
The Six Perfections

འབྲུག་གི་ཐུགས་རྒྱུ་ལ་བསྐྱབ་ཚུལ།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

12 November 2019

As usual, we begin with a short meditation. [*Tong-len meditation*]

Try to cultivate bodhicitta as your motivation.

We have finished discussing the six perfections, the purpose of which is mainly for ripening one's own continuum. Now we move onto the four means of gathering disciples, which is mainly for ripening the continuum of other beings. In this topic we will find out how we can inspire and lead others to engage in virtue.

HELPING OTHERS TO MATURE: THE FOUR WAYS TO GATHER DISCIPLES (cont.)

(b) Training in the four ways to gather disciples that help others to mature¹

Training in the four ways to gather disciples that help others to mature has five parts:

1. What the four ways to gather disciples are
2. The reason they are stipulated as four
3. Their functions
4. The need for those who gather a following to rely on them
5. A somewhat elaborate explanation

(i) What the four ways to gather disciples are

First there is a list of the four ways to gather disciples.

- (1) Generosity is as earlier explained in the section on this perfection.
- (2) Pleasant speech is teaching the perfections to disciples.
- (3) Working at the aims is setting disciples to work on the aims as they have been taught, or involving them in correctly taking up these aims.

So, the first one indicates the perfection of generosity and the second indicates engaging in pleasant speech to ensure your interaction with others is pleasant and relevant to them. The third one is essentially leading or motivating others to put what has been taught into practice.

- (4) Consistency of behavior is stabilizing yourself in the very aims in which you have established others, and then training in them.

This indicates that you should practise what you teach to others.

The commentary then continues with the scriptural source of the four ways to gather disciples.

The *Ornament for the Mahayana Sutras* says:

¹ The introduction to the chapter on the perfection of generosity begins with the following heading structure.

c" The process of learning the perfections

1" how to train in the bodhisattva deeds in general

(a) Training in the perfections that mature the qualities you have when you become a buddha

So, Training in the Four Ways to Gather Disciples That Help Others to Mature is the second part of Training in the Bodhisattva Deeds in General

Generosity is the same as before; teaching the perfections, Involving others in taking them up, and involving yourself

Are asserted to be pleasant speech, working at the aims, And consistency of behavior, respectively.

(ii) The reason they are stipulated as four

Four ways to attract or gather disciples have been listed, so why are there four?

Question: Why are the ways of gathering disciples set as four?

Reply: In order to gather a following of disciples for the sake of establishing them in virtue, they must first be pleased. This, moreover, depends on your giving them material things, providing benefit to their bodies.

Your goal is to benefit others with the Dharma, so you wish others to hear, understand and develop faith in the Dharma, and to practise it. As a way to please and connect with others, you give them things, which is very a effective way of pleasing them. When they are pleased and become close to you, they will be receptive to listening to what you say.

The text continues:

Thus pleased, they first must know how to connect to the path. That is to say, by using pleasant speech to explain the teaching, you cause them to cast away ignorance and doubt, and then to correctly apprehend the aims.

Here, the words *pleasant speech* specifically refer to teaching according to the interest, mental capacity and exact needs of the listeners. As a result of listening to the teaching, they will cast away ignorance and doubt, and then the disciples will correctly apprehend the aims. Then:

Once they have understood these, you cause them to accomplish virtue by working at these aims.

One of the verses of the *Prayer of the Hundred Deities of the Land of Joy* has this request:

Please release a rain of vase and profound Dharma,
Precisely in accord with the needs of those to be trained.

This implies pleasant speech, which is teaching exactly according to the needs and spiritual temperament of the disciples. The text continues:

However, if you have not accomplished virtue yourself, when you say to others, "You have to engage in this, you have to reject that," they will say, "Why do you tell others, 'Accomplish this aim,' when you do not accomplish it yourself? You still need somebody else to correct you."

Here, you can clearly see how Lama Tsongkhapa emphasises that for the teaching that you give to be beneficial, you must first practise what you teach to others. Otherwise, they might ask why they have to practise what you teach them when you don't practise it yourself. Therefore, there is this emphasis on putting what you teach into practice. When you do this then teaching the Dharma becomes a means to subdue your own continuum, while at the same time helping others to subdue their continuum. If you don't practise what you teach, then not only will your own mind be unsubdued, but you won't be able to help subdue the minds of others either. However:

But if you are practicing yourself, they will think, "This person is established in the virtue to which he (or she) is leading us, so we will definitely derive benefit and happiness if we accomplish it." They then either engage in it anew, or (for those who have already engaged in it) do not reject it and become stable in it. So for this you have to be consistent in your behavior.

This explains how the fourth way of gathering disciples is consistent with the purpose, which is to put into practice what you teach to others. My intention in reading this text is so that you will also read and reflect on its meaning, to understand how what Lama Tsongkhapa instructs here is directly related to you. You will *either engage in it anew*, or if it's something that you've already heard or are already practising, then this helps to stabilise and give you more confidence in your practice.

