
Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

ལྷན་སྐྱོད་ཀྱི་ལམ་ལུགས་ཀྱི་སྒྲིབ་མ་བུ་གསུངས་སོ།།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

13 June 2017

As usual, let us spend some time on our meditation practice. [*Tonglen meditation*]

We can set our motivation for receiving the teachings along these lines: For the sake of all mother sentient beings, I need to achieve enlightenment, so for that purpose, I will engage in listening to this Mahayana teaching and put it into practice well.

The subject of our teaching is the renowned text, the *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*, by Atisha. My intention is to just go briefly over this text, as I have previously taught the Lam Rim quite intensively¹. I felt that, for auspicious reasons, it would be good to present an explanation on *Lamp for the Path* at this time.

The *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* is held in great esteem and regarded as very sacred because it is the root of all other lam-rim teachings. There have been various lam-rim teachings, and the *Lamp for the Path* is the source or root of all of them. As a commentary to *Lamp for the Path*, none excels the *Lamrim Chenmo - The Great Treatise on the Stages of The Path to Enlightenment* by Lama Tsong Khapa. Of all the lam-rim teachings, I can say with certainty that the *Lamrim Chenmo* is indeed the most extensive commentary on *Lamp for the Path*.

After Atisha composed the original text of *Lamp for the Path*, the Buddhadharma was revitalised and spread throughout Tibet. Indeed, many great masters have gained realisations on the path to enlightenment by relying on the study and practice of this very teaching. When we think about how so many beings have benefited from this teaching, we can definitely generate strong faith and admiration for Lama Atisha. Of course, more detailed accounts of his life are presented in the lam-rim teachings, so I will not take up extra time presenting that here.

In the commentary that I am using [the explanation on *The Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* called *Joy of the Blossomed Excellent* by Panchen Lobsang Choekyi Gyaltzan²], the contents of the text are presented under four main headings, which are basically the same as in Lama Tsong Khapa's great treatise on the lam-rim and in all other lam-rim texts:

1. The greatness of the author
2. The greatness of the Dharma

3. How to teach and listen to the Dharma that has these two greatneses (of the authors and of the Dharma)
4. Presenting the actual meaning of the teaching (in the lam-rim, this heading corresponds to 'The sequence in which the disciples are to be taught the actual instructions').

In order to present the explanation of the text to others, one needs to have received the lineage of the explanation first. I have received teachings on the *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* several times, including from my own great teacher, Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey, as well as from His Holiness, the Dalai Lama. In fact, from a very early age in Tibet, when I was studying in the monastery, I had a great interest in this text and took it upon myself to memorise the entire text. Having memorised it, I really tried to gain some understanding of the meaning. In this way, I took this text to heart, and I found really incredible benefit from it. For me, it was like finding a treasure, a real source of joy and inspiration for gaining an understanding of the Buddha's teachings. Of course, I am not claiming in any way that I have gained any realisations or deep understanding of the text, but what I can share is that I have received the lineage of the teachings and have taken a keen interest in them from an early age.

We need to really take the lam-rim teachings to heart and rely upon them to help subdue our mind. There is no greater text to help subdue this unruly mind that we find so hard to subdue. Indeed, if we cannot subdue our mind by relying on the lam-rim teachings, there are no other teachings that will help us subdue it. That is because the lam-rim condenses the entire path to enlightenment, categorising it into the three scopes for the three types of practitioner (those having the motivation to attain a human rebirth; or liberation from cyclic existence; or complete enlightenment). Thus, it is a very sacred teaching.

We must take the initiative to overcome the disturbances in our mind. Our mind is mostly preoccupied with trying to please our relatives and friends, and subjugate our enemies, or those towards whom we feel aversion. We create a lot of negativity in so many ways by engaging in attachment and anger based on ignorance, which gives rise to attachment and anger. Thus, our mind is rampant with the three poisons, causing so much confusion and distortion.

We all long to be happy. And there is no other way to experience genuine happiness than by subduing this unruly mind. It is our unruly mind that constantly looks outwards to blame external conditions and situations; it always finds fault externally, failing to look within to find the real causes for its disturbance. Due to the unruly mind, we are constantly preoccupied with finding faults in others and in external situations.

Relying on these sacred teachings, however, becomes a means for us to look inward and begin to work on subduing the inner conditions that bring us unhappiness and turmoil. Of course, specific instructions on how to subdue one's mind will be presented in the teaching itself, but this is by way of an introduction.

¹ Commentary to *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*, Pabongka Rinpoche, Study Group 1990-2000. Also, ongoing commentary to the Middling Lam-rim, Wednesday evenings with Geshe Doga, from 2003 to present, and various lam-rim teachings for one-day, weekend and Easter courses at TI.

² Fourth Panchen Lama, 1570-1662

1. THE GREATNESS OF THE AUTHOR

The first outline, the greatness of the author, is presented to show that the teachings have an immaculate, profound source. The author of this text that we are about to study, the *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*, is Atisha. All the classical lam-rim teachings begin with this heading, the greatness of the authors, which is divided into three sub-headings:

- How Atisha was born to one of the high families of great lineage
- How he attained his good qualities in that very rebirth
- The great activities he did to further the doctrine after getting these qualities.

I will just briefly go over these points, as I mentioned to you in our last session that you need to look them up in the *Great Treatise* or in *Liberation in the Palm of your Hand*, which many of you have. Most of you have received the lam-rim teachings, so you should already be familiar with these points of the topic.

In relation to Atisha's life story, the main point is that when one begins to understand the greatness of the author, one will naturally generate faith in the author and faith in the teachings presented by the author. So one sees the greatness of the author, which encompasses the great trainings and practices he undertook, and after that, the great activity of propagating the teachings.

In this way, one begins to generate great faith in the actual teaching itself, the *Lamp for the Path*. This leads us to the next greatness, which is the greatness of the Dharma, given to increase one's respect for the instruction.

2. THE GREATNESS OF THE DHARMA

The greatness of the Dharma here refers particularly to the subject matter, the *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*.

As explained in the commentary by Panchen Lobsang Choekyi Gyaltsan, although Atisha composed many treatises, *Lamp for the Path* is like the root, because it carries the essence of all the Buddha's teachings. That is because of its three features and four greatnesses, which is the same as explained in other lam-rim teachings.

The **three features** are:

- 1) This teaching is complete because it contains all the subject matter of sutra and tantra
- 2) It is easy to put into practice because it emphasises the steps for taming or subduing the mind
- 3) It is superior to other traditions because it is enhanced with instructions from two gurus who were schooled in the traditions of the Two Great Champions. The Two Great Champions, also known as trailblazers of the Mahayana doctrine, are Nagarjuna and Asanga. The guru skilled in Nagarjuna's instructions was Rigpai Kuchok [Vidyakokila], and the guru skilled in Asanga's instruction was Lama Serlingpa [Suvarnavipa].

The Great Treatise also outlines the **four greatnesses** of the Dharma, which are given to increase one's respect for the instructions:

- 1) The greatness of allowing you to realise that all the teachings are without contradiction
- 2) The greatness of allowing all the scriptures to present themselves to you as instructions
- 3) The greatness of allowing you to easily discover the true thinking of the Victorious One
- 4) The greatness of allowing you to save yourself from the worst misdeed.

As mentioned previously, I am just relating the main points here; it is for you to read the lam-rim texts, such as *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*, to get a more detailed explanation on each of the four greatnesses. My aim is to present the key points, which can serve as the basis for you to have discussions and read the relevant parts for yourselves. In order to get a sound understanding of the lam-rim, you need to familiarise yourself with it again and again, through reading and discussing it.

I also intend for you to have discussions on the Madhyamika text that I had taught previously.

3. HOW TO TEACH AND LISTEN TO THE DHARMA THAT HAS THESE TWO GREATNESSES (OF THE AUTHORS AND OF THE DHARMA)

This commentary to *Lamp for the Path* does not go into detail in explaining how to listen to the Dharma that has the two greatnesses, and mentions that you can refer to The Great Treatise. In the lam-rim outline, it is presented as:

1. The way to listen to the Dharma
 - 1.1. Contemplating the benefits of studying the Dharma
 - 1.2. How to show respect for the Dharma and the teacher
 - 1.3. The actual way to listen to the Dharma
2. The way to teach the Dharma

You can read the lam-rim texts for further explanations under these headings and sub-headings.

4. PRESENTING THE ACTUAL MEANING OF THE TEACHING

The lam-rim covers these subjects under the fourth main heading mentioned earlier: 'The sequence in which the disciples are to be taught the actual instructions'. Under the major heading, 'The preparatory rites', the relevant sub-heading is:

- The root of the path: devotion to a spiritual guide

Under this, the next level of sub-heading is 'What to do in your meditation sessions', which is then subdivided into 'The preparatory rites'. This latter subdivision includes the sub-heading 'Petitioning the merit field' and so forth.

So the presentation in the lam-rim is that first we must relate to the root of the path, which is relying on the spiritual guide, and following that, we engage in the actual practices.

Thus on the basis of relying on the spiritual guide, we take these instructions on the path, beginning by taking the essence of this precious human rebirth with its eight freedoms and ten endowments. In the commentary to the

Lamp for the Path, the first verse is how to take the essence of this human rebirth.

The *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* itself begins with taking the essence of this precious human life, presented in the context of the practices of the three scopes. The topic of how to take the essence of the precious life is presented under the three main headings:

- Recognising the preciousness of this human life
- Contemplating its great meaning
- Taking the essence from this rebirth and putting this teaching into practice.

Within the three scopes, the small scope practice of taking the meaning of this precious human life would be to use it as a way to obtain a higher status in the next life, such as a precious human rebirth. Taking the essence for the medium scope person would be to achieve liberation, while taking the greatest essence from this precious human life would be to use it as a means to achieve enlightenment.

To take the essence of this precious human life, one needs to first contemplate its rarity and how easy it is to lose it. Without contemplating the rarity of this precious human life and its impermanence – how easy it is to lose it – there is no way we can embark on the actual practice of the Dharma, because one's concerns would mainly be focused on this life's affairs.

So it is essential in the beginning to contemplate not just the preciousness and rarity of this human life, but also how easy it is to lose it. As the great master Lama Tsong Khapa said, by thinking about the preciousness of this human life, one will not waste one's time sitting around idly engaging in frivolous, meaningless activities. And by thinking about the rarity of this precious human life, characterised by its ten endowments and eight freedoms, one will understand the great meaning one can achieve with it: that it will enable one to secure a good rebirth the next life.

Then, if one wishes to advance further and seek the goal of liberation from cyclic existence, that goal can be obtained only through having this precious human life. Liberation cannot be obtained through any of the rebirths of the lower realms; it is only obtained through rebirth in higher realms, such as this precious human life. Furthermore, that which enables us to seek the highest goal of enlightenment is this very precious human life that we now have.

In simple terms, the teaching is saying that you are in possession of this very precious human life now; that it is rare, and it will be difficult for you to obtain such conditions again in the future; and that, now, as you have this great opportunity, you must not waste it but put it to the highest of the three purposes mentioned earlier.

You can read more about the precious human rebirth characterised by the ten endowments and eight freedoms in other lam-rim teachings, which explain in more detail how it is rare, difficult to obtain, and so forth. This topic is preliminary to the actual subject matter of the practices of the three scopes. In the commentary to the *Lamp for the Path*, this topic is not explained in detail at all, it just goes

right into the practice of taking the essence of the precious human life.

The fourth main heading as presented in the commentary, 'Presenting the actual meaning of the teaching', is subdivided into four:

- The meaning of the title
- Salutation of the translator
- The actual meaning of the text
- Explanation at the end

The meaning of the title

The title is presented here in Sanskrit – *Bodhipathapradīpa*. In Tibetan, it is *Byang chub lam gyi sgron ma*, and in English, *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*.

The commentary breaks down the Sanskrit term and gives its literal translation: *bodhi* refers to enlightenment, *patha* is the path, and *pradīpa* refers to lamp.

It is called the *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* because enlightenment is the state of the primordial wisdom of the Buddha, the ultimate state of having completely abandoned all faults and acquired all qualities. That which leads one on the path are the ten grounds and five paths. This treatise is called a lamp because, for those who do not have an understanding, or have a wrong understanding, or have doubt, it removes all of this darkness.

From the title, one can get an understanding of the actual contents of the treatise itself. The word 'enlightenment' refers to the ultimate goal to be obtained, and as explained in the commentary, 'path' refers to the ten grounds and five paths, which serve as the causes to achieve the ultimate state of enlightenment. The term 'lam-rim' connotes that there are different stages that lead an individual all the way to enlightenment, whereas the title of this text, *Lamp for the Path to the Enlightenment*, indicates that it is a lamp for those who embark on the path – the ten grounds and five paths – to enlightenment, a state where one's wrong conceptions, wrong understanding and doubts are completely eliminated.

The commentary also gives an explanation of the word 'enlightenment'. In Tibetan, this is *jang-chub*. *Jang* means to purify or clear away – in this case, it means clearing away both the deluded obscurations and obscurations to omniscience. *Chub* means to completely master or thoroughly establish, which refers to thoroughly establishing the omniscient mind, that which thoroughly cognises the two categories of all existence, conventional truth and ultimate truth. Similarly, the Tibetan term for Buddha is *san-gye*, which is also made up of two syllables, *sang* (one who has totally eliminated all obscurations) and *gye* (one who has fully perfected all good qualities). The Sanskrit word, Buddha, means to awaken, as in awakening from the stupor of ignorance, and to open up, like the opening of a lotus flower.

From this explanation, we can see that the English translation 'enlightenment' does not carry the specific connotation of the two main qualities of the enlightened mind. As mentioned earlier, *jang* means that the enlightened mind has completely abandoned the deluded obscurations and obscurations to omniscience; and *chub* has the connotation of completely establishing all the

qualities, particularly relating to thoroughly knowing the two truths – of conventional reality and ultimate reality. Because the enlightened mind knows all existence, it is omniscient.

Therefore, the primordial wisdom of the enlightened being has the two qualities attained as a result of entering the path and engaging in the five paths and ten grounds. The unique understanding we can derive from this explanation is that the state of enlightenment is attained through a gradual process of having engaged in all the earlier causes – it cannot be spontaneously attained by anyone, but only attained through its causes. This greatly encourages us with the possibility of attaining enlightenment ourselves. Buddha was not always enlightened, but was once exactly like us, practising on the path and gradually engaging in all the paths and grounds in a sequential manner, finally attaining the ultimate result of enlightenment.

So there is the real possibility that each of us can attain enlightenment. We can refer to Buddha Shakyamuni's own life story to see how it is possible for each and every one of us to also attain enlightenment. This is very encouraging.

The teachings also explain that we each possess 'Buddha nature'. The two obscurations are adventitious, meaning that they are not inseparable from our mind, but rather can be separated when the appropriate measures are applied. This means that we can definitely eliminate both types of obscuration from our mind; all stains and obscurations can be completely removed. And when they are removed, the primordial wisdom or ultimate nature of the mind becomes apparent, making enlightenment possible. This is the 'Buddha nature' that we all possess.

