

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

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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Make sure that you cultivate the bodhicitta motivation by generating a genuine aspiration to achieve the state of buddhahood for the sake of all beings. Then think that it is in order to fulfil this bodhicitta aspiration that you are listening to these teachings, and will put them into practice.

We have now finished describing the eighteen root downfalls of the Bodhisattva vows.

The Four Binding Afflictions

It is said that to complete sixteen of these eighteen root downfalls, four binding afflictions or delusions have to be present. The two exceptions are the root downfalls of generating wrong view, and losing one's bodhicitta mind, and in these two cases the binding afflictions do not need to be present for the downfall to be completed. If you commit either of these two then automatically, regardless of the four binding afflictions, you lose your Bodhisattva vows.

By generating wrong view, for example the wrong view of lacking faith, or rejecting the law of karma or cause and effect, you specifically lose your Bodhisattva vows the moment after you have generated the wrong view. You do not lose it concurrently with generating the wrong view, but the moment after.

The four types of binding afflictions are:

1. Not giving up thoughts of committing negative downfalls, and still desiring to commit them.
2. Not having any sense of shame and consideration in committing the downfalls.
3. Committing these downfalls happily and with satisfaction.
4. Not recognising the negative actions of the downfalls as wrong actions.

Apart from the two root downfalls that automatically cause the loss of one's Bodhisattva vows, all four binding afflictions must also be present, along with one or more of the other sixteen downfall actions in order to lose one's Bodhisattva vows. It is said if one commits a root downfall action without these four afflictions being present, one's vow is not actually lost. However, this does not mean that the misdeed one has committed becomes a secondary Bodhisattva offence. It is still considered to be what is called a *pham-pa* in Tibetan, that is a part of the downfall of the root vows.

1. The first binding affliction is not giving up thoughts of committing the downfall.

With this binding affliction you always have a desire or motivation to commit any of the eighteen root downfalls. Therefore you cannot stop yourself from creating the actions of the downfall. In other words, in order to maintain the Bodhisattva vows it is very important to overcome this binding affliction which is really a thought or desire to commit wrong actions.

2. The second binding affliction is not having any sense of shame or consideration.

This is also important to overcome, because it is said that without this sense of shame and consideration you would still be likely to commit these downfalls, even though you have prevented the thought of committing the actions.

We have discussed the difference between shame and consideration in the past. Briefly, the Tibetan term for shameful is *ngo-tsa*, is thinking, “I should not do this action because it is wrong”. With *ngo-tsa* shameful you avoid wrong actions because you clearly recognise them as wrong, and not necessarily because of your concern for and consideration of the view of other people. Without a sense of shame you have no self-respect, or sense of decency about your behaviour, nor do you care about your self image.

In Tibetan consideration is *trel-yö*, which is considering the views of people other than yourself. *Trel-yö* is also a powerful factor which causes us to refrain from negative actions. With it you respect and consider other people and their views. That is to say you understand that committing certain misdeeds may be fine with yourself but not fine with other people and your relationship with them. The fact that you usually take spiritual vows and commitments from your Gurus and Refuge Objects means that it is easy for *trel-yo* to arise. This sense of consideration serves as a basis to maintain your ethical practice.

Regarding this, Shantideva said in his *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* that we should always try to think that all the buddhas and bodhisattvas are always present throughout space and time. Therefore, there is no place to do negative actions discreetly. Sometimes you commit misdeeds thinking that nobody is watching and that it is all right to do so as long as you are not seen performing them. So you can see here how effective is to have *trel-yo* in order to refrain from breaking vows and committing any misdeed.

Although both are a sense of moral restraint, the main difference between *ngo-tsa* shame and *trel-yo* consideration is the reason for restraint. In the case of *ngo-tsa* it is mainly related to oneself and *trel-yo* relates to other people. Both are equally essential in sustaining a pure morality. It is said that if after you have committed a misdeed you feel even a small degree of shame or consideration, then the misdeeds that you create will not be a *pham-pa*, or root downfall.

3. The third binding affliction is committing the misdeed happily and with satisfaction.

The ‘happily’ refers to feeling happy about the actual actions which are the misdeed. The ‘with satisfaction’ implies that from the depth of your heart you like, enjoy, desire and take pleasure in doing the action.

4. The fourth binding affliction is not recognizing the misdeed as a wrong action

This is just a brief discussion of the four binding delusions.

In the commentaries it is said that there are three categories

of the four binding afflictions in terms of their intensity or degree.

1. The heaviest degree of affliction.

This is when all of the four binding delusions are present, causing the root downfall to occur.

2. The medium level of affliction

This refers to the fourth delusion of not recognizing the misdeed as wrong, which in fact is regarded as the worst one. If you are afflicted with this delusion, then regardless of whether or not any one or two of the other three afflictions are present, your affliction is of the medium level.