The text then summarises this section:

The *Ornament for the Mahayana Sutras* says:

Know the ways to gather disciples to be four:
A method to give benefit, involving others in
Comprehending the teachings, involving them in
Engaging, and likewise involving yourself.

(iii) Their functions

This explains the function of each of the four means of gathering disciples. The text begins with a question.

Question: What do these four ways to gather disciples do for the disciples?

Reply: Generosity makes them fit vessels to hear the teaching, for it makes them happy with the person who explains it.

This clearly indicates how the practice of generosity is particularly effective in bringing people closer to you or winning their hearts and minds.

Pleasant speech makes them take interest in the teaching that is to be given, because it gives them a detailed understanding of the aims and dispels their doubts. Working at the aims makes them practice in accord with what they have been taught. Consistency of behavior makes those who have engaged in the teachings not reject them but practice for a long time.

Then there's a summary of the function of each of the four:

The *Ornament for the Mahayana Sutras* says:

By the first they become vessels;
By the second they take interest;
By the third they practice;
By the fourth they train.

(iv) The need for those who gather a following to rely on them

Because the buddhas have declared these four ways to gather disciples to be what achieves all the aims of all disciples and to be the superb method, those gathering a following must rely on them. The *Ornament for the Mahayana Sutras* states:

Those involved in gathering a following
Rely on this means;
It is praised as the superb method,
Achieving all aims for all.

This part of the text is repeating what the Buddha said.

(v) A somewhat elaborate explanation

There are two types of pleasant speech. The first, pleasant speech associated with worldly customs, means that you first assume a clear expression free of anger, give a smile, and then please living beings in worldly ways, such as inquiring after their health, etc.

Here the text indicates the benefits of observing the worldly customs of good manners as part of practising pleasant speech – showing a pleasant expression when meeting people, such as smiling and making friendly and welcoming

conversation. The worldly custom of asking people, 'How are you?' and things like that accord with the practice of pleasant speech that we need to put into practice.

The text continues:

The second type, pleasant speech associated with presenting the perfect teaching, means that you instruct living beings in the teaching for their benefit and happiness, beginning with teachings on developing faith, ethical discipline, study, generosity, and wisdom.

In these lines *for their benefit and happiness* indicates that our motivation for giving teachings is to benefit others with happiness; it should not be stained by any wrong thoughts such as wanting to become famous and so forth. Then the teachings that you give to others should help them to develop faith in the Three Jewels, and apply ethical practices (such as the ten virtues), learn about the three baskets of teaching, and develop the discriminating wisdom of knowing right from wrong, and so forth.

For those of you who give introductory teachings on Monday nights, I advise that before the teaching night, you might spend an hour considering the kind of motivation you will have in teaching the Dharma to others and reflecting on what you're going to teach. You will find going through this kind of rehearsal very beneficial.

The text continues with this advice:

The avenues of pleasant speech are as follows. To an enemy who would kill you, you say helpful words without a fault in your heart. With the very dull-witted, you willingly rise to the challenge, tirelessly giving talks on the teaching and causing them to adhere to virtue.

It says here that we should be very patient in giving teachings, especially to those who are very slow in learning. We should not undermine them or give up teaching them because you find that they're too slow, or that they never learn anything. Rather you should *tirelessly give talks on the teaching thus causing them to adhere to virtue*.

Next the text says:

To devious beings who deceive their masters, abbots, etc., and engage in wrongdoing, you speak pleasantly with helpful words and without anger, teaching even the most difficult persons. In order that persons whose minds have not matured may eliminate obscurity and be reborn in happy realms, you give discourses to them on preliminary practices-generosity and ethical discipline.

This refers to those whose inner continuum is not fully ripened. You teach them the preliminary practices such as generosity and ethical discipline in order to help them to find a good rebirth.

To persons whose minds have matured, who are rid of obscurity and possessed of a joyful frame of mind, you reveal the foremost and perfect teaching of the four noble truths. You encourage householders and renunciates who are careless to be conscientious, and to those who have doubts you speak elaborately and explain the teaching to them to dispel their doubts. Working at the aims is twofold: bringing the immature to maturity and liberating the matured. It is also presented in three parts as follows. (1) *Involving persons in taking up the aims of this life* is causing them to employ means consistent with the teaching to acquire, to protect, and to increase their resources.

The point being made here is that you teach others according to their interest, mental capacity and predisposition. Even helping others to gather material goods

or protect their wealth rightfully, and not through stealing and so forth is not necessarily on contrary to the way of the Dharma. Secondly:

(2) *Involving persons in taking up the purpose of future lives* means to establish persons in the life of a renunciate who lives as a mendicant after they have rid themselves of possessions. Although this is certain to bring happiness in future lives, it is not certain to do so in this life.

Here, the text mentions the benefit of living a life of a *mendicant* – an ascetic practitioner who owns little and is attached to nothing and who lives a very contented and free life. As a renunciate we are supposed to live like an ascetic, carrying a begging bowl for receiving food from others. You'll find the details about how a renunciate should live in the *Vajra Cutter Sutra*.