The commentary next explains the purpose of presenting the text, beginning with the Sanskrit name. It is traditional to present the Sanskrit title first. The commentary explains the three main reasons for doing this:

- To show the authenticity of the source of the teaching
- To remember the kindness of the great pundits and translators of the past. Indeed, this very text that we have is only possible because of the great pundits, who composed it, and the translators, who translated it
- Giving the title in Sanskrit first leaves an imprint in one's mind of that sacred language of ancient India.

Salutation of the translator

What is missing from the English text that we have here is the homage of the translator, which is usually presented first. This is: 'I pay homage to the bodhisattva, the youthful Manjushri'.

As the commentary explains, the translator of this text is the fully ordained bhikshu, Gelong Geway Lodro. The translator pays homage to Manjushri to show that, within the three different categories or baskets of texts, this text belongs to the Abhidharma or treasury of knowledge category. This is because its main content is the wisdom realising both the contaminated and uncontaminated classifications of phenomena. It thus presents the means

and methods to obtain a good worldly status, such as the causes to be reborn as humans or in the god realms; and that which surpasses that, liberation and enlightenment.

The actual meaning of the text

Having explained the meaning of the title, followed by the salutation of the translator, we now arrive at the third outline, which is the actual meaning of the body of the treatise. This is subdivided into three:

- Praise
- Pledge to compose
- The actual meaning

The **praise** is presented in the first verse of the text itself:

1. *I pay homage with great respect to all the Victorious ones of the three times,
To their teaching and those who aspire to virtue.
Urged by the good disciple Jangchup Wö,
I shall illuminate the lamp for the path to enlightenment.*

The first verse actually includes both the paying of homage as well as the **pledge to compose**. The homage is in the first lines, *up to their teachings and those who aspire to virtue*. The next two lines, *urged by the good disciple Jangchup Wö, I shall illuminate the lamp for the path to enlightenment* are the pledge to compose.

We can leave up to here for this evening. It would be good for those who have the lam-rim text to refer to it and look into these points, so that you can relate it to the next presentation.

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Edited Version*

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

20 June 2017

As usual, let us engage in our meditation practice.
[Tonglen meditation]

As I explain regularly, it's important for us to generate a positive motivation for receiving the teachings.

3. HOW TO TEACH AND LISTEN TO THE DHARMA THAT HAS THESE TWO GREATNESSES (OF THE AUTHORS AND OF THE DHARMA)

When the lam-rim explains how to listen to the Dharma it refers to listening by removing the three faults and generating the six recognitions. It is important to have some understanding of how to listen to the Dharma, otherwise the explanations that we hear will not have served much purpose.

Unless we make an attempt to recollect these points and implement them whenever we listen to the teachings, we may wonder, 'Oh, is there a particular way to listen to the teaching?'. That would be an example of how, if we don't put advice that we receive into practice, we may not recollect those points when it is necessary to remember them.

Many of you would have read *The Vajra Cutter Sutra*. At the beginning of this sutra, when Subhuti requests the Buddha to teach, the Buddha says, 'listen, listen well and properly retain it in your mind'. This is how you should listen to the teaching.

As presented in *The Vajra Cutter Sutra*:

Then, in the morning, having put on the lower and upper Dharma robes and carried the begging bowl, the Bhagavān entered the great city of Śhrāvastī to request alms. Then, having gone to the great city of Śhrāvastī to request alms, the Bhagavān afterwards enjoyed the alms food, and having performed the activity of food, since he had given up alms of later food, put away the begging bowl and upper robe. He washed his feet, sat upon the prepared cushion, and having assumed the cross-legged posture, straightened the body upright and placed mindfulness in front.¹

Reflecting on this we need to understand how important it is to be really be familiar with the subject that we are presenting, and have mindfulness when we give a talk or a teaching.

It seems to make a real difference to a presentation when one has contemplated and thought about the points one is intending to present. If one really takes the time to contemplate and think about these points, they have a clear and vivid appearance in the mind when one is

presenting, and the presentation itself flows well. It will not be like just reading out a text, and it will have really positive effect on the listeners as well.

Because of this, I remind Monday evening presenters to take the initiative to really think about and contemplate whatever subject they want to present. Of course, if you want to look up certain points you could refer to your notes, but if you are not just reading from your notes or text then the presentation will be much more effective. We can learn about how to teach from the way the kind and incomparable Buddha conducted himself prior to teaching.

Relying on alms shows how the Buddha, along with his disciples, did not have any preference for any particular type of food; he wasn't choosy and would just go out and receive whatever was offered. This is the proper way for fully ordained Sangha to conduct themselves. Being served by others and expecting a palatable meal is not the right way to go about it at all. I have mentioned in the past that if I had the chance I would like to go out on alms rounds in India, however I didn't have an opportunity to live that way of life in the past. Nevertheless these are good points to contemplate.

The Vajra Cutter Sutra says that the bhikshus respectfully sat together, which suggests that it was not a teaching where people were casually coming and going, but rather it was a teaching that was conducted in an orderly and disciplined manner. Then, when the Buddha had completed his preparation, Subhūti spoke saying:

"Bhagavān, the extent to which the Tathāgata Perfectly Enlightened Buddha has benefitted the bodhisattva mahāsattvas with the highest benefit, the extent to which the Tathāgata has entrusted the bodhisattva mahāsattvas with the highest entrustment - Bhagavān it is astonishing; Sugata it is astonishing. Bhagavān, how should one who has correctly entered the bodhisattva's vehicle abide? How practice? How control the mind?"

That was said, and the Bhagavān said to the venerable Subhūti, "Subhūti, well said, well said. Subhūti, it is so; it is so. The Tathāgata has benefitted the bodhisattva mahāsattvas with the highest benefit. The Tathāgata has entrusted the bodhisattva with the highest entrustment. Subhūti, therefore, listen and properly retain it in mind, and I will explain to you..."

In accordance with the explanations in the lam-rim, saying, 'listen' relates to being like a stainless vase, which is a vase without any stains. We wouldn't consume the contents of a dirty or stained vase because it could be contaminated. In terms of listening to the teaching this illustrates the importance of developing a positive motivation. Without a positive motivation, one's mind could be stained by ulterior motives and so forth, and then the teaching itself will not be beneficial. Generating a positive motivation prior to listening to the teaching is way of ensuring that one is in a clear and positive state of mind.

When the Buddha says 'listen properly' this relates to being free from the fault of an upturned vase. If a vase is turned upside down, then you cannot pour anything into it. Similarly, when one listens to the Dharma, one should listen to the teaching in an extremely attentive manner.

¹ *The Vajra Cutter Sutra*, translated by George Churinoff, FPMT, 2002. Available at <http://fpmt.org/education/teachings/sutras/vajra-cutter-sutra/>.

The third point presented in *The Vajra Cutter Sutra*, is 'to retain it in mind'. In relation to being free from the three types of vases, this relates to being free from being like a leaky vase. Even if a vase is made of a good material, if it has a leak then no matter what you put into it, the contents will not be retained. Similarly, if you do not retain what you have heard in the teaching, then it is very likely that you will just forget about it and not remember the contents of the teaching.

Therefore, as I repeatedly suggest, it is good to read the text again and again, familiarise yourself with the topics, and put them into practice as much as you can. That is the way to retain the meaning of the teachings.

We won't go into the six recognitions now; you can look them up for yourselves.

The reason I relate these points is to remind you to refer to the lam-rim teachings and read the relevant points as a way to refresh what you have already learnt. We need to relate retaining the teachings in mind to virtue. We need to familiarise ourselves with virtue as way to retain it at all times. We need to put some effort into that because it is not easy for us to maintain virtue. Rather, the opposite is true. We find that we easily engage in non-virtuous activities because of our familiarity with them. Through sheer habit we seem to very easily and spontaneously engage in non-virtuous deeds, whereas accumulating virtue is much harder. That is why we need to make an effort to keep virtue in mind.

As we familiarise ourselves with accumulating virtue, recalling a virtuous state of mind will start to have a really positive effect on us. Our minds will become gentler, kinder and more positive, and consequently much happier. Therefore, it definitely has great personal benefit.

4. PRESENTING THE ACTUAL MEANING OF THE TEACHING

In our last session, we introduced the verse that has the salutation and the pledge to compose.

1. *I pay homage with great respect
To all the victorious ones of the three times,
To their teaching and those who aspire to
virtue.
Urged by the good disciple Jhangchup Wö
I shall illuminate the lamp
For the path to enlightenment.*

Salutation

The commentary explains that the object of the salutation needs to be identified. As the verse itself indicates: *I pay homage with great respect to all the victorious ones of the three times*. Here the victorious ones relates to the enlightened beings, the buddhas.

At this point, it would be good to reflect on the actual meaning of the term, '**Buddha**'. There are many different terms used to refer to the Buddha, such as 'Victorious One', 'Buddha', 'Conqueror', 'Tathagata' and so forth. One needs to immediately relate every name used to describe the Buddha to the ultimate qualities of the enlightened being, which in essence are the **excellence of complete abandonment** and the **excellence of**

realisations. This is what we need to immediately recall when referring to the buddhas.

I mentioned in our last session, that in Tibetan the term for 'buddha' is *sang-gye*. The syllable *sang* has the connotation of completely abandoning or eliminating all obscurations i.e. excellence of complete abandonment, while *gye* means to proliferate all good qualities, which means gaining all possible realisations. Similarly 'Victorious' has the connotation of being victorious over all negativities and all defilements. Here the quality of 'abandonment' is explicit, while implicitly, one needs to understand that it also relates to the quality of having obtained all realisations. In this way, as I have mentioned before, the Tibetan term *san-gye* encapsulates all the qualities of an enlightened being. It is good to reflect on these specific points.

As the commentary explains, being victorious means overcoming or destroying something, and what is being destroyed here is the very cause of all of one's faults, which is negativity. The Buddha is thus completely victorious over all the demons, which are none other than the consequences of negativities.

This meaning is reflected in the mantra of Buddha Shakyamuni - TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNIYE SOHA. MUNI means victorious. The threefold reference to the Buddha as 'victorious' has a specific meaning here. The first MUNI refers to overcoming all negativities; the second MUNI refers to overcoming all delusions and the third is overcoming the obscurations to omniscience. Buddha Shakyamuni is victorious over all three levels of these defilements. Whereas arhats, for example, who are referred to 'foe destroyers' are also victorious, but only in relation to overcoming the first two types of defilements, i.e. negativities and delusions, as they have not abandoned the obscurations to omniscience. Therefore, MAHA MUNIYE means 'great victorious' which refers to completely overcoming these obscurations to omniscience.

We can relate the first level of 'victorious' to the path of seeing. An arya being who has reached the path of seeing would have conquered all negativities, and henceforth they will never be reborn into the lower realms. The first level of 'victorious' can refer to those who are on the path of seeing as well as those who are on the path of meditation. The second level of 'victorious' relates to arhats who have overcome all delusions and their seeds, and the third level of 'victorious', i.e. 'great victorious one', relates only to an enlightened being such as Buddha Shakyamuni. We needn't worry too much that we are being left out for we will also be called 'victorious' as we progress along the path and overcome specific defilements and obscurations.

As of now, we definitely have the ability to be victorious over the temporarily release of the lower realms in our next life. That is because we have the full potential to practise virtue and observe ethics as a way of creating the causes for a good rebirth in our next life. So we can definitely say that we have the full ability and full capacity right now to be temporarily victorious over the lower realms. We have to say 'temporary' because to completely overcome being born into the lower realms

one has to have actually obtain the certainty that this will be the case. On the path of seeing one actually obtains the certainty of never again having to be reborn in the lower realms, because one has completely overcome the causes of such rebirths. However on our level, it is a comfort to know that we do at least have the ability to be victorious over our next rebirth in the lower realms.

Creating the causes to be reborn in a higher status in the next life, such as being reborn again as a human being with the eight freedoms and ten endowments, will definitely give us a great opportunity to practise Dharma again. We can definitely assert through reasoning that in our next life, our situation will be much better in terms of the conditions for practising Dharma. If we find ourselves struggling now, next time round it will be much easier because of the significant effort we have made to practice the Dharma now and the connections we have made with a number of great Mahayana teachers in this life. So through one's aspirational prayers and having met with some incredibly pure Mahayana teachers, we can rapidly progress along the path in our next life.

That is why I have always advised you to take every opportunity to go to the teachings of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Don't worry too much about whether or not you understand the teachings or whether or not there are some commitments; take every opportunity to receive teachings from His Holiness. There is great benefit in doing this because we are making a deep connection with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. His Holiness is a great compassionate being who is constantly thinking about the welfare of sentient beings, so when we make the connection with him, the imprints of that connection will definitely mature and be activated in the next life, enabling us reconnect with His Holiness to receive teachings and rapidly progress on the path. So there is a great significance in making that connection now.

All of this relates to *paying homage with great respect to all the victorious ones of the three times*, i.e. the buddhas of all the three times.

In relation to the teaching and those who aspire to virtue, we need to understand this on a personal level and understand that we need to take the initiative to create the causes to achieve a precious human rebirth in a future lifetime. Indeed we all have the right to obtain a precious human life adorned with the eight freedoms and the ten endowments. We have the ability and we have the right. As we are not deprived of having those rights and abilities, it falls upon us to really take that to heart and engage in practice.

As we know, having the eight freedoms and ten endowments are not in themselves sufficient. We can safely say that all of us have the eight freedoms and ten endowments right now, but what we need to do is to really strive towards meeting with a Mahayana teacher, who will help us to mature our mind so that we can make rapid progress in the Dharma. We need to really prepare for the next life, since there is a continuity between lifetimes.

If we can ensure our practice reaches the level of being able to secure a good rebirth in the next lifetime with the

eight freedoms and ten endowments, then we will have been a practitioner of medium standard. That is something we can strive to achieve.

In terms of the causes for a precious human life for our next rebirth, the illustrious master Chandrakirti said in the *Madhyamakavatara*: 'There is no greater cause for the high status than morality'. Thus, morality and observing ethics is the very basic cause for obtaining a precious human life in the next lifetime. As the Buddha himself taught, the way to observe morality or ethics is by avoiding the ten non-virtues. Right from the start the Buddha mentions abstaining from killing any sentient being. When we put this into practice and make a pledge to intentionally avoid taking life and avoid the rest of the ten non-virtuous deeds, then we are actually practising morality. This is how we need to understand it.

The Dharma jewel

Joy of the Blossomed Excellent – the commentary on *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* – explains the Dharma to be the oral teachings of the Buddha, the teachings that are practised, and the realisations that are actualised. In summary, Dharma is divided into two main parts: the oral teachings and the realisations obtained.

The actual Dharma Jewel relates to true paths and true cessation. One needs to understand why true paths are referred to as cause, and true cessations the result. As these are significant points to understand, I will explain it a bit further.

To explain what true paths mean, one needs to understand that whenever a trainee on the path directly realises the selflessness of a person, they obtain the path of seeing and are thereby called an arya being. Henceforth the paths in their mental continuum are referred to as true paths.

