

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

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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We should ensure that our motivation to study these profound teachings on lam rim is that of bodhicitta - the ultimate wish to achieve enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. Make sure that this is your thought. Taming one's own mind is another purpose of studying the lam rim.

Taming the Mind - The Essence of Spiritual Practice

Studying the lam rim to tame one's own mind is not something that contradicts the bodhicitta motivation. In generating bodhicitta you have cultivated the thought to achieve full enlightenment for the sake of all beings. Saying “for the sake of all beings” implies that the intention behind your actions is to benefit other beings. To fulfil this bodhicitta motivation you must practise lam rim and focus upon pacifying all negative states of mind.

It is very obvious that it is impossible to perform any action for the sake of other beings if we do not rid ourselves of such negativities, particularly the selfish ones. If we look within ourselves we see two attitudes - those of self-cherishing and of cherishing others. Of these two, the attitude of self-cherishing is by far the stronger, so how can we benefit any other beings? Let alone benefiting a far distant being, we cannot even benefit those with whom we have a close relationship. So it is very important to recognise what type of attitude influences the motivation behind our actions.

A very selfish and negative mind is like a very harmful and destructive weapon. Whenever it strikes it destroys all our inner peace and happiness. So we can see that it is some negative state of mind within us that is the main cause of any form of misery which we find in our life - such as being restless, or lacking stability in our lives, or seeming to confront unending problems. Not only does this negative state of mind cause a lack of inner stability, but it also causes a lack of stability in our relationships with others - a friend can rapidly change to an enemy and an enemy may become a friend and so on. All those things happen because we are led by a state of mind which is wild and cruel. Therefore it is clear that unless we cultivate peace inside ourselves by calming and disciplining our mind, we are in no position to help other beings.

As far as methods of calming the mind are concerned there is no more effective and better method than that found in the lam rim teachings. This method of gaining complete control over the mind is the same as that used by early masters.

If we want to be a person with more dignity, blessings and a good heart, then the only way to do this is by taming all the uncontrollable states of mind. Once we

achieve some level of mind control through our own effort, then we can really appreciate the level of spiritual practice which we have achieved, regardless of our own level of knowledge. Through the teachings we shall have found what we seek - inner peace and happiness.

We have to realise that this ability to control our own mind is something that we have to achieve for ourselves, and that the spiritual teachings are the method to do this. If we do not apply these teachings to our own mind then these teachings have no personal benefit. Not even one's teacher, or the Lord Buddha can cultivate such positive states of mind for us.

Having realised that lam rim is the most superior and effective method of calming our mind, how then is it to be put into practice? For this we must realise that practising the methods of lam rim is not something unrelated to our day-to-day life.

We must realise that spiritual practice will bring more happiness into our life, and help to solve unwanted experiences in life, for example in relationships with others, or at the work-place. The whole point is being able to judge whether there is any progress, whether spiritual practice is beneficial, whether or not one is receiving blessings from receiving the teachings. It is in daily life that we can see if there is more peace and satisfaction than before we began to follow the spiritual teachings.

In a sense what we base our spiritual practice upon is our commonsense sense of discrimination of what is good, and what is bad in our actions of body, speech and mind. From this perspective we should practise to increase, as much as possible, the positive qualities of our actions of body, speech and mind whilst at the same time decreasing the negativities of our actions of body, speech and mind.

What is negative and what is positive? To a large extent we can understand this by using ourselves as an example. If we take for example our dealings with friends and so on. What we need to consider when we look in our minds, is the sort of attitude that we hold towards a person. If we experienced that attitude from another how would we feel? Likewise with understanding the difference between our positive and negative verbal actions. In this way we can gain an understanding of how our actions of body, speech or mind determine the reactions which we receive from others. It is very clear if we think in this way.

Therefore what the “practice” part of “spiritual practice” means that in daily life we must practise or retain all that

is positive in our actions of body, speech and mind. This can be in terms of our relationships with others and also in our workplace. By adopting the spiritual teachings as a life practice in such a way, there be a direct benefit to us. The result of such practice, and the transformation of our actions of body, speech and mind into something more beneficial to others, will naturally attract more friends and lessen enemies. Others judge you in terms of your actions of body, speech and mind. If these three actions are positive, then in the eyes of the world you are a positive human being. In short the spiritual practice that we do has some benefit even in this life.