In my younger days I used to dream about spending the rest of my life as a mendicant. Even though mendicants hardly own anything, and never settle in one place I was quite attracted to living as a wandering practitioner which I thought was a very contented and peaceful life. However, my life didn't end up like that.

In fact, these days renunciates enjoy a life of comfort in terms of abundant food, and the luxury of a place to live, and so forth.

Thirdly:

(3) *Involving persons in taking up the aims of both this and future lives* means to cause householders and renunciates to take up freedom from mundane and supramundane attachment, for this generates mental and physical pliancy in the present life, ...

This shows us that even though renunciates (and others too) do not own anything externally, the way they live is very suitable for generating mental and physical pliancy.

... and the attainment of a purified deity and nirvana in the future.

Work at the aims even when it is very difficult. It is difficult to induce those who have not previously accumulated roots of virtue to take up virtue.

It is difficult to encourage those who have not accumulated the roots of virtue to put the teaching into practice.

It is difficult to work at the aims with respect to those who have magnificent resources² because they live in a situation where there are so many grounds for being unconscientious.

The text is saying that those who are materially rich and obsessed with wealth are filled with so many distracting thoughts that it's very difficult to get them to put the teaching into practice.

And it is difficult to work at the aims with respect to those who are indoctrinated with the views of non-Buddhist philosophers because they are hostile to the teaching and, because of their foolishness, do not understand reasoning.

With respect to the stages of working at the aims, you first cause those with childlike intelligence to follow easy personal instructions. Then, when their understanding has reached a middling level, you have them follow intermediate personal instructions. Finally, when their wisdom has greatly expanded, you have them follow the profound teaching and subtle personal instructions.

This clearly indicates the importance of teaching others according to their mental capacity. If their mental capacity is

very small, then you teach to suit that mental capacity, just as you teach to suit those of the middling capacity and those of great capacity. After explaining the importance of giving instructions according to the mental capacity of the listeners, the text continues:

Consistency of behavior means that you maintain practices equal to or superior to those in which you establish others.

This refers to the fourth means of gathering disciples which is to behave in a manner consistent with your purpose. In other words, you should practise what you teach to others. Your practice should be either equal to those you teach, or, as it says in the text, superior to them.

The text continues:

Accordingly, even though in whatever you do you must first focus on the welfare of living beings and not lose your resolve for others' welfare, you must discipline yourself in conjunction with these pursuits.

This is saying that your intention should always be to benefit others, helping them to subdue their continuums. It is important that this is always your motivation for giving teachings to others. And, of course, you should be practising the teaching yourself.

Lama Tsongkhapa always emphasises that without subduing your own mind, there's no way that you can help others to subdue their continuum. Therefore, you must first subdue your own mind. So, it makes a sense that you must put what you teach to others into practise before you teach it to others.

... in conjunction with these pursuits. Triratnadasa's *Praise of Infinite Qualities* says:

Some who are undisciplined use reasonable words, but
Contradict these words, so they are called "unable to help
others to discipline themselves."

Knowing this, you placed all living beings in your heart,
And strove to discipline yourself wherever you had
lacked discipline before.

The four ways to gather disciples also comprise two categories: gathering disciples via material things and gathering disciples through the teaching. Giving material things is the first of the four ways to gather disciples. The remaining three of the four ways are included in the second, gathering disciples through the teaching.

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Edited Version*

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² Meaning an abundance of wealth and possessions.

The Six Perfections

འཇུག་པ་ཆེན་པོ་སྤྱི་ལ་བསྐྱབ་ཚུལ།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

19 November 2019

We will begin with the usual meditation.

[Tonglen Meditation]

Next, we will recite the prayer, *Praise to Dependent Arising*.

Today marks the Buddhist festival called Descending from Heaven. A week after giving birth to the Lord Buddha, his mother passed away and took rebirth in one of the lands of gods. So, some time after he achieved enlightenment, as a way to repay the kindness of his mother, the Buddha went to the land of the gods to teach the Dharma to his mother and the gods there. Accordingly, the Buddha taught the Dharma and today is the day that marks his descent from heaven to Earth. There is also a sutra called *Meeting of the Father and Son Sutra*, which records the Buddha's deeds to repay his father.

As we recite this *Praise to Dependent Arising* we should fervently pray, 'May we never be parted from the holy teaching, or from the Buddha.' Right now, we are so blessed and fortunate that we have met with the Buddha's teaching, and also had contact with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who we can say truly represents the Lord Buddha. Thus, meeting His Holiness the Dalai Lama is like meeting the Lord Buddha himself.

His Holiness is a bodhisattva and a bodhisattva is also regarded as a son of a buddha. Just as the son of a king is the heir to the king, a bodhisattva is one of the Buddha's heirs. Hence, we have a wonderful opportunity to accumulate great benefit in this life. We should also make a strong and fervent prayer that we never be separated from the Buddha and his noble teaching, and that we never stray from the Dharma path.