To explain it more specifically, the first moment on the path of seeing is called 'the uninterrupted path of seeing', which is a direct antidote for the abandonments on the path of seeing. The moment the particular abandonments on the path of seeing are abandoned, the trainee obtains what is called 'the liberated path of seeing', and this is when the trainee obtains cessation.

The abandonment that they obtain on the path of seeing is cessation, and it is obtained only by applying the antidotes; without applying the antidotes, abandonments cannot be obtained. There is some debate about this because cessation by its very nature is said to be permanent, and therefore it cannot be said to be a direct result as such.

However it is obtained as a consequence of engaging in the path of seeing. We would say that it is not a substantial result but it is a consequence of having abandoned particular defilements.

Therefore true paths are found only within an arya being. As such, ordinary beings will not have actualised the actual Dharma Jewel. The main point is that the actual Dharma Jewel is only found within the mental continuum of an arya being.

True cessation is obtained as a consequence of having first meditated and then obtained the true paths within the mental continuum. So it is possible to say that true

cessations are the result of true paths. For as long as antidotes to overcome a particular defilement are still within one's mental continuum, one doesn't yet have the cessation of overcoming those defilements. It is only when particular defilements have been abandoned, that one actually obtains the cessation of abandoning those defilements. This should be clear.

This is part of the common presentation of the Three Jewels.

The Sangha Jewel

The Sangha Jewel refers to those who aspire to virtue and, as explained in the commentary, it refers to all arya beings of all three vehicles. The term 'arya', which is translated in English as 'noble', refers to beings who have obtained the direct realisation of emptiness.

Here again it is good to understand the literal connotation of arya. The Tibetan word for arya is *phag-pa*, has the connotation of surpassing, which relates to aryas surpassing the ordinary beings. However, I personally like to relate it to a more specific explanation related to surpassing self-grasping.

Prior to gaining the realisation of emptiness and selflessness, one is still dominated by grasping at the self. As ordinary beings, we are completely controlled by self-grasping, and so whatever we do is mostly motivated by our self-grasping. Then, as a direct result, we create the causes to endlessly experience the various types of suffering of samsara. When an individual gains the direct realisation of emptiness and thus selflessness, they obtain the direct antidote for overcoming the self-grasping mind. Because of having actualised the direct opponent to self-grasping, which is the direct realisation of selflessness and emptiness, their minds are not dominated by self-grasping. So I feel 'surpassing' has a more subtle meaning when is related to being released from the control of self-grasping.

There are two specific types of self-grasping: innate self-grasping and intellectually acquired self-grasping. The uninterrupted path of seeing specifically serves as an antidote for overcoming intellectually acquired grasping at a self. Whereas when an individual being obtains the liberated path of seeing, that liberated path of seeing becomes an antidote for overcoming innate self-grasping. So from the moment an arya being obtains the liberated path of seeing, the antidote that overcomes innate self-grasping is continuously present. It is because they have the antidote to continuously counter innate self-grasping, they are not under the control of that self-grasping.

As ordinary beings, grasping at a self continuously dominates our mind; we are like slaves to this self-grasping doing whatever this master commands. Whereas when one becomes an arya being, one will be in control of one's mind, because one has the antidote to self-grasping in one's mental continuum. We can all very easily relate to being under the control of self-grasping. For example, in the morning we might be quite pious and engage in practices purifying our negativities such as doing prostrations, but by afternoon we have created more negativities. This is really a clear sign that we are under the control of self-grasping.

Of course, we can say that our situation is not too bad, as we are at least attempting to purify negativities regularly. So perhaps our debt of negative karma is not too great. However we do keep creating more negativity, and so we circle around, purifying some negativities but then creating more, and this will continue until we gain complete control over our own self-grasping.

The commentary explains the literal meaning of *ge-dun* – the Tibetan term for 'Sangha' – which is to aspire to virtue. That is because, as explained in the commentary, they abide firmly and have obtained an indestructible faith in virtue. Their minds are inseparable from virtue, which is their constant focus. So the Sangha are called 'aspiring to virtue'. An analogy is an indestructible knot, which relates to an indestructible faith. This explains the knot that is in the blessing chord or string presented to us by lamas. My understanding of this knot is that it represents indestructible faith.

As the commentary explains, the homage is paid to the buddhas of the three times; to the Dharma jewel – true cessation and paths of the three times; and to the arya Sangha beings of the three times. So the salutation and prostrations are offered to Three Jewels of the past, present and future. If asked 'by whom?', the individual who is making the salutation to the Three Jewels is Master Atisha himself, and he does so because he has acquired complete conviction and faith in the Three Jewels. This is how Atisha pays respect and offers salutations.

The reason for paying homage to the Three Jewels is as a way to remove obstacles to the composition. If these obstacles are not removed one will not be able to complete the composition. That is why it is appropriate to take some measures to remove obstacles. Paying homage and making salutations to the Three Jewels is an optimum way for accumulating great merit. As explained in the teachings, with enough merit humans can accomplish whatever they want to accomplish. That is why homage is paid to the Three Jewels here at the beginning of the composition.

Furthermore, as mentioned in the commentary, the great masters of good conduct engaged in this practice, so this is a way to inspire future disciples, such as ourselves, to engage in the same practice. This practice of paying homage to the Three Jewels is a supreme means of creating virtuous deeds.

There is Tibetan term in the verse, which has the connotation that something is to be followed after paying homage. So, as the commentary explains, after having paying homage, the particular deed to be engaged in is the composition of this text, *The Lamp on the Path for Enlightenment*.

Pledge to compose

The word 'illuminates' means to explain clearly, and the path to enlightenment is expounded in this text in a very clear and concise manner. The reason for the pledge to compose the treatise is so that the author will be able to complete the actual work without any hindrances. This is the tradition that was followed by the great masters and scholars of the past who, before beginning any composition, always made a pledge. A pledge made by

the great masters after a lot of contemplation and sound reasoning is similar to an engraving on stone, which doesn't fade away easily. Once a pledge is made, they will never withdraw from that pledge.

Why was this text composed?

As explained in the commentary, detailed reasons are explained further along in the text itself by referring to sutras – the actual teachings of the Buddha – and then clarifying those points.

As the commentary says:

The condition for composing the text is, the good disciple Jangchup Wo, made the request to Atisha, who was the master of all in Tibet.

As the verse states Atisha was *urged by the good disciple Jangchup Wo* to compose the text.

Atisha's own commentary on *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*² explains that 'the good disciple' refers to Jangchup Wo being a suitable vessel for the Mahayana teachings. The actual request is said to have been made when Jangchup Wo told Atisha, 'Here in Tibet there is a lot of confusion about the teachings and there is no clarity on them. So as a way to clarify all of the different and opposing views and confusions, please compose such a text which clarifies the Buddha's intent'.

As mentioned in the commentary the request was to 'explain the meaning of the entire Mahayana or Great Vehicle concisely in a few words that contain the whole meaning. Please write down how you engage in practice yourself'.

So Lama Atisha himself took upon the task of composing the text as a way to benefit the entire Dharma. It was composed in the particular monastery called Thoe-ling.

Atisha himself explains in his auto-commentary, the request made by his disciple Jangchup Wo:

In this area of Tibet there are persons who misinterpret the Mahayana path or the Buddha's teaching. Gurus and spiritual friends are arguing back and forth about things that they themselves do not comprehend. They all have their own logic to analyse the suppositions about the profound view and broad practice. With so much disagreement on all sides, I beg you to clear up these doubts for us. And so because of his repeated entreaty for his sake, I do light this lamp for the path of enlightenment, following the teaching of the sutras and the tradition.

The actual meaning of the text

This is presented under two headings:

- Explaining the three types of beings in brief
- Explaining the characteristics of each individual being

We will continue with this next week.

*Transcript prepared by Bernii Wright
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Edited Version*

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² Often referred to as his *Auto-commentary*.

Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

27 June 2017

As usual, let us engage in our meditation practice.
[Meditation]

Now we can generate the motivation for receiving the teaching along these lines: 'For the sake of all mother sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment. So for that purpose I will engage in listening to these Mahayana teachings, and put them into practice well'.

As I regularly mention, we must not underestimate the importance of generating a positive motivation. When we think about it, there are only really three possible states of mind that one can be in at any given moment: virtuous, non-virtuous, or neutral. There are no states of mind other than these three. So if we don't intentionally generate a positive state of mind, then that means our state of mind will either be a neutral or a negative one. Reciting the Refuge and Generating Bodhicitta Prayer is a means to cultivate a most positive mind.

You are all aware that taking refuge ensures that one's practice of Dharma becomes a pure practice, unsullied by any worldly stains, while generating the bodhicitta motivation ensures that one's Dharma practice becomes a Mahayana practice. One needs to understand that the Refuge and Generating Bodhicitta Prayer encompasses the entire path. We should not underestimate the value of the practice of taking refuge and generating bodhicitta whole heartedly; indeed, when we take this to heart its value is quite phenomenal. We might recite the prayer regularly, but if we don't make that extra effort to bring its meaning to mind and take it to heart, then they will just be empty words. If we are not careful we may form the habit of merely reciting the words without reflecting on their intended meaning.

His Holiness regularly emphasises that the preliminaries to a teaching are very important. He says that he considers the preliminary as being even more important than the actual teaching. When we take this advice to heart it becomes a very profound personal instruction.

Indeed, our practices can only become meaningful and fruitful if they are based on preliminary practices. Without ensuring a good basis with the preliminary practices the actual practice will be compromised. In brief, our motivation ensures that the practice of teaching the Dharma and listening to the Dharma actually becomes a Dharma practice. A pure practice of Dharma is dependent on the pure motivation that precedes it.

This is true from both the teacher's side and the students' side. Whether the material the teacher is presenting is a pure Dharma practice for the teacher is dependent on the motivation generated from the teacher's side; for the listeners, whether the Dharma that they hear actually becomes a pure Dharma practice is dependent on their

motivation. That is why we need to pay attention to our motivation.

As the great master Atisha said, 'We must ensure that the teaching of Dharma does not become a means for the delusions to increase; rather we must ensure that it becomes a means for the sutra and its intended meaning to be relayed accurately'. From the teacher's side the specific instruction is to ensure that the presentation of the Dharma does not cause delusions to increase. One should bear in mind that the main purpose is to convey the sutras – the Buddha's teachings – and their intended meaning accurately. The ultimate purpose and intention of all the Buddha's teachings is said to be to lead sentient beings to the ultimate state of enlightenment.

Further, it is said that the purpose of practising the teachings is to acquire all positive qualities and remove all faults, which includes the defilements and all obscurations. That is the ultimate purpose of practising the teachings. We all long for good qualities – there is no one who does not want to achieve the best qualities. So we are all naturally inclined to want to achieve them. Likewise, there's no one who wouldn't want to get rid of faults – we all want to get rid of faults. As we all aspire towards that ultimate goal, we need to ensure that our practice actually meets that end.

I take the initiative of spending a significant amount of time generating a positive state of mind and really contemplating the teaching I am about to present. I spend most of the day preparing in that way before I come down. It benefits my mind and it is really one of the best meditation practices. Some say that it benefits their mind and if it does then it is a benefit for others. What I can definitely say, however, is that it really benefits my own mind.

When I come down to actually present the teaching then I feel that it goes well because of the preparation I have done. If you listen with a positive motivation then, to that extent, it will definitely benefit your mind.

Some have asked me, 'How can Dharma practice benefit me in my everyday life situations? How can these practices help? How can they be of benefit in my work situation?' I don't blame them for asking these questions because their time is mostly spent in the work environment. Everyone has to acquire the means to sustain themselves and their families, so a lot of time has to be spent at work.

My advice has been to spend some time before going to work in the morning generating a positive motivation such as: 'Today when I go to work may I not be under the influence of negative states of mind such as jealousy, competitiveness, or disparaging other colleagues and so forth. I will do my work honestly and truthfully. As I'm being paid for it, may my work actually fulfil the purposes of my employer'. When one sets one's motivation in such a positive manner, then the time spent at work will be beneficial and more virtuous.

I've given more lengthy examples and explanations on this previously, however in brief the main point is to have a positive motivation before going out and about with our daily activities.

The commentary on *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* includes a discussion confirming that the auto-commentary on *Lamp* was actually composed by Atisha. It goes on to explain that Lama Tsong Khapa mentions that it was indeed composed by Atisha but with a few later annotations. Further, the commentary explains that:

In brief by composing the *Lamp for the Path*, Atisha captured the essence of the teachings of all the buddhas of the three times. He composed the text in this format as requested by his heart disciple Dromtonpa, who then introduced Lama Atisha's teaching on the *Lamp for the Path*, and the three Kadampa brothers further spread it throughout Tibet, and it has remained unsullied up to this day. Thus, those who have the time must not miss the opportunity to study this text and put into practice.

The *three Kadampa brothers* refers to Geshe Potawa, Geshe Chengawa, and Geshe Phuchungwa who were the heart sons of the great master Dromtonpa. Here 'heart sons' means that they were very close disciples, who were entrusted with specific teachings and instructions, like a king will trust his crown prince to reign over the kingdom.

Bodhisattvas are also referred to as the children or sons of the buddhas. As explained in the *Commentary on Bodhicitta*, that is because bodhisattvas are like the representatives of the Buddha. The *Madhyamakavatara* text explains that bodhisattvas are known as the children of the Buddha because they are born as the result of the teachings of the Buddha. This means all their qualities and realisations are obtained as a result of the Buddha's teachings, so they are like sons, or children of the Buddha.

How does *Lamp for the Path* illuminate the Buddha's teachings?

This a hypothetical question raised in the commentary, which then goes on to explain.

The great master Atisha definitely illuminates the Buddha's teachings and is able to illuminate the Buddha's teachings clearly, because he possesses all the excellent causes such as having received the unmistakable personal instructions from previous lamas, having seen the tutelary deities directly, and also being a great master and scholar of the five sciences.

The five major sciences are:

- Arts & crafts
- Medicine
- Grammar
- Logic
- Philosophy

There are also five minor sciences which are:

- Poetry
- Synonyms
- Lexicography
- Astrology
- Dance and drama

In the commentary there is a supporting quote in verse form from a treatise called *Be'u-bum ngon-po*, [or *Blue Scripture*], which is a compilation of the Kadampa sayings of Geshe Potawa and other Kadampa masters like Sherab Gyatso.

Having been endowed with all the instructions from the lamas
And having seen the mind-seal deities

The Tibetan word for the tutelary deities is *yi-dam*, the literal translation of which is 'mind seal'. Basically, a *yi-dam* is a deity who is close to one's mind or heart, and the 'seal' means that it is an immutable connection. As many biographies of Atisha mention, Atisha had a direct connection with the deity Tara, and there are many accounts of him having received direct advice from Tara.

The next lines quoted in the commentary are:

A master of all the five arts
Therefore he was able to clearly illuminate the path.

The commentary goes on to say that the *Lamp* possesses four features that establish its authenticity.

1. It has a quintessential purpose
2. It has a specific purpose
3. It contains valid subject matter; and
4. There is a connection between the previous three features and the text.

