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

A Commentary by The Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Samdup Tsering



ལྷོ་ལམ་རིམ་རྒྱུ་ལ་ལག་བཅངས།

7 March 1995

Aims Of The Study Group

Welcome to the first study group teaching for this year. Geshe-la is delighted that so many new study group students are here tonight.

The aim of joining the study group is to study the teachings for yourself, and then put them into practice so that others can also benefit as a result.

These were the original aims of the study group, and with continuous progress, most of them have been fulfilled. For example, this study group has produced a number of students who both practise Dharma and are qualified to teach others.

In the early days we had difficulty in finding enough qualified students to lead meditations or teach. There were too many Monday nights and not enough teachers. Now there are not enough Monday nights for all the teachers we have! This is a direct outcome of the study group. Not only do we provide meditation facilities here in the centre but we also provide them outside the centre.

However real accomplishment is making progress in one's own spiritual practice. Just having studied Dharma or gained some knowledge is not sufficient to help oneself let alone to help others. If what is learnt is not put into practice, the result is not feeling positive about that learning because there is no apparent personal benefit. Even if one teaches, what is taught has no personal meaning, so one can not feel positive about what one is teaching. Later there may even be regret about having spent time studying Dharma. If Dharma is practised that cannot happen, and so there is some personal benefit.

So Dharma gives a better way of thinking and looking at things. If we share this with close friends, there is no better way to help them see the truth.

If we think and act as a result of a mind which is obsessed with desires and hatred, or afflicted with ignorance we are no different from animals. Whereas Dharma gives us a way of thinking which is opposite to the normal way of thinking that is corrupted by afflictions.

Teaching

As a rule, only those who are past or present members of

the study group are asked to lead Monday night introductory meditations. This rule was made both to inspire and to provide experience. The study group students who have taken Monday night meditations and visited other centres have been very successful, and earned much praise.

Ultimately, one has to think of helping others, regardless of whatever one has achieved in life, be it inner knowledge or outer wealth. If we keep all our knowledge and skills to ourselves, it only becomes an object for generating pride, which is of no benefit at all. Whereas if after obtaining wealth and knowledge we seek to help others, starting with our family and friends, then whatever is achieved makes you feel more positive and able to rejoice.

Lama Tsong Khapa said:

If the mind is positive, good or wholesome, then all that follows will be good or wholesome.

If we generate the positive thought to help others, then naturally all the actions we undertake as a result will also be very beneficial.

Harmony

The most important condition for the success of this group is to have a very friendly harmonious atmosphere. Think, for example, of a school where there is a good relationship between students and teacher, where both students and the teacher are very friendly, relaxed and open with one other. Such a harmonious atmosphere makes the class not only more enjoyable to the students and the teacher, but also makes a great difference to the quality of the students' education. Similarly if we create such an atmosphere not only between students and teacher, but also between the students themselves, then the hour we spend together is very enjoyable and fruitful. You will come to these nights happy to see your friends and talk with them. Then because this loving and friendly atmosphere has been created, all will feel free to discuss anything with the others. We shall find each other very helpful, and be able to share our knowledge and experience. So even if it is only one hour, it is a very useful and beneficial hour.

In study group the emphasis is on achieving spiritual qualities, so one learns of value of friendship, love,

compassion, tolerance and patience. We try to practise and develop these together as a group, so when we walk out of this hall what we learnt here has some influence in dealing with outside problems. Therefore, there is benefit while sitting here and studying with others but then also afterwards there is a benefit.

Tonight we have not started the actual teachings. According to the study group constitution, the first four nights are teaching, then follows a discussion night and the written test. Tonight's session is not counted as part of this month's teaching.

We stop here and will chant Twenty-one Taras' prayer and dedication. Then everyone should have a friendly hand shake with everyone else, to introduce each other and say "Very happy to meet you".

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14 March 1995

The Benefits Of Bodhicitta

Try to think of this very unique form of human life which you have obtained now. With a perfect mind and body and all other favourable outer and inner conditions, you can fully practise Dharma, and use this life to best advantage.

So make an effort to generate bodhicitta - the altruistic mind of enlightenment - because there is no better opportunity than now to generate that state of mind. Not only is bodhicitta said to be essence of all Dharma teachings but it is the source of peace and happiness to all beings in the world.

The benefit of generating bodhicitta is that it can help us to overcome the source of all our problems, which arise from a self cherishing mind. We must realise that up to now the selfish mind has motivated or influenced all our actions. The result is being caught in an unending cycle of suffering. However because of this unique form of life there is the opportunity to generate bodhicitta in one's mental continuum, and so challenge this self cherishing mind.

Bodhicitta Is Generated From Renunciation

In order to generate bodhicitta - this precious mind of enlightenment which is said to be the entry door to the Mahayana path - one must generate its root cause, compassion towards all beings. Compassion arises through observing the suffering of other beings and then generating a wish for them to be free of that suffering.

Before we can generate compassion for others we must feel the same about ourselves. Therefore it is said that to generate compassion we must first generate renunciation, which is the wish to attain liberation for ourselves.