The most important thing for us is that we always have contact with the Buddha's teachings in the future. Some students have expressed their concern about whether or not they will meet me in future. I said to them that meeting me is not important; what is important is that they meet the Buddha's Dharma. I also said, 'Keep praying. You never know, we may meet again in a future life.' Caryn Clarke once said to me that she was not really frightened about death, but what really concerned her was whether she would meet me again in the future. Hearing from her that she was not frightened about death was, I thought, not only a confident statement, but also very much showed the sign of a good practitioner. I was quite impressed when she said that.

Indeed, when you think of death, it passes very quickly; the duration of death is just a matter of breathing out and then not breathing in. So, we should be more worried about what happens after death. Death is not the end of our life; rather we then go onto the next destination. But

we have no control over where we go. This is something we need to think about now, in order to ensure that we go to where we would like to go.

Some religions, like Christianity, accept the fact that our body ends with death. However, they believe in something they call 'the soul', which goes to the next life. Depending on how you live your life, it either goes to heaven or to hell. So even Christians talk about a future life. Compared to Buddhism, their explanation of a future destination is quite simple.

We will start the prayer now.

[Recitation of Praise to Dependent Arising]

Try to cultivate the proper motivation as we continue with the teaching.

(b) Training in the four ways to gather disciples that help others to mature

(iv) A somewhat elaborate explanation (cont.)

We will continue with the text:

Moreover, these four ways to gather disciples are the way all the bodhisattvas of the three times work for the welfare of others, so it is the single path to travel.

This is quite self-explanatory, and is, of course, referring to the four means of gathering followers. *Moreover, these four ways to gather disciples are the way all the bodhisattvas of the three times work for the welfare of others* refers to what is practised by all the bodhisattvas of the three times – past, present and future. Therefore, *it is a single path to travel*.

The *Ornament for the Mahayana Sutras* states:

All those who have gathered disciples,
Are gathering, or will gather them
Do so in this way; therefore, this is the path
For the maturation of living beings.

This passage from the *Ornament for the Mahayana Sutras* summarises the way bodhisattvas help the maturation of the continuum of all other living beings through these four means of gathering the followers. With regard to gathering beings, those beings who need to be matured include those who have gathered disciples. This includes all those who the bodhisattvas have already gathered or attracted, and those who the bodhisattvas are presently gathering or will gather in the future. It directs us to *do so in this way*.

We have previously discussed what the four means of gathering are – generosity, pleasant speech, practising the purpose and accordance or conforming with the purpose. It is through these four skilful means of gathering that the bodhisattvas benefit other beings in terms of maturing or ripening their continuum with virtue.

Then the text continues:

In general, then, though the bodhisattva deeds are limitless, the six perfections and the four ways to gather disciples are their best summation.

This is saying that even though the deeds of the bodhisattvas are very vast, if we have to condense them then the best way to do that is to divide them into two, which are, as it says, *the six perfections and the four ways to gather disciples*. These two sets of practices of the

bodhisattvas' deeds condense all of the vast deeds of bodhisattvas.

The text continues:

For, bodhisattvas have just two tasks, the maturation of causal collections for their own buddhahood and the maturation of the mind-streams of living beings; they accomplish both of these through the perfections and the ways to gather disciples.

This explains the reason we can condense all of the bodhisattvas' deeds into the deeds of the six perfections and the four ways of gathering. It says here that the bodhisattvas' deeds have two purposes: the purpose for self or for themselves and the purpose aimed at benefitting others. Then the text shows here how these two purposes are accomplished. For instance, the six perfections primarily accomplish the bodhisattvas' purpose for themselves and the four means of gathering accomplish the purpose of achieving the welfare of other beings or benefitting others.

Thus the *Bodhisattva Levels* also says:

The perfections bring to complete maturation the buddha qualities you will have yourself. The ways to gather disciples bring all living beings to complete maturation. In sum, know these to be the active expression of a bodhisattva's virtuous qualities.

This passage from the *Bodhisattva Levels* summarises what has already been explained, showing how the bodhisattvas' purpose is to achieve their ultimate goal of complete enlightenment, which they are able to achieve through the six perfections; while the bodhisattva deeds for fulfilling the purposes of other beings is to show them how to achieve their own enlightenment. Again, the bodhisattvas are able to fulfil that through these four means of gathering. Through that, they are able to mature or ripen other beings so that they are able to reach complete enlightenment.

The text continues:

Therefore, I have set forth in this section these two categories of practice. If you want to know them in more detail, look in the *Bodhisattva Levels*.

With respect to the way these practices are done during and after meditative equipoise, the Great Elder says:

The deeds of bodhisattvas are
The magnificent six perfections and so forth.
The yogi arisen from meditative equipoise
Resolutely accomplishes the path of accumulation.

