
Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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19 June 2018

Make sure that you cultivate the bodhicitta motivation, just as we have recited in the refuge and generating bodhicitta prayer.

[Tong-len meditation]

Meditation and Dharma is the practice of adopting virtuous actions and abandoning non-virtuous actions.

It is good to do a bit of meditation practice, isn't it? Meditation practice is a form of training that familiarises our mind with a virtuous state of mind. Whether you do a meditation or a Dharma practise, recognising it as a means to practise virtue and abandon non-virtue is very important. What is a virtuous or positive state of mind, and what is a non-virtuous or negative state of mind? Thinking about that is fundamental to our practice.

Benefit and harm

We should also try to clearly understand the statement that a virtuous mind benefits us **indirectly** while a non-virtuous mind **indirectly** harms us. What **directly** benefits us is happiness, which is the result of virtuous mind, and what **directly** harms us is suffering which is the result of non-virtuous mind. Without understanding this, there is really no basis to our Dharma practice.

This also throws some light on future and past lives, and tells us that if we want happiness then we must create its causes beforehand, and if we do not want suffering then the causes of suffering must be abandoned beforehand. Understanding how we indirectly experience benefits from a virtuous mind, and harm from a non-virtuous mind is very important. We will then know that any virtuous practices we do in this life, even they don't yield a result in this very lifetime, are not wasted for we know they will yield a result in future lives. We need to focus on and take into account the result of virtue and non-virtue. We cannot anticipate happiness the moment we create virtue – this won't happen.

Virtue and non-virtue

A **virtue** can be defined as that which brings about happiness. What this means is that virtue has the potential or capacity to produce happiness. This does not mean that the moment we create virtue we experience its result of happiness; nonetheless, the potential or capacity of the virtue is left in the mental continuum. Similarly, a **non-virtue** can be defined as that which brings about suffering. However, the experience of suffering doesn't coincide with the creation of the non-virtue; when a non-virtue is created the potential for that suffering to ripen is left in the mental continuum. This potential will gradually ripen its result when it meets with its conditions.

Here, we learn that if we desire happiness, which is the result of virtue, then we must create virtue, and if we don't desire suffering, which is the result of a non-virtue, we

must abandon non-virtue. In this way we will develop a good knowledge of the practice of what to accept and what to reject, based on the law of cause and effect. With such knowledge deeply ingrained within ourselves we will automatically engage in practices to adopt virtue since we want happiness, and in practices that reject non-virtue, since we don't want suffering.

Ten virtuous and ten non-virtuous actions

As to identifying the differences between virtuous and non-virtuous actions in a broad sense, the kind Lord Buddha pointed out ten virtuous actions which are to be accepted, and ten non-virtuous actions which are to be rejected. This teaching is particularly relevant and suited to the minds of beginner practitioners.

The Buddha said that killing is an act of non-virtue. Why? It is because it brings suffering. Abandoning it is an act of virtue, which will bring happiness. I have raised this topic here because you are studying the lam-rim where this topic relates to the person of small scope. Yet if we think extensively, then we can see that this topic encompasses the entire path.

The Buddha advises us not to commit an act of killing because such an action is non-virtuous and will bring great harm upon yourself and others. Since everyone cherishes their own life as being very, very precious, committing an act of killing is a great sin or negative action. Of the ten virtuous actions, refraining from killing is the first virtuous action. To inspire his followers to protect the life of sentient beings and abandon acts of killing, the Buddha said, 'If you harm other sentient beings you are in fact harming me, and if you benefit other sentient beings you are benefiting me'. Just thinking about this one statement by the Buddha, we can understand how precious the Buddha's words are.

As to the practice of adopting virtuous actions, there are ten virtuous actions of which the first three relate to the bodily actions of refraining from killing, stealing and sexual misconduct. The benefits of adopting an act of refraining from killing other beings such as animals or even other humans is just enormous. A person who commits an act of killing may not feel pain but the extent of his act of inflicting suffering upon the victim and all others related to them is unbelievable.

Just as life is the most precious thing that we possess, our wealth is also very precious. Therefore, the Buddha advises us to refrain from stealing. Sexual misconduct also brings much pain and suffering to others, and is one of the worst negative actions. That's why the Buddha advised his followers to forbid sexual misconduct; other religious traditions also forbid this and it can sometimes be against the law too.

