

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

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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Try to reinforce the bodhicitta motivation by thinking, “I want to achieve complete enlightenment for the sake of all beings, and it is for this reason that I am receiving these teachings and shall put them into practice”.

## The Root Downfalls of the Bodhisattva Vows

We have been discussing the 18 root downfalls of the bodhisattva vows, and we have finished the first three.

4. The fourth root downfall is abandoning the Mahayana teachings and giving false teachings.

Here ‘Mahayana’ refers to the Mahayana teachings, which comprise the teachings on both profound emptiness and extensive deeds. ‘Abandoning’ means generating the thought that these profound and extensive Mahayana teachings could not be the words of Lord Buddha.

The second aspect of this fourth root downfall is promoting faulty teachings. Here ‘faulty teachings’ means a teaching from the outsider, or non-Buddhist schools. It also includes fallacious teachings, which are not authentic Buddhist teachings. This root downfall includes not only showing a great enthusiasm and interest and even joy in acquiring knowledge of false teachings, but also teaching these false teachings to others, and causing them to follow these false teachings. This is the meaning of teaching false teachings.

5. The fifth root downfall is stealing the property of the Supreme Jewel, which is the refuge objects.

The act of stealing refers to taking the belongings or the possessions of other beings. In the fifth downfall, the owner of the stolen goods is described simply as the Supreme Jewel, or the refuge objects. In a sutra it is said that Supreme Jewel refers to stupas and Sangha communities. Using that sutra then the term Supreme Jewel in fact includes all the three objects of refuge, because the stupa symbolises both the refuge objects of the Buddha and the Dharma.

The **actual object** of the theft refers to objects which belong to the three refuge objects, which of course are the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. We generally understand that these three objects of refuge refer to the actual Buddha as the refuge object Buddha; to the truth of cessation and the true path which are the refuge object Dharma; and that Sangha refers to superior or Arya beings. However, here the **refuge object Buddha** refers to not only the actual Buddha, but also to the symbols or representations of the Buddha, such as the image of Buddha in the form of a sculpture or painting, as well as to a stupa.

The **refuge object Dharma** refers to the two types of Dharma. One is the spoken Dharma, which is the

scriptural texts, and the realised Dharma which is inner realisations.

There are two types of the **refuge object Sangha** - ordinary Sangha and Arya Sangha.

In the case of **ordinary** beings the term ‘Sangha’ refers to a group of a minimum of four ordained monks or nuns. However in the case of superior beings this is not necessary, as even a single **Arya** Sangha is entitled to be called ‘Sangha’.

So the three objects of refuge as just described are the owner of the things that you steal when committing this downfall. The actual substance of the theft can be any object which has been offered to these three objects of refuge. Even taking up the residence of the Three Jewels can also be the object of theft.

What is the **measurement of having committed this downfall**? It is said that it is the time when one engages in the actual action of stealing the property of the refuge objects. If the theft is of items belonging to Sangha, we say that if it is ordinary Sangha then it must be theft of a thing belonging to a group of four ordinary Sangha members. However if you are one of that group of ordinary Sangha members, then taking something owned by the group is not regarded as theft.

There is also the consideration of the **type of the thought** which presides over the action of theft. That thought has two elements - recognition and motivation.

**Recognition** means knowing that the item which you are stealing, belongs to the three objects of refuge.

**Motivation** refers to your intention of stealing the property of the Supreme Jewel.

The motivation can be general or specific. Let us use the example of an act of stealing the property of a Sangha. Your motivation is general if it is to steal the property of Supreme Jewel, although the thing to be stolen may be a property of a particular Sangha. Such a general motivation can serve the purpose of being a motivation to complete a particular action. The recognition is correct as long as the stolen thing belongs to any Sangha.

Your motivation can be specific. You do not intend to steal from the Supreme Jewel generally, but from a particular Sangha (Sangha A). In this instance, if you ended up stealing something which belonged to Sangha B then your recognition was wrong, and so there was no consummation of the action of stealing.

As to **the means of stealing**, one can either personally engage in the action of stealing, or have someone else steal it for you. Whether one steals directly or indirectly, by force or other means, it is all the same thing - it is the act of stealing. Upon the completion of the act of stealing

one would have the thought of having now obtained that object. If you commit a full action of stealing the property of any of the three objects of refuge, you are committing the downfall of stealing the property of the Supreme Jewel.