The text continues:

Beginning bodhisattvas who have taken the vows of the conquerors' children and are on the path of accumulation practice only the six perfections, whether in meditative equipoise or subsequent to it. They sustain some of the perfections in meditative equipoise and others in the post-equipose state. Some aspects of meditative serenity (which is meditative stabilization) and some aspects of insight (which is the perfection of wisdom) are cultivated in meditative equipoise, whereas some other aspects of meditative stabilization and wisdom are sustained in the post-equipose state, along with the first three perfections.

The first three perfections are the perfections of generosity, moral ethics and patience.

Joyous perseverance occurs in both the meditative equipoise and post-equipose states, while one type of patience—certain aspects of the patience of certitude about the profound teachings—also occurs in meditative equipoise.

Essentially, if we think of the bodhisattvas' deeds in terms of timeframes there is the time of meditative equipoise and there is the post-meditation period. The text talks about where the six perfections are emphasised relative to these timeframes. We note here that in the post-meditation period there is an emphasis on engaging in the deeds of the first three perfections, which are generosity, moral ethics and patience. You can clearly see the reason: it is vitally important for bodhisattvas to accumulate a great amount of merit, which they do mainly through practising giving and ethics and so forth. Whereas the last two perfections of concentration and wisdom are primarily practised in a deep meditative state, that is, during the meditation period. However, as it clearly says here, some aspects of both concentration and wisdom must also be practised and applied even in the post-meditation period.

We can also see how both concentration and wisdom are important in whatever practices we do. If we practise generosity or we engage in simple single-pointed meditation, it is very important to depend on concentration and especially the wisdom-knowledge that is essential for all practices. In fact, without wisdom-knowledge, it is very difficult to make any progress in terms of cultivating and developing virtues.

Then the text continues:

The Great Elder says:

During periods after rising from meditative equipoise¹,
Cultivate the view that all things
Are like a magician's illusions, as in the eight similes.
Thereby emphasize in post-meditative thought
Purification and the training in method.
During periods of meditative equipoise
Continually condition yourself to
Serenity and insight in equal measure.

If we look into the meaning of the passage by the Great Elder, there are two stanzas, which give us some instructions on what we should do when we are in deep meditative equipoise on emptiness. Then it talks about what practice we should do when we arise from that meditative equipoise and engage in various deeds subsequent to that meditative equipoise.

It says, *during periods after arising from meditative equipoise cultivate the view that all things are like a magician's illusion, as in the eight similes, thereby emphasise in post-meditative thought*. That shows how, when we arise from deep meditative equipoise and engage in the world and move into the post-meditational period of engaging in diverse activities, our mind becomes engaged with various objects. It is saying here that these objects may appear to our mind as if they all exist truly or inherently from their own side.

Therefore, *cultivate the view that all things are like a magician's illusion*, which is to say, even though things

¹ This refers to arising from the deep meditative equipoise that is penetrating emptiness.

appear to our mind as truly existing, they don't exist that way in reality; hence we should see them like a magician's illusion. It also says *as in the eight similes* which indicates that there are other similes which can also be used to understand how things appear during the post-meditation period. So, even though things appear as truly existent, this appearance doesn't accord with the way things exist in reality.

The text also says, *thereby emphasise in post-meditative thought purification and the training in method*. Here 'purification' means getting rid of grasping at things in the way they appear to our mind in that post-meditation period, i.e. appearing to have true existence. It is saying here that we need to engage in *purification* to stop grasping at this inherently existent self, even though things appear in that way to our mind.

The text then talks about *training in the method*. It clearly shows here that in the post-meditative period, our primary focus is on enhancing the method aspects of the practice. Then *during the period of meditative equipoise continually condition yourself to serenity and insight in equal measure*. Other common terms we use are 'calm abiding' and 'special insight'. The necessity for, and importance of the union or combination of both calm abiding and special insight is as you will find in many other texts.

We can see here how Lama Tsongkhapa has given us a very detailed explanation of what we should do, guiding us in terms of when we go into deep meditation, as well as when we come out of that meditation and engage in post-meditation activities. The explanation indicates that this is not something he made up himself. He used authentic sources – the early Buddhist classic texts of the great masters – to elaborate on the subject matter.

This has been an explanation of the practices of bodhisattvas. Many of you have learned about the view of emptiness, and even if you don't fully understand the whole idea, at least, every now and then, you should try to apply this in your practice. When we perceive various things, they give our mind the notion of true or inherent existence. They appear to our mind like that, so at least try to see that they don't reflect the ultimate mode of existence, that this is not the way things exist, and that things do not exist objectively in that way. The text is saying that it will be very beneficial if you try to stop grasping, or at least try to decrease the force of your grasping at things as being truly existent. Then, even if we don't gain the realisation of emptiness right now, any meditation on emptiness that we do now will leave a good impression in our mind, which will help us to easily and quickly gain the true realisation of the wisdom of emptiness in the future.

The text emphasises that we have to apply what is instructed here. When we engage in the meditation on emptiness, we need to utilise all our knowledge of emptiness. To understand how things lack inherent existence, we maintain our focus on the emptiness of things. At the same time, it emphasises here that when we arise from our meditation practice things may appear to our mind as having inherent existence, and it is important to recognise and understand that this is not the

ultimate mode of existence; that this is not the way they actually exist.