All these ethical practices are a source of peace, happiness and freedom for humankind. If we consider ourselves to be followers of the Buddha, we must take his advice seriously, and remind ourselves of them from time to time by thinking, 'It is not right for me to go against of the Buddha's advice'. If we happen to commit any non-virtuous action such as killing, then it is important to try to acknowledge it as soon as possible, regret it and take a vow of not repeating it again. 'Oh no, what have I done? The kind Buddha advised me not to do it but I have, and I

really should not have. Alas! Ah ka ka, ah ka ka that's terrible! I won't do it again.'

There are four non-virtues relating to speech, which are lying, slandering, speaking harshly and idle gossip and three non-virtues relating to mind, which are covetousness, harmful thought and wrong view.

So, it is vitally important that you really understand the fundamental practice of adopting the ten virtuous actions and rejecting the ten non-virtuous actions very well, and put them into practice. I'm not going through all of them in detail, by explaining the result of each of them etc., as you have all learnt this in the past. I'm simply reminding you of what you already know. And more importantly, I'm reminding you to bring your knowledge into your practice. In the end, as I always say, what is most important is your practice.

As you know, all these topics are part of the lam-rim, or the stages of the path teachings. I can candidly say that there is no other way to control and calm our mind other than integrating lam-rim teachings into everyday life. I am not boasting when I say this, but I have been arduously practising the lam-rim since the early age of twenty-one or twenty-two, as I was very inspired by Tsongkhapa's *Three Principal Aspects of the Path*.

Around that age I practised lessening desire and cultivating a sense of contentment a lot. I realised that the ten innermost jewels of the Kadampa masters (the four entrustments, the three vajra-like convictions and the three changes in one's living status) are what Dharma practice is all about and this really moved my mind.

However, due to unforeseen changes in my situation I was forced to leave my country. In giving teachings I always focus on encouraging people to integrate the Dharma into their practice and to know how to combine their knowledge of Dharma and practice. I am not fond of judging people and things by saying this and that, but with a sincere thought of helping others I share with them what I have found beneficial to myself.

We quite often hear that we should practise virtue i.e. adopt virtuous actions and abandon non-virtuous actions. Do you now understand the meaning of the virtuous actions that we ought to adopt and the non-virtuous actions that we ought to abandon? The point here is that the happiness we want and the suffering that we don't want derives from these two actions. In fact, all the other major religious traditions including Christianity and Islam also teach the same principles of adopting virtuous actions and abandoning non-virtuous actions. So this practice is common to all the major religious traditions.

Community benefits

Even as just one person, you are benefiting others if you refrain from non-virtues such as killing due to your recognition of the principle of compassion. Conversely, if you commit an act of killing many will suffer as a result and your violent action will disturb the peace and security of the community.

Before you are able to benefit a large number of sentient beings or the larger community, you have to start your practice by benefiting those who are close by, even if it is just one other person. You have to start your practice with

that person, who serves as a basis for further developing your altruistic thought and actions. The practice of benefitting the other person is virtuous, which you ought to adopt, and harming them is non-virtuous, which you ought to abandon.

Imagine if all the people who are living in the country or the community where you are living show some respect for the life of other beings, which means they have seen the value of the first virtuous action of refraining from killing, or the second virtue of respecting the property of others. The more people who put this into practice the more peace and security and freedom they will bring to that community.

If, on the other hand, the people living in that area show no consideration for others, never hesitating to commit an act of murder, or theft if they feel they have some sort of need, then there won't be any safety in that community. There will be no peace, and nobody will feel really safe and free. Even if the country and people are doing well economically there won't be a sense of peace, happiness and freedom. From this perspective the Buddha's teachings on compassion really serve as a very important source of peace and happiness for both the individual and the broader community.

As I always say, part of your practice is trying to understand that if you benefit the person you live with or indeed any other person in any way, then you are also benefitting yourself. Conversely, if you cause harm to that person, then you are also harming yourself, and also destroying your own peace and happiness. So it's important to be a bit more sensitive to the needs of the other person; be sensitive about what makes them happy, and what will hurt their feelings. This is important.