What prevents us from wanting to be free of suffering? It is attachment to samsara, the seeming beauty of cyclic existence. Without seeing the true nature of cyclic existence as the true source of unending suffering, there can be no genuine wish for liberation. In order to produce this aspiration for liberation from cyclic existence the faults of cyclic existence need to be known.

This is where we are up to in these Lam Rim teachings. Last year we reached the fifth of the six faults of cyclic existence.

The Fifth Fault Of Cyclic Existence - Rising And Falling Repeatedly

The fifth fault of cyclic existence is the fault of falling and rising over and over again. This is true in relation to our wealth, social position, friends and so on which are always subject to change. This fault can be summarised into four main points according to the Sutra:

1. Collection results in losing
2. Rising results in falling
3. Meeting results in separation
4. Birth results in death.

By realising this truth of impermanence the unreliability of cyclic existence can be observed, and thus attachment to objects within cyclic existence can be minimised. For example there might be a strong attachment to having a friend. The reason for this is because having observed the great pleasure this produces, we believe that this friend can permanently satisfy our mind.

In reality this feeling of pleasure is very impermanent and temporary. It can be gone as soon as that friend moves away, or some dispute arises. If we see that the friend, and the feeling of pleasure associated with meeting them are temporary, our degree of attachment to that friend and the associated (temporary) feelings of pleasure diminishes.

So seeing the faults or suffering nature of the phenomena of cyclic existence can help us to overcome attachment to them.

Attachment And Suffering

Whenever we see some disadvantages in things we immediately wish to be rid of them. For instance as soon as we see some fault or disadvantage in living with or befriending another person, the immediate thought is how to distance oneself from that person. Similarly, as a result of seeing the faults of cyclic existence, we naturally seek liberation from it.

As long as we are within cyclic existence, then all the faults discussed to date are unavoidable. The fault of being attached to wealth, friendship, fame or position is the main cause of suffering and sadness in life. When we lose wealth or friendship, it brings a great deal of

suffering to our mind; falling from a high to low social position brings great disappointment. The main reason for undergoing this suffering is because of attachment to these things. If we are not mentally attached to our friends, we shall not experience a great deal of suffering even if we lose them. In order to fully understand own experiences from this perspective, we must contemplate them at our own pace.

Consider the suffering that is experienced as a consequence of the breakdown of a relationship of many years. The intensity of this suffering is almost beyond control. Later, after separation, seeing one's former partner living very happily with someone else makes the experience even worse. That additional suffering confirms that the relationship was based on attachment, rather than true love and compassion. If it were true love and compassion there would be no reason to feel negative about seeing the former partner living happily after the separation.

Even though it is difficult to avoid attachment in our relationships with others, at least minimise it. Try to replace attachment with love and care for your friend. Then there is more mutual benefit while the relationship continues. Even if the relationship ceases, the friendship will still continue, with continuing benefit for each other.

Our financial position can also change. If we have a strong attachment to our wealth and possessions, we suffer more when we are reduced to poverty. The same applies to our social position. There is no guarantee that whatever the position that is attained will be long lasting. Some people even find themselves in a high position but seeing its disadvantages, want to have a lower position. Then having attaining that lower position they are still unhappy because they are socially embarrassed. Why do you experience this dissatisfaction of being in a lower position? It is all because of attachment.

By using our own levels of understanding, together with our experiences, in our meditations, we can develop more realisations about the real truth of our day to day life experiences.

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¹These notes were prepared from two transcripts of the translation of the talk given by Ven. Geshe Doga. The text of these notes differs from the oral translation in that they seek to convey the essence of the teaching, and may also include variations made after discussion with the translator. This section in particular was rewritten after clarifying the meaning with the translator.

Adair Bunnett then checks the typescript against a tape recording, and edits the text, which is finally checked by Alan Molloy.

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21 March 1993

Try to generate a strong motivation to attain the state of Buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings; and that for this purpose you are listening to these profound teachings on the Lam Rim, and practising them.

The Importance Of Correct Motivation

At the start of any practice, such as listening to a teaching, we need to check our mind, because it is not worthwhile to allow our actions to be directed by a negative state of mind. When we generate a motivation we are trying to change our frame of mind. If our mind is in the grip of some mental delusion or negativity we must change that state, and in doing this we must also generate the wish to attain the state of enlightenment for sake of all beings. In order to generate this wish for state of enlightenment you must have some understanding of Dharma; of the teachings. With this understanding of Dharma, then simply generating a proper motivation gives you an overall view of the entire stages of path leading to enlightenment.

Contemplating The Faults Of Cyclic Existence

With regard to the Lam Rim teachings we are discussing the faults of cyclic existence in terms of the fault of frequently rising high and falling low. We cannot avoid this fault of cyclic existence as long as our mind is attracted (or attached) to the beauty of cyclic existence, and as long as our life is bound to these contaminated aggregates. The main purpose of contemplating the various faults of cyclic existence is to overcome attachment to the seeming beauty of cyclic existence; towards this life as well as all the lives to come in cyclic existence. We must realise that if we are to challenge and reduce this attachment to cyclic existence, we have to see the pitfalls in this and future lives.