4. PRESENTING THE ACTUAL TREATISE

This has two subdivisions:

- Presenting the three types of beings in brief; and
- Presenting the specific characteristics of three types of beings

The actual distinction between the three types of beings will be presented later. Here it specifically refers to the distinction made on the basis of the capacity of the mind.

Presenting the three types of beings in brief

The next verse is:

2. *Understand there are three kinds of persons
Because of their small, middling and supreme capacities.
I shall write clearly distinguishing
Their individual characteristics.*

Verse 1 said *I shall illuminate the lamp for the path to enlightenment*. So right from the beginning, the very premise of this whole text is made clear – it illuminates the path to enlightenment. This is a very concise state of intent.

First the commentary explains the meaning of the person who is striving to achieve enlightenment. It explains that in general 'person' refers to all beings or individuals. As the other texts also explain, 'person', 'I', and 'being' are synonymous, i.e. they have the same meaning. This is a quote that I will never forget, because when I was studying in the monastery as a young monk, our teacher would make us repeat it many times.

As the commentary further explains, the person identified here is in accordance to the meaning of the Sanskrit word *puruka*, which means a being with ability, or capable of performing an activity. This is a point I've also mentioned previously; it is a very important point to know what 'person' actually means, as way to understand one's own potential and capabilities.

As the commentary further explains,

Being able to perform a function with an ability,
refers to being able to achieve a purpose for the life

beyond this life. Such a person is a Dharma practitioner who has one of three capacities.

The specific quality of a person with ability is quite clearly identified in the commentary as someone who is able to achieve a purpose beyond this life.

Generally, the definition of human that is given in the texts is someone who is able to utter speech and understand meaning. But being a human in this context refers to someone who is able to achieve a purpose beyond this lifetime. These are individuals who are not focussed on this life's affairs but who look beyond to the next life and onwards. That is the meaning of a human being – a person with capacity. So, if we were to fully utilise the value of our human life, then it means we need to be focused on achieving goals beyond this life.

At this point the commentary again quotes from the text *Be'u-bum ngon-po*:

Because of fear of the lower realms in the future life,
One refrains from negativity.
By recollecting the faults of cyclic existence, and thus longing to achieve liberation,
They engage in the four noble truths and the three trainings.

The first two lines relate to the person of the least capacity or the small scope who, driven by fear of the lower realms in the next life, refrains from negativity. The last two lines explain the person of medium scope.

The *Be'u-bum* then refers to the person of great scope:

By fearing the lower vehicle, they generate bodhicitta.
Such individuals would be known as humans,
Otherwise what purpose does a human serve,
How could you call them a person?

Then the commentary explains:

These three types of beings are the three persons that are explained here. There are three types of paths leading to their individual goals. Those of least capacity strive to achieve a good status in the next life and those with intermediate capacity will focus on achieving liberation. This is the common path. Those who are of supreme capacity strive to achieve the ultimate state of enlightenment, i.e. become a buddha. These are the three paths.

The paths of these three beings are illuminated in this treatise in a very concise, clear and easy to understand manner.

First there has been a presentation of the characteristics of these three paths in general, and now the distinctive elements of each of the paths are presented.

The three paths

The three paths are:

1. The path of those striving for the higher status, which refers to the methods to achieve high status in the next life.
2. The path leading to liberation, so-called because it presents the methods and means to achieve liberation.
3. The path to enlightenment or buddhahood presents the ways to achieve enlightenment.

In brief, as presented in the text itself, the beings of the three scopes are presented in relation to the paths which lead to their ultimate goals. Thus, the goal of those of the least capacity is to achieve high status in the next life; the goal of the intermediate capacity is to achieve liberation; and the goal of those of greatest capacity is to achieve enlightenment.

This is the presentation of the three scopes in brief. It is good to have this clear and concise understanding from the very start, which then serves as the basis for the more elaborate explanations that follow. Even reciting the verses with that understanding will leave very good imprints in our mind.

From this very clear presentation one gains an understanding of the three scopes or how the three types of beings are distinguished in relation to their mental capacity.

Presenting the specific characteristics of three types of beings

This is subdivided into three:

- Presenting the characteristics of the being of the small scope
- Presenting the characteristics of the being of the medium scope
- Presenting the characteristics of the being of the great scope

Presenting the characteristics of the being of the small scope

3. *Know that those who by whatever means Seek for themselves no more Than the pleasures of cyclic existence Are persons of the least capacity.*

The author of the commentary Lobsang Choekyi Gyaltsan¹, was renowned not only as a master of many different treatises but also for his non-sectarian approach and genuine interest in all of the four traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. Because he was well versed in all of them, he is praised by many of the masters of the other traditions, such as the great Sakya Pandita.

His presentation of the characteristics of beings of the small scope begins with:

I'm now going to explain the meaning of the small scope. This is someone who doesn't have the slightest attachment to this life, and who has the ability to seek the means to achieve a purpose for future lifetimes.

On that basis they focus on achieving the highest excellence of the human realms, or further, the desire god realms of Indra, the god of love and so forth and, even higher, the gods of the form and formless realms such as Brahma and so forth.

Furthermore, the methods that are employed are based on having a profound and convinced faith in cause and effect. Based on that they observe the morality of avoiding the ten non-virtues, which becomes the cause for obtaining the excellence of a human rebirth.

They further strive to obtain the four contaminated meditative concentrations and the formless absorptions as means to obtain the desire god realms

¹ Fourth Panchen Lama, 1570 -1662

and the realm of Brahma respectively. Employing these methods, such a being who strives to achieve this for their own purpose is a being of the least capacity.

The first point is the necessity of having a *convinced faith in cause and effect*. This is a point that we really need to keep in mind. As the teachings emphasise again and again, the basis for practice is having a convinced faith in karma, the law of cause and effect. Without such a convinced faith there would be nothing to prevent one from engaging in negativity. What prevents one from engaging in negativity, and if one does engage in negativity, what encourages one to immediately to regret and purify that negativity is a convinced faith in the law of cause and effect. As presented here, abiding by the law of cause and effect is the specific cause to be born with *the excellence of a human rebirth*. This is something that we have the ability to do right now.

The second point refers to the methods and causes that are needed to be reborn in the form realms. The **four contaminated concentrations** are four types of meditative absorptions that serve as the cause to be reborn in the form realms. In order to obtain the four levels of concentrations progressively, one needs to have first developed calm abiding, followed by cultivating the preparatory stage, which is a preparatory virtuous state of concentration within the sphere of the form and formless realm that directly generates an actual state of meditative concentration of either form or formless absorption.

There are **four formless absorptions** that one needs to achieve as causes to take rebirth in the formless realms.

Also, it is important to take note that when the commentary explains that, *such a being who strives to achieve this for their own purpose is a being of the least capacity*, there is a reason why it doesn't mention that such a being is striving to achieve this **merely** or **solely** for their own purpose. This indicates that the practices presented here are also followed by beings who are ultimately striving to achieve enlightenment; the practices in the small scope are presented as preliminary practices for developing bodhicitta. Thus, it is said that the being of the small scope needs to engage in the practices with, at very least, an effort based bodhicitta motivation.

Adopting the methods to be reborn in the form and formless realms may be beyond our immediate reach now. However, the main point to be emphasised here in relation to our own capacity at present, is that it is essential to engage in the practice of adopting the ten virtues and avoiding the ten non-virtues, which is practised on the basis of having a convinced faith in the law of cause and effect. Based on that we further engage in the practices of generosity and so forth. Then we are acquiring all the causes and conditions to achieve a human rebirth in the next lifetime with all the excellences, which means having sufficient sustenance and so forth.

We can take this up as a personal practice, making the commitment, 'I will not engage in the ten non-virtues of taking life, taking the possessions of others, engaging in sexual misconduct, lying, uttering harsh words, divisive

words, or idle gossip, having covetous thoughts, harmful thoughts and intentions, or harbouring wrong views. By avoiding these and adopting their opposite, the ten virtues, I will engage in the practice of abiding by the law of cause and effect, which will secure my future'. In this way, we are making a personal commitment to engage in practice.

Making that commitment is a form of taking a vow. There's a difference between avoiding non-virtue without having made any commitment, and taking a vow and actually practising morality based upon **commitment and promise**. One accumulates much greater virtue when one observes the ten virtues after having made the commitment to avoid the ten non-virtues.

Next week we will discuss the particular terminology of *skyes bu chung ngu*, the small scope.

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Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

4 July 2017

As usual let us spend some time for meditation practice.
(*Tong-len meditation*)

Please adopt the most positive motivation. There are basically three different types of motivation.

We can all acknowledge that whatever activity we do, we do with the intention of achieving happiness. The practice of Dharma is ultimately done for that purpose. Even with worldly activities, we engage in them for the purpose of achieving some level of happiness.

In terms of the different types of happiness we can achieve, they can be subsumed into three types - the happiness of higher status; the happiness of definite goodness; and the ultimate happiness of enlightenment. The happiness of higher status can also be related to the happiness of this life and, but more importantly, to attaining higher status in our future lives. The happiness of definite goodness is the happiness of achieving liberation - to be completely free from the sufferings of cyclic existence. And the highest or ultimate happiness is the state of enlightenment or omniscience.

The three motivations for Dharma practice

In order to set the proper motivation for receiving teachings such as this on the lam-rim, we need to first rule out any improper motivations. Engaging in the teachings to merely achieve happiness in this life would not be an appropriate motivation or goal. Focusing on merely achieving a good rebirth in our next life would also not be a sufficient motivation for receiving this teaching. Further, seeking liberation solely for oneself would also not be an appropriate motivation.

The most appropriate motivation for receiving this lam-rim teaching would be one in which we aim to achieve enlightenment for the welfare of all sentient beings.

The reason this is called the most appropriate motivation can be understood as follows. When we strive for the happiness of only this life, the effort we put into achieving this aim will not become a cause for future happiness beyond this lifetime. We're not saying here that doing spiritual practice or engaging in activities to gain happiness only for this life is wrong. It is fine to seek happiness for this life. But the point here is that if the intention is *merely* to seek happiness for this life, then whatever activity or practice we engage in will not become a cause for happiness in future lifetimes. Whereas if one engages in a practice that is a cause for happiness in future lifetimes, then not only will it become a cause for happiness in a future life, but it will also become a cause to experience happiness in this life.

As mentioned in some practices that we recite daily, 'when you focus only on this life, your future life's welfare will not be accomplished; whereas if you focus

on your future life's welfare, this life's welfare will naturally be accomplished'. As His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, regularly quotes from Lama Tsongkhapa, 'when working for the welfare of others, one's own welfare will be fulfilled on the side'.

These are significant points to really take to heart. It gives us a logical reason to consider focusing beyond this life and for the welfare of other sentient beings. If focusing on the welfare of other sentient beings fulfils our own purpose as a positive side-effect - without effort, naturally and spontaneously - then we will feel more encouraged to work for the welfare of other sentient beings.

Otherwise, if we think that working for other beings comes at the expense of losing one's own happiness, we might have some hesitation about it, thinking that we will miss out. This mistaken thought that we may lose our own happiness, is what obstructs us from working wholeheartedly for the welfare of other sentient beings. So when we take this point to heart and fully commit to working for other sentient beings, we need not worry about our own welfare, because that will be fulfilled naturally, as a positive side-effect.

Another significant point to contemplate is that when we think about our problems, most of them come from not being able to fulfil our personal needs. We're always busy trying to fulfil some sort of purpose for ourselves. This brings us a lot of agony when we're unable to accomplish it. Even if we do temporarily fulfil that purpose, we're not satisfied and have to strive for more. So if focusing merely on oneself and one's own purpose brings more difficulties, problems, anxiety and stress in one's life, then is it really worth pursuing that? Rather it would be worthwhile to consider a different approach.

The real cause of our problems is neglecting others' welfare while focusing merely on our own. Completely ignoring others' needs and concerns and focusing only on our own personal happiness and welfare is what brings about all of our angst. When we understand how the lam-rim structure is presented in a way that takes us beyond that narrow self-interest and expands our mind towards others, we can see that it is deeply profound.

It is good to understand the difference between *generating* a positive motivation and *maintaining* a positive motivation. I have mentioned this many times in the past; it is a significant point.

In the context of the lam-rim teachings, the appropriate motivation would be as presented earlier: to reverse any inappropriate intention or motivation we might have had previously, such as focusing merely on this life's welfare, or focusing merely on our own future life's welfare, or seeking only liberation for oneself. Instead, we direct our motivation to the goal of achieving enlightenment for the sake of other sentient beings.

In general, *generating* a positive motivation would mean reversing the mind from a non-virtuous state to a more virtuous state. We reverse non-virtuous states of mind, i.e. any state of mind that is motivated by the delusions or afflictions, and adopt a positive frame of mind instead.

But if a positive state of mind such as love and compassion is already prevalent in one's mind prior to

engaging in a practice, then there is no need specifically to generate a positive motivation, but rather *maintain* the positive state of mind one already has.

The specific point we need to note here is that when we generate the positive motivation of seeking the welfare of other sentient beings – more specifically the bodhicitta motivation – even if it is contrived and requires an effort to generate, when one subsequently engages in the practices of the small scope, they will in fact become a preliminary practice for engaging in the great scope. The practices presented in the small scope section of the lam-rim become the cause for achieving a good rebirth in the next life – the goal of small scope practitioners or beings of least capacity. However, even with a contrived bodhicitta motivation, these practices become a preliminary practice for the great scope.

This is because in order to continuously practise the Great Vehicle and engage in the practices of a bodhisattva right up until we achieve enlightenment, we need to achieve good rebirths, so we need to create the causes for obtaining such good rebirths.

Further, even with the contrived bodhicitta motivation to seek enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings, when we engage in the practices of the medium scope, again the practices – in this case, of the being of medium capacity – will become a preliminary practice for engaging in the practices of the great scope. This point needs to be understood well.

Presenting the characteristics of the being of the small scope (cont.)

In our last session, in the commentary on the *Lamp of the Path*, it explained that a small scope being is someone who strives to achieve their own purpose of a good rebirth, such as in the human realm, or in the higher form and formless realms. So the explicit meaning of the small scope being should be clear to you.

The commentary further explains:

While the person of a least capacity engages in the practice of the sublime Dharma, their practices are inferior to the practices of the medium and great scopes, because they strive only for the perfections of cyclic existence and turn their back on the welfare of other sentient beings.

The sublime Dharma here refers to the Buddhadharma. The reason for this distinction is that 'dharma' in general refers to all phenomena. All existence is referred to as dharma, which comes from the literal meaning of the Sanskrit word, which is translated in Tibetan as *choe*. The general definition of dharma or *choe* is, 'that which holds its own identity'. So this definition of dharma is inclusive of all existence, as every existent phenomenon holds its own particular and unique identity.

This meaning of dharma is also synonymous with 'objects of knowledge' which is the term used to refer to all existence. Essentially, objects of knowledge subsume conventional phenomena and ultimate phenomena – as there is no existence other than a conventional truth or an ultimate truth. Thus 'objects of knowledge' subsume the two truths.

