

Study Group - "Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand"

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

ལྷན་ ལམ་རིམ་རྣམ་གྲོལ་ལག་བཅུངས།



22 August 2000

Ensure that you cultivate the proper motivation.

422.331.223 The Measurement Of Having Gained Special Insight

Having gained calm abiding on emptiness, one should then make an effort to gain special insight. As we have learned, a fully-fledged calm abiding is gained by depending on the nine stages of mental abiding, and is qualified by the bliss of pliancy. Generally speaking, one has to gain calm abiding before gaining special insight, however calm abiding alone is not sufficient to gain special insight.

You can take any object, or in fact any object of knowledge, as an object to gain special insight. For instance you can use impermanence or a vase as your object. In the discussion here however, we are talking about special insight with respect to the selflessness of a person.

Before engaging in meditation to realise special insight, we have to develop a calm-abiding understanding of emptiness through applying the four essential points of analysis, to prove that the person is empty of inherent existence. In other words we have to develop the realisation which refutes the object of an innate sense of 'I', and which grasps at the inherent existence of 'I'. We have to make sure that we have gained this fully-fledged calm abiding realisation before engaging in special insight meditation.

According to the lam rim text, calm abiding is a state of meditation wherein we are able to effortlessly focus and concentrate single-pointedly on the meaning of emptiness, and then by the virtue of this single-pointed concentration experience the bliss of mental and physical pliancy. In order to further sustain this realisation, mindfulness has to be applied; this is remembering the object of one's realisation, which is the lack of inherent existence of a person. Alertness is also applied to prevent any mental sinking or excitement from hindering one's single-pointed concentration.

If there is not enough clarity in the meditative concentration, or if there is some weakness in the mode of apprehension of the object as to the realisation of the emptiness, then this realisation has to be reinforced by reapplying the four essential points of analysis. It is said that if one is able to fix the mind on emptiness with calm abiding realisation, then one is in stabilising meditation.

Once in that state, in order to achieve special insight then, without in any way interrupting that state of stabilising meditation, one further analyses the depth of emptiness by further applying the four points of analysis.

This further analysis to achieve special insight is done in a state of calm abiding.

The text uses the analogy of calm abiding as being a very clear, still lake, such as when there is no wind. The analysis that one does at that moment is compared to a fish, which is moving here and there underneath that still, clear lake. You engage in the meditation where, along with the degree of stability provided by calm abiding, you also use the mind of discriminating wisdom to analyse emptiness. As you continue this further analysis using these four essential points within the state of calm abiding, then it is said that eventually your realisations go further just by the force of the discriminating wisdom which analyses the emptiness. Then by that force of discriminating wisdom, one can experience a very special mental and physical pliancy which is said to be superior to that which is experienced at the time of gaining calm abiding. It is said that one gains special insight by this experience of mental and physical pliancy, which is achieved through the force of the discriminating wisdom analysing emptiness, in conjunction with calm abiding.

In a nutshell calm abiding is the state of meditation which is achieved by means of the nine mental abidings. In that state of meditation one has the ability to effortlessly focus single-pointedly on the objects as one wishes. In that state there is also the mental and physical bliss which results from single-pointed concentration. This is calm abiding.

The Difference between Calm Abiding and Special Insight

The difference between calm abiding and special insight is not a case of seeing something that you have not seen before. They differ in the degree of the mental and physical bliss of pliancy. The bliss of pliancy is achieved in association with calm abiding; it arises by virtue of one's single-pointed concentration. The mental and physical pliancy and bliss that you experience with special insight is a superior form of this pliancy. This is because it is achieved through the force of discriminating wisdom analysing emptiness in addition to the force of single-pointed concentration of calm abiding. Literally when we say 'special insight' the 'special' refers to the superior bliss of pliancy that is achieved at the time of gaining special insight.

Earlier in the lam rim text there was discussion about the benefit of achieving the union of calm abiding and special insight. In that discussion another analogy for calm abiding and special insight was used: calm abiding being likened to a butter lamp which is not disturbed by

wind, whereas special insight is like the brilliant light or clarity provided by that lamp. From that example we can gain the very clear and complete understanding that both calm abiding and special insight are essential, and that special insight is necessary to gain a clear understanding of the object. In many ways this example is the same as the analogy of calm abiding being like a still lake, and special insight as the fish swimming in the lake.

The lam rim text then cites a quotation from Lama Tsong Khapa, which goes something like this:

“Having gained a thorough knowledge
Of the three principal aspects of the path,
One should then spend time in a solitary place
To achieve the ultimate purpose of one’s life.”

