

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

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Taking The Essence And Meaning Of This Life

Firstly we should all cultivate the right motivation, which is the bodhicitta mind, thinking that the reason we are receiving these profound teachings is to achieve the enlightened state of buddhahood.

As the Lama Tsong Khapa prayer says:¹

“This life which has leisure is more precious than the wishing-jewel;
So difficult to find it is as quickly gone as lighting in the sky.
Thus realise that all worldly activities are like chaff in the wind,
and seize the essence of leisure and opportunity day and night.
The reverend Lama practised like this
Those desiring liberation should do likewise.”

As this prayer says when you think of achieving some purpose in life, this human life you have achieved now is more meaningful and more precious than a wish-fulfilling jewel. Not only is it precious but it is extremely rare to find such a life. We have to seize the opportunity to use it now, because we may not achieve this life form again. By realising the preciousness and rarity of this life, understanding its value, and fully utilising its potential, we can accomplish all our temporary and long term goals.

It is also important to understand the qualities of this life. If it is going to last forever, then we can postpone taking its essence. However as the Lama Tsong Khapa prayer says, we have to remember that life is as impermanent as a lightning flash, so we cannot delay making use of it.

The Three Scopes Of Spiritual Practice

One must be very clear about the true purpose or essence of this perfect human rebirth. We can understand it at three different levels.

At the minimum or **small level** the purpose is to utilise this life in order to achieve a better rebirth in future, as either a human or godly being. The **intermediate purpose** is to achieve the state of liberation from cyclic existence. The **supreme purpose** of this life is to achieve complete enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Of course day-to-day pursuits are very appealing to our mind, by appearing to have great value, but in fact they are of no value. From the point of view of the spiritual teachings the purpose or essence of this life falls into one of these above three categories. If we do not think it does, then we are misleading ourselves, and pursuing something of no essence.

The Small Scope

At a minimum, we have to understand that seeking the small purpose of life is seeking a goal beyond this life. It is said that only by having a goal beyond this life does this justify having obtained this human life.

We have to gain some conviction about the existence of a future life. In fact, most major religions of this world propose

the existence of future life. It is important to understand that there is a future life, because if there is no life after this one, why should we bother about what happens after this one?

From a philosophical point of view what does 'future life' mean? We all know that when we die this body completely disintegrates. Somewhere in this self we have a notion of 'I'. Does that also disintegrate with the body? If we investigate we find that it does not, and that when the body disintegrates the self, or 'I', continues its journey. If we examine further, what else beside the 'I' continues? It is the mind. It is the only element accompanying the 'I' or self into the future life.

For the sake of argument, if we have this understanding then the whole teaching of the Lord Buddha makes sense by focusing as it does upon our mind accumulating positive qualities, while diminishing negative ones.

To achieve a happy human rebirth in the future, the main practice to follow is the spiritual teaching on the small stages of the path. In this we study the practice of taking refuge, the karmic law of cause and effect, the sufferings that exist in lower rebirths, as well as death and impermanence. The factor which determines whether our immediate next rebirth will be a lower or higher rebirth is the karmic factors stored in our mental continuum. Going to a lower or higher rebirth is determined by the white or black karmic imprints on our mind. In following the small stages of the path it is very important for us to see our purpose beyond this life, and through this not have a mind which is caught up with the affairs and goals of this life.

The most important teaching is taking refuge, which is not by just mouthing the words. It has to come from the heart with a deep understanding of our own mind. We have to realise the two main causes of taking refuge which are:

1. Some sense of fear or insecurity, which has to arise because of an understanding of the sufferings of lower rebirth, which are inevitable unless you do something to prevent that lower rebirth from happening.
2. You turn towards the object of refuge for protection, guidance and refuge.

However more important than placing hope and faith in the object of refuge, is following the instruction of the refuge objects. In summary, this instruction is the practice of accumulating positive actions by always sustaining a positive state of mind, such as loving-kindness towards other beings. At the same time one should strive to eliminate negative actions, thoughts, and states of mind.

If we do this practice for just one minute of every day in our life, we are at least doing something to extract the essence of this life.

Medium Scope

The medium or intermediate purpose of life means broadening our mental scope by understanding that achieving the small purpose is very temporary and not enough, and that it is not the complete solution of our problems. So one thinks 'I must achieve the state of liberation because that will fully satisfy all my wishes, and fulfil all my hopes of ending suffering for

¹ Lama Tsong Khapa, 'Concise Meaning of the Stages of the Path'

ever'. The main practice of this middle stage of the path is the Four Noble Truths - the Truth of Suffering, the Truth of the Cause of Suffering, the Cessation of Suffering and the Path leading to the Cessation.

With a broad mental perspective one can comprehend this whole teaching of the middle stages of the path, and see the possibility of achieving the everlasting state of liberation, permanently removing all suffering. Then, all one's spiritual practice and daily activities will be directed towards achieving that goal. That is extracting the medium purpose of life. In the middle stages of the path one understands, and follows the threefold training, and so understands the Truth of the Path, thus advancing to the Truth of Cessation.