The main point again is that while dharma in general refers to all existence or phenomena, the sublime Dharma

refers particularly to the Buddhadharma and its practice. The literal meaning of dharma is 'to hold'. Tibetan scholars further elaborate its meaning to 'holding its own identity', which has a deeper meaning.

We could use this drinking glass as an example. It is a dharma, in the sense of that it is a phenomenon that by definition, 'holds its own identity'. We can see that this is true for the glass – anyone with an unmistakable awareness who sees the glass will unequivocally recognise it as a glass. Whenever we see a glass, we immediately identify it as a glass, not something else. This is clearly because the drinking glass 'holds its own identity', of being a glass.

It is good to understand how the general definition of dharma also relates to the sublime Buddhadharma. As presented in the small scope, the sublime Dharma in essence is to engage in the practice of observing the morality of avoiding the ten non-virtues and adopting the ten virtues.

How does 'holding its own identity' apply to the morality of avoiding the ten non-virtues? For the person, who practises the morality of avoiding the ten non-virtues and adopting the ten virtues, their morality is what 'holds' that person against taking rebirth in the lower realms.

This is the real point we need to understand in relation to the meaning of dharma when it is applied to the practice of the sublime Dharma. When an individual observes the morality of avoiding the ten non-virtues, it is that morality that holds or protects them from falling into a lower rebirth in the next life – nothing else but the practice of morality can hold one from an unfortunate rebirth. You can relate this understanding to the all other practices as well.

Another meaning of dharma is to reverse from the alternative. In relation to our Dharma practice, if our mind is in a state of non-virtue, we are applying the Dharma when we reverse that mind and bring it to a virtuous state.

The three characteristics of the small scope being

As explained in the commentary the being of small scope is a being of lesser capacity than an intermediate or a great being.

In the first line: [of verse 3 of the *Lamp*, which was read last week] *Know that those who by whatever means* refers to the first of three characteristics of the small scope being, **the characteristic of deed**. The second line [which is the third line in the English translation] *Than the pleasures of cyclic existence* refers to the **characteristic of the goal** or the effect. The third line: [the second line of the English translation] *Seek for themselves no more* refers to the **characteristic of thought or intention**. The fourth line: *Are persons of least capacity* shows the **basis of these characteristics**, which is the being of the small scope itself.

We will now go over these three characteristics in more detail:

1. For the characteristic of deed: while there are various practices prescribed in the small scope, the main practice is developing the morality of avoiding the ten

non-virtues, which then becomes the actual characteristic of deed.

2. The characteristic of the goal: is to seek high status or a good rebirth in one's next life.
3. The characteristic of thought or intention: is to seek that goal mainly for oneself.

The basis of these three characteristics is the being of the small scope. The person who incorporates these three characteristics would be a being who has the thought or motivation to seek the goal of achieving good rebirth – either as a human being or in the god realms – by engaging in the practices of adopting the ten virtues and avoiding the ten non-virtues. This describes the being of least capacity who engages in the practices of the small scope.

Relating this to our own personal practice, when we observe morality with the intention to obtain a good rebirth and combine it with a higher purpose, we are engaging in the practice of meditation on the path of the small scope – we incorporate the practice of the small scope as a form of meditation in our own practice.

The commentary further clarifies:

The definition of the small scope being as demonstrated here is: a person who merely has an interest in obtaining high status and engages in the unmistakable methods to achieve that.

As was explained more elaborately in Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland*¹, high status itself refers to the happiness of the human and god realms; the goal to be achieved is rebirth in the actual human or god realm. As presented concisely in the commentary, it is good to reflect on what a being of the small scope entails. It is a being who merely has an interest in attaining high status and engages in the unmistakable methods to achieve that.

Relying on a spiritual guide

The commentary explains:

The root of the path for all the three beings is reliance on a virtuous friend. That is so because when we please the lama or guru, we will generate the wish to take the essence of this precious human life. If we do not take the essence of this precious human life and engage in the sublime practice of Dharma, we will not be able to engage in any of the paths of the three scopes.

This is very true because, as presented clearly here, if we don't first of all recollect this precious life and do not wish to take the essence from it, there is no way we can engage in the true practice of Dharma.

Reliance on the spiritual teacher or virtuous friend and attaining the precious human rebirth, with its eight freedoms and ten endowments, are practices that serve as preliminaries for all three scopes. As the teachings present, reliance on the spiritual or virtuous friend is the very root of the path. Without relying on a skilled teacher, we would not be able to gain real insight into any practice. We may assume that we understand the contents of Dharma books just by reading them, but we will not be able to gain a profound insight into its meaning.

One needs to rely on a teacher who has a profound understanding and insight, which is passed on so that we can then gain those specific instructions.

Relying on a spiritual master is presented as a specific topic in the lam-rim. Only after explaining how to rely on a spiritual master are the further topics of how to engage in the practices of the three scopes presented.² While the commentary does not go into those specific details, we need to understand how they actually fit into this section.

Identifying the precious human rebirth or taking the essence of the precious human rebirth as presented in the lam-rim also comes into this section of relying on a spiritual friend. As the commentary further explains:

Because reliance on the virtuous friend is the very root or preliminary practice of all the three scopes, it is presented in these verses in the *Lamp on the Path*:

Verse 6:

For those excellent living beings,
Who desire supreme enlightenment,
I shall explain the perfect method
Taught by the spiritual teachers.

Verse 23:

Understand that a good spiritual teacher
Is one skilled in the vow ceremony
Who lives by the vow and has
The confidence and compassion to bestow it.

This specifically relates to relying on the spiritual teacher to receive the bodhicitta vows. However, as the commentary explains, before receiving the instructions, one must first understand that reliance on a spiritual teacher or virtuous friend is essential.

Then the commentary explains:

For the small scope being there are four specific objects of meditation:

- Impermanence
- The faults of the three lower realms
- Refuge
- Cause and effect or karma.

By contemplating cause and effect, we engage in the practice of morality or avoiding the ten non-virtues.

In order to generate the *intention* of the small scope, one needs to rely on the first two practices, [impermanence and thinking about the faults of the lower realms.] And in order to engage in the *practice* of the small scope, one needs to relate to the next two objects of contemplation, [refuge and thinking about cause and effect.]

The lam-rim outline first of all presents reliance on the spiritual teacher or virtuous friend. We will not cover it in detail here, but as mentioned earlier in this commentary, it precedes all three practices of the three scopes as a preliminary practice.

Lam-rim structure as presented in *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*.

The stimulus to take the essence from your optimum human rebirth

1 A short discussion to convince you

² In the *Lam-rim Chenmo* outline, 'Relying on a Spiritual Teacher' precedes 'The Meditation Session', 'Refuting Misconceptions about Meditation' and 'A Human Life of Leisure and Opportunity'.

¹ Tara Institute, Study Group transcriptions, 2010-12.

- 11 Identifying the optimum human rebirth
 - 111 The freedoms
 - 112 The endowments
 - 112.1 The five personal endowments
 - 112.2 The five endowments in relation to others
- 12 Thinking about the great benefits of the optimum human rebirth
 - 121 Its great benefits from the short-term point of view
 - 122 Its great benefits from the ultimate point of view
 - 123 Thinking briefly about how even every moment of it can be most beneficial
- 13 Thinking about how difficult the optimum human rebirth is to acquire
 - 131 Thinking about the causes for its being so hard to acquire
 - 132 Some analogies for the difficulty of acquiring it
 - 133 It is difficult by nature to acquire

Thinking about the precious human rebirth.

Next we contemplate the precious human rebirth. Here, the section on the small scope in the lam-rim begins with the stimulus to take the essence from the optimum human rebirth, then there is a discussion to convince you, initially by identifying the human rebirth, then thinking about its great benefit.

The section on the optimum human rebirth goes into the specifics of identifying the eight freedoms and ten endowments, encouraging one to take essence of the precious human rebirth. Having identified the optimum human rebirth, the lam-rim asks us to think about its great benefits, from the short term and long term or ultimate point of view, and how it will achieve the greatest purpose for oneself.

For our personal practice, we must relate these explanations to our current situation, thinking about how we have obtained this optimum precious human rebirth with the eight freedoms and ten endowments. What does it mean? How can it help us? How can it help us achieve our greatest purpose?

In fact, on the basis of this precious human rebirth that we have now, we can engage in the practice of Dharma to achieve our immediate and ultimate purposes for the welfare of all sentient beings. We can achieve that right now. We need to contemplate how we have the full potential and ability to engage in the practice of the sublime Dharma. Contemplating this, we can generate a mind of rejoicing and encouragement. It is an incredibly fortunate, wonderful privilege to have the full potential and ability to engage in the practice of supreme Dharma.

The next outline in the lam-rim is thinking about how difficult the optimum human rebirth is to acquire. This is presented to prevent us from becoming complacent and thinking: 'Although this human rebirth is really precious, maybe I can obtain it later, so there's no need for me to take essence of it now'.

However, as Lama Tsongkhapa mentions, it is as if we have obtained this precious human life this one time

only, which indicates that it is a miracle for us to have obtained it now, and that it will be extremely difficult to obtain such a rebirth again. This is because the causes to acquire a precious human rebirth with the eight freedoms and ten endowments are extremely difficult to acquire. The main causes are that one's practices have to be based on pure morality. Practising pure morality serves as the basis, then engaging the practice of generosity and so forth, and making stainless prayers are the causes for obtaining the precious human rebirth.

You can refer to the lam-rim to understand this topic in more detail – first this precious human rebirth and what it encompasses; then the rarity of the precious human life; and then the difficulty of obtaining it. This will encourage us to engage in the practice of Dharma. As the lam-rim then explains, the precious human rebirth is not only difficult to acquire, but once acquired it will not last long: it will easily cease to exist. So contemplating the lam-rim teachings on death and impermanence will be a further impetus for us to engage in Dharma practice.

Lam-rim structure as presented in *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*.

How to extract the essence from your optimum human rebirth

1 Training your mind in the stages of the path shared with the small scope

11 Developing a yearning for a good rebirth

111 Recalling that your present rebirth will not last long and that you will die

111.1 The drawbacks of not remembering death

111.11 The drawback that you will not remember Dharma

111.12 The drawback that you will remember [the Dharma] but not practise it

111.13 [The drawback that] you will practise but not practise properly

111.14 The drawback of not practising seriously

111.15 The drawback of acting vulgarly

111.16 The drawback of having to die with regrets

111.2 The advantages of remembering death

111.21 The advantage of being most beneficial

111.22 The advantage of being most powerful

111.23 It is important at the beginning

111.24 It is important in the meantime

111.25 It is important at the end

111.26 The advantage that you will die happily and gladly

111.3 The actual way to remember death

111.31 The nine-part meditation on death

111.311 The first root: thinking about the inevitability of death

111.311.1 The first reason: the Lord of Death will inevitably come, and no circumstance at all can prevent this

111.311.2 The second reason: thinking how nothing is being added to your lifespan and it is always being subtracted from

111.311.3 The third reason: thinking about how you will definitely die before getting around to practising Dharma

111.312 The second root: thinking about the uncertainty of when you will die

111.312.1 The first reason: the lifespan of people from the Southern Continent is not fixed, and this is especially so for lifespans during these degenerate times

111.312.2 The second reason: when you will die is uncertain because there are many factors contributing toward your death and few toward your life

111.312.3 The third reason: when you will die is uncertain because the body is extremely fragile

111.313 The third root: thinking of how nothing can help you when you die except Dharma

111.313.1 The first reason: wealth cannot help you

111.313.2 The second reason: friends and relatives cannot help you

111.313.3 The third reason: even your body cannot help you

111.32 Meditation on the aspects of death

112 Thinking about what sort of happiness or suffering you will have in your next rebirth in either of the two types of migration

Death and impermanence

In this commentary of the *Lamp for the Path*, the first object of meditation in the small scope section is impermanence, which refers to death and impermanence. The lam-rim outline presents how to engage in the practice of contemplating death and impermanence.

First we think about the drawbacks of not contemplating death and impermanence, and then the advantages of contemplating it. There are six drawbacks of not remembering death and six advantages of remembering death. If one does not recall death, what are the drawbacks? One contemplates each of these points as presented in the lam-rim. After having explained the six drawbacks and advantages, the lam-rim then goes into explaining the actual way to remember death, which is presented in the nine-part meditation on death.

The nine-part meditation is presented as three roots, six reasons and three conclusions.

The three roots are: thinking about the inevitability of death; thinking about the uncertainty of the time of death; and thinking about how nothing can help you except for the Dharma at the time of death.

There are three reasons for each root. The three reasons for thinking about **the root of the inevitability of death** are: *firstly* the Lord of Death will inevitably come and nothing can prevent it; *secondly* nothing is being added to your lifespan, it is always being subtracted from; and *thirdly*, thinking about how you will definitely die before getting around to practising Dharma. At the end of this, one concludes that one must definitely practise the Dharma.

When we look around, we can definitely see that death is certain. However, we may still feel a bit complacent,

thinking 'it will come to me later'. To overcome such complacency, the lam-rim presents the **second root, thinking about how when one will die is uncertain**. Again, this is presented with three reasons.

The *first* is that the lifespan of people from the Southern Continent, which refers to the Earth, is not fixed, especially during these degenerate times. The *second* reason is that when you will die is uncertain, because there are many factors contributing towards your death and few towards your life – some of these are explained in more detail in the lam-rim. The *third* reason is that when you will die is uncertain because the body is extremely fragile. We can see that this is definitely true with certain examples, such as the case of a cricketer who died some time ago because of the cricket ball hitting him on his neck. In another case, someone going out on a walk in the park died before they got back home. Someone else died just by taking the wrong pill – a very small pill caused their death. These are just some examples of how our body is extremely fragile. So there is no certainty about when we will die.

After going through the three reasons for the uncertainty of the time of death, we come to the conclusion that we need to engage in the practice of Dharma, right now, in this very instant.

The **third root is thinking of how nothing can help you when you die except the Dharma**. The three reasons under this root are: *firstly*, wealth cannot help you at the time of death; *secondly* friends and relatives can't help you; *thirdly* even your own body cannot help you. Again, these points are obvious. Nothing can prevent your death or assist you at the time of death; no matter how much wealth you have none of your wealth can prevent your death or help you. And no matter how dear friends and relatives may be to you, they cannot help you. Even your own body cannot prevent your death. Having contemplated this, we conclude that we need to practice the Dharma purely.

We really need to take time to contemplate these points: how death is certain, but the time of death is uncertain, and at the time of death nothing can help us – our wealth cannot help us, friends and relatives cannot help us, and our own body cannot help us. Contemplating this will lessen our attachment to wealth, friends and relatives and our body. When strong attachment towards these objects is reduced, it makes more space in the mind, and so the mind is much more relaxed. This is how we can understand the practical benefits of this nine-part meditation on death and impermanence.

As Lama Tsongkhapa mentions in the *Three Principal Aspects of the Path*, by contemplating the rarity of this precious human life and how it does not last long, the clinging to this life will be reversed.