Here we are being urged to direct all our effort into putting into practice the lam rim teachings we have heard. Consider the considerable knowledge we have gained of the three principal paths; we learned renunciation as part of the small and medium stages of the path, we have learned about bodhicitta, and also the perfect view of emptiness. If someone asks us what the state of liberation means, or what the three principal aspects mean, we have some knowledge. For instance if we talk of the state of liberation we know that the most suitable form of life to achieve liberation is the human life of leisure and endowment. We have a fair idea of what causes we have to create to achieve liberation, and what obstacles we have to remove to achieve liberation. This shows that as a result of hearing it, we have gained some hearing-knowledge about the Dharma. The effort that we put into following these teachings has left some seed in our mind.

In the quotation above Lama Tsong Khapa urges us to engage in spiritual practice. This includes knowledge gained from both listening to the Dharma, and as a result of contemplating it for ourselves. Therefore Lama Tsong Khapa says we should rely upon a solitary life. In one way, this is also saying that if we do not now seriously begin our practice then we may not get such an opportunity again, for this life can end at any moment. When we think about what Lama Tsong Khapa said, there is no reason not to seriously pursue meditation practice. As said before, through hearing the teachings we have gained some knowledge of the Dharma, and tested that knowledge with our own intelligent mind. That is, by examining our hearing-knowledge with our own mind, we have validated our hearing-knowledge of the teachings.

Lama Tsong Khapa asked why do we not now enhance our knowledge with meditation practice, by relying on a solitary life? Relying on a solitary life can mean two things: it can be solitary in terms of place, and solitary in terms of mental attitude. It is said that living a solitary life in terms of mental attitude is the more important. We can lead a solitary life in terms of being in a place free from busy crowds and the noise, but our mind may not be solitary. Having a solitary mind means being free from all worldly concerns, like the eight worldly concerns, or dharmas, and all the very mundane unnecessary thoughts that can inhabit our mind.

What we need to do is to develop a practice to calm our mind, so that we can make progress along our spiritual

path. As discussed on the weekend course on Six Session Yoga, making progress means training our mind stage by stage. There is no way to make a sudden very fast leap to higher goals without that stage by stage progress.

We have to apply whatever we have learned about Dharma to our mind, in order to calm it, and remove it from the influence of all the negative states of mind. Apart from learning about Dharma, practising Dharma is for us the most important thing to do, because it is only through practice that Dharma will be of benefit to us.

On the other hand if we do not practise, it is even possible that our knowledge of Dharma will poison our mind, rather than heal it. For example, if our knowledge of Dharma becomes a cause for us to be very competitive with fellow practitioners, or to feel jealousy or pride towards others, then how sad and pathetic our practice of Dharma has become.

Lama Tsong Khapa said that it is important to try to make the best use of our human life and seize the opportunity before it is too late.

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

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29 August 2000

Try to cultivate the bodhicitta mind by thinking that the purpose for studying the Dharma is to achieve the state of Buddhahood to benefit all sentient beings.

433.331.3 Engaging in the Uncommon Vehicle of Tantra or Vajrayana

Now as to the topic of these teachings, we are up to the heading of Engaging in the Uncommon Vehicle of Tantra or Vajrayana.

Using the term 'vehicle' in the context of the Great Vehicle or the Lesser Vehicle generally refers to the means of achieving a goal. Used in the context of Lesser Vehicle it refers to the means of achieving a goal for oneself. In the context of the Great Vehicle or the Mahayana it refers to the means of achieving a goal for the sake of all other beings.

Alternative Terms and Their Meaning

There are at least five commonly known terms that are synonymous with the tantra vehicle. These are the secret vehicle, the mantra vehicle, the resultant vehicle, the vajra vehicle and the method vehicle. Each of these terms has a different literal meaning, which in turn explains different aspects of Tantra.

Saying that the vehicle of tantra is a **secret vehicle** implies that it should be practised in secret and that it is not suitable to be taught to those with a lesser mental faculty, or who are not mentally ripe.

The next term is **mantra vehicle**. Mantra is a Sanskrit word where *man* means mind and *tra* means protection. So the implication of the term is to protect the mind from ordinary perceptions and apprehensions. However the reference of mantra in the ultimate sense is to the exalted wisdom of great bliss. So, for instance, the ultimate reference of the Tara mantra is the omniscient mind of Tara.

In the Guru Puja there is a line which says that you bless the offerings with the blessings of concentration, the blessing of mudra and the blessing of mantra.

Briefly the blessing of concentration means that when we are making these offerings our mind has to be single-pointedly focused on whatever the substance or object we are offering. In reality those substances are the non-dual bliss and emptiness.

In a relative sense the blessing of the mantra means that whatever mantra we say from our mouth is a blessing of the offering.

Then there is the blessing of the mudra, which in a relative sense is when you display ritual gestures with your hand as you make the offering. This blessing of the mudra also refers to the manifesting your body in the aspect of the deity.

This explanation of the blessing of concentration and so on is a side track, but because we do this Guru Puja offering so often it is good to know its meaning.