In this way we will find benefit in the post-meditation period, in terms of effectively counteracting mental delusions and preventing them from arising. And if any delusions do arise, the meditation on emptiness has the benefit of weakening the force of that delusion. In this way we can really taste the benefit of meditating on emptiness while we are sitting in meditation, as well as in our everyday life.

Sometimes, when we sit in meditation we find ourselves feeling very peaceful and calm. But after we finish the meditation we completely forget all about our practice and easily lose our self-control and lose our temper. So there is a tremendous benefit from this meditation on emptiness. As we read in the *Praise to Dependent Arising, For you, emptiness seen as dependent arising does not render as contradictory emptiness of self-nature and ability to function*. Even though everything lacks inherent or true existence, all the nominal functioning of things becomes tenable. It also refers to *the wondrous teachers, wondrous refuge, wondrous speakers, wondrous saviours*. Here Tsongkhapa praises the way the Buddha taught this profound view, showing the ultimate mode of existence, while at the same time, making sense of things conventionally.

Now we continue with the text:

When bodhisattvas whose minds are untrained in such marvelous but difficult deeds hear of them, they feel distressed. Although they are unable to practice such things at first, they come to understand them and then to intimately familiarize themselves with them as objects of aspiration. Later they engage in them spontaneously without any strain. Thus, familiarization is of the greatest importance, for if these bodhisattvas recognized their inability to actually engage in such deeds and then gave up on even the familiarization conducive to training the mind in them, they would greatly delay reaching the pure path.

This shows the importance of progressing stage-by-stage. Initially one engages in practice that is conducive and in accord with one's own level and mental capacity. Then, as one continues this practice and habituates oneself with it, the practice which was initially very hard becomes very natural and very easy. The bottom line here is that it is important to engage in practice and not to lose heart by saying, 'It's too hard'. One must practise even if it is hard. At the very least, practise in accordance with your capability – practise something that you can do.

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Edited Version*

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

26 November 2019

We will begin with our usual meditation.

[Meditation]

As usual we now cultivate the bodhicitta mind.

Last Sunday, we did a course on cultivating bodhicitta through the method of exchanging self with others. So, those of you who did the course should apply this method to give rise to bodhicitta.

At the course I forgot to mention the meaning of 'exchanging' in the context of applying the method of exchanging the self with others. But you should be able to find out about it by yourselves.

With the 'giving and taking' meditation we are habituating our mind with the thought of giving and taking. For example, with regard to giving, we imagine giving our body, possession and virtues to other sentient beings.

Of course, we should not leave the meditation of giving simply at the thought of giving. We must try to translate this thought into deeds of giving of our body, possessions and virtues, and in this way we engage in benefitting other beings. Having said that, we should not give any objects that we are not ready to give away, such as our body. Great bodhisattvas can give their bodies if they see it as being beneficial for others. We, however, should engage in the practice of giving as best as we can according to our own capacity, and not give anything that we should not be giving.

As part of giving, we must avoid holding any harmful thoughts towards others and committing harmful deeds, otherwise we defeat the purpose of giving, which is to benefit others. So, our main practice is to benefit others as much and as best as possible. This is indeed the essential element of our Dharma practice, and it is grounded on feeling love, compassion and a sense of endearment towards others, as well as a recognition of their kindness for us.

Therefore, we need to train and habituate our mind to feel close to others, and to cherish them with a loving mental attitude. When we see other sentient beings, we should think that they are our mothers and, as such, are incredibly kind and affectionate to us like a mother loves her only son. We should also think that by depending on them, we can accumulate all the virtues to achieve the perfect state of buddhahood. Therefore, we should think that these sentient beings are truly a field of spiritual merit as they provide us with an opportunity to accumulate merit. Having recognised them as a field of merit, we see them with the eyes of a loving mind and with deep regard and respect. Viewing sentient beings in such a loving and very respectful way over and over again is a true cause to please and delight all the buddhas.

Shantideva's *Bodhisattva's Way of Life* says,

(Pleasing living beings) delights the Tathagatas
And perfectly accomplishes my own purpose as well.

In addition, it dispels the pain and misery of the universe,

Therefore I should always practise it.

In Shantideva's *Bodhisattva's Way of Life* we also find advice on how to speak with other sentient beings. It says,

When talking I should speak from my heart and on what is relevant.

Making the meaning, clear and the speech pleasing.

I should not speak out of desire or hatred

But in gentle tones and in moderation.

When we see other sentient beings, we should acknowledge their kindness because we depend on them to achieve the state of buddhahood. Shantideva goes so far as to say that we pay homage to the Buddha because we see the Buddha as a cause to achieve the state of buddhahood, the state of enlightenment. In the same way, when we practise generosity, moral ethics and so forth, we are really depending on others to be able to practise the six perfections that serve as a cause for us to achieve enlightenment. As Shantideva states:

There is no doubt that those with the nature of compassion

Regard all these beings (to be the same) as themselves.