First, we contemplate the preciousness of this human life, then contemplate the inevitability of death and how it will come at any time, and then we contemplate how nothing, no external object, can help us at the time of death. This will confirm that only the Dharma will help, and thus encourage us to really take the essence of this precious human life by engaging in the practice of Dharma.

On the point about reducing attachment to our wealth, friends, relatives and so forth, we must not misinterpret that as meaning we need to give up everything and live in poverty. We need to understand that the specific point here is to give up the attachment to one's wealth, friends, relatives and so forth. It doesn't mean giving up one's possessions and living in poverty, or not having any friends or relatives.

Contemplating death and impermanence becomes an impetus for us to engage in the practice of Dharma as presented in the small scope.

Thinking about the faults of the unfortunate realms

Following the contemplation of death and impermanence, we may start to naturally wonder, what will happen after death? What would that existence be like?

When we really contemplate this well, we will come to understand that we will not cease to exist; death doesn't mean we completely cease to exist, there is definitely a continuum. Where does our continuum go? What types of rebirth will one take? This is the point where the lam-rim presents the section on unfortunate rebirths.

As one definitely has to take rebirth, there are only two choices – either a fortunate rebirth or an unfortunate one. The choice of whether we take a fortunate or unfortunate rebirth is not entirely up to us, but depends entirely on one's virtuous or non-virtuous karma.

There are three types of unfortunate rebirth: the hell realms, the hungry ghost realms and the animal realms. As presented in the lam-rim, when we contemplate the sufferings of the lower realms – the specific sufferings of the hell realms, and hungry ghost and animal realms – and the prospect of having to experience those, one will generate the strong aspiration to be free from these sufferings.

We won't have time to go into the details of the lower realms. In the next session, I will refer to some of the points, again just to give you a brief understanding of the sequence. After having contemplated the sufferings and generated a keen determination to be free from them, we will naturally think, who can help us? How one can we be free from these sufferings

This is where the lam-rim presents the topic of refuge. Taking refuge in the Three Jewels is the means for us to free ourselves from the sufferings of the lower realms. But going for refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha is, in itself, not sufficient. We need to abide by the advice and practices prescribed in the section on taking refuge, which is engaging in the practices of adopting virtue and shunning negativity – the topic of karma, or the laws of cause and effect.

This is how these topics are connected to each other. Again, as mentioned earlier, while we don't have time to go into the details here, it is good for you to refer to the teachings, read the related topics, and familiarise yourself with them. The main thing is to familiarise yourself with the sequence. If we have a good understanding of the sequence, then whenever one hears teachings on any of these topics, one will be able to

immediately relate it to its specific category and how it is connected to the other topics of the lam-rim.

As presented in the *Lines of Experience* by Tsongkhapa:

There is no certainty that after death we may not be
born in the lower realms;
The protection from such terror lies in the Three
Jewels alone;
So we must make firm the practice of going for refuge
And ensure that its precepts are never undermined.

So, the main point here is that by reflecting on the sufferings of the lower realms, we realise that the only thing that can protect us from these sufferings are the objects of refuge, and thus by going refuge in the three jewels, we then engage in the practices of abiding by the law of karma, which in essence is adopting virtue and shunning negativity.

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Edited Version*

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Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

11 July 2017

As usual let us spend some time on our meditation practice. [*Tong-len meditation*]

Now we can generate a positive motivation based on the bodhicitta intention, such as, 'in order to benefit all sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment, so for that purpose I will engage in the practice of listening to the Mahayana teachings with the intention of putting them into practice well'.

As I've explained previously, when one's motivation is based on the altruistic intention to achieve enlightenment, this then becomes the most positive state of mind for doing the practice. And since we have already meditated on the *tong-len* (giving and taking) practice, it should be now very easy for us to generate the bodhicitta motivation.

The *tong-len* practice is actually the basis for developing superior intention. While superior intention is not explicitly mentioned in the technique of exchanging self with other, it is actually a key part of it. Superior intention develops naturally during the meditation, because when one engages in the *tong-len* practice, willingly taking on others' suffering and developing a strong intention to give one's own happiness to others', this encompasses the superior intention by taking on the responsibility to free others from suffering and endow them with happiness. In this way, the practice itself encompasses superior intention.

In the seven-point cause and effect sequence of developing bodhicitta, developing superior intention is the immediate cause for developing the actual bodhicitta mind. Likewise, when one willingly takes the sufferings of others upon oneself as a means of freeing all beings from suffering, and gives them one's own happiness to place them into a state of happiness, one is actually generating the mind of superior intention. After one takes this responsibility to free all beings from suffering by oneself alone, then the aspiration to achieve enlightenment develops spontaneously. As I've mentioned previously many times, bodhicitta consists of two aspirations. During the causal stage, one generates the aspiration (or wish) to benefit other sentient beings which is then followed by the aspiration to achieve enlightenment (for that purpose). But in the resultant stage, it is only after achieving enlightenment that one can fully engage in the means to benefit other sentient beings.

Liberation in the Palm of your Hand illustrates this point with a story of how, at a time of famine, a father was looking for food to feed his family. When he came upon a piece of meat, it initially occurred to him to take it back to his family and share it with them. But then he thought that if he shared it, each one would only receive a very

small portion which would be hardly enough to sustain any of them. It then dawned upon him that it would be far more worthwhile for him to eat the meat himself to gain more energy so he could continue to look for more food to help his family and others, and relieve the suffering of the famine. This analogy of the father being clever by eating the meat himself is very significant: it illustrates the need to obtain enlightenment for oneself first in order to be able to adequately benefit other sentient beings and relieve them from suffering. Without first eliminating all obscurations and acquiring every possible quality oneself, there is no way that one will be able to help others eliminate all their faults and obscurations and acquire all possible qualities. This is the main point to be understood.

During the causal stage, bodhisattvas engage in virtuous deeds with the intention to wholeheartedly benefit sentient beings, and thus fully commit themselves to the welfare of other sentient beings. Because of their long acquaintance with the wish to benefit others, the buddhas can benefit sentient beings effortlessly and spontaneously when they actually achieve the resultant state of enlightenment. It becomes completely natural for them to benefit sentient beings without any hesitation or effort from their side, and that is because benefiting others was their core practice during the causal stage where their only intention was to benefit sentient beings.

As the Buddha himself said, 'if you harm sentient beings, this is equal to harming me; if you benefit sentient beings, this is equal to benefitting me'. That is the extent to which a Buddha holds all sentient beings very dear without any biased mind. Of the two aspirations of generating bodhicitta, the aspiration to achieve enlightenment is for oneself. But that doesn't mean that the state of enlightenment is merely sought for oneself; rather it is for the sole purpose of benefitting all sentient beings. This needs to be understood well.

The incomparably kind Buddha said 'all sentient beings are my relatives'. The Buddha said this because he had perfected the practice of love and compassion to the extent of extending it equally to all beings. Because of this unbiased love and compassion towards all beings, they all naturally appear as affectionately close to the Buddha's mind; no one appears as an enemy to the Buddha! We can see this factually from our limited experience. When we feel a sense of love and compassion for others we can feel an affectionate attitude towards them and they appear close and affectionate towards us. But if love and compassion starts to diminish in one's mind, then others don't appear as close. Indeed, when one feels hostility within oneself then others will begin to appear as enemies. This is how we need to see the value of love and compassion. We definitely have the ability, the potential and the basis for developing love and compassion. So, it's a matter of familiarising our mind with it again and again; meditating on it again and again to activate our potential. Having that practice will definitely bring great solace and joy to one's mind as one

The last session covered the small scope. Now, as the commentary entitled *Joy of the Blossomed Excellent* by Panchen Lobsang Chokyi Gyaltsan explains:

Here, there are four meditational topics relating to the actual path of the person of a small scope which are – impermanence; the shortcomings of three lower rebirths; taking refuge; and training in the morality of abandoning the ten unwholesome actions. Furthermore, the first two topics are to generate the mental attitude of the person of a small scope and the latter two include the related practices.¹

The commentary mentions the four meditational topics. The first is ‘impermanence’ which, when elaborated in the lam-rim, relates particularly to ‘death and impermanence’. When one contemplates death and impermanence, one thinks of the experience one goes through when one comes to the end of this life. What we call ‘death’ refers to the actual separation of our physical body from our mind. When the separation occurs, the body disintegrates but the mind does not. There is a continuation of the mind along with the individual self or the ‘I’. And because there is a continuity of the mind and individual self, one ‘takes rebirth’.

With rebirth, one goes on to another existence, but this is not completely under one’s own control. Rather, it is under the control of one’s previously created karma. For as long as one takes rebirth under the control of delusions and karma, there are only two types of rebirth one can possibly take: a fortunate (happy) rebirth or an unfortunate rebirth. These are the only two alternatives. One does not have control over one’s rebirth, but what does help to avoid taking an unfortunate rebirth is taking refuge in the Three Jewels.

All these points are mentioned in the verse quoted last week from Lama Tsong Khapa’s *Lines of Experience*:

There is no certainty that after death we may not be
born in the lower realms;
The protection from such terror lies in the Three
Jewels alone;
So we must make firm the practice of going for refuge
And ensure that its precepts are never undermined.

This verse encompasses all the meditational objects mentioned earlier.

When contemplating death and impermanence, one realises that one has to take rebirth, and that there are no alternatives other than either a fortunate rebirth or an unfortunate rebirth. With the prospect of taking an unfortunate rebirth, one needs to contemplate the extreme sufferings one would have to experience, such as the extreme sufferings of heat and cold in the hell realms; the sufferings of extreme hunger and thirst in the hungry ghost realms; and the sufferings of stupidity in the animal realms. As one meditates on and contemplates these sufferings, a real sense of fear will occur in one’s mind followed by an urgency to be free from the lower realms. Motivated by fear of the lower realms one seeks the methods and means to be free from the sufferings of these unfortunate rebirths. At that point, when one sees the supreme objects of the Three Jewels, which possess the full ability to free oneself, one takes refuge in them.

REFUGE

The topic of refuge is presented in the lam-rim teachings, according to the *Great Treatise of the Stages of the Path* by Lama Tsongkhapa.

It consists of four main topics:

1. The cause of going for refuge; then based on that
2. The objects of refuge
3. The way you go for refuge; then having gone for refuge
4. The stages of the precepts

Liberation in the Palm of your Hand has a similar outline, but is slightly different as it relies on the commentary on the lam-rim called the Swift Path. So there are some slight difference. However, the main point is that the objects of refuge are actually presented with these four main topics.

The cause for going for refuge

The refuge of the small scope is when one generates the mind of wanting to be free from the sufferings of the lower realms and sees that the objects of refuge, the Three Jewels, have the full ability to free one from that suffering.

Medium scope refuge is based not only on the fear of unfortunate rebirths in the lower realms, but also by seeing that taking rebirth in cyclic existence in both the lower and higher realms is in itself the nature of suffering. When one cannot bear the thought of taking rebirth again in cyclic existence, one develops a strong determination to be free from the entire rebirth in cyclic existence, and goes for refuge in the Three Jewels; refuge of the medium scope.

Great scope refuge generates the mind of wishing all beings to be free from the entire range of cyclic existence. Beings of the great scope go for refuge in the Three Jewels with the determination to achieve enlightenment. It is good to understand this distinction to see how it fits into our own practice.

The general definition of refuge is: Having the conviction that the Three Jewels have the full ability to free one from fears of rebirth in the lower realms and cyclic existence. The definition encompasses the two causes: the first cause is that one generates a fear and a determination to be free from the lower realms and from cyclic existence in general. Then based on this, when one clearly sees that the objects of refuge have the full ability to free you from these fears, and single-pointedly and wholeheartedly places one’s conviction upon the Three Jewels, this is the actual ‘going for refuge’. So, in simple terms ‘going for refuge’ having faith in the Three Jewels.

The objects of refuge

The three objects of refuge need to be understood in terms of the Buddha as being the actual teacher or the guide; the Dharma is what is to be implemented and practised and the Sangha as being helpers along the path.

There is a very good analogy of how the objects of refuge serve as a purpose to benefit oneself. In the *Uttaratantra* Maitreya explains that a sick person must rely on a skilled doctor (the Buddha), who prescribes the unmistakable medicine (the Dharma), and rely on the

¹ Kindly translated by Samdup Tsering.

nurses or attendants (the Sangha) to help them. This analogy explains how the three objects of refuge are linked.

Also understand that the Buddha can be considered as our indirect teacher of the Dharma. Our actual teachers are those who present the teachings to us now. They are like the representatives of the Buddha, imparting his teachings through an unbroken lineage. It is good to understand this point otherwise one may wonder how can the Buddha be our teacher when we don't have direct contact with him or see him right now.

The way you go for refuge

A significant point I've mentioned many times, is that of the Three Jewels the actual protection is the Dharma Jewel. There can be misinterpretation when the Dharma is referred to as the actual Jewel which protects oneself. Some may then think that perhaps the Buddha Jewel and the Sangha Jewel are not sufficient refuges. That would be a misinterpretation. The reference to the Dharma Jewel being the actual protection is because while the Buddha and the Dharma Jewel are both actual refuges in terms of protection for oneself, the one which directly liberates us is the Dharma Jewel. That is because by actualising the Dharma Jewel oneself, one is protected from these fears, which is why it is referred to as an actual Jewel.

To further understand how the Dharma serves as the actual protection, reflect upon how it refers to actualising the Dharma within oneself through the paths and the cessations. If we were to refer to the Dharma Jewel as being object of refuge that is within someone else's continuum, then it would be hard to understand how it acts as a protection for oneself. Although they are immaculate with perfections, if the Dharma with its paths and cessations is within someone else's continuum, such an arya Sangha's continuum, then it is hard to get a sense of how that will protect oneself. Of course, the Buddha himself represents all Three Jewels: he is the enlightened being; the one who encompasses the Dharma Jewel as well as being the ultimate Sangha. However, the Dharma Jewel which is referred to here as the actual protection has to be developed or actualised within oneself. That is how we can understand the Dharma Jewel as that which liberates oneself from the fears of the lower realms and cyclic existence i.e. the actual protector.

To emphasise this point, the Buddha himself mentioned, 'One is one's own protector'. Thus, one becomes one's own protector by actualising the Dharma Jewel within one's mental continuum. This is the main point to understand. Within the presentation of the Three Jewels, the Buddha is the teacher and the Sangha are the helpers. So that leaves the Dharma as the only one of the Three Jewels to actually serve as the real protector for oneself.

This is an important point to understand. Otherwise, when we refer to the objects of refuge as the protectors that protect us, we may instinctively relate to the objects of refuge as being external. The ultimate Dharma Jewel as presented within the Four Noble Truths are true paths and true cessation within the mental continuum of an arya being. Since we have not reached the level of an arya being, this may leave us with a doubt such as, 'If the

ultimate Dharma is true paths and true cessation, and I haven't achieved this yet, then how can the Dharma Jewel actually protect me?' Therefore, the Dharma Jewel needs to be something that we have already cultivated within our mental continuum, which then serves as the actual protector. If we cannot posit something now in our own mental continuum as being the Dharma Jewel, it will be very hard to comprehend how the Dharma Jewel protects us. That is why it is important to have a clear understanding of this point.

