and competitiveness and so on as they arise. If, in the face of adverse situations that act as fuel for the mental afflictions we do not even think of applying our Dharma knowledge, then our meditation and spiritual practice is not going to help us in reducing suffering and securing happiness in our life. Take for example a situation that is very irritating, hostile or provocative: without the application of Dharma, we will simply lose our self-control and react with anger, and as a result bring harm to ourselves and others.

Lama Tsongkhapa said that because of meditation one's mental afflictions should decrease, and one's faith in spiritual practice and meditational deities and gurus should increase. As one practises meditation more and for a longer period, one should be able to find it easier to practise whenever one wants to and experience more control over one's thoughts, actions and emotions. The meditation practice should have a direct impact on one's mind; this is very important.

However, that is not going to happen unless one puts the Dharma into practice. Simply studying or learning about Dharma is not enough. If you do not think of applying what you have learnt to your practice then there will not be much benefit of your learning, even if you have gained much knowledge. As Lama Tsongkhapa said, meditation or Dharma practice is to remedy the mental afflictions. Accordingly, if we apply Dharma or meditation practice to remedy mental afflictions whenever they arise, we can then gradually see that an effect of our practice is overcoming those mental afflictions, and along with it various problems in our life. Consequently, we will gain more confidence and faith in our Dharma practice, boosting a stronger motivation to apply even more Dharma practice in everyday life.

In our last teaching, we came across these lines from *The Wheel of Sharp Weapons*:

Our spiritual practices are grand
Yet our practice of helping others is tiny,

This is again emphasising that the most important thing is to integrate the Dharma into daily life. Then, we will benefit even if our Dharma knowledge is small. On the other hand, if we don't put our knowledge into practice, then no matter how great that knowledge may be, there is no benefit.

How do you apply Dharma in your life? Recall this verse from the *Eight Verses of Thought Transformation*:

Examining my continuum throughout all actions
As soon as an emotional affliction arises
That endangers myself and others
By facing it I shall strictly avert it.

We should examine our continuum throughout all our actions. If we see any mental afflictions arising, then recognise that affliction as being a very destructive force that will bring harm to yourself, as well as others. We should then immediately apply the antidote. This shows the urgency of applying the antidote; the moment an affliction arises we should think of immediately applying the antidote, without giving any chance for mental afflictions to gain the upper hand. In other words, if we do not apply the antidote immediately, then the enemy of the mental affliction will gain more strength and become harder to combat.

In short, our approach to Dharma practice is to recognise it as a means to diminish mental afflictions and also understand that we must put it into practice. It is through practice we will really begin to appreciate the benefits of Dharma as being the most effective means of overcoming suffering in our life.

Dharma helps us in eradicating the internal causes of unhappiness and problems, which are the primary ones. For instance, there are external and internal cause factors for anger. Of these two, the internal factors are more influential than the external factors because if you could get rid of the internal factors, then you will be able to resist the external factors; resisting external factors however will not get rid of internal factors. This is likened to an analogy of someone who has to cross some ground covered with prickles. It would be a waste of time if the person tried to remove all the prickles on the ground; the solution would be to simply cover their own feet with leather. This analogy resonates with a deep meaning of Dharma. If you reflect on it, you will understand what the Dharma is and what it is for, rather than just knowing it.

To a great extent we can change our feelings by changing our mental attitude and outlook. Let's look at anger, which arises due to various factors, including the object on which the mind is occupied at that time. This means that we can overcome anger by switching our mind to a different object; however we need to meditate effectively to do this. In one such meditation we direct our mental attention to the anger itself, focussing on the nature and impulses of anger, rather than letting our mind ponder on the object of anger, such as a perpetrator. Shifting our mental attention in this way can diminish anger. This shows how shifting our mental attention to different objects can change our mental attitude, and thereby our feelings.

Therefore, whenever we experience any disturbing state of mind that brings about sadness or unhappiness, it should occur to us, 'I must do something to get rid of that and what I need to do is to transform my mental attitude and outlook'.