Furthermore, those who see (this Buddha-nature) as the nature of sentient beings see the Buddha themselves;

Why then do I not respect (sentient beings)?

If merely a benevolent intention

Excels veneration of the buddhas

Then what need is there to mention striving to make

All beings, without exception, happy.

Shantideva reminds us that when we look at other sentient beings, we should recognise their kindness in giving us the opportunity to be able to achieve enlightenment. Therefore, we should view them with love, and a deep sense of respect.

When beholding someone with my eyes,

Thinking 'I shall fully awaken

Through depending on this being'

I should look at that person with love and an open heart.

You should memorise these verses, include them in your daily practice and reflect on their meaning.

One of the students who did the Sunday course gave very positive feedback about the group discussion, saying it was very helpful for their practice, and that at the discussion people were speaking from their heart and sharing their knowledge based on their personal experience. I was pleased to hear that.

This verse from the *Bodhisattva's Way of Life* shows how to counteract anger and your reaction to a person who annoys you.

Thus, since patient acceptance is produced

In dependence upon a hateful mind,

That person should be worthy of veneration just like the sacred Dharma

Because he is a cause of patience.

If you can recollect that verse, say it to yourself and reflect on it, you will find it very effective in preventing anger.

(b) Training in the four ways to gather disciples that help others to mature

(iv) A somewhat elaborate explanation (cont.)

We now return to the text. In the previous teaching, we stopped at this paragraph:

When bodhisattvas whose minds are untrained in such marvelous but difficult deeds hear of them, they feel distressed. Although they are unable to practice such things at first, they come to understand them and then to intimately familiarize themselves with them as objects of aspiration. Later they engage in them spontaneously without any strain. Thus, familiarization is of the greatest importance, for if these bodhisattvas recognized their inability to actually engage in such deeds and then gave up on even the familiarization conducive to training the mind in them, they would greatly delay reaching the pure path.

Then the text gives this quote:

The Praise of Infinite Qualities says:

Deeds that hurt the worldly even to hear about
And that even you did not undertake for a long time
You accustomed yourself to, so in time they became
spontaneous.
Thus, it is difficult to develop good qualities without
familiarization

In this verse from the *Praise of Infinite Qualities*, we find the advice that if we become familiar with something then it will arise spontaneously. However, we must make an effort if we are to achieve that force of familiarity. If we stop making any effort by thinking it is too hard because of our lack of familiarity, then we will never become familiar with it. As the text says, *Deeds that hurt the worldly even to hear about and that even you didn't undertake for a long time, you accustomed yourself to, so in time they become spontaneous*. In worldly terms, some actions might initially be very hard to do, but if you make a strenuous consistent effort to accomplish those actions then eventually they will become easy. Then, as *you accustom yourself* to those actions, *in time they become spontaneous*.

When the Buddha was on the path of learning, he had to engage in many practices, and even he had to initially put a great deal of effort into possessing excellent qualities and getting rid of any faults. So, excellent qualities don't arise easily and require a great deal of effort to attain. Then, in the end, when you reach the state of enlightenment, all the excellent qualities arise spontaneously and effortlessly, and you are completely free of all the faults. So the text is advising us not to feel discouraged if we find our practice very hard and difficult. It is saying that through making a consistent effort we can definitely achieve our desired goal in terms of developing all the excellent qualities and eliminating all the faults. However, if we lose our courage and simply give up, then we won't achieve anything.

We would note that negative forces are very strong within us now while positive forces are very weak. So if we are to generate a positive state of mind or engage in a positive action we need to make a robust effort in our thoughts and deeds. Even if we are able to do something positive, we are unable to sustain it. So, with respect to the positive side we need to familiarise ourselves with positive states of mind over and over again, otherwise we can't achieve anything or, if we achieve something we will easily lose it.

On the other hand, negative forces are very strong within us. Therefore, negative thoughts arise very easily and engaging in negative deeds needs no effort on our part. We are already habituated with the negative side, and there is certainly no need to habituate ourselves with it further. For

example, we generate desirous attachment, hatred etc. and these negative emotions destroy our inner peace and joy and compel us to engage in destructive actions. We can observe how these negative emotions arise very easily without any effort – the slightest external condition is enough for them to arise.

Positive states of mind, however, such as the mind of non-attachment of not being attracted to sensual things, or the mind of non-hatred of not holding any hostile or ill feeling towards others are positive emotions, because they bring us peace and happiness. But these positive states of mind don't arise easily. Therefore, we need to make an effort to cultivate them and habituate ourselves with them over and over again in order to sustain these positive thoughts and deeds. Otherwise we can easily lose or forget about them.

The text continues:

Those who have taken the bodhisattva vows have no choice but to learn the bodhisattva deeds. But even those who have not adopted the engaged spirit of enlightenment through its ritual strive to inculcate a desire to learn the deeds, thus increasing the force of their enthusiasm for learning them. Then, when they take the vows, their vows will be extremely stable, so make an effort to do this.