The vehicle of tantra is sometimes called the **resultant**

vehicle. This is in contrast to the Sutrayana or the vehicle of the perfection of wisdom, which is called the causal vehicle. Here tantra is called the resultant vehicle because it employs the path that accords with the desired result, which is the attainment of the state of Buddhahood.

Here result refers to the four thorough purities of the state of Buddhahood: purity with respect to place which is the pure land, purity of the body where you attain the body of a deity, purity of resources which is that in that state of buddhahood whatever you experience is the uncontaminated bliss of the exalted wisdom, and purity of actions, which means that all your actions are effortless and spontaneous.

In tantra you undertake practices which themselves very much resemble the resultant state of Buddhahood – the four thorough purities. For example, when you engage in tantric practice you think of the place where you are sitting as a pure land. In this pure environment you generate yourself as the deity, which is the pure body. Arising as the deity you indulge yourself in secret objects that induce uncontaminated bliss. At the same time, the way you perform deeds of purifying and benefiting other beings is also similar to the actions of a Buddha.

Tantra is called **the vajra vehicle** because in tantra you employ the yoga of Vajrasattva, which indivisibly unites both method and wisdom.

Tantra is also called the **vehicle of method** to indicate the superiority of the tantric method over the Sutrayana, or to indicate the greatness of the tantric method.

Another general thing that you should know is the basis of distinction between the different vehicles of Buddhism, such as the lesser vehicle, the greater vehicle, and then within the greater vehicle you have Sutrayana, and Tantrayana. These vehicles are distinguished on the basis of the different methods they employ on the path. Whereas the schools of tenets are differentiated on the basis of the different philosophical view that each school presents.

The Importance of the Three Principles of the Path

In the lam rim text it is said that before one enters into the vehicle of Tantra, the secret mantra vehicle, it is most important that one has gained the realisation of the three principles of the path, which are the main subjects of the vehicle of Sutrayana.

In fact when it is said that Tantra is a very quick means to achieve the state of enlightenment, it is assumed that one has already gained the realisation of those three principles of the path, which are renunciation, bodhicitta and the wisdom of emptiness. We see that the order of presentation of this topic in the lam rim text reflects this. We have covered the topic of the three principles of the path at great length, before arriving at this topic of Tantra.

We can study and realise true renunciation by following the

teachings for the stages of the path of persons of small and medium scope. Then by following the stages of the path for the person of great scope we study bodhicitta, and generate bodhicitta mind. The wisdom of emptiness is essential, and is common to all three stages of the path.

We can only achieve the state of liberation from cyclic existence or the supreme liberation that is the state of Buddhahood, if we depend upon the three principles of the path. Realising renunciation enables us to achieve liberation from cyclic existence, whereas the bodhicitta mind leads to the achievement of complete enlightenment. The wisdom understanding emptiness is essential as it is a common cause for the achievement of both liberation and complete enlightenment.

As this lam rim text says, anyone who engages in the tantric path without gaining the realisations of the Sutrayana path, for instance the three principle aspects of the path, is like a small boy riding on a very wild horse. Rather than achieving any advantage they face great danger. It is very important to understand here that even the greatness of Tantra is very much dependent upon gaining the realisation of all the Sutrayana teachings, such as the three principles of the path. As we said before, without gaining renunciation there is no way to achieve liberation, let alone achieving complete enlightenment or the goal of the tantric path of the generation or the completion stage.

On the other hand, however, we have to understand that we can make very quick progress if we gain a very good experience and realisation of all the stages of the path of Sutrayana. For instance if one generates renunciation, in a sense the stronger the renunciation the stronger and more forceful the compassion, and through this a more forceful bodhicitta mind is generated. It is said that with the complete realisation of the three principles of the path, if one engages in the tantric path one can quickly gain complete enlightenment.

The Advantages of the Tantric Path

The lam rim text mentions that the teaching of Tantra is rarer than the occurrence of a buddha. The teaching of Tantra is rare in the sense that only a very few of the 1000 buddhas who will manifest in this degenerate age will teach about Tantra.

We have to understand that the benefit of relying on the tantric path is that it is possible to achieve the state of enlightenment within a single lifetime of the degeneration age.

Understanding the benefits should motivate us to engage in this tantric path. However, as we have said before, we have to progress stage-by-stage along the spiritual path. For the tantric path it is said that first of all one has to rely upon a tantric master or a vajra master with full qualifications. One then enters into the mandala of, for instance any of the three highest yoga deities of Guhyasamaja, Heruka and Yamantaka, and then one takes the initiation. After that one maintains and safeguards all the tantric pledges and vows which one has taken as part of the initiation.

It is important to try to understand the systematic stage-by-stage order of progress, from properly relying on Guru devotion at the beginning of the path, up to the final result of the path, which is achieving the state of non-duality of the path of no more learning.

