
Study Group - “Liberation *in the Palm of Your Hand*”

A Commentary by The Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Samdup Tsering



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Reinforce your motivation by thinking that your reason for studying and practising the lam rim is to attain complete state of enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings, and with this strong thought, to make this life most meaningful and not without purpose.

Making life meaningful:

It is very important to constantly remind ourselves to make the best use of our life: to generate the thought that until now we have used this life for the good purpose of practising dharma, which will be of benefit now and forever. In addition to this positive thought, you should also strongly affirm the intention to continue to practise dharma so as to make the remainder of this life meaningful.

We should always try to feel regret for all the negative deeds and thoughts done in the past, and make a strong affirmation not to repeat them in the future. If you put your best effort into spiritual practice, then every day is worth living, and the longer you live the more benefit you get out of your life.

On the other hand, if you forget dharma and always engage in negative actions, then instead of gaining something from life, every day you will lose something. Then, living a long life is not worthwhile, since you only accumulate more negativities.

So it is important to always try our best to practise dharma. For the most of us, this means to safeguard all the vows we have taken, such as individual liberation vows, and bodhisattva or tantric vows (for those of us who have taken initiations). These vows are like our inner jewel or treasure, so we must maintain them as purely as possible. Then they will be a source of future happiness, and even material wealth.

For many of us practice means taking self-initiation. If you have completed a retreat in association with any tantric practice, do not completely forget the practice as if you have finished the path. Continue to practise with self-initiation, the benefit of which is to purify even root downfalls.

There are benefits from dharma practice, so day by day make an effort to progress along this path.

A balanced approach:

It is best to combine our normal day-to-day worldly activities and spiritual practice. Just devoting all our time and energy on working to obtain food and clothing is not enough, either now or for the future.

While we continue our daily life and work activities we should also try to practise dharma. Put aside some time to contemplate dharma: any topic of dharma such as "What does precious human rebirth mean?" or "What are the eight freedoms and ten endowments of a perfect human rebirth?" Regardless of the duration, set aside some time to do dharma practice as purely and completely as possible.

Of course, in the texts we learn that when you begin your spiritual journey or path you must renounce the world. But in practice you can only physically give up all worldly activities - job, friends etc. - if that decision comes out of a true sense of renunciation. With a true sense of renunciation there will be no retreat from your pursuit of that path when facing difficulties, nor will there be any regret at a later stage.

But to experience true renunciation is very difficult. Therefore it is better to have a more balanced approach without giving up everything at the beginning. Otherwise, without true renunciation, as soon as there are difficulties in the practice, there will be an inability to cope with them, or there will be frustration with slow progress. Then later there will be regret about the decision to follow dharma practice, or even the thought that dharma practice is of no value or benefit, or that it is too hard.

So there is more value if your approach is not one sided in the sense of being only dharma. It is not that this is not right, but because if you are not ready you could end up generating a wrong view, and losing faith in dharma.

Of course at the beginning of dharma practice it seems very appealing to take vows or to change one's life-style to follow the model of an ideal practitioner, since such a model seems to offer a more peaceful happy life. It is like someone with no experience of sitting in positions of authority, who believes such people have many privileges of which they can take advantage. In reality it is different when you are the one actually sitting in that chair.

It is good to do what suits us in practical life. Therefore

it is best to have a balanced life, and practise without changing your outer life too much, so that you do not become an inconvenience, or shock your family and friends. What they should see is that you are like any one else. Not only can you work and fulfil your responsibilities, but you can also achieve something extra.

The right way to practise dharma:

We are focusing upon knowing the right way to practise dharma. Without really knowing the meaning of practising dharma, some people have the notion that the practice of dharma means not engaging in normal relationships. As a result the man abandons his girlfriend and becomes a monk, or the woman abandons her boyfriend and becomes a nun. Then later they face problems as a result of not finding a girlfriend or boyfriend.

How should we make progress? Our focus should be on our mind. Our mind is so thick with desire for sex or wealth, and if we practise without remedying these things, then, although on the surface there may be a change, in fact our actions cause damage to ourselves.

Therefore the practice of dharma depends on our own state of mind. The opportunity to practise dharma is there for all – those people with a very busy working life, those in other worldly affairs, the famous and the very rich. People can practise dharma to suit their lifestyle.

Buddha said to an early king "There is liberation in a householder's life". This indicates that the real dharma is something which takes place in our mind – within ourselves. It is not something which takes place outwardly.

No matter what you do, if you perform that action out of a view to benefit others then there is always some benefit as a result. Even when, due to a lack of knowledge, that action turns out to be non-beneficial, or not positive, then there is still some positive result, since the action was derived from your beneficial attitude to others.

Practical ways to practice dharma in everyday life:

As a business person, you can think that the things you sell will be very useful and beneficial to others. By generating such a thought, then whenever business is conducted you are integrating spiritual practice, which is a cause to generate compassion or a beneficial attitude to others. If the goods you sell are over-priced, then there is nothing wrong if there is also regret about that, since this is a spiritual practice which purifies some portion of the negativity you create by cheating others.