On a personal level, one may contemplate the points mentioned here when contemplating on the sufferings of the lower realms. As we contemplate on these unbearable sufferings, we develop fear at the prospect of having to take an unfortunate rebirth. If we don't truly understand that there is something that can protect us from the sufferings of the lower realms, then it would quite useless to think about the sufferings of the lower realms. If one does not see that there is a protection from these sufferings, then contemplating it would just be an unnecessary extra suffering for us.

The stages of the precepts

Having contemplated on the prospect of having to experience the sufferings of the lower realms, one generates fear which then develops into the determination of wanting to be free, and seeking protection. The point is to identify the protection (the Dharma Jewel) within our own mental continuum, which at our level is the morality of abandoning the ten unwholesome actions. We all have the ability to abstain from the ten unwholesome actions. This morality is what we can refer to as the actual Dharma Jewel within ourselves right now, which is the main cause to free ourselves from an unfortunate rebirth.

The morality of abandoning the ten unwholesome actions is the actual cause to free oneself from rebirth in the lower realms. When one observes morality, one need not have any doubts about experiencing a rebirth in the lower realms. While one has not obtained the paths and cessation, one obtains a similitude of it by contemplating the sufferings of the lower realms and understanding suffering.

As mentioned in the teachings true sufferings are to be recognised; true origins are to be abandoned; true cessations are to be attained and true paths are to be actualised. So based on this understanding, one contemplates the sufferings of the lower realms, abandons engaging in unwholesome deeds motivated by the delusions, which is the origin. Observing the morality of abandoning the ten unwholesome deeds leads to not being reborn in the lower realms, which the attainment of cessation. And actualising the path is undertaking the practice of abandoning the ten unwholesome actions.

As it mentions later on in the presentation of the great scope, if we see the objects of refuge as 'external', 'distant, and 'on a high level', we will not gain the benefit of taking refuge. So, the real refuge has to be personal, something that is actualised within oneself. This leads again to the main point, the meditational objects of the path of the person of small scope *are impermanence, the shortcomings of the three lower rebirths, and taking refuge and*

training in the morality of abandoning the ten unwholesome actions. This is the practice of a being of small scope. When we put this into practice ourselves, we are incorporating the practices of the small scope.

KARMA

The need to contemplate karma arises at this point: thinking about the cause and effect sequence of engaging in non-virtue leading to undesirable results and engaging in virtue leading to favourable results. As Lama Tsong Khapa explains in the *Three Principal Aspects of the Path*:

Freedom and endowments are difficult to find and life has no time to spare.

By gaining familiarity with this, attraction to the appearances of this life is reversed.

By thinking over and over again that actions and their effects are infallible, and [contemplating] the miseries of cyclic existence,

Attraction to the appearances of future lives is reversed.

While it is mentioned specifically in all three scopes, all three are subsumed into the small scope of how to reverse the clinging to this life. Thus, focussing on death, impermanence and karma, taking refuge and gaining sufficient training in the morality of abandoning the ten unwholesome actions, becomes the way to dispel clinging to future lives, especially the lower realms.

Contemplating karma encompasses thinking about positive (white) karma and negative (black) karma. This requires specifically contemplating positive karma and its consequences and negative karma and its consequences. As Lama Tsongkhapa mentioned, it really depends on one's state of mind. 'If one has a positive state of mind, then the paths and grounds will be positive. Whereas if one has a negative state of mind, the paths and grounds that one traverses will be negative'.

This means that observing or engaging in virtue and shunning negativity is really dependent on one's state of mind. So, observing karma relates to one's intention and one's state of mind, and we should be mindful of this as a way to adopt virtue and shun negativities. If one engages in virtue the result of that is happiness, and if one engages in negativity the result is suffering; one needs to reflect upon this well to gain a firm conviction of karma and its effects. For example, if one abstains from killing the result will be happiness for oneself, and if one engages in the act of killing one will experience suffering as a result. Since we all wish to experience happiness and do not wish to experience any suffering we need to create the causes for what we all want.

1. Lam-rim structure as presented in *Lam-rim Chen-mo*.

The General Characteristics of Karma

b' Developing the faith of conviction that is the root of all temporary happiness and certain goodness

1' Reflecting on karma and its effects in general

a' The actual way in which to reflect in general

1' The certainty of karma

2' The magnification of karma

3' Not experiencing the effects of actions that you did not do

4' The actions you have done do not perish

Karma is explained in the lam-rim under these three main headings:

1. Reflecting on karma and its effects in general
2. Reflecting on karma and its effects in detail
3. How you engage in virtue and turn away from non-virtue (after you have reflected on karma and its effects in general and in detail).

There is an actual way to reflect on karma in general, so these are points to understand. I will just touch on the main points and then you can read the texts for yourselves.

Reflecting on karma and its effects in general

There are four ways of reflecting on karma in general.

1. The certainty of karma

When one engages in any of the ten non-virtues, such as the first one which is killing, one needs to identify clearly what is referred to as non-virtue or negativity. If the actual act of killing is what we call non-virtue or negative karma, then refraining from, or avoiding killing is a virtue. This is how one needs to specifically identify what is non-virtue and what is virtue in relation to the creation of karma.

The certainty of karma means that when one engages in the non-virtuous act of killing (for example), then the certainty of the karma is that one will have to experience an unpleasant result, which is suffering. There are specific sufferings related to the non-virtue of killing - the details of which are explained again in the lam-rim text, which you can refer to. But briefly, it is an unfavourable result, which is suffering. There can never be a positive result from engaging in the act of killing. It will most certainly be an unpleasant result of suffering. When engaging in the virtue of refraining from killing, then it is certain that one will experience a positive result (not negative) result. This is how the certainty of karma should be understood.

In thinking about the certainty of karma, it is said that one needs to come to the conclusion (again a unique presentation in some of the lam-rim teachings) that 'I must definitely avoid engaging in negative karmas and definitely engage in adopting virtue'. That is the conclusion that one needs to reach.

2. The magnification of karma

The teachings explain the magnification (or multiplying) effect of karma with an analogy of a small seed. Even the small seed of a tree, when planted, can grow into a massive tree. In reverse, a huge tree can come from a small seedling. Using that as an analogy, the teachings describe how the magnitude of karma is even greater than seeds and their results. Therefore one should engage in positive karma. Even when one engages in the smallest positive deed, the results can be incredibly great in the future. Likewise, even if one engages in the tiniest negative deed, the results can also be incredibly great in the future. As the teachings explain in detail, the conclusion one needs to come to is that having contemplated the magnification of karma, one must avoid even the smallest negative deed and adopt even the tiniest of positive deeds.

We can implement this practice by contemplating these points – just thinking about it once or twice is not sufficient. One needs to really contemplate on it again and again. If one does so from the depth of one’s heart, one can develop a strong conviction in karma. At that point, it is definitely possible to practice to the extent of avoiding even the tiniest negative deed and adopting the smallest of virtues. These are points to reflect upon.

3. Not experiencing the effects of actions that you did not do

If one does not create the causes, one will not experience the desirable effects; one needs to contemplate this.

As the teachings further explain, by contemplating this characteristic of karma, you will not experience the effects of the actions that you do not do. If one has created negativity, then one cannot possibly experience even though that is what one desires. By contemplating this way, the conclusion is that one must definitely resolve to purify any negativities one has accumulated with the aid of the four opponent powers. One needs to develop a very strong determination that one must definitely purify the negativities one has accumulated in the past. Having contemplated the nature of karma one sees the necessity for purifying negativities, So one engages in applying the four opponent powers as a purification practice.

4. The actions you have done do not perish

The teachings explain that when one engages in a certain action, whether it be positive or negative, the action does not perish nor does it go to waste of its own accord. Having contemplate this point, one comes to the conclusion that after engaging in virtuous deeds, one needs to dedicate and make pure aspirational prayers. As soon as one engages in a virtuous deed, one must adorn that virtuous deed with the dedication and pure aspirational prayers, which will then ensure that one’s positive deeds remain secure and will not perish. When we adopt these practices in this way we have personalised these instructions for our practice

A commentary on the lam-rim mentions that what we should obtain from contemplation on karma and the desired result, is the conviction that if one commits even the slightest negative deed, then it will bring about great negative results. Similarly, by engaging in the tiniest virtuous deed, one obtains great positive results. Having developed a strong conviction in this, one actually engages in the practice of adopting virtues and shunning or abandoning negativities. That is the result one obtains.

We might think we have an understanding of karma, but if we don't apply it in our practice, then our understanding of karma is just superficial and hasn't really had any effect in encouraging us to engage in practice. But when we really take it to heart, and contemplate, and develop that conviction in karma, then we will naturally and spontaneously engage in the practice of adopting virtues and shunning negativities. This is what we need to aspire to.

The Buddha used two analogies to explain the reason for creating the smallest virtues and shunning even the tiniest negativities. The first analogy is the ability of small

drops of water to eventually fill a huge container; likewise by adopting even the smallest virtue we can accomplish great results in the future. This analogy is very significant. Then, as a way to advise us to shun even the smallest negativity, the Buddha used the analogy of a small spark or fire being able to burn and consume a great hay stack.

Similarly, even the smallest of negativities can destroy a lot of our virtues and bring about a lot of suffering for us as a result. I consider these to be crucial points of practice – personal instructions prescribed for us at our level. At our level we cannot assume that we can engage in great virtuous deeds when we don't have the full capacity and means right now to do so. Again, we might be complacent about small negativities and think ‘oh, there’s no harm in engaging in that!’, or complacent about adopting the smallest of virtues saying, ‘oh well, what’s the point of doing such a small virtuous deed?’. Through contemplating these points, one needs to take every opportunity to engage in the smallest virtuous deed because as the analogy demonstrated, the accumulation of small virtuous deeds, can then bring about large positive results for oneself.

As the commentary explains, the first two topics aim to generate the mental attitude of a person of small scope, which is taking refuge and training in the morality of abandoning the ten unwholesome actions. These two include the practices that have been mentioned here. That is the practice that is to be adopted.

To summarise these instructions on a personal level, at the end of each day look at your deeds during the day. If you find that you have engaged in any of the ten unwholesome actions, or non-virtuous deeds, then you need to adopt the practice of developing regret and engage in a purification practice to purify those negative deeds. When you reflect on the day, and acknowledge that you have engaged in some virtuous or positive deeds, you should then adopt the practice of dedication and making aspirational prayers, to dedicate those virtuous deeds. This is the way we incorporate this practice into our lives.

Commenting on negativity, previous masters say there is one key quality about negativity and that is that it can be purified. One needs to understand that ‘purification’ means making a negative karma ineffective so one does not have to experience the negative results. This purification is a practice that nullifies the negative consequence of a previously created negative deed.

Practising virtue means increasing the virtue. So when the text says to practise virtue and avoid negativity, then that’s what we need to do. Training the mind and so forth is a way to increase one’s positive qualities and positive deeds.

*Transcript prepared by Bernii Wright
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Edited Version*

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Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

18 July 2017

As usual, let us engage in our regular meditation practice.
[*tong-len meditation*]

It's important to generate a positive motivation for receiving the teaching, which can be along these lines: For the sake of all mother sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment. So for that purpose I'll engage into listening to these Mahayana teachings and put them into practice well.

Presenting the characteristics of the being of small scope (cont.)

We've mostly covered the small scope, but I will just mention a few more points.

The small scope is summed up in this quote, which I'm pretty sure is from Lama Tsongkhapa:

In brief you should adopt virtue and shun negativity.
Always hold the mind of benefitting others and avoid harming others. And by contemplating and meditating on the meaning of Dharma, subdue your mind.

This is really a core instruction, which gets right to the heart of the practice. As mentioned here, we need to take every opportunity to adopt virtue and refrain from engaging in negativity. Furthermore, we need to always acquaint our minds with the wish to benefit others and avoid causing any harm. And in order to subdue our mind we need to put into practice what we hear from the teachings. So by contemplating on the meaning of the teachings we hear, we need to meditate on it as a way to subdue our mind.

While this is presented as a summary of the small scope, we can clearly see that this is in fact an essential practice to be adopted on both the medium scope and the great scope as well. So it is a core practice for all three types of beings.

Presenting the characteristics of the being of medium scope

The commentary begins with a definition of a person of the medium scope by quoting verse 4.

4. *Those who seek peace for themselves alone
Turning away from worldly pleasures
And avoiding destructive actions
Are said to be of the middling capacity.*

As the commentary explains:

The person of the middling scope is defined in terms of the three characteristics; namely thought, deed, and goal. Having contemplated on the suffering nature of all of cyclic existence, from the hell without respite to the peak of existence through various reasons, not even in a dream do they desire to be born as a universal king, a Brahma or an Indra, hence their thought is characterised by a sense of repulsion or turning their back on the pleasures of cyclic existence.

Thought

What is explained here is that a being of the medium scope is one who is completely repulsed by cyclic existence. *Having contemplated the suffering nature of all cyclic existence,*

from the hell without respite, refers to the lowest or deepest of the hells, while *the peak of existence* refers to the realm in cyclic existence where the greatest worldly happiness is experienced.

By thinking with *various reasons, not even in a dream do they desire to be born as a universal king, or a Brahma, or an Indra,* indicates how renunciation has to be generated. If one wishes to be free from cyclic existence, one has to feel a strong, deep sense of wishing to become completely free from it, to the point of feeling strong repulsion towards all the pleasures of cyclic existence. Then based on that repulsion one seeks to attain liberation.

When I went to the Kalachakra initiation in Bodhgaya in 2003 there was a young geshe who was trying to test me. Although I didn't know him he seemed to recognise me, saying, 'Geshe Doga, tashi delek'. I asked Geshe Sonam Dhargye who he was, and found that he was a geshe from one of the houses of Sera Jey, called Lawa Khangtsen, and that he had been appointed to teach at the Namgyal Monastery in Dharamsala.

He had a book about the Kalachakra initiation with him, and he asked me, 'How many initiations are there in the Kalachakra?' I replied, telling him a particular sequence of the different stages of the Kalachakra initiation. Then he said, 'Oh, but aren't there fourteen initiations?' And I said, 'Well yes, there are fourteen in total, but they are subsumed into the ones that I have just listed'. When His Holiness actually bestowed the initiation he did so in accordance with how I had listed them. As this young geshe was close to me, I nudged him to indicate that I had been correct.

Then I asked him what does 'generating the mind of a yogi' mean? He didn't have an immediate answer for that. But because he was good at debate he said, 'Oh it must refer to those who are receiving the initiation'. As we became more acquainted with each other he asked me another question, 'Why does one eat meat when doing highest yoga tantra practice?' I gave my response and he seemed very pleased with my answer.

In our discussions back and forth he became very fond of me and later on he said, 'Geshe-la you don't have to go out and try to find a toilet in the crowd, I have access to the toilets in the administration building nearby, so you can use my pass to go there. He was really fond of me and said, 'If you need anything from Dharamsala just write to me'. That was the level of fondness that he showed to me.