We have only discussed Tantra briefly here. The tantric path is regarded as a swift path to achieve enlightenment, because both aspects of the path, the accumulation of merit and wisdom, or method and wisdom, are united into the

one path.

In the Sutrayana when you engage in meditative equipoise on emptiness you are mainly accumulating wisdom, but not merit. In order to accumulate merit you need to arise from meditation, and in the post meditation period engage in actions to accumulate merit and so on. So merit and wisdom are accumulated separately.

In Tantra it is said that both merit and wisdom are accumulated simultaneously. For example, in tantric practice when you visualise yourself as a deity you are accumulating merit, and at the same time, the mind that visualises the deity also realises emptiness, thereby accumulating wisdom as well. Therefore, the superior quality of Tantra is that it offers access to the state of Buddhahood through one meditation, or one mind that has both the method and wisdom.

The next topic is about the four means of gathering disciples, which is the means to ripen the continuum of other beings. We shall continue on this topic in the next teaching.

Study Group Seminar

In October there will be a Study Group Seminar and Geshe-la recommends the topic of Special Insight.

Of course the success of the seminar depends mainly on the effort that everyone puts into preparing their contributions to that topic. Divide into four groups to prepare for the part of the topic which is allocated for each group to present. Depending on the topic you could divide into smaller subgroups, and before the actual day of the seminar meet together to discuss the topic. So in this way, if there is a good coverage of the topic on the day, and then this will be very beneficial for everyone.

Each group has to focus on their own topic to the point where they feel very competent about providing answers to any question arising from other groups. At the same time you also have the opportunity to put questions to the other groups. To do that you also have to give some thought to their topics, and try to think of important questions which you want to know, or which you may not have resolved in your own mind.

The seminar would be more interesting and exciting if every group made a list of some assertions about the topic. Then the other groups can focus particularly on those assertions, which may give rise to some good questions. Of course if you make such assertions in your group presentation, then this also puts the other groups on the spot especially if they do not have any questions.

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5 September 2000

Cultivate the bodhicitta motivation by generating the thought that these profound lam rim teachings which you are studying are to achieve complete enlightenment to benefit all sentient beings. At the same time generate the thought of putting these teachings into practice in order to achieve that ultimate goal of complete enlightenment.

422.331.332 The Four Means of Gathering Disciples

Tonight we begin the teaching on the four means of gathering disciples in order to ripen the inner continuum of other beings. These four means are:

1. Giving what is necessary
2. Speaking pleasantly and skilfully
3. Leading others to practise Dharma
4. Setting a good example by practising what you teach to others

As part of the training in the bodhisattvas' deeds these Four Means are said to be the most effective way to ripen the continuum of other beings, in the sense of making them a very suitable vessel for Dharma.

1. The first means of gathering disciples is giving what is necessary, which mainly refers to giving material aid. When you engage in the bodhisattva's deeds to benefit others the very first and most important factor is to please other beings. They have to feel pleased about you. It is said that giving whatever material things that they need is a very effective way of pleasing ordinary beings in particular, and a very effective means of fulfilling their wishes and needs.

However, when you talk of the giving, this also includes giving Dharma as well as material aid. Although giving material aid is the main reference here, we should also know that if we see others are ready to receive it, then we should give them the Dharma of fearlessness. This is especially the case when someone faces a threat to their life. What they most need, and would most appreciate, is having their life protected. In this case, the most effective means to benefit, and through this to please that being is giving the dharma of fearlessness.

2. The second means of gathering disciples is speaking pleasantly. This is placed second because once other people have been pleased through the gift of material aid, you next satisfy their mind, by practising this means of speaking pleasantly.

After you have won the heart of the others through the first means of giving, then practising the second means of gathering disciples concerns the way you talk and communicate, and the kind of outer gestures that you show to others. These are all very positive to the minds of others. Speaking pleasantly means that you are very skilful in leading others, and helping and benefiting them.

In teaching others you have to teach the Dharma that is most suitable and effectively beneficial to them. For

example, if you directly criticise someone who has been very recklessly engaging in negative actions without any regard to moral values, saying that what they're doing is evil and negative, then of course they are not going to like hearing that.

Therefore it is also important to know that speaking pleasantly means choosing the right words which sound very pleasant and eloquent to others. When speaking to others it is also important to exhibit pleasant facial expressions, rather than frowns or some other unpleasant expression. If you show a smile when speaking, this is generally regarded as good manners, which is also very important.

From this point of view the teaching on the lam rim or the stages of the path to enlightenment is not just a teaching about very long-term goals. We can also understand how it is a teaching in accord with what society considers to be good manners and a civilised culture.

So we have to understand that we are trying to adopt, integrate and practise all the things which ordinary people generally regard as good manners. We are to understand that these good manners are also part of our spiritual practice, our Dharma practice. This encourages us to always be polite and very pleasant when talking with other people.

