
The Middle Length Lamrim

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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Happy parting, happy meeting

I'm delighted to have all of us together here tonight. Lama Tsongkhapa said that when you depart from someone in a happy mood then, naturally, when you meet the same person again you will also be happy. This is how I feel about meeting together with you tonight. Along these lines, we should be happy and enthusiastic with engaging in meditation, as well as when we finish the meditation. If we engage in meditation and then stop doing it because we find it too difficult or boring, or are unhappy about the meditation, then we will not be keen to return to the meditation practice again. In fact, we might even end up hating to see our meditation cushion. Therefore, it is important to enjoy meditation and not try too hard. If necessary, take a break to maintain your continuous motivation and enthusiasm for meditation practice.

Pleasant mood and gestures

As human beings, we should maintain a pleasant mood along with gestures - not unpleasant ones such as having an angry face - especially towards those we live with. Pleasant gestures promote happiness and joy, which we all like to have at home and wherever we are. Conversely, unpleasant moods and gestures bring an atmosphere of tension, fear, distrust and unease, which we do not want for ourselves or for others.

We can train ourselves in thoughts and deeds to be courteous and act with wholesomeness, beginning with those who are close to us and with whom we most often interact. It is wrong to think that at home we can conduct ourselves in any way we like. Be it at home or outside the home, showing a pleasant mood and gestures automatically brings joy and happiness. When I used to go to the St Kilda sea baths, there was an elderly man who said to me he had been coming and observing me over two years. He said I always had a smile on my face. He asked me if I was a Buddhist and I replied, 'Yes, I am.' He then said that he could see the benefits of Buddhism. And then he started to practise Buddhism.

Dharma practice means training one's mind

Dharma or spiritual practice is essentially about living a good life as a human being. If we live a Dharma life, such as being compassionate, caring and loving towards other beings, then our life story will be a praiseworthy one. The life story of a person is primarily defined by their mental attitude, because it describes what people do in their lives and what sort of person they are. The essence of Dharma practice is to transform our minds from negative to positive attitudes, and develop love and compassion for other beings.

For Dharma practice, we need to ask ourselves if we feel empathy when we see other beings tormented by suffering. We may feel sadness and pity, but do we think, 'What can I do? What can I do to relieve the pain of that being?' If we do not feel that way, it is a sign that our mind is not habituated or trained enough in compassion. Therefore, we must train our minds in compassion, and through this training, we can

further develop whatever love and compassion we already have within us.

Intelligence is our best resource

We should make the best use of our intelligent mind - a sense of discrimination that we all possess - for accomplishing both spiritual and worldly activities. Whatever we do, such as choosing a subject for pursuing studies or an occupation, we must use our intellectual wisdom and examine what benefits there are. We all want happiness and to avoid suffering. We must ask ourselves the question, 'What is happiness? What are the main factors or causes of the happiness we want and the unhappiness we do not want?'

What is happiness?

We can talk about happiness in terms of physical happiness and mental happiness. Physical happiness primarily refers to enjoying the physical good health of our body, so we ask ourselves, 'Do I enjoy good physical health?' Likewise, we ask, 'Do I have mental happiness?' The best tool to find happiness is by using the human intelligence we possess. If we utilise our intelligence, we can have a clear idea whether whatever we are studying or doing is beneficial for us, in terms of achieving happiness and avoiding suffering. Common sense also shows the benefit of using human intelligence when investigating things, rather than simply following some emotions and so on. Through our discriminating intelligence, we will come to know that to find the happiness we want, there are favourable conditions that we must meet and obstructions we must eliminate.

Karma

In Buddhism, the law of karma and its result explains the causes and effects of things and events. On a subtle level, the concept of karma is way beyond our knowledge. However, we can also talk about karma from the point of view of the immediate causes and conditions that are responsible for the occurrence of various things and events. If we utilise our intelligence, these immediate causes and circumstances are quite obvious to us.

Similarly, we can talk about achieving long-term happiness in terms of our future life, or liberation from cyclic existence or even the supreme liberation or complete enlightenment of the omniscient state of buddhahood. Of course, these are all achievable. But if we are honest with ourselves, do we really seek this long-term happiness? Most probably not; we are not even remotely interested in this. So, what we are most interested in is immediate happiness - right now in this current life. And why not? We see we have only one life, so we want maximum happiness and joy in this life. Therefore, the real question is how we can achieve happiness in this immediate timeframe, how can we make it last longer throughout this life and, if possible, in future lives?