Recently, a young girl said to me she has been meditating for nearly a year and found that even just recognising anger when it arises within her, and being aware of its shortcomings, is of tremendous benefit. What she had said is very true.

Another young girl said that she finds meditation very helpful, and that she has been applying it as much as possible. She said meditation helps her in overcoming certain emotional problems. However, she confided that she finds it difficult to help her with overcoming romantic attachment to her boyfriend. I really appreciated her sincerity in sharing her meditation experience and trying out meditation practice. Indeed, it is said that of all the forms of mental afflictions desire-attachment, such as sexual craving, is one of the most difficult mental afflictions to abandon. Let alone adolescents, some men as old as ninety crave sexual activity. As we have gone over the time we will skip the usual meditation for tonight. I don't consider myself as a good speaker, nor do I want to be one, but I am here among you all as a close friend. So, with a good spirit of mutual friendship, I feel it is my duty to share with you all what I find beneficial in my life and what I think is relevant to you.

How to train in calm abiding

Posture

We have discussed at length the favourable conditions and the means for achieving calm abiding and then moved on to beginning the meditation practice. In our last session we discussed the sitting posture – on a comfortable seat possessing the seven features of the posture of Vairochana Buddha.

Object of meditation

As the lam-rim commentary states:

From the visualization of your guru on the crown of your head, imagine that a Shakyamuni image splits off. Place it in space at about the level of your navel.

Here the object for achieving calm abiding is the image of Shakyamuni Buddha. You visualise Shakyamuni Buddha in the space in front at the level of your navel. Here the term 'navel', which in Tibetan is *tewa*, also connotes 'central' or 'main'. It doesn't necessarily refer to the biological navel which is located a bit too low for the visualisation. Here the navel or *tewa* refers to the heart, which is also called *tewa* as it is the central part of the body. So you visualise the image of the Buddha in the space in front of you at the level of your heart, at the distance of about the tip of your hands when you do a full length prostration.

The visualised image should be about the size of your thumb. It is recommended to visualise the object in small size because it is said that it is easier to enlarge the object from the small to larger size than to reduce it from the large to a smaller size.

Some people might find it a bit awkward to visualise the object in the space in front, worrying about how it can remain in the space without any support. Therefore, it is advised that you visualise the image of Buddha on the mat of a mass of cloud, just as in the visualisation of the Tsongkhapa and lineage gurus in the practice of the *Hundred Deities of the Land of Joy*.

As to the weight of the object, nothing is mentioned here, but from the pith instruction of gurus such as His Holiness the Dalai Lama the object should be thought of as like a beaming light, but having a bit of weight. The purpose of imagining the object as a beam of light is to achieve the effect of overcoming mental sinking, while imagining it as having a bit of weight is to achieve the effect of overcoming excitement. It is like not being able to get up quickly if our body is loaded with some heavy burden. So thinking of the object as carrying a bit of weight has the benefit of overcoming excitement.

In order to have a clear visualisation, you should initially have a good close look at the actual object, examining all of its details, such as, in the case of the Buddha, observing the Buddha's face, sitting posture, the colour of the Buddha's robe, the hand gestures and so on. If you are relying on the instructions given by the gurus with respect to the object, then refer to the detail provided in those instructions. Then, when you start the meditation you have to try to bring to mind whatever details you can recall and be satisfied with that.

Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand says:

At first this visualization will not be clear, but it is not yet necessary to achieve clarity. All that appears may be, for example, a flickering yellow blob of just some part of him, such as the head, feet, hands, etc.

As it says here, in the beginning, whatever image that comes to mind as you begin the meditation won't be very clear but that's OK. The key is to try to maintain your focus on that object. Here, the focus is not like the way we view an object with our eyes, where the object we look at is out there. Rather, the object is within your mind in the form of a mental image that represents some object. The way your mental attention focuses on that image as an object is such that it is as if your mind is dissolved into the object, and the mind and the object have become one. It is important when you begin the meditation that you are satisfied with whatever first image of the object comes to mind, because it is said that trying to get a clearer picture of the object or analysing it will risk the danger of completely losing or scattering the object.