From among the stages of the path for persons of great capacity, this concludes the explanation of the stages of the path for training in the aspirational spirit of enlightenment and for learning the deeds of the conquerors' children in general.

Even as ordinary beings, we can recognise how our experience of pain and pleasure primarily derives from our changing mental attitudes. You don't have to be particularly intelligent to see that. If we observe and examine our experiences, we can see that the reason we feel so much stress, anxiety and misery and bottle it up is mainly because of a certain pattern of thoughts. We can then understand that if we don't remedy these disturbing thoughts, then we will end up with serious mental illnesses and not be able to cope. At the same time, we can also understand that if we have a stable positive state of mind, we will have a stable experience of peace and happiness and a positive outlook on life regardless of external circumstances. Therefore, it is very important that we aim our meditation practice at bringing about a positive change within our mind in terms of extinguishing the negative states of mind and enhancing the positive states of mind. In this way, our meditation helps us to find more happiness and overcome suffering in our life.

Benefiting self and others through the six perfections

With the six perfections, we can accomplish both our own purpose and the purpose of other beings in terms of accomplishing all the excellences, such as an excellent life, excellent living conditions and excellent companions. These excellences are the cause of a happy, marvellous and fulfilling life.

We want to live a marvellous life, not only in this life but also in all future lifetimes. Hence, we need to ensure we keep continuously creating the causes and conditions for this, life after life. Engaging in the six perfection fulfils all our needs now and in the future.

Generosity brings an abundance of wealth and good conditions. We should acknowledge our past generosity for all the wealth and good resources we have now, and through it, whatever joy and support we receive. In the same way, to have the same good fortune of wealth and

resources in our future lives, we must remember to keep practising generosity in this life.

Realising that there's no point in possessing an abundance of wealth and good resources unless we have found an excellent form of life to enjoy it, we understand that we need to adhere to the practice of moral ethics which is the primary cause to find a good rebirth.

Then, we also want to be surrounded by excellent companions and the primary cause for that is the practice of patience. We know that as social beings, having other people as our friends or a close relationship with them is an important cause for wellbeing and happiness. Needless to say, if we want to benefit other beings, they have to come to us, connect with us and trust us. For example, bodhisattvas are able to benefit infinite numbers of beings because they have a skill to attract other beings.

Next, we need to rely on joyful effort to ensure that whatever tasks we undertake are fully completed. The perfections of concentration and discriminating wisdom are the main means to subdue our mind, protect it from the influence of mental afflictions and develop true knowledge.

As I frequently remark, if our mind is under the dominance of mental afflictions, then whatever we accomplish in our lives brings us no inner peace and satisfaction. So, we need to cultivate meditative concentration to stabilise and calm down mental afflictions and disturbing thoughts, and then uproot them through developing discriminating wisdom. Cultivating wisdom knowledge is also important in terms of overcoming confusion, and knowing what to accept and what to reject, and accordingly moving along with our lives.

The best way to make this special life meaningful is through benefitting other beings. So, first we need to win their friendship and trust. Therefore, it is said, the most effective practice of benefitting others is giving or generosity. However, there is no point of giving if we harm them or if we don't refrain from harming them through our thoughts and deeds. Hence, in addition to the practice of giving, we must also practise morality, which is refraining from any acts of harmfulness.

Even though we offer other beings benefits and support, they may not view it that way or appreciate us – they may even become angry with us and harm us. What do we need to do in this situation? We need to practise patience, particularly the patience of accepting hardship and harm from others.

The first three of the six perfections – giving, moral ethics and patience – are primarily the means to benefit other sentient beings.

Now, in terms of achieving our own purpose, we need to gain wisdom, because ultimately we wish to achieve the bliss of liberation, which depends on gaining the insight of wisdom.

To actualise this wisdom, we must have a state of mind which is completely calm and stabilised. What brings about such a state of calm-mind is single-pointed meditative concentration, which enables us to get rid of all the agitated states of mind and rest the mind on any given object effortlessly for as long as we wish to stay there. Therefore, meditative concentration and discriminating wisdom are the primary causes to achieve our own purpose.

In short, all the activities that are aimed at accomplishing our purpose and the purpose of others require continuous

effort, day in and day out from our side. Therefore, the practice of joyful effort is essential for accomplishing the purposes of both others and ourselves or, in other words, to fulfil the two aspirations to achieve our welfare and the welfare of others. We must understand that the practice of the six perfections is the main cause for achieving the state of buddhahood. In terms of the causal order, we first achieve our goal, which is the state of buddhahood, and after that we achieve the goal of other beings in the sense of benefitting them perfectly.

Next week we have a teaching break and you have a discussion on the four means of gathering disciples.

We will now recite Samantabhadra's prayer, the *King of Prayers*. This is to dedicate all the virtues we have accumulated in the past, that we are accumulating now or will accumulate in the future for the sake of the flourishing of the Buddha's teaching and for the benefit of all living beings.

Finally, we will recite the Twenty-one Tara Praises for Llysse's mother who is unwell.

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