We can also understand that it is our spiritual practice to try as much as possible to do the same thing at home. This includes speaking pleasantly to our partner. You know that it is good manners to always ask, "How are you" and "How are you feeling" and when they come home from work to ask, "How was the day? Was it too tiring?" and then to say "Can I make tea or cook the meal? You have a rest." This kind speech is pleasant to others, and generally in accord with common knowledge of what is good to show to other beings.

Even for those who are mentally very dull and those who are always creating negative actions, with pleasant skilful speech related to their level it is possible to gradually bring about some change. As long as what you say does not completely contradict them, it is possible that the other person will listen to the message, and through that then they can slowly make progress.

3. The third means of gathering disciples is the means of leading them to put the Dharma into practice. After you have assisted others according to their needs and capacities through practising the second means of speaking pleasantly, it is also important to cause them to follow the practice of Dharma. Here, what is important is to cause others to think 'I must practise Dharma'. Practising Dharma ranges from the very small practice of a virtuous action, up to practising all the dharmas through which the state of liberation is achieved. Through this third means you have to be able to motivate others to put the Dharma into practice,

and to seek the state of liberation.

4. The fourth means of gathering disciples is setting an ideal example by practising what you teach to others. If you do not practise this fourth means then the other three means will not be very effective. For example the third means is motivating others to undertake spiritual practice. It also means showing them the different stages of spiritual practice that they could and should undertake. If however, after doing that you do not practice the same thing yourself, any practical spiritual advice that you give to others is not going to be inspiring. The others might even criticise you saying, "Why should I listen to you, because you are not living up to your own words?"

They might turn your words back on you saying, "Instead of giving me this Dharma lecture you need this lecture yourself! You too need to overcome your negative states of mind, and to subdue your own continuum". So it is important that as a teacher you should be doing far more practice than your students, so as to be a further cause to inspire them in their practice. However it is said that if you practise at least at the same level as those to whom you teach the Dharma, then you accord with the meaning of this fourth means of gathering disciples.

How The Four Means Can Be Included Within The Six Perfections

It is said these Four Means of Gathering Disciples can be included within the Six Perfections. Obviously the first means of giving can be included within the Perfection of Giving. Speaking pleasantly is also included in the Perfection of Giving, with particular reference to Giving the Dharma of fearlessness. The next two means of gathering disciples can both be included into the Perfection of Morality. There are three aspects of the Perfection of Morality. These last two means of gathering disciples are included in the morality of benefiting other beings.

Why Are the Four Means of Gathering Disciples Taught Separately?

The Four Means of Gathering Disciples taught separately from the Six Perfections to give the indication that first of all one should engage in practice to tame and subdue one's own continuum. After this, then one should engage in the practice of helping others to subdue their continuum. To help others one has to specifically engage in these four means of gathering disciples, as they are the most effective methods.

So we have now basically finished the main body of the lam rim teachings.

422.322 Developing Bodhicitta Through the Ritual Of Taking Vows

Earlier, in the teaching on the bodhicitta mind, it was said that this topic of how to generate bodhicitta through ritual ceremony would be discussed later. At that stage we finished the first method of generating bodhicitta. We are now up to the second method, which was deferred until later.

The topic of generating Bodhicitta through a ritual ceremony is explained under two sub-headings:

1. How to acquire the vows you have not yet taken.
2. How to safeguard and develop the vows which you have already acquired.

422.331 How to Acquire the Vows You Have Not Yet Taken

This ritual ceremony of generating bodhicitta mind is to further increase the bodhicitta mind. You engage in this

ceremony after gaining at least some experience of the bodhicitta mind as a result of following all the causes, for example the seven-fold cause and effect to generate bodhicitta mind. By following those six causes and their effect you cultivate love and then through this, special intention which then results in the experience of some form of bodhicitta mind. In order to increase this aspiring bodhicitta mind one engages in this ritual ceremony of bodhicitta. In order to increase one's engaging mind of bodhicitta, one then also engages in the ceremonies of taking the bodhisattvas' vows.

It is said that when you engage in this ritual ceremony of bodhicitta, you are trying to generate some form of bodhicitta mind not just by word (by repeating the prayers of this ritual ceremony), but by putting it into practice. It is clearly said in the text that if your ritual ceremony consists solely of just repeating the words of the ceremony then you cannot gain any experience of bodhicitta mind, and therefore you cannot receive this vow. However the lam rim text says that even if you do not actually experience the arising of some form of bodhicitta mind, it is still beneficial to engage in such ceremonies. This is because through such ceremonies one at least implants some bodhicitta seeds in one's mind. If one takes this ritual ceremony very seriously as a practice, then it is said that by virtue of the presence of all the holy beings in this ceremony it is possible to receive the vow.