Mental attitude matters

It is very clear to us and a proven fact that our state of mind matters for our happiness and wellbeing. It is also now well known that meditation practice is the most effective means of subduing our minds from disturbing thoughts. Hence, we benefit from meditation in terms of reducing and remedying mentally and emotionally-related problems and thereby finding happiness in real-time. From our own experience, we can understand that if our mind is always preoccupied with wandering thoughts, then we cannot be at peace. We should check the cause when we experience restlessness, tension,

stress and anxieties; we will find that the main cause is our uncontrolled wandering thoughts.

Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakosha* states that if our mind is filled with too many conceptual thoughts, we cannot have happiness. His Holiness the Dalai Lama recollects how in his childhood he was fond of running around the Potala palace and all those around him used to worry he would fall off the edge. So, one day, an attendant warned him that there was a ghost in one area. His Holiness said that this really worked for him! He didn't dare go to that area for fear of encountering the ghost. Of course, the attendant made up the story about the ghost. Likewise, a lot of the problems we find are just created by our own minds. Whereas meditation practice replaces the troubling and confused mind with a clear and peaceful mind. When we have a clear and peaceful mind, we are relaxed and calm, regardless of where we are and what we are doing.

Take personal responsibility

In order to achieve happiness in terms of mental happiness or physical happiness, we must take responsibility by thinking, 'I must create the cause.' Whenever we find ourselves lacking happiness, we should stop crying out, 'No one is helping me!' as many people do. Whether we talk of our goal in terms of making progress in spiritual practice or in mundane life, I think it is very important we have a strong sense of self-responsibility. We should also be broadminded and courageous. The Indian master Aryadeva said, "Whether you are high or low, rich or poor, everyone has their problem related to their mental or physical wellbeing". If we think about this, it is very true.

Make use of our sense of discrimination

Sometimes we get so confused that we don't know what to do. At such times do we use our intelligence, our ability to reason, discriminate and discern things as a human being? Do we realise that we possess a human mind and intelligence?

Whatever difficulties we go through, we should first recognise that what we are going through is a human experience, a human hardship or human problem. If it is a human problem, then we should realise that, since we are human beings, we have the capacity to resolve it. We must believe in our own potential as a human being. Likewise, we should try to recognise that whatever we are trying to achieve is within the reach of a human being. As with any other human being, we have the same potential to reach our goal. This is so important. His Holiness the Dalai Lama remarks that sometimes when people seek advice on how to overcome certain problems, he simply tells them he has the same problem. This, His Holiness says, helps others. It helps because it makes them realise that they are not alone in having the problem, which then boosts their courage and tolerance so that they have a broader perspective.

We all have great potential within us. We just need to recognise it and say to ourselves that we can overcome whatever problems we face in life and achieve the goals we want to achieve. Not only can we fully take care of ourselves but we can also help others. If we want, we can benefit others, such as giving material aid or advice etc. There are many ways we can be of benefit to others. We must realise that benefitting others is also benefitting ourselves. In fact, it is said that if you benefit others you benefit yourself automatically.

Be realistic

The reality is that we are just ordinary beings, and so are the people we are sharing our lives with. Sometimes we lose our temper and get angry. Likewise, other people are also prone to getting angry. So, we need to realise that no-one is perfect and be more understanding of people and everyday situations, or what is normal. We need to be realistic in our approach to things so that when people become angry and react angrily towards us, we try to think that the main cause is their anger or negative thoughts and emotions, not the people themselves. In this way, we can stop blaming other people.

It seems like whenever things go wrong, we need something to blame or point a finger at. If that is the case, we should blame our past bad karma for any unwanted things we face. Indeed, what we go through in life is the result of our past karma, and why sometimes we receive harm from other people is because of mental afflictions within them, such as anger. We therefore should be blaming the mental afflictions within them but not the people themselves. This way of thinking can help us better understand the situation of other people and through this, we can cultivate patience and compassion for them. Let our own wisdom knowledge and sense of discrimination be our main guide. If we use our wisdom, there will be more benefits to us in terms of gaining stability, self-confidence and meaning in our life.