We should try to place the focus of our spiritual practice upon how to improve our daily actions of body speech and mind. In all our actions, whether walking, sitting, or eating we must be aware of making sure they are the right actions - then our spiritual practice would really benefit the lives of both ourselves and others. Our spiritual practice would then become a source of joy and happiness. On the other hand if we make no effort at all to integrate the spiritual teachings into our daily actions then all our life will just consist of complaints about not having enough friends, or about relationships with others, and so on.

Our own actions are the most important thing that matter in life, and we have to assume responsibility for them. Generally speaking people believe that those with more friends and relatives have more people to support them. However it is not always the case. For some people, having plenty of friends and relatives means having more problems in life. If we do not control our actions of body and speech, then the immediate recipients of our actions are those closest to us. It is the same with harsh speech. The immediate recipient of a frowning face is the person closest to you. If you do not discipline your actions then friends and relatives become a cause of problems and concerns in life.

Of course this is not to say that friends and relatives are perfect, and that everything is always our own fault. But even if it is by someone else's fault, and you hear a harsh word from a friend, and you also lose control and reply with harsh words, then your response causes even more damage to the relationship.

On the positive side the people to whom we are always considerate are none other than the people closest to us - family, close friends, and our work mates.

So we have to engage in spiritual practice, and what that means to us is to practise right actions towards those we meet in life. This may mean improving your means of verbal communication, or your mental attitude, or your physical expressions.

If you have a belief in the law of karma then you must put that into practice by transforming daily actions of body, speech and mind so they are not harmful to other beings. In work situations you are paid to fulfil some required responsibility. If you do not do so, then you are dishonest. By having faith in the law of karma we try to fulfil our responsibilities honestly, and so our actions not only benefit ourselves but are also of personal benefit.

Questions and answers

Geshela: What are the Three Baskets of the Teachings and the Three Higher Trainings?

Students: The Three Baskets are vinaya, sutra and abidharma.

The Three Higher Trainings are higher morality, higher concentration and higher wisdom.

The Three Higher Trainings

In the context of the lam rim the training of wisdom specifically refers to special insight which is also known as superior insight. The training on concentration refers to calm abiding.

These three are related in that wisdom depends upon the training in concentration which in turn depends upon the training in morality.

This is because the wisdom which is special insight can only be achieved after achieving calm abiding, in which even subtle mental distractions are overcome. However to overcome these subtle internal obstacles to meditation and calm abiding, we must first overcome gross disturbances, which is done by the practice of morality.

In other words the first training of morality is the foundation of the other two trainings. In fact we covered the three trainings last year. Refer back to the lam rim commentary. It is also good to study useful examples to understand the function of these three trainings.¹

It is important to gain a good understanding of these three trainings as they are the tools to calm one's mind. In practice it is necessary to apply these three trainings so as to fully calm and subdue the mind. So it is important that we know them well.

One of the advantages of undertaking such a thorough study of these subjects is to develop wisdom knowledge about them - this knowledge can be very supportive of our practice. For example, while meditating we might sit and focus on the subject, and it seems all right, but after the meditation session we might forget the whole point of the meditation, and so it becomes very hard to integrate spiritual practice into our daily life.

Throughout our practice we must apply mindfulness. However mindfulness itself lacks the discrimination of what is right or wrong. Therefore, in order to apply mindfulness all the time, there must be a good knowledge of what is right and wrong.

By applying mindfulness to ensure attention, object and method, supported by wisdom knowledge, are maintained throughout, meditation will be very effective. Then even after meditation, mindfulness must still be maintained so that actions are not polluted by some negative actions. Even this mindfulness requires the support of the wisdom knowledge which discriminates right from wrong.

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¹ Editor: In a previous class Geshela gave the example of the axeman to illustrate the Three Higher Trainings:

"To cut a tree you need a sharp axe, and the wielder of the axe must have a strong shoulder and hand. Without a strong shoulder and hand the tools cannot chop down the tree, no matter how sharp the axe. Likewise the three higher trainings are indispensable. To cut the tree of ignorance of grasping at the 'I' we need the sharp axe of wisdom, supported by the firm shoulder and hand of concentration."