There are three versions of the way to conduct this ritual ceremony. The very short version of the ceremony has no separate preparatory stage; there is just the actual ceremony. The medium version has both a preparatory stage and the actual stage, which are both done on the same day. The extensive, very long version is done over two separate days; on the first day you do the preparatory stage, and on the next day you do the actual ceremony. According to the late Junior Tutor to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche, the lam rim explanation of the ceremony follows the long version.

We shall discuss this in the next teaching next week.

Geshe-la said that he received this bodhicitta ceremony, and this commentary on this lam rim teaching, from the late Junior Tutor to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, in Tibet. At the time Geshe-la was around 20 years old. Thinking back, Geshe-la says that the conditions in terms of basic food, clothing and shelter were very harsh compared to today. However having an opportunity to give such a teaching to others, he always feels that those harsh parts of his life of rigorous studies have all paid off, and become a very worthy cause.

Of course 20 years is a very youthful age, but looking back Geshe-la feels that he was not all that youthful. He also remembers that at the time he received these teachings there was a nun sitting next to him who was probably from a very well off family. Geshe-la noticed that even the base of the mandala that she was using was fully gold-plated. Geshe-la says he received some *tsampa* or barley flour from her.

You would be quite shocked and would feel sorry if you heard all the details of the conditions under which I studied in the monastery, Geshe Doga said.

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12 September 2000

Try to generate the bodhicitta motivation for studying the lam rim.

422.331 How to Acquire the Bodhicitta Vows (cont)

In the last teaching three different versions of conducting the ritual ceremony to generate bodhicitta were described.

This teaching further elaborates on the very long version, which is done over two separate days. The preparatory or preliminary sections are done on the first day, and the actual ceremony is done on the second day.

The preliminary stage should include a full explanation of the entire stages of the path. However here it is not necessary to present an explanation of all the stages of the path, because the ritual ceremony is being given as part of the teachings on the lam rim, which we have already covered in great detail.

On other occasions it is necessary to hear the teachings on the entire stages of the path on the preliminary days. These include where the ceremony of taking bodhicitta vows is conducted as part of or after the conferring of an initiation, or as part of a special explanatory transmission of the teachings, or an oral transmission of the teaching.

Obviously knowledge of the rules of conducting this ceremony is mainly necessary for those who lead this ceremony, but it is also important to try to understand the systematic traditional procedure for conducting this ceremony. It is not good to assume that you will never have the opportunity to conduct this bodhicitta ceremony, because in the future that may change.

Cleaning

On the preliminary day the setting of the altar needs to be prepared, and the place cleaned and so forth. All the gurus, buddhas, bodhisattvas who you have invited, will witness this ritual ceremony of generating bodhicitta and taking the bodhisattva vows. So you make offerings and do prostrations and so on prior to the actual ceremony.

The lam rim commentary uses the example how it is inappropriate to invite the universal king to a filthy place, which is full of dust, and the residence of beggars and scavengers. So as part of this ceremony, it is necessary to make the place as clean as possible. Of course here in Australia most places are basically very clean and very tidy. So you sweep and dust, and if possible sprinkle some perfumed water about, and arrange offerings of flowers. Likewise try to make the throne on which the guru sits as beautiful as possible, with lots of flowers and other precious ornaments.

Offerings

Of course it is also important to set out all the offerings properly. As this is done try to think that this ceremony is of great personal importance and that it is a very significant occasion.

The commentary text refers to not offering the six types of objects. Those six types of objects specifically concern the Sangha. They are not allowed to give away their three robes, their begging bowl, their vinaya sitting mat, and their strainer.

There is mention of the three categories of possessions of the Sangha. These concern their livelihood, their necessities and their extra belongings. Perhaps what is meant is that Sangha are not allowed to make an offering of anything belonging to the category of livelihood. Of course some of these rules were made at a time and place where the Sangha lived a very simple, basic life with few belongings. In these modern times, as a Sangha you may even own more than one set of robes and many other possessions. So what is said here may not be completely applicable to these Sangha.

Accumulating Merit

On the preliminary day all the people participating in the ceremony engage in the practice of accumulating merit and purifying negativities, and safeguarding that from any interference. Traditionally on the preliminary day (when the ceremony is done over two days) all the participants meet early in the morning, and as part of this practice of accumulating merit and purifying negativities they recite some sutras. The number of sutras depends upon the number of people, and how fast they can read.

The recommended sutras are the whole collection of the Buddha's sutras, called the *Kangyur* in Tibetan language, which consists of 108 volumes or, according to some scholars, 102 volumes. A lesser amount of reading would be the sutra called *Do Palmo che* in Tibetan, which consists of six volumes of texts. This sutra reviews the deeds of the bodhisattvas in great detail, including the very subtle deeds of bodhisattvas. Because of its contents this sutra is considered to be very profound. Geshe Doga recalls that his teacher, the late Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey, read this sutra at least two or three times.