If we truly examine the source of all the problems and unending difficulties (both mental and physical) that we continuously face in this life, we shall see that the real cause of our suffering is our attachment to this life, and the seeming beauties of cyclic existence. Seeing this will motivate us to begin to try to diminish that attachment.

So how do we overcome this attachment? For this we need to engage in meditation practice, according to authentic teachings. By following this practice, our mind will be turned away from those objects and conditions

which produce attachment and increase mental delusions in our mind. Then our mind will be turned to a virtuous object with which we become very familiar. With this approach we have the power to overcome, challenge and prevent mental delusions from arising in our mind. By overcoming these mental delusions our verbal and physical actions become very pleasant, positive and free from all misconduct.

The Faults Of Attachment

The teachings tell us that the wealth, friends and so on, which we accumulate in life, ultimately have no personal benefit. Yet this is not the way we normally view things. Normally we view these samsaric objects as a very reliable and lasting source of happiness, and as a result we have strong desire to possess these things. In fact this desire is itself very deceptive. It is one of the worst forms of deception, because out of this desire we believe that the possession of those desired objects will make us very content and satisfied. But if by luck we obtain all those desired objects, which are supposed to content our mind and body (good food, shelter, in fact everything we think of as bringing comfort to our life) still we desire more. Therefore even though there is sufficient comfort, it does not content the mind, and since the mind is not content it wanders after other things.

Furthermore no matter how much wealth you acquire it can always be removed, either by force, or through death (when you have to leave everything behind). So ultimately there is no continuing benefit from these possessions.

This talk of suffering and the negative side of samsaric objects is not intended to depress; rather it is to help our mind to see things realistically, and thereby gain some benefit. If we train our mind to understand this negative aspect of samsaric objects then it will minimise our attachment to them. Then our view of them will change. Then, with a decrease in our attachment and a changed view, when death comes it will not be a shock to leave all these objects of attachment behind. We shall already know that this will happen, and be able to do it easily.

So our attachment to samsaric objects not only brings immense problems when we are alive, but also when we are dying.

Safeguarding The Pleasure We Already Have

Even the lasting experience of the sensual pleasures also depends upon contentment. It is important to content yourself with whatever comfort and happiness you already possess. So try to see the benefits and advantages of whatever comforts you already have. Then make every effort to safeguard and protect that. Because as soon as something else is seen and desired, all the existing comfort and joy is completely forgotten. Then if the next goal is not achieved there will be disappointment, but on top of this you have lost whatever joy and comfort you had previously. So there is a sense of total failure, and there is no pleasure in that.

Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey advised that you should always feel positive and try to safeguard the lasting peace and joy you have now, rather than about thinking and worrying about things you have not got. In terms of sensual pleasure you must safeguard the pleasure you already have, and make sure that it is not lost, before making an effort to find something else.

The true sense of peace and happiness derives from one's own mind. This is why celibate monks or nuns have moral ethics restraining their three doors from any wrong actions. As a benefit of this restraint, the vows serve as a source of peace and joy. In a similar way lay people can practise moral virtue and restraint of their three doors of body, speech and mind.

These teachings help us gain more understanding of our own mind. With this knowledge we can heal the diseases of the mind and enhance the peace and joy within. With this we finish the teachings on the sutra which gives the four end results of impermanence.

- 1 The end result of accumulating is losing
- 2 The end result of meeting is separation
- 3 The end result of rising is falling
- 4 The end result of birth is death

Contemplating these faults of cyclic existence should inspire us to want to free ourselves from cyclic existence, and in this way cultivate the aspiration to achieve the state of liberation.

Regarding Leading Meditations

Geshe-la asked Dennis to check with everyone whether you prefer to do a Guru Shakyamuni Buddha meditation, or to do meditation on each topic as we have in the past.

If you decide to vote for the Guru Shakyamuni Buddha meditation, Geshe-la would like to ask Dennis and Ven. Kaye to put the form of the Guru Shakyamuni Buddha meditation, and dedication together on paper. With the mantra just say "Om muni muni...svaha." There is no need to say the "Tayatha". Everyone needs to have a copy, so they can memorise the whole prayer, and so do it in silence, with no need to have someone in front to

lead.

Part of the reason for this second option is that in the past the usual meditations have not been organised properly. People need to have some preparation before doing the meditation. The idea was for the people leading the meditation to distribute some information about the topics one week prior to the meditation so that everyone can become familiar with the topic. Then on the night, the leader could just give an outline of the main points of the meditation.

You can recall that Geshe Doga suggested that part of the purpose of the Study Group dinner was to raise funds to pay for photocopying. If you decide to continue with different meditations then it must be properly organised. The person doing it has to write down the outline in advance and give it to everyone one week before. If people read the outline of the topic on which you will lead the meditation, they will be able to read up on subject beforehand. Then they can build up a framework from further study. The person leading the meditation should speak from the heart without papers.

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28 March 1995

422.211.6: The Fault Of Lacking Friends¹

གྲོགས་མེད་པའི་ཉེས་པ།

Last week we stopped the teachings at the fault of lacking friends. The reality is that within