6. The sixth root downfall is abandoning the Dharma. This downfall occurs if you declare that the teachings, which constitute the three baskets of the teachings of the three vehicles of Hearer, Solitary Realiser and Bodhisattva vehicles, are not the actual teaching of the Buddha.

Dharma includes the entire teaching of the three vehicles - the great vehicle or Mahayana, and the lesser vehicles - Hearer, and Solitary Realiser.

The great vehicle-Mahayana is a teaching which is complete in itself. It consists of the three baskets of Scriptures which mainly deal with the profound topics of wisdom and extensive deeds. Abandoning the great vehicle teachings means generally criticising the complete Mahayana teachings, and even falsely claiming that they are not the real word of the Buddha. If you generally declare that the Mahayana teachings are not the teachings of the Buddha, then this is the downfall of abandoning Dharma.

Likewise with the teachings of the Hearer vehicle which are mainly about the four noble truths showing the entire path and the fruit of the Hearer vehicle. Here again, generally saying that the Hearer teachings are not the words of the Lord Buddha is committing this downfall. For it to be considered a downfall you have to criticise the entirety of the teachings of the particular vehicle, and not just direct your criticism to a particular aspect of the teaching. For instance if you have some criticism of the teaching on the noble truth of suffering which is in the teachings of the Hearer vehicle, it is not a general criticism, so it is not necessarily the downfall of abandoning the Dharma.

Likewise with the teaching of the Solitary Realiser vehicle which mainly concern the Twelve Links. Again, if you criticise this teaching of the Solitary Realiser (which explains the Twelve Links) as not being the word of the Lord Buddha, this is the downfall of abandoning the Dharma of the Solitary Realiser vehicle.

So we can see that the sixth root downfall has within it three downfalls in terms of abandoning the Dharma of the three vehicles.

### **The Importance of Knowing the Teachings**

Along with regular practice it is also important to try to develop an understanding and knowledge of the teachings, because it is said that one of the doors of negative actions is ignorance. Therefore through gaining knowledge and understanding of the teachings one can prevent any negative actions, which might result from ignorance of the teachings.

We have just been discussing the teachings of three vehicles, and we have to understand from that how essential it is for us to learn the teachings according to lam rim terminology and structure.

The teaching of the small stages of the path focuses on the basic practice of abandoning the ten non-virtuous actions. The only way to make any progress in one's spiritual path is to progress from the small stages of the

path. This is because without a sound base we are not going to achieve anything if we try to engage in some higher form of practice. As Lama Tsong Khapa said, "having become an vessel of the common path, may I soon enter the Vajrayana, the supreme of all vehicles". The common path means lam rim which includes the three stages of the path. Making progress in those three stages is done in a systematic orderly fashion by first making progress in the small, then in the medium and finally in the great stages of the path. So the practice of the small stage is not something to be underestimated, or ignored. As we learn from all the texts, if we do not make any effort with that, there is no point to our practice, and we cannot benefit from engaging in any higher stages of the path.

### **Discussion Night**

For the coming Study Group discussion night and the test, could we select two questions from each one of the test papers this year? For the compulsory question everyone is to write about their own experience of studying the lam rim, focusing especially on the part of the lam rim teachings which you find most beneficial for your practice and your life. Is it the teaching on renunciation or on death and impermanence or on bodhicitta? The compulsory question is to write about what you find most beneficial for your life from the lam rim teachings. So the detail of the compulsory question is up to you!

### **The Activities of a Scholar**

There are three activities of scholars: teaching, composing, and debating. This compulsory question gives you the opportunity to exhibit your skills in composition. In fact by joining this Study Group everyone has been receiving training in all three of these scholarly activities.

As you all know, there is the opportunity to give teachings and lead meditations, and also as part of the Study Group you have the discussion nights, which involve debating. Then our test involves writing or composing. In fact if you were to put all your study group test answers together then it is a bit like your own lam rim composition, and so you are all the authors of lam rim texts. So Study Group gives everyone the opportunity to become great scholars!

These three scholarly activities of the Dharma practitioner are all directed towards the flourishing of Dharma, as well as its preservation. The activity of teaching Dharma ensures that the Dharma is sustained and will never decline. In fact, teaching ensures the maintenance and preservation of the Dharma. The activity of composition ensures the longevity of the Dharma. Finally, the activity of debate ensures that the Dharma is preserved faultlessly.

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

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### **Note on authentication**

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