Love and compassion mind-training

Earlier we touched a little bit on how happiness and suffering are mainly a state of mind. We have happiness if our mind is calm and warm. If we have a disturbed and uneasy mind, we suffer. So, the question is, how can we train or habituate our minds to be calm, warm and wholesome? The answer is to train our minds in love and compassion in the sense of activating love and compassion in our minds. First of all, we need to understand that by nature our mind is not static but fluid and flexible. This means that we can train it to be more loving, compassionate and gentle. For example, through training the mind in the sevenfold cause and effect method of recognising all beings as our mother and so forth to generate bodhicitta, we can encourage bodhicitta to arise in our mind. This can be either a contrived and artificial one that arises by dependence upon our conscious effort or an uncontrived one that arises spontaneously or effortlessly.

Lama Tsongkhapa says in his lamrim texts that in terms of the sequence of training the mind on feeling love and compassion for all other beings, we should start by cultivating love and compassion towards those who are close to us first. This advice is a pithy instruction because if we don't have love and compassion for those beings who are near to us, then saying, 'May all sentient beings have happiness and be free of suffering', doesn't carry any real meaning.

Who are all these sentient beings we want to be happy and free of suffering? How can we feel love and compassion for other beings when we lack it for those who are close to us? Indeed, sometimes we hold ill feelings towards them and don't try to show them love and compassion. The effect of cultivating love and compassion is that it automatically makes our inner continuum warm, loving and gentle; we can achieve this.

Years ago, just before leaving for Australia, I had a private audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama at his Dharamsala

residence. At that time, His Holiness advised me to be kind and gentle towards Western Buddhists as they are all new to the world of Buddhism. He then said to me that if they try to denigrate and boss me around that there was no need to put up with that! To this day I remember that advice. I have been trying my best to implement my teacher's advice in developing love and compassion and warm-heartedness towards others. I believe I have made progress, as from time to time I get compliments from others, even from my friends in the monastery, saying that I am a person of calm and gentle nature. So, I speak to you from my own experience that if we make an effort with our practice, we can become more loving, compassionate, happier and calmer people.

Causes of happiness and suffering

How can we find and sustain happiness? I think we first need to reflect on and understand the true cause of happiness and suffering. Is it external or internal? If it's external, then we're talking about physical or material factors. Since we all want happiness and do not want suffering, we have to recognise the respective causes. Having recognised the cause of happiness, we then must protect or safeguard it to the point that if we face any danger or threat to our happiness, we should feel alarmed and vigilant and do whatever we need to do to protect our happiness, whether it is in terms of physical health or mental happiness.

The master Shantideva said,

Though longing to be rid of suffering,
They rush headlong towards suffering itself.
Although longing to be happy, in their ignorance
They destroy their own well-being, as if it were their
worst enemy.

We have to understand this as personal advice from Shantideva. If we do not follow this advice from one of the great sages and masters, then we won't have any hope of making any progress in our practice and rendering our life meaningful.

If happiness and peace comes from external factors then we would have to conclude that the more wealth people have, the more happiness they have. Rich people, like Kerry Packer and now his son James Packer, should be the happiest as they are considered some of the richest people here in Australia. Well, Kerry passed away several years ago due to kidney failure, and I saw his son James Packer on the TV news shedding a tear. I understand that Kerry was generous and made a lot of financial contributions to the St Vincent heart and lung transplant unit. I heard that his father was a bit aggressive, but Kerry remained a very loyal son.

Between physical and mental happiness, mental happiness is a joyful feeling that arises within us and is more important and meaningful to us. Can you recall when you have had that experience? It's a most wonderful feeling, isn't it? We fully own it and only we can experience it. We cannot share it with other people even if we want to. It is not like external things such as money, clothes, food, drinks and so on which we can share with others.

Harmony in relationships

Harmony in relationships is a very important cause of peace and happiness, whether it's family, organisations or on a global level. Where there is harmony and a friendly atmosphere there can be peace and joy, even if there are problems in other areas. This reminds me of my early days in

a place called Buxa Duar in West Bengal. Thousands of Tibetans escaped to India following the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959, and under the guidance of His Holiness the Dalai Lama some 1500 monks and nuns from all schools of Tibetan Buddhism were settled there to begin the restoration of Tibetan Buddhism in exile in India.