Great Scope

To extract the great essence or purpose of this life is to direct every action towards achieving complete enlightenment for the sake of all beings. The emphasis of spiritual life is on generating love and compassion for others, with a primary concern for their needs. Through fully developing this love and compassion, there is some sense of universal responsibility and superior intention, so that not only do you feel love and compassion but you also feel a sense of personal responsibility to take all their problems upon yourself.

However merely mentally assuming responsibility for others is not going to fully benefit them. To do that requires special resources and capabilities. Then we realise that the only ones in that position are fully enlightened buddhas, and so we aspire to achieve the fully enlightened state as the means to benefit all beings. This altruistic aspiration is the bodhicitta mind, and it is the main feature of the Mahayana teaching. To achieve the supreme purpose of this life the most important practice in daily life is cultivating this bodhicitta mind.

The Source of Unhappiness

When we talk of the importance of shifting our interest from this life to future lives we might wonder whether we shall have enough happiness in this life, finding all the things we need. First of all we need to find out the main source of our continuous unhappiness and dissatisfaction in our day-to-day life. When we examine, we find that the main cause is that our mind is too attached to this life. That is why we are not happy, no matter how much wealth and possessions we accumulate. There is never enough!

How do we achieve happiness and satisfaction in this life? The spiritual teachings place an emphasis on future lifetimes, by generating an awareness of death, and our situation after death. The immediate and direct effect of such a meditation is to reduce our clinging to this life in a way that turns our mind closer to our real situation. The way we are living our life and the way we are viewing things is very deluded, and somehow we become trapped in those deluded fantasies, causing unending worry and suffering.

In fact we can all understand that the reality is, as the Buddha said, "The end of meeting is departing, the end result of birth is death, the end result of accumulating is losing and the end result of rising is falling". If that is reality then why is our mind still attached to things which are subject to loss and disintegration? This shows us how our mind plays tricks on us.

For this reason Shantideva has said: "Even though what we have cherished is happiness yet our ignorance prevents or destroys the cause of happiness as if it were our enemy. Yet although our wish is to be separated from suffering, we always run after it by creating its causes."

Regardless of future lives, to bring about mental peace and satisfaction in this life we have to free ourselves from attachment to this life since it is that which brings suffering in this life. With attachment we cannot gain satisfaction out of the possessions we have accumulated in this life, and when the mind is attached to material objects they can torment us.

Geshe Doga says that there are some wealthy people who can understand how instead of bringing security, wealth can bring insecurity, dissatisfaction, and fear.

If we think about these teachings, especially the teaching on death and impermanence, we can diminish attachment and clinging to this life, and even though the focus of the meditation is on the betterment of future lives, it can also bring more peace and satisfaction now. Everything becomes more meaningful, and we find more satisfaction in this life.

The teaching tonight is to give you a framework with which to undertake your spiritual practice. Our own mind is the focus for whatever spiritual activity we undertake. Why? Because it is the source of all the happiness we want and the suffering we do not want. If we relate our view of a situation to our mind, then we can see the good and bad in our own mind.

There is no question that whatever we choose to do in our life is done with the hope of improving the quality of life - of finding more happiness and satisfaction. However despite whatever changes we make in our life there is always frustration. Even if we do achieve what we want to achieve, the satisfaction only lasts a short while, and soon we find that something is not right.

If we observe what goes on in our own mind as we go through life, we find that we are always struggling to find happiness, and we suffer when we do not find it. For instance, many people suffer when they cannot find a partner with whom to live their life, because they have the view that finding the right partner is going to bring satisfaction in life. So there is the suffering of not finding a partner. Then having found someone, there is doubt about whether they have found the right person. Even if it is the right person, then after a while some problem arises, and they believe that they have failed because they are suffering, rather than feeling the hoped-for happiness.

From where are these fluctuations of feelings and emotions coming? They come from the thoughts and attitudes in our own mind. The root cause is our ignorance, and based on that ignorance we give way to our desires. Desire within relationships is the main cause of suffering. In other words, we suffer because we cannot obtain objects which are appealing, beautiful or pleasant to our mind, and when we obtain them, we fear losing them, or we worry if they will last for ever. These emotional instabilities are derived from the desire in our own mind. Likewise anger and hatred also generate suffering in our life.

It is important to understand how beneficial and effective it is for us to relate the cause and effect of what we experience in our life to our mind, and then try to change, bringing a sense of more happiness and preventing suffering by changing our mind. To be honest, uprooting desire or hatred is an almost impossible, unrealistic goal for the beginner. Although it is an unachievable goal, if we familiarise ourselves with, or engage in specific meditations to overcome this desire or hatred, we can at least decrease the intensity of the desire whenever it arises and causes some problem. Then we can overcome these problems. Meditation means to familiarise oneself with knowledge of desire and the various techniques to overcome it. Then it is very much easier to apply these techniques when we want to do so.

As the great master Padampa Sangye said, "Be your own master so you are in control of yourself and judge of your own actions." Whether you are good or evil is not something judged by outsiders. It is you who have the best knowledge of your own qualities and faults.

Before we finish, Geshe Doga advises that newcomers to the study group should do some study on the topic of calm abiding which we have covered so far. We started this topic last year and in the next teaching we shall continue with it.