3. Small level of affliction

This refers to possessing any of the first three binding delusions, but not the fourth one.

The whole discussion about the Bodhisattva vows is part of the topic of the instructions on Taking Bodhisattva Vows, relating to the Engaging Mind of Bodhichitta.

Liberation is in the Palm of your Hand

In the lam-rim commentary, after completing the Instructions Relating to the Engaging Mind of Bodhichitta the text says, "I have shown you the path to liberation. Achieving that liberation depends upon you".

This quotation carries a strong message. Having heard the entire lam-rim teachings showing the stages of the path to enlightenment, the only way to benefit from these teachings, whether it be enlightenment or just some benefit in this lifetime, depends on our own practise.

We have to understand that the amount of practice we do is far more important than the amount of knowledge we have gained from listening to the teachings. We have to make sure that what we have learnt in the lam-rim teachings we have received is not just an intellectual exercise, or some outer knowledge. Rather we have to make sure it becomes the basis of our daily spiritual practice.

If you study the works of Lama Tsong Khapa and the great Atisha, you will find that their whole emphasis is on practice. It is in order to make progress in our practice that we must meditate on the topics of the teachings and their meaning. We should try to understand the point that Lama Tsong Khapa made when he said that we should combine learning, contemplation and meditation in such a way that the more our learning increases, the more our contemplation also increases, which in turn increases our meditation.

If we follow Lama Tsong Khapa's instructions, knowledge of meditation must come from the knowledge of contemplation, which comes from the knowledge gained by studying or listening to the teachings. So, when we think of what to practise, or what to meditate on, think just of what you know about Dharma. Because your practice must come from the knowledge you have gained through studying Dharma.

There is really not much point in listening to the lam-rim and other spiritual teachings if we do not relate them to our practice. If you just listen to the teachings and do not practise there may be some sort of future benefit, but there is obviously no benefit to one's immediate life. Such a limited involvement cannot be a substantial cause to achieve a better future life, let alone the state of liberation in the future.

If we do not practise it, the Dharma we have learnt is like a beautiful looking unripe fruit, and there is no use in that! Try to encourage and motivate ourselves to practice Dharma by thinking of the benefits of practising it.

If we are familiar with the topic of this excellent human rebirth and the rare opportunity of meeting with these perfect teachings, we must also understand that the only way to achieve any meaning or purpose of this life is through practice. Without practice then no matter how much knowledge you gain from the teachings, you will not have achieved any purpose of your human life.

There are three purposes of this human life. Achieving the small purpose of human life means to be able to create the causes to find a higher rebirth, and to prevent lower rebirth. Achieving the medium purpose of human life is to achieve liberation from cyclic existence. Achieving the great meaning of this human life is to use this life to create the causes to achieve complete enlightenment.

We should understand the importance of practising Dharma over all other things, and understand what we mean by practice. It means understanding that practice concerns our own mind and its mental attitudes. In a sense even meditation practice concerns our mental attitude. What does mental attitude mean? In what way does practice have an effect on one's mind? It counteracts the negative states of mind such as desire, hatred and so on. Mental practice means removing all these mental delusions which overpower the mind.

In fact, in Tibetan we say that the Buddhist scriptures are the scriptures of inner knowledge. This implies that the content of the scriptures concerns the personal development of inner knowledge and wisdom. More specifically, it means developing the knowledge and wisdom which can cut the ignorance of self-grasping at its roots.

We have been studying the lam-rim text for a long period of time. If we understand the meaning of it, this text will enable us to understand and develop this inner knowledge. Conversely the text will help us to overcome our mental delusions. We have to ensure that the knowledge that we gain from the scriptures and the time we have spent in gaining that knowledge actually does help us to eliminate the delusions within our mind.

How very sad if your learning of the scriptures does just the opposite, and the time you spend in spiritual practice becomes yet another source of increasing various mental delusions such as jealousy, competitiveness, and so on! If that happens whatever knowledge one has gained from the scriptures, even though they are Buddhist scriptures, is not really inner knowledge, but it has become a poison for you.

Only by putting into practice whatever we learn from the teachings can we receive the true benefit and appreciation of the Dharma. At the same time we can achieve more happiness and minimise suffering in our life. So it is obvious why practising the Dharma by counteracting delusions in our mind can bring true happiness, and make a positive change to our life.

If we examine the cause of most of our unhappiness, and the internal conflict, stress and anxiety in our mind, most of the time the cause is not external objects or factors. Most of the time the cause is created within ourselves. If we check on what it is that brings this unhappiness, dissatisfaction and so on that we presently experience, we can see that it can be any one of those mental delusions that we have learnt about in the lam rim. Just like other beings, we all want to find happiness and avoid suffering, therefore it is so sensible and worthwhile to follow the Dharma by studying and practising it in our daily life.

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Note on authentication

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