I remember how in those days in Buxa Duar, and later on in the relocation in South India, the living conditions were very harsh and tough. The monastery and all the monastic houses had to support themselves as hardly any support was received from outside or from the families of the monks. So, besides educating the monks, the teachers and senior monks had responsibility for the livelihood of the monks. I remember that the teachers often gave most of their own food to the students. The conditions were tough yet there was a strong sense of harmony and responsibility within the community, so the time was passed joyfully and successfully. It was really the hard work and kindness of those early monks that made possible the foundation of the amazing three Gelugpa seats of learning – the Sera, Drepung and Ganden monasteries – in South India, as well as many monasteries and nunneries across India. Through these institutes, Buddhism has flourished all around the world and a great many learned monk and nun scholars and practitioners have been produced.

Contentment

Inner happiness depends on contentment; likewise material happiness also depends on contentment. If we are always greedy and desire more and more, then we will find no satisfaction, no matter how much wealth we possess. If we think about it, the purpose of material objects is to satisfy us, bring us some sort of enjoyment. Otherwise, what is the use of gathering wealth which takes a great toll on our time and effort?

Practical application of Dharma practice

It's important to make our Dharma practice directly relevant to our life and to make our life meaningful. Of course, when we recite prayers, such as, 'May all sentient beings have happiness, and may bodhicitta, a wish to achieve liberation, arise within me,' we accumulate great merit and benefit. But in practical terms, we need to ask ourselves, do we really mean it when we pray, 'May all sentient beings have happiness'? If so, do we know who the sentient beings are who we are wishing to benefit? Sometimes, instead of thinking of benefitting others, we think of harming them. So, we should actively think of benefitting others by developing love and compassion towards those who are close to us, who we live and interact with. We will then find that our Dharma practice brings benefits to our own lives and the lives of other beings.

In short, we all want happiness in terms of the physical happiness of a healthy body, and the mental happiness of emotional and mental wellbeing. If someone asks, 'Are you happy?' and you enjoy happiness in terms of a happy mind and body you, or the 'I', will say, "Yes, I am happy." Otherwise, you will say, "No, I'm not well."

What is the 'I' or 'Self'?

This 'I' that says 'I am happy' or 'I am unhappy', is just the basis upon which the 'I' is designated, no more than that. If we search for it by asking whether the 'I' is our body, our hand or any part of our body, then we find it is not. Other

than the basis of the designation of the 'I,' we cannot find the 'I'. In addition to this 'I' which is the reference to the 'I', when we say 'I am happy', 'I am unhappy', and so on, we also have an 'I' which we feel sits deep inside us – a conception of an 'I' or self-grasping which is the source of all the troubles in our life. Due to this, we generate hatred towards undesirable things but generate attachment towards desirable things. We basically suffer and struggle throughout our life because of being caught in these feelings of hatred or attachment.

Why meditate?

Through meditation practice we can pacify hatred and attachment, at least in the sense of stopping it from manifesting within us or being free from the manifested form of desire and hatred, and thus find a moment of peace and rest. So, we can understand that meditation practice is beneficial to us. But to access the peace and joy that arise from the complete pacification of hatred or attachment we need to remove its root cause. If a temporary break from hatred or attachment can give us such peace and joy, then peace and joy that comes from the complete pacification must be quite unfathomable. Although we can't experience such peace at the moment, we can logically understand it.

With meditation practice, we are training and subduing our mind and stopping it from going after wandering thoughts. Following our wandering thoughts and being caught within them causes worries, fears, stress and anxiety, which brings unnecessary confusion, suspicion, suffocation and cloudiness in the mind. As a result, we become very susceptible to things, lose our temper easily and have no consideration for others or see no other way of looking at things.

All we worry about is I and me. In this way we end up becoming a very miserable and restless person. We even make it difficult for others to get along with us as they find us stressful and tense to be near. On the other hand if, in the face of adversaries, we are able to see things in a constructive and positive way and say to other people, "It's okay, fine by me, don't worry", we will automatically feel much better and calmer. The root cause of our problems and suffering is self-grasping and the egocentric mind.

Whether we talk about eliminating mental afflictions, or cultivating positive states of mind such as love and compassion, we must utilise our discriminating wisdom, understanding that everything is cause and effect. We have positive and negative mental forces, and they oppose each other. For example, love and hatred are two opposite mental attitudes. We can understand this from the perspective of how they are based on two different perceptions of an object. Love is based on perceiving its object, such as another person, as being loving, pleasant and close to us. Whereas hatred arises when we perceive the other person as being unpleasant, irritable or undesirable. So, by perceiving the object of hatred in a positive way, from a different way of thinking we can induce love for the object. More precisely, meditation practice is a form of mind training to change and habituate the mind to positive mental attitudes. Whatever meditation practice we do, it must help us by counteracting mental afflictions. The Kadam Geshe Potawa said, 'If it counteracts mental afflictions, it is Dharma. If it doesn't counteract mental afflictions, it is not Dharma.' Hence, the purpose of Dharma practice is to counteract mental afflictions.