A shorter form of reading is *The Perfection of Wisdom Sutra in 8000 Lines*, the main theme of which is emptiness. Or you can read the sutra which is called *The Fortunate Aeon*, which is about the 1000 buddhas of this aeon. This sutra gives the names of each of these buddhas, when they shall appear, who will be there, the name of their parents, the nature of the dharma that they reveal, and how long this dharma lasts and so on.

Here on our altar we have two copies of this sutra, *The Fortunate Aeon*. Geshe-la brought one from India, carrying it as part of his luggage. Of course the other one came when we bought the whole collection of *Kangyur*. Geshe-la remembers that when he first came to Tara House the one sutra we had was *The Perfection of Wisdom in 8000 Lines* which was donated by Sera Je Monastery, and was brought here by the late ex Abbot Khensur Legden when he came to Australia.

Ritual offerings

On the preliminary day make an offering of *tormas* to the interfering spirits in order to ward off any obstacles. One of the ritual offerings to ward off such interfering non-human spirits is called *chag sum* which is a very brief ritual offering of three *tormas*.

Geshe-la wants to tell you this story about ritual offerings that he never forgets. When he was in Shilong, which is the area

where the incarnation of the late Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey was born, he had a Tibetan friend, who is a Buddhist. This friend is married to a local woman from the Nagaland tribe, and she is a Christian. At one time she had a very severe toothache, and tried various medicines but could not stop the pain. Her husband suggested that he organise this ritual *chag sum*, three-torma offering, and she agreed. After the ritual was done the pain stopped, and from that moment onward she became very positive about Buddhist beliefs. Geshe-la says that in later years her husband was very pleased that this had happened to her.

We should also try to get some advice as to the practice we should do particularly in order to remove obstacles to our spiritual practice. One thing that is clearly stated in the text is reciting sutras. Therefore we have to try to understand the benefit of reciting any sutras even the short ones like *The Heart Sutra*, and their effectiveness in removing obstacles in our practice.

Personal Preparations

The reason why we have to take this ceremony as a very significant event and seriously is because in this ritual ceremony we are joining ourselves with other bodhisattvas, by generating the bodhisattvas' heart of bodhicitta. Even if in this ceremony we are not in a position to actually produce this bodhicitta mind, and to actually become a bodhisattva, at least we have a genuine motivation, and a genuine wish to do so. Therefore even in this fabricated way we generate bodhicitta and we become a bodhisattva, and are called a child of a buddha.

Therefore we should mark this ceremony as a very special occasion, trying to do our best with our preparations, to celebrate this occasion. Consider how much effort we put into worldly festivals such as wedding ceremonies, or New Year celebrations. We put a lot of effort into preparing our body, and choosing and wearing new clothes, as well as preparing other decorations.

In Tibet, New Year is a very big event where people traditionally wear new clothes. On the night before children have a difficulty falling asleep because of their excitement about wearing their new clothes. The nearest equivalent in the West is Christmas.

The point is that we do a lot of preparation for such worldly celebrations. So try, as said here in the teachings, to understand the importance and the significance of this ceremony. Wear your new or best clothes. Sangha members should also wear their best or newest robes, and if they have Dharma robes carry them to the ceremony. Attend the ceremony with a very clean body.

On the actual day we also need to carry what they call the substance for generating bodhicitta. This is to symbolise the life story of the Buddha who, when he first generated the bodhicitta mind, made offerings. In ancient times the symbolic offering was a clay vase or flowers. So we also carry some object of offering to follow this example of the Lord Buddha.

As mentioned in the lam rim commentary, the place where this ceremony is conducted should be imagined as being a celestial mansion, square in shape with four doors. At each door are the four gods of Indra surrounded by all their retinues of gods. Circling the mansion are all the other gods, who we call the white godly beings, because they support the flourishing of the dharma. On the interior four walls of the mansion are pictures depicting the life story of the Buddha, at the time when he was a bodhisattva on the path of learning, engaging in various bodhisattva deeds. Try to imagine that all these pictures are so very vivid that they are like the real thing.

The first day can be divided into two sessions. What has just been described is the first session. For the next session you invite the guru, the master.

The Second Session of Preparation

You should visualise the guru masters who you rely upon for this ceremony of generating the bodhicitta mind as being in the aspect of Shakyamuni Buddha. In fact it is always recommended that whenever you conduct this ceremony to generate bodhicitta mind, or to take the bodhisattva's vow, then the preceptor or the guru should be imagined as being in the aspect of Shakyamuni Buddha. Whereas when you engage in a ceremony to receive tantric vows then the guru is in the aspect of Guru Vajradhara, surrounded by the assemblies of the tantric deities. It is always good to remember these details.

After the guru has taken his seat then you engage in the practice of the six preparatory dharmas in a very extensive way. The guru will give a detailed, thorough explanation of the actual ceremony on the next day, when you will generate bodhicitta mind, or take the vows.