Due to the influence of a deep-seated self-centred mind within us, we normally forget about other people. So is it possible to find happiness with that self-centred mind? Generally speaking we have to say that we are fundamentally social beings, so the friendship of others is a very important contributing factor to our happiness. With a self-centred mind there is a strong view that you are independent and that you don't need to depend on anyone else, and that you can become completely self-sufficient.

But in reality, the average person is not able to cope with a solitary life isolated from others. It's extremely difficult to cope with such an isolated kind of lifestyle. Therefore, from the point of view of personal happiness, it is important to have some consideration for other people and their needs, bringing them benefits, and as much as possible refraining from any action that harms them.

Personal benefits

As mentioned earlier, it's not enough to gain some knowledge of the Dharma. We have to reflect on that knowledge and try to gain a deeper understanding of it. For example, we hear a lot about the shortcomings of the self-cherishing mind and the benefit of the mind of cherishing others. We have to ask ourselves whether whatever understanding we have of any verse from a scripture that refers to the shortcomings of self-cherishing and the benefits of cherishing others has an effect on our own outlook and deeds in everyday life.

You really have to personalise your spiritual understanding. Do you really believe that the self-cherishing mind has the many shortcomings that are described in the texts? We also hear a lot about the benefits of cherishing others, but again does that understanding lie in the depths of your heart? From your own experience you know that self-cherishing brings suffering while the mind of cherishing others brings happiness. It's very important to relate whatever we learn to our practice.

We started tonight with the meaning of meditation, saying that it is to familiarise our mind with a virtuous state of mind, and then ended up discussing the question, 'What is a virtuous state of mind?'. In order to meditate effectively it is important to recognise a virtuous state of mind.

You must think about Dharma by relating it to your own self and your practice. Those of you who lead the Monday night introductory sessions would know how, prior to your Dharma talk, it is important that you feel good and at peace with yourself and have the right motivation, which is solely to benefit others. With such good preparation then as you begin the talk, the flavour of your talk will be unique. Without good preparation, no matter how many words you spout from your mouth when you teach, they will seem empty and have no feeling or real effect.

I tell those who give Dharma talks to others that teaching Dharma is also very beneficial for them too. So, I advise them that as part of their preparation, they should spend one or two hours to cultivating a virtuous state of mind, and a proper motivation, which is to think that your sole purpose in teaching Dharma and sharing your knowledge of Dharma is to benefit others and cause the Buddha's doctrine flourish. With good preparation, then as you begin to teach not only will you feel that the whole experience is very positive, but also your listeners will have an inspiring impression of you as well.

It is so important to reflect on whatever you know about Dharma over and over again and integrate it into your life. I have mentioned to you numerous times, that when I was about eighteen or nineteen years old I saw the text, *The Fragmented Collection of the Kadampa Masters Words* (consisting of about 30 sections) for sale in the Lhasa street market. Luckily, I had some money, so I bought it. I started to read it when I got to my room, and it really moved me and brought me a deep sense of happiness. I was particularly moved by Atisha's advice in that text:

The best friends are mindfulness and introspective awareness,
The best instruction is to observe your mind,
The best quality to have is altruism.

When I first saw these lines, I felt so happy; they touched me deeply. I thought about them a lot and they benefitted greatly, and I have taught about these a lot too. Although these instructions by the Kadampa masters are just a few words, I found they really struck a chord in my heart. I am not saying that I am a great practitioner; in fact, I am no different from all of you. As I find this instruction very beneficial I am advising you to think about the meaning of this pith instruction of the Kadampa masters and integrate it into your life.

Now we have used up the time for this evening, so maybe that's enough. I am sorry if it sounded like me gossiping or telling you about myself. Maybe I have chatted so much that some of you with greater knowledge might have find it too noisy for your ears, but maybe others might have found it useful. Certainly, I find this chatting enjoyable. Whatever you do it's important you don't forget happiness: be happy to drink tea, happy to discuss, happy to sleep, happy to get up, happy to go home, happy to go back, happy when eating, happy with what you are doing. Don't forget happiness. 'I am happy, I am all right'. Thinking like this is very, very beneficial, and recognising happiness is good. Some people have too much happiness, but they don't recognise and don't understand it. This country is rich materially, but is it rich in terms of happiness for people? To me happiness is inside in the mind; I don't see money as a happiness.

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