Which meditation to use?

The next question is, which types of mental afflictions or delusions should we tackle first? Lama Tsongkhapa advises that we should examine our inner continuum, and then work first on overcoming whatever mental affliction is mostly affecting or harming us. Accordingly, we should engage in the meditation practice that is designed to remedy a particular mental delusion. For example, to overcome anger, we meditate on patience. But we need to know what patience is.

Put simply, patience is an uninterrupted state of mind which is not disturbed or swayed by any adversaries such as harm or difficulties. We cultivate patience by changing our mental attitude and outlook on things and situations.

The antidote to overcoming desire, as mentioned in the scriptures, is to meditate on the unpleasantness of the desired object. I came across someone who remarked to me that he tried the meditation of perceiving the unpleasantness of the object to overcome attachment, but it didn't work for him. In fact, I thought, the person still had not got rid of the pleasant aspect of the desired object in his mind. Then, to realise emptiness, we meditate on the dependent arising of things.

Happiness and suffering cannot be shared with others

There is a lot to learn in relation to what we need to do in our meditation practice, and the skills that are needed to engage in meditation practice effectively. However, it is clear that meditation practice is very beneficial, especially for individual practitioners, rather than the practice of benefitting other beings. Through meditation we can achieve the happiness that we seek; we find it within ourselves. Only we experience it, and we cannot share it with others. I often say to people that I would love to share the peace and happiness I have found within me.

Similarly, we all experience suffering without choice. Often we do not know the cause and cannot get rid of it, nor can we get help from others. Even if they want to help relieve us from suffering, they find themselves helpless, just as we sometimes feel empathy towards other beings who are afflicted with severe pain and suffering, but we are unable to help them; we cannot take their pain upon ourselves to reduce their suffering.

Karma and samsara

So, our situation shows that personal responsibility is the only way to find happiness and avoid suffering. We must develop a good understanding of cause and effect. Happiness and suffering have their own causes. For example, even finding a bit of joy from sipping a cup of tea has a cause. Overall, happiness results from virtuous karma and suffering from non-virtuous karma.

We should also understand that we need to make an effort to achieve happiness and avoid suffering, by engaging in meditation practice and gaining knowledge of the Dharma. Whatever we do with our meditation practice we should make it relevant to achieving what we want, which is happiness, and avoiding what we want to avoid, which is suffering. Also, if we want to benefit others, we should make it relevant to them, in terms of giving them happiness and eliminating their suffering.

If we think about our situation, we can understand that we are trapped in samsara in the sense that we are going around in the endless cycle of suffering existence. We say that the main source of samsara and our suffering situation is mental afflictions and karma. This means that if we are controlled by afflictions and karma there is no end to suffering and no freedom for us. Just look at our current body which is suffering in nature because it is the result of karma and afflictions. We know how difficult it is to maintain the good health of our bodies. When the body gets cold we may use a heater to warm it up, but then it will get hot and we will get sick easily.

No matter what we do and achieve, we cannot find satisfaction and there is no end to our problems. All these dissatisfactions are clear signs that we are subject to the truth of suffering, and the truth of suffering is due to the force of karma and mental afflictions. We need to be aware of this.

Engage in meditation practice

When teaching, I don't see myself as a teacher or higher due to sitting on the throne. We are all the same family. So, I say whatever comes into my mind, but with the good intention of benefitting you. The problem is not that we don't know how to meditate, but we lack motivation and enthusiasm and don't find the time to practise meditation. To develop more motivation and invest more time and effort into meditation we should recognise the benefits of meditation practise. Then, having gained the understanding of how to meditate, we must meditate, otherwise what use is that knowledge? Initially, we didn't practise meditation because we didn't know how to meditate; that's fair enough. Later, we learned about meditation but we never practised – we don't want to be like that. As part of the meditation practice, we ought to know how to measure the effectiveness of our practice. The early masters say, 'Decrease mental afflictions by the force of meditation and pacify and tame the inner continuum by listening to the Dharma'.

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