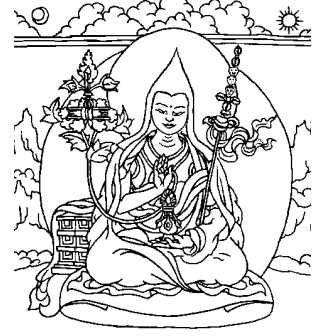


Study Group - “Liberation *in the Palm of Your Hand*”

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Samdup Tsering

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As usual try to establish the bodhicitta motivation by generating the thought that you are studying and practising these stages of the path to enlightenment for the sake of all living beings.

As part of your motivation, you should also think that the reason for listening to these teachings is to put them into practice in order to achieve the state of buddhahood for the sake of all beings. The benefit of correcting our motivation before undertaking any action is that the bodhicitta motivation ensures that our actions are not selfish and are directed towards benefiting other beings. Then right from the beginning we ensure that our practice is a true spiritual practice, and is in fact a Mahayana practice.

Benefits Of Loving Kindness

As we discussed in the teachings last week, through the practice of cultivating loving kindness we receive the benefits of all the other spiritual practices. By cultivating loving kindness for all beings we purify a large portion of our own negativities, and accumulate a large amount of merit or positive energy. This practice is the true cause to take rebirth in the human and godly realms. For instance, it is said that by cultivating loving kindness for all you attain as many rebirths as human or godly beings as there are living beings. There is also the benefit of preventing undesirable diseases and untimely death, as well as preventing harm from non-human spirits. Therefore cultivating loving kindness is the spiritual practice we should do in order to achieve any goal on our spiritual path, whether it be purifying negativities, or speeding up our spiritual progress in the path, or removing obstacles in our path.

422.321.125 The Fifth Cause: Great Compassion

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Having meditated on loving kindness the next stage of cultivating bodhicitta is great compassion. To engage in this meditation on compassion it is necessary to know:

- the object of one's compassion which is all other sentient beings who are undergoing a great deal of suffering
- the mental attitude of compassion which is wishing all these beings to be free from this suffering.

With this mental attitude of compassion you feel, “How wonderful it would be if all sentient beings were free from suffering”, and then “May they be free of suffering”, and “May I be a cause for them to be free suffering”.

Great compassion holds a unique place in Mahayana spiritual training. It is said that great compassion as a method for achieving full enlightenment is like a father, whereas the wisdom of realising emptiness is likened to a mother. The point of using this analogy of mother and father is related to ancient cultures in which the race (or

caste)¹ of the child is determined by the race (or caste) of the father. This applied in very specific detail so that if the father is a king then all his children will be of that kingly race. Likewise when you generate great compassion, you create the definitive cause to achieve the Mahayana enlightenment of buddhahood. In other words great compassion does not result in the enlightenment of the lesser vehicle of hearers and solitary realisers. However the wisdom of emptiness is likened to a mother, since the mother can produce a child of any race dependent upon the race of the father.²

So great compassion is the root practice of the Mahayana or great vehicle, which means that all Mahayana practice should be based upon great compassion. In general it is said that the basis or foundation of Buddhist practice should be non-harmfulness.

The Importance Of Great Compassion At The Beginning, Middle And End Of The Spiritual Path

It is important to know the significance of great compassion in all stages of the Mahayana path, from the beginning to the fruit of the path.

Because of the importance of great compassion to the Mahayana path Chandrakirti homage paid to great compassion at the beginning of his text *Supplement To The Middle Way*. This is quite unusual since most compositions pay homage to buddhas and bodhisattvas. Chandrakirti's praise to compassion indicates that great compassion is important at the beginning, middle, and the end of the Mahayana path. To yield a good harvest, the most important cause at the beginning is sowing good seed, in the middle it is water and heat, and at the end the harvest is a good crop. In yielding the great harvest of buddhahood, compassion is the only cause which is important in the beginning, the middle and the end. In his praise of compassion Chandrakirti uses the analogy of seed, then water, then harvest to explain why compassion is the one and only³ cause which is important at the beginning, middle, and the end.

¹ Editor: This refers to the caste system of ancient India. This was a patrilineal system, where descent or title is traced through the male line.

² Editor: It is a tenet of the Prasangika Madhyamika school that the emptiness realised by both Mahayana and Hinayana practitioners is the same in that both realise the non-inherent existence of the self. However they are differentiated by their method, which for the Mahayanist is compassion that has developed into the mind of bodhicitta.

³ Editor: From the “Illumination of the thought” by Lama Tzong Khapa a commentary to Chandrakirti's “Supplement to the middle way”; “ ‘Compassion alone’ indicates that unlike the three different examples of importance (the seed, water and ripeness) at the beginning, middle and end for an external harvest, only compassion is important in the beginning, middle and end for the harvest of the conqueror”.

At The Beginning

The reason why great compassion is important at the beginning of the Mahayana path is that when it is generated compassion, it makes a person become very definite about entering into that path. It is the very direct and substantial cause for bodhicitta to arise.