Later on I had heard that he had disrobed and is now in Canada. Although His Holiness was very fond of him because of his knowledge and understanding of the texts, unfortunately he disrobed and was not able to maintain his position in Dharamsala. There were also some other geshe and others seated nearby, who also appreciated what I shared with him.

As presented here in the commentary, a being of medium scope is characterised by such strong repulsion that they turn *their back on the pleasures of cyclic existence*. This relates to the first line in the Tibetan verse, which is *turning away from worldly pleasures*.

This indicates that a being of medium scope has to develop a very strong sense of renunciation, being repulsed by all the pleasures of cyclic existence from the depths of their heart.

Deed

As I've mentioned previously, of the three types of sufferings, beings of the medium scope have a very strong

inclination to completely overcome all-pervasive compounded suffering from the depth of their heart. Then, based on that they seek to achieve liberation; I've explained previously what actual liberation connotes.

As further mentioned in the commentary:

Motivated by this thought that deeds are characterised by thoroughly engaging in any of the seven vows of self liberation, and abandoning negativities of the three doors.

This refers to the characteristics of their deeds. They involve engaging in any of the seven vows of self liberation, namely:

- The vows of a fully ordained monk and a fully ordained nun;
- The vows of a novice monk and novice nun;
- The vows of a layman and laywoman;
- The probationary nun's vows.

These constitute the seven self-liberation vows. They are known as self-liberation vows because by taking these vows and by practising morality based on these vows one engages in practices that liberate oneself from cyclic existence. Many of you might already have taken lay vows. Other texts mention keeping the morality of avoiding seven of the ten non-virtues, which refers to abandoning the three non-virtues of body and the four of speech. Abandoning these seven unwholesome negativities is also a practice of morality that will be explained further on.

Goal

Then the commentary states:

With these two characteristics of thought and deed, they aspire to merely achieve the goal of totally pacifying suffering and its causes, this is the characteristic of their goal. The person who possesses these three characteristics is called the person of a middling scope.

As explained in the commentary, a person *who possesses these characteristics of thought*, as explained previously, refers to having a deep sense of renunciation, *and the deeds* refers to engaging in the morality of avoiding unwholesome actions, with the goal of achieving liberation. Such a being is characterised as being one of medium scope.

As further explained in the commentary,

They are the reference of a person here because they engage in the noble Dharma correctly.

The reference of a person of the medium scope is a person who engages in the noble Dharma correctly, which was presented earlier.

They are superior to the person of the small scope because their mind is disgusted with the entirety of cyclic existence, they are however inferior to the person of a great scope because they lack the superior intention of taking upon the burden of the welfare of other beings.

While they are superior to the small scope being, they are inferior to the great scope being because they lack superior intention.

The commentary further explains:

Hence the first three lines in the verse indicate the characteristics of thought, deed, and goal, and the fourth line indicates the basis of these characteristics.

The verse in the root text says to avoid 'destructive actions', and on this, the commentary quotes the great master Sharawa.

'Destructive actions' here doesn't simply refer to the destructive actions as such, but also refers to any contaminated actions that result in high status rebirth because it indicates both the action and the delusion which are the cause of cyclic existence.

The point being made here is that within the class of 'destructive actions' which, as mentioned here, are to be avoided, there are also contaminated actions that result in a higher status rebirth. Therefore, not all destructive actions are necessarily abandonments, because if something is to be an abandonment then it has to be negativity in all respects. Jetsun Chokyi Gyaltsan, who is the author of the Sera Jey texts, clarified this point, saying that the causes to achieve a high status are not an abandonment because they are virtue. So what is being explained here is that as virtue is something to be acquired, it cannot, by its very nature, be an abandonment. Another great master, Gung-tang Jam-pel-yang, praised this as being a brilliant clarification.

In summary, the person of medium scope is striving to overcome cyclic existence, and therefore they avoid the causes for that, which are the contaminated actions. Yet although the causes for the high status are ultimately to be avoided, they are not to be seen as an abandonment. That is the main point.

As Sharawa mentioned, '*destructive actions*' refers to any contaminated actions that result in higher status rebirth because it includes both the action and karma and delusion which are the causes of cyclic existence. For example, the causes for a human rebirth are the delusions and karma. While a human rebirth ultimately has to be avoided, in order to achieve liberation, we do need to achieve a human rebirth temporarily. What we wish to ultimately overcome is something to be sought temporarily, and a goal to be achieved in that sense. That is how this needs to be understood.

For example, the main motivational causes for obtaining a human rebirth are the delusions, specifically the grasping at a self that is clearly identified in the twelve interdependent links. The first (ignorance), eighth (craving) and the ninth (grasping) links are delusions, while the second (consciousness) and the tenth (compositional actions) are karma. The karma to take rebirth as a human has to be virtuous karma. So, although motivated by delusions, the propelling or throwing karma leading to the tenth link (a human rebirth) has to be a virtuous karma.

A human rebirth is brought about by the three links that are delusions, and the two that are karma. However, while the delusions are an abandonment, karma is not entirely an abandonment, as it has to be a virtuous karma in order to bring about a human rebirth. So due to the delusions and karma one obtains the contaminated appropriated aggregates of a human.

As I have explained many times, they are called 'contaminated' because their cause is the delusions. The contaminated aggregates are the result of the delusions, so here the name of the cause is given to the actual result. There are also instances when the result is used for the name of the cause. They are referred to as 'appropriated aggregates', or in some translations 'perpetuating aggregates', because they are a continuum that is linked from the past to the future.

We need to obtain the contaminated aggregates of a human rebirth so we can create the causes to be completely free from cyclic existence. Therefore, as explained in the teachings, we need to obtain the high status of a human

rebirth until we achieve liberation; once liberation is obtained the human rebirth is discarded. So, a human rebirth is something that we need to have at present, but it will be discarded at the end when we obtain liberation.

The three trainings

The commentary continues:

Also avoiding 'destructive actions' here indicates all three trainings as the antidote.

As explained here, the three trainings are of fundamental importance for cultivating the cause for liberation. Of the three trainings, **morality** is seen as the basis. At its best, morality is making a commitment to observe certain vows, and at its very least it is abandoning negativities.

Morality is seen as a basis for developing concentration. It is said that that very observance of morality overcomes what is known as the gross distractions, which refers to frivolous activities and other external distractions. By observing morality one actually abstains from engaging in these external distractions, and thus one's mind naturally becomes more focussed inwardly.

With this inner focus one will be better equipped to develop the **concentration** needed to overcome subtle distractions. So there are two levels of distraction, gross and subtle. This is explained clearly in *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*. The gross distractions are excitement and laxity, and these are overcome by developing concentration. The subtle distraction is the inner distraction of grasping at a self, which is only overcome by understanding selflessness or emptiness.

The most profound level of concentration is related to developing calm abiding and thus the **wisdom** that realises emptiness, which is called special insight. This is how you need to understand the interdependent relationship between the three higher trainings.

Shared paths

Then the commentary makes this point:

There are many persons of great scope who share the path common to the person of a small and middling scope.

This refers to beings who are on the great scope path, who engage in the practices of the small scope and medium scope as a means to enhance their great scope practices. We, who aspire to the great scope, engage in the practices of the small scope and medium scope as the basis for the practices of the great scope.

The commentary further explains:

Hence, the person of middling scope explicitly mentioned here primarily refers to one who correctly engages in the means of achieving liberation but merely for their own sake.

This is the definition of a medium scope being, which refers back to the line in the root text, *Those who seek for themselves alone, and so forth*.

If someone, who is inspired to engage in the practices of the small scope and medium scope, reaches the practices of the medium scope, and meets with a virtuous teacher who is of the Hinayana path, then they will naturally be inspired to follow the Hinayana path.

Whereas when someone who has these aspirations meets a Mahayana virtuous teacher, then from this point on they will be led onto the path of the Great Vehicle. It is for this reason that the great masters of the past have encouraged us

to make strong prayers to meet with a Mahayana virtuous friend or teacher. This is a most important aspiration to make.

The Mahayana virtuous friend or teacher will, when guiding a student or a disciple on the path, present the practices of the small scope, and followed by the practices of the medium scope in such a way as to inspire the student to develop the strong wish to benefit other sentient beings. Then, because the wish to benefit other sentient beings is implanted in their mind from the very beginning, the student becomes very acquainted with that wish. When all the practices that are common to the small scope and the medium scope are done with the underlying wish to benefit other sentient beings, then when the student becomes mature enough to engage in the practices of the great scope, they will be ready to implement the techniques for developing bodhicitta, love, compassion and so forth.

The commentary further explains,

In terms of the vehicles there are two such persons, namely those who are followers of the hearer's vehicle and self-realiser vehicle.

I've also explained this previously and it's good to be able to make this distinction. The person who enters the hearer's path or the solitary realiser's path doesn't necessarily have to be a proponent of the tenets of the Lower Vehicle. When they are on the hearer vehicle path, they don't necessarily have to be a proponent of Hinayana tenets.

The commentary further explains,

In terms of the objects to be meditated upon there are two, namely, meditating upon the four noble truths and meditating upon the forward and reverse order of the twelve links.

As presented here, those who are on the hearers' vehicle path are said to engage mainly in the practices of the Four Noble Truths - the Truth of Suffering and the Truth of Origination, which are to be abandoned, while adopting the Truth of the Path and thus achieving the Truth of Cessation. There is no other than that which is presented in the four noble truths. Solitary realisers are said to meditate mainly on the forward and reverse order of the twelve interdependent links.

Three types of middle scope practitioners

The commentary further explains:

The explicitly mentioned person of the middling scope can be further divided into three. Namely those are those who are motivated by an aspiration to achieve liberation for themselves; engaging in the moral training of the ten wholesome actions are the small person of the middling scope;

We can relate this presentation to our own personal practice. The practice of the small scope is engaging in the ten wholesome deeds and avoiding the ten unwholesome deeds for one's own purpose; we need to understand how to incorporate this with our intention to benefit others.

When the commentary says *to achieve liberation for themselves*, it doesn't specify solely for themselves. We can engage in practices to achieve the goal of personal liberation, but it is not solely for our own purpose. The implication of not specifically mentioning 'solely' indicates that the practice of working towards liberation can lead into the practices of the great scope.

The second type of person refers to:

those motivated by the same aspiration engaging in the four noble truths are the mediocre person of middling scope, or medium scope;

And the third is:

those who possess the same aspiration meditating upon the non-duality of selflessness are the great person of middling scope.

Having presented these three types of people

the commentary further explains:

Following the system of the Great Teacher Nagarjuna and Glorious Chandrakirti, [indicating that Atisha is the follower of the Great Teacher Nagarjuna and Glorious Chandrakirti] the followers of the Lesser Vehicle can be divided into three from the perspective of their meditational understanding and realisation of the three types of selflessness respectively employing as an object of meditation.

Then the three selflessnesses are presented. They are:

- Selflessness in terms of being merely empty of substantially existent self;
- Selflessness of objective phenomena in terms of being empty of partless particle of external object; and
- Subtle selflessness in terms of being empty of inherent existence that both the person and phenomena are merely imputed conceptually.

This needs to be related back to the earlier point that a person who has entered the Hinayana path does not necessarily have to be a proponent of the Hinayana tenets.

The person who realises the **first type of selflessness** would be a person of the Hinayana vehicle as well as a proponent of Hinayana tenets. More specifically, they would be a proponent of the Sautrantika school of tenets. Therefore they are followers of the Lower Vehicle.

The person who realises the **second type of selflessness** would be a proponent of the Mind Only school. In terms of a vehicle they would be a person who has entered the Lower Vehicle, the Hinayana vehicle, but as they are also a proponent of the Mind Only school they are a proponent of the tenets of the Great Vehicle.

The person who realises the third type of selflessness, subtle selflessness, who has entered the Lower Vehicle, is a proponent of a Great Vehicle school of tenets, specifically the Consequentialists or the Prasangika Middle Way school.

In accordance with the system of the Great Teacher Nagarjuna and the Glorious Chandrakirti, it is said that an arya being necessarily has to have gained the realisation of emptiness, and it is also asserted that according to this system an arya being has to be a proponent of the Prasangika Middle Way school. So someone who has gained the realisation of selflessness or emptiness, while not necessarily having to be a Mahayanist, definitely needs to be a proponent of the Prasangika Middle Way school of tenets.

Practices of a middle scope being

We can leave this for our next session.

Because I'll be in retreat from this Monday I want you to do a discussion and an exam over the next two Tuesday sessions.

Bring along the texts, the *Great Extensive Lam Rim* as well as the *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand* to the discussion. Then, using these texts as a basis, you can work through the topics of relying on a spiritual teacher which is the root of the path, and then reflect on the pleasures and endowments of a human rebirth and how to take the essence of these pleasures and endowments. There's no need to go into too much discussion about the hell realms, such as whether they exist or not, or trying to get your heads around how to understand it, as in our context it's sometimes hard to comprehend. Then discuss the four main subjects of the contemplation of the small scope which are impermanence, generating fear of the lower realms in particular, then karma, and taking refuge.

It's very good to engage in discussions because it's a way for older students to refresh their understanding of these teachings, while newer students will gain a better understanding. So it's of mutual benefit for everyone.

Engaging in studying a text, hearing the teachings and discussing them serves as a means to implant good imprints in the mind. The way that I understand imprints is that when we hear, for example, a certain point or a teaching, we might forget it, sometimes the moment after we hear it. Although we may not immediately recall what was said earlier, on the subtle level it does implant some sort of imprint which, when activated in the future, will develop into a better understanding. That is how one could understand the importance of imprints.

The sequence that is presented in the teachings is that we must first hear the teachings, which includes study and discussion and so forth, and then we need to contemplate them and, finally we need to put them into practice. Of course, when we put them into practice then our understanding is further enhanced and we will develop real faith in the Dharma. Otherwise, if we just listen and really don't really engage in the practice as a way of gaining some experience of changing and subduing our mind, then there's a danger that whatever teachings we hear will end up further strengthening the delusions in our mind. And that is the great pitfall.

It is said one obtains a blessing from listening to the teachings, while also accumulating virtue. To be a blessing, the teachings that one receives need to move and transform our mind. They have to be experienced on a personal level, otherwise it is hard to understand how the teachings have had any effect. But when one personalises them, and actually incorporates them into one's daily life and practice, then the blessings and virtues ensue.

As mentioned in the past, at the very end of life nothing but the Dharma can help at the time of death. This is an important point to really contemplate. It is something that is within our hands right now; we have the ability to actually incorporate the Dharma, which is the only thing that can help at the time of death, into our life right now.

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Edited Version*

Exam *1 August 2017*

1. Discuss : Relying on a spiritual teacher.

2. List the Eight Leisures and Ten Endowments.

3. Explain the benefits and meaning of a precious human life.

4. Explain the difficulty of obtaining a precious human life.

Discuss the four main headings of the small scope:

5. Remembering death.

6. Contemplation of the Suffering of the lower realms.

7. Taking Refuge in the Three Jewels.

9. Observing the Laws of Cause and Effect.