
The Quick Path to Enlightenment

༄༅། །བྱང་ལྷན་ལམ་རིམ་དམར་བྲིད་ལྷུར་ལམ།།

Commentary by Venerable Geshe Lobsang Dorje

Translated by Sandup Tsering

13 April 2022

First, we will do a short meditation together, trying to get rid of any distracting thoughts we may have in our minds. With this meditation practice, we keep our mind on the object. Whatever the object we use for our daily meditation, it is important that we just keep the mind on that object as much as possible without being distracted by any other objects and thoughts.

Recognising the precious human rebirth

Last week, we finished the topic on recognising the human life of leisure and endowments and its purpose. This was followed by the teaching on the difficulty of finding a human life of leisure. These are topics we should meditate on.

We meditate on these topics to realise how fortunate we are to have found such a unique human life, which possesses great potential and offers us an opportunity to achieve all our temporary and ultimate goals. Our temporary goal is to secure happiness in this life and the future lives. Whereas the ultimate goal is to achieve liberation from cyclic existence or even the complete state of enlightenment or buddhahood. To achieve our goals we must, on one hand, remove all the obstacles that prevent us from reaching our goals whilst also meeting all the favourable conditions necessary to reach our goals. Therefore, meditating on the eight pleasures of the precious human life makes us realise that we are free of all obstacles, and meditating on the ten endowments makes us realise that we indeed have all the favourable conditions to achieve our goals. If we are blessed with a perfect human life of great meaning and potential, the next question is, how shall we take the meaning or essence of it? What is the meaning of the life of leisure?

What does it mean by taking the essence of the life of leisure?

According to the lamrim or structured stages of the path teaching, the purpose or the meaning of a human life of leisure can be understood on three levels, depending on the mental capacities of those who follow the stages of the path. So, there are three types of person, namely the person of small scope, the person of middling scope and the person of great scope. Regarding the practices relating to each one of the three beings, the lamrim presents three important outlines.

- training of the mind in the stages of the path shared by the person of small scope
- training of the mind in the stages of the path shared by the person of middling scope
- training of the mind in the stages of the path of the person of great scope

These three reflect the systematic stages of the development of a single person on the spiritual path to complete enlightenment. To achieve the state of complete enlightenment or buddhahood, we must progress sequentially through these three trainings. So, for the person who wishes to achieve complete enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings, the lower and middling stages of the path serve as a prerequisite for achieving complete enlightenment or as the branches of the training in the stages of the path of the person of great scope.

Why the person of great scope must train in the stages of the path shared by those of small and middling scope.

Bodhicitta is one of the main criteria to enter the Great Vehicle or Mahayana path. Hence, bodhicitta is called the entrance door to Mahayana or Great Vehicle of Buddhism. Those who train and follow the path with a mind of bodhicitta are called persons of great scope.

What is bodhicitta? It is an aspiration to achieve complete enlightenment to benefit all beings. Bodhicitta arises from great compassion towards all sentient beings. Compassion is a strong sense of empathy and unbearable feelings for the suffering of all sentient beings. To generate bodhicitta, we must produce strong compassion to the point that just the sight of sentient beings suffering causes our hair to stand on end because we can't bear to see them suffering.

Therefore, cultivating great compassion requires an understanding of how other sentient beings are afflicted with suffering which leads us to understand the nature of suffering. Buddhist literature describes three types of suffering, but the most subtle or deepest nature of suffering is called all-pervasive suffering of conditioning which is very important to recognise. The other two are the suffering of suffering and the suffering of change.

To cultivate great compassion, we must recognise suffering, particularly all-pervasive suffering, and wish for ourselves to be liberated from it. In a sense we must first feel compassion for ourselves, seeing how we are bound by all-pervasive suffering. Hence, we must cultivate renunciation, which is defined as an aspiration to achieve liberation from cyclic existence after being fully dissatisfied with it.

Renunciation is a personal wish to achieve liberation from cyclic existence. When we wish other sentient beings to be liberated from suffering, that wish becomes compassion. However, it is not possible to genuinely generate the compassion of wishing others to be free from suffering without generating the personal wish to be free from suffering.

Therefore, we can understand here why it is necessary for the person of the great scope to train in the stages of the path shared by a person of middling scope because the primary aspiration of the person of middling scope is renunciation, the aspiration to achieve liberation from cyclic existence. As part of the training in the shared path of the person of middling scope, we seek happiness of liberation by finding no happiness within cyclic existence.