Without the great compassion one cannot enter the Mahayana path. To enter into the Mahayana path one must generate bodhicitta, and in order to generate bodhicitta there has to be a strong sense of responsibility for freeing all other beings from the ocean of suffering, and a strong resolve to do so. Such a sense of universal responsibility to free all sentient beings from suffering will only arise from great compassion, otherwise there will not be this sense of responsibility. On the other hand we see that if we do not generate great compassion, then we cannot produce this sense of responsibility and vow to free all beings from suffering. Without this we cannot generate bodhicitta, and without bodhicitta we cannot be a Mahayana practitioner.

In The Middle

We have seen why great compassion is important at the beginning of the Mahayana path but it is also important at the middle of that path. This is the time from when we first generate the bodhicitta mind up to the attainment of full enlightenment. In this period great compassion is also very important, because in the middle the Mahayana practitioner has to meditate all the time to further develop and intensify great compassion. If the practitioner fails to focus upon great compassion in the middle, there is a danger of falling into the lower vehicle as a result of losing their Mahayana spirit and courage.

Shantideva said that if not for great compassion then it is very easy to lose the Mahayana spirit and to feel very discouraged by thinking of the great number of sentient beings and all their very negative, ill-mannered and pathetic deeds, and also because of the length of training needed to complete the Mahayana path. Then it would be easy to fall into the lesser vehicle of hearers and solitary realisers. However with great compassion to sustain the mind, the Mahayana spirit will never diminish because one will have no concern for one's own needs and suffering, and will voluntarily take upon oneself any hardship in order to benefit other beings. So great compassion in the middle is the very important cause to quickly accumulate merit.

At The End

At the end on attaining the state of buddhahood, the reason why all the activities of a buddha or enlightened being automatically benefit other beings is said to be due to this great compassion. Having attained the state of enlightenment a buddha does not think that the ultimate goal has been reached, and be satisfied with self peace and bliss. Rather every action of the buddha is to benefit other sentient beings.

How quickly bodhisattvas achieve full enlightenment or buddhahood depends upon the intensity of their development of this great compassion. We should also understand that the reason why the tantric path is the quicker path to enlightenment is because that path requires a more intense state of great compassion.

Compassion In Personal Practice

How can you relate your knowledge that great compassion is important at the beginning, middle, and end of the Mahayana path to your own practice? You have to realise that whatever compassion you have within you is very important and precious, and it is a quality through which

you can truly help and benefit other beings.

In the context of your own practice, compassion is important at the beginning. In the beginning whether you show any concern for those around you - friends, relatives, strangers, enemies - depends upon whether you have compassion and love for them. Not only is compassion important at the beginning because it initiates within us the thought and actions to help others, but in order to continue these actions of help and benefit we must retain this thought of compassion in our mind. It is very obvious that in the beginning we generate some compassion, and then because of this compassion we go and help others. But if that compassion does not continue, our actions to help others will stop. The benefit of compassion is not only in terms of other beings, but also for your own life in terms of sustaining lasting peace and happiness in your life, which you can continue to enjoy if you practise compassion.

Using Compassion To Assess Spiritual Progress

We can judge our progress towards complete enlightenment on the basis of how our compassion is progressing. If someone asks "How close are you to reaching full enlightenment?" you can answer by checking your own mental attitude to other beings: how much compassion there is, and whether or not it is biased, and how strong it is.

In this way we can, to some extent, judge for ourselves how close we are to reaching our spiritual goal. You may notice some negative thought towards other beings that you have had in the past has been transformed to compassion and love, and also that your compassion is unbiased and is stronger. The text says that this is a sign that you have minimised your faults, and increased the positive qualities. You can see that if you continue with your practice it is possible you can completely remove all the faults and attain all the excellent qualities, which is the full enlightenment.

In our spiritual practice we try to gain those qualities which have lasting benefits for this life, the next life and the lives thereafter. However we cannot expect to gain these spiritual qualities quickly and easily. So it is important to be very convinced of the benefits of seeking these qualities, and then we are able to continue to follow our spiritual practice, even if it is hard and there is no apparent sign of any development or progress. If we do this over a period of time then our progress will become apparent, and this gives us the motivation to continue to practice. As a result your practice will become easier and a source of inspiration and delight.

The quality we seek to develop through spiritual practice is far more beneficial than anything we can gain in this mundane world, where there are so many appealing objects to be seen and heard so that we feel we must possess them. We have so many things in this world but still we feel we must collect more. We can see how all these things are futile and meaningless because we must leave them all behind when we face death. At death it is only the qualities of our mind which can support us and bring peace and happiness.

Therefore if we keep the continuity of our practice it is possible that when we die, we shall die as an excellent practitioner. When an excellent practitioner dies they do so with a great celebration of this life - it is said like a son meeting his father with great joy. In order to encourage oneself in spiritual practice, we must remind ourselves of its long term benefits.