Do not let these slip from your memory; tighten your retention and do not allow the mind to become distracted. This system of nurturing your recollection alone will be all that is needed to interrupt dullness or excitement. This is why this is the supreme instruction that the great adepts hold in their hearts. Moreover, dullness is cut short by tightening up your image retention. Excitement is cut short by your lack of distraction. When you meditate in this way and achieve a measure of stability, you are most in danger of falling prey to dullness; so be wary of dullness and keep a tight hold on your retention of the image and its clarity. Once you have achieved some clarity the

danger is excitement. Take the required measures against excitement and seek further stability.

We have to be mindful of the object through the power of our memory. Keep that object in mind by preventing any mental distractions. As *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand* says, this kind of application of mindfulness, or the power of memory, has the benefit of actually getting rid of both mental sinking and excitement. Great meditators take to heart this skill of utilising the power of memory or mindfulness. Through this one is able to hold the object without any influence of any mental distractions, as the key to success in meditation.

The meditators need to get right the skill of retaining the object to overcome sinking, and of preventing mental distractions to overcome excitement. At the same time, they should be able to remain vigilant. As they advance their skill to such a level there is good mental stability or retention of the focus and they realise the danger of sinking emerging. At the same time, when they tighten the retention of the object, they remain vigilant enough to keep the danger of excitement at bay. In this way, the meditators ensure that there is both sustained clarity and stability in the meditation.

Initially you don't see the full details of the object, and the object will also lack clarity. This is not unexpected in any way. What is important is maintaining single-pointedness, and then as the stability of concentration increases and becomes fortified, directing your attention to further details of the object won't interrupt the focus of the concentration. When your meditative concentration gains such a degree of mental stability that focusing on a specific detail of the object won't cause any loss of focus, you can then expand your visualisation with more details of the object, such as visualising the Buddha's face, colour of body etc., scanning the whole body from the head down to the feet, or from the bottom up to the head. It is eventually possible to clearly visualise the whole image as clearly as seeing it with your eyes, without being influenced by any distraction. As mentioned earlier, in the early stage of meditation, trying to visualise the object in more detail or with greater clarity can be an obstacle to achieving single-pointed concentration because this would completely scatter the concentration.

You should know now that when we meditate, we are focussing on an internal object, which, as the text says, refers to an image within one's mind and not an outer object. When we talk about achieving calm abiding, we are talking about achieving calm abiding on the basis of this object, which is an inner object within our mind. This is important because the main reason for achieving calm abiding is to achieve special insight, which refers to a realisation within one's mind. This realisation is dependent on a state of calm abiding in relation to an inner object within one's mind. There are some texts which mention the possibility of achieving some form of calm abiding through the eye sense consciousness, however, that kind of calm abiding is not a suitable cause to achieve special insight.

His Holiness The Dalai Lama's birthday falls on the 6th of July, which is a Friday; we will celebrate it the next day, on Saturday morning.

In previous years, Margie and her team have done a wonderful job in preparing lunch, which brought a lot of benefit in terms of not only making everyone happy but also creating a harmonious and friendly atmosphere in the centre. This is very important. From my side, I will make financial contribution for the lunch and I hope you all can take care of organising the lunch.

I am not saying that Tara Institute is not doing well, but I want to emphasise it is important to do whatever we can to maintain harmony in the centre, so that everyone who is involved in the centre gets along with others very well and enjoys very close friendships. When there is such a friendly atmosphere it really brings joy and happiness for everyone who comes here. However, if there is no harmony it can affect everyone who comes here and the progress of the centre.

As you know the Lord Buddha advised that harmony is a very important cause of happiness for the community of Sangha, and also for the flourishing of Sangha practices. You can also see how this is also very much relevant to the lay community. Even if there are two people living together, harmony is important for both of them. If you have chosen to live with someone, then the only way to live together very happily and mutually beneficial is having harmony in the relationship. Harmony is important for the happiness of the family. Even if the family has all the material good conditions, if it lacks harmony then there will be tension in the atmosphere and wealth cannot bring happiness. It is the same for the centre. If the activities of the centre are to flourish and benefit all the people, it is very important that we maintain harmony in the centre.

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