Since we are following the stages of the path of great scope, we realise that achieving self-liberation is insufficient.

Nonetheless, to achieve liberation, we need to depend on finding a good rebirth and overcome attraction or attachment to this transient life. Hence, we need to integrate the stages of the path shared by the person of the small scope, whose goal is to continuously secure a higher status rebirth. The person of small scope views their future rebirth as more important than just this current life.

Why are the stages of the path of the person of great scope presented in three stages?

If all three stages of the path are part of the same path leading to the goal of the great stages of the path, we might ask why we bother to categorise the path into three stages rather than just one – the path of the person of great scope?

One reason why the stages of the path are categorised into three is to overcome any pride in great scope practitioners by looking down upon those of small and middling scope whilst following the stages of the great path.

It shows here how the training in the paths common to the person of small and middling scope is essential and fundamental to training our mind in the stages of the path of the person of great scope. Considering ourselves as a person of great scope, each morning as we get up, we try to cultivate bodhicitta and great compassion for others and try to be more beneficial to others rather than thinking only of our own needs. It is, however, important that we never look down on practitioners following the small or middling scope, and never criticise or despise them. At the same time, we must ensure we don't let pride that we are the followers of the great stages of the path arise. The other reason is to show the variation in the mental capacities of the followers or trainees. Some are less intelligent; others are more intelligent and yet others are very intelligent. Therefore, the stages of the path are presented in accordance with the mental scope of various followers.

Training the mind in the stages of the path shared by the person of small scope – death and impermanence

First, we begin with training the mind in the stages of the path shared by persons of small scope. One of the first topics for a person of small scope is death and impermanence. Through this, we can generate a strong motivation to engage in Dharma practice and overcome laziness or sluggishness which is one of the main obstacles that impede us from engaging in Dharma practice. Initially, we need to know the benefits of meditating on how things are impermanent and the shortcomings of not meditating on them.

Here the teaching on impermanence specifically relates to death and impermanence. Through meditating on death and impermanence, we can develop an acute awareness of death. Why do we need to cultivate this awareness? Among many other reasons, it will help us to overcome laziness, such as the laziness of procrastination - delaying our spiritual practice. We may have a general idea about death and impermanence, for instance, we know that one day we will die. But at the same time, deep down we are holding on to our life as being permanent. We tend to assume, 'I won't die today, the next day, next month or next year.' In this way we think that we will have time to practice later, so we keep delaying from one day to the next

day, from month to month and year to year. Meditating on death and impermanence overcomes this kind of laziness.

If our effort in our Dharma practice is not infused and driven by an awareness of death and impermanence, it ends up serving the purpose of this temporal life and hence makes our practice weak and ineffective. Technically speaking, is it a Dharma practice? Most likely not. Whereas an awareness of death makes us think and direct our actions toward our future lives. What happens when we die? Do we go to the next life? Yes, we do, and we can think of life as a journey from one place to another. We know we will have to leave this life but if we know after that we are going somewhere, then we will think of preparing ourselves for the next journey.

An example of how we prepare ourselves in advance when we know we are departing for somewhere is an old monk in Dharamsala who was diagnosed with cancer. He checked with a doctor to see if it could be cured by surgery, and to find out how long he would live. The doctor said he could live for another six months if he had the surgery but only for three months if not, and the surgery might result in other side effects and have an impact on his quality of life. In the end, the monk decided not to have surgery. As he knew he had only three months left, he spent every moment of every day engaging in Dharma practice. Later, he said that in terms of his Dharma practice, he had achieved more in three months than he had achieved in his whole life. This story shows how the awareness of death can be a strong and effective motivator for our Dharma practice.

Meditation on death and impermanence is not just about overcoming the fear of losing all the things we cherish, such as our body, wealth and friends etc. Nor is it about preventing death. In any case, these are things we cannot achieve, as it is said that birth results in death and meeting results in separation. The truth is that whatever is bound by karma and mental afflictions is in the nature of suffering by the course of nature. Hence, the main purpose of the death and impermanence meditation is to motivate us to better prepare for our future lives so that we don't fall into a lower realm. It is to motivate us to live life meaningfully by practising right actions and avoiding wrong actions.

We find here three roots and nine reasons - three for each root - regarding the death and impermanence meditation. We will continue this in our next session.

*Transcribed by Su Lan Foo
Edit 1 by Katherine Boland
Edit 2 by Sandup Tsering
Edited Version*

© Tara Institute