You need to remember that there are two types of bodhicitta mind - the aspiring or wishing bodhicitta mind, and the engaging bodhicitta mind. Wishing bodhicitta is the bodhicitta that simply wishes to achieve complete enlightenment for the sake of all beings. With this you do not promise that you will actually engage to undertake the bodhisattvas' deeds. Whereas the engaging bodhicitta is not only a wish to achieve complete enlightenment for the sake of all beings, but also a vow to undertake the bodhisattvas' deeds.

To clarify this difference, the text uses the analogy of a journey to India. Before beginning your journey, your intention to go there is like wishing bodhicitta, whereas the thought at the time of actually moving towards your destination is like engaging bodhicitta.

There are two different sources for the ritual formula that is used in this ceremony. According to Asanga's text, *The Bodhisattva's Ground*, there are separate formulas to generate the two types of bodhicitta, the wishing and the engaging bodhicitta. Whereas Shantideva's text *The Bodhisattva's Way of Life* gives only one formula with which to generate both types of bodhicitta at the same time.

The two ritual formulas of *The Bodhisattva's Ground* are based on the separate needs of the practitioners. This text provides a separate formula of merely generating wishing bodhicitta for those who are not capable of generating engaging bodhicitta. *The Bodhisattva's Way of Life* is mainly for those who are ready to generate both types of bodhicitta mind. That is a clarification made in the text. So, when participating in the ceremony, if you are unsure about taking Bodhisattva vows or vowing to engage in Bodhisattva deeds, then think that you are just generating wishing bodhicitta.

Following this there is the thanksgiving mandala offered to the Guru Buddha and then everyone in prayer recites the lam rim dedication. Finally the guru concludes the first day by further reciting three more verses of dedication prayers. The first one is the prayer, which says,

"May this precious mind of bodhicitta be generated and the one which is generated not decline, but further increase."

The second prayer says,

"May all the motherly and fatherly sentient beings possess happiness, may the lower rebirth be all empty, and may the prayers of all the bodhisattvas wherever they are dwelling be fulfilled."

The last verse prays for the long life of the glorious Guru, and for peace and happiness in the world. It prays that whatever virtues you have accumulated will be a cause for all beings, including yourself to quickly achieve Buddhahood.

Next week will be discussion night. The compulsory topic will be identify the three principal aspects of the path, and then to give an explanation of each one according to your own level of understanding. Of course the following week will be the test night.

TARA INSTITUTE

STUDY GROUP DISCUSSION NIGHT –19 September, 2000

Covering discourses 22/08/2000 – 12/09/2000

1. What is the difference between Calm Abiding and Special Insight?
2. According to the Lam Rim text, what is "Calm Abiding on Emptiness" and what means can be used to maintain this state of Calm Abiding? How does one then achieve Special Insight?
3. Explain the significance of the various names given to the practice of Tantra: 1) Secret vehicle 2) Mantra vehicle, 3) Result vehicle, 4) Vajra vehicle, 5) Method vehicle?
4. Before entering the vehicle of Tantra, it is important to gain a clear understanding of the 3 principles of the path. Name these 3 and explain why these are a prerequisite? Why is the Tantric path regarded as a swift path to Enlightenment?
5. Briefly outline the 4 means of gathering disciples in order to ripen the mindstream of others.
6. The ritual taking of vows is a means to further enhance the Bodhicitta mind. Describe the preparations needed for the two day Bodhisattva Vow ceremony. Must one have first generated Bodhicitta in order to take the vows? Discuss the difference between the aspiring and engaging forms of Bodhicitta.

Compulsory question

7. Discuss the meaning of the three principle aspects of the path

YOU ARE IN GROUP

T A R A I N S T I T U T E

(Study Group Test)

25th September 2000

Answer any four from question no.1-6

Question no.7 is compulsory

Time allowed one hour

1. What is the difference between Calm Abiding and Special Insight? What does it mean by the union of these two?
2. According to the Lam Rim text, what is "Calm Abiding on Emptiness" and what means can be used to maintain this state of Calm Abiding? How does one then achieve Special Insight?
3. Explain the significance of the various names given to the practice of Tantra: 1) Secret vehicle 2) Mantra vehicle, 3) Result vehicle, 4) Vajra vehicle, 5) Method vehicle?
4. Before entering the vehicle of Tantra, it is important to gain a clear understanding of the 3 principles of the path. Explain why these are a prerequisite? Why is the Tantric path regarded as a swift path to Enlightenment?
5. Briefly outline the 4 means of gathering disciples in order to ripen the mindstream of others.
6. Describe the preparations needed for the two day Bodhisattva Vow ceremony. Must one have first generated Bodhicitta in order to take the vows? Discuss the difference between the aspiring and engaging Bodhicitta.

Compulsory question

7. Discuss the meaning of the three principle aspects of the path