If we know how to practise dharma and are very conscious of it, then every single footstep you take, or round of breathing, or every word uttered can be integrated as part of our spiritual practice – as part of our spiritual development.

If we develop love and compassion to others, and then develop this to the point that it absorbs into our daily

thought process, then naturally everything we do (because of our love and compassion) can be transformed into our spiritual practice – for example the common act of offering tea to a friend.

422.212.23 Suffering Of The Godly Beings (Continued)¹

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We are up to the topic of the suffering of godly beings, particularly those in the desire realms.

Without recognising the suffering of the godly beings in the desire realms, we might wish to be reborn there, since they are comparatively endowed with enormous material wealth, pleasure and mental peace. We may even mistakenly believe that the pleasures of a god are the everlasting peace and bliss of liberation. When we recognise the various sufferings that the gods of the desire realm experience, then we won't have any wish to be reborn there.

The desire realm gods are also called Knowers of the Three Times because they are capable of knowing their past, present and future life.

While still in the godly realms, and enjoying a good body and resources, with good companions, seeing what they will next experience in any of the three lower rebirths, causes them great pain and fear which they cannot tolerate.

According to the text, which you can study for yourselves, when the godly beings approach death, they undergo suffering in the one week prior to death, as they experience the five distant signs and five close signs of death.

In addition there are fights between the gods and demigods, and stronger gods abuse lower gods, even banishing them. In the presence of stronger gods the weaker lower gods thus undergo misery and suffering, which makes them lose their self esteem and dignity.

Therefore taking rebirth in the godly realms will not free us from suffering. Indeed being born there consumes all the virtuous merit or karma accumulated in the past. Furthermore no new positive karma is created, because of the environment and indulgent life. The lifespan of the gods is so long that they exhaust a huge amount of positive merit, and so after death most of them go to a lower realm.

Reducing Attachment In Our Life

In some ways the experience and suffering of the godly beings can be related to our own experience in this human level of rebirth. Our living conditions – the place where we live, the environment, the resources we enjoy – are comparatively very fortunate. We should see them as the result of our own positive karma, from our

¹ Page 499 Liberation in the palm of your hand. The title used in the text is: "Thinking about the suffering of the gods".

meritorious actions of the past. We must therefore be aware that by utilising these good conditions, we are using up the merit we have created in the past. If we do not create more positive actions, then we shall face the same fate as godly beings at the time of death, and fall into lower realms in the next life.

We can also apply our knowledge of why the gods experience fear at the time of death. They have had a very good life, and now they still desire it, even as they are dying. So at death they suffer as a result of not wanting to be separated from the source of their pleasure. In the same way, if we are also attached to our good living conditions, wealth, friends, and so on, then at death, without any choice, we are separated from them, and we shall undergo the same suffering which the godly beings experience at their time of death. So from contemplating the suffering of the gods at their time of death, and the cause of those sufferings, we can learn that we are no different from them, and realise that we must do something so that the same thing will not happen to us.

We must practise to minimise attachment, because where there is attachment, there will be suffering when you lose the object of attachment, or fail to find it. To overcome attachment we must generate renunciation not only to this body but even to the godly forms, which are also the nature of suffering.

So try to meditate to generate renunciation. Even doing this for one minute is worthwhile. Then at best, even if the desire for things is not completely overcome while living, at the time of death your mind will not have desire and will not cling to various objects. As a human we can generate true renunciation by generating an awareness of our own suffering, and also generate compassion for others by observing their suffering.

Our effort in practising dharma should in some way influence our mind to be in a positive state of virtue. On a daily basis we must train our mind to feel love and compassion for all other beings, or just to be in a state of peace, or even to be in a state of equanimity or indifference. On a regular basis train your mind not to hold any negative attitude for an hour, or even ten minutes. If you cannot do that at least try not have any obvious negative state of mind.

It is important to train our mind consistently so that it becomes very soft and obedient. When you reach the state where you can direct or shift the mind as you please, then it is not hard to do the same thing at the time of death. Then you can cultivate a happy peaceful state of mind, which will lead to a happy rebirth.

So your future rebirth is totally in your own hands. With a trained mind and a very positive attitude even at the time of death, then it is certain that your future life will be very fortunate. Then the transition from this life to the next is a matter of replacing this old, weak body with a new one.

In the discussion next week the compulsory question for the following week's test will be on describing all the benefits of hearing dharma with reference to the verse which begins 'Hearing [the dharma] is like a lamp which clears away the darkness of ignorance. Not only is it a supreme lamp but it is supreme wealth which cannot be stolen by others'. Based on that verse then, explain the benefits of hearing or listening to dharma.

One of the important factors for good discussion is to be very friendly, and share your knowledge and experience with each other. So the discussion should be mutual, where all benefit and support each other, and contribute happiness and joy of life to each other

Headings with outline numbering are derived from the Text. Headings without outline numbering are derived from Geshe Doga's commentary.

The original typescript is prepared from Alan Molloy's original transcript, which has been checked against Damien Busby's notes. Adair Bunnett then checks the typescript against a tape recording, and edits the text, which is finally checked by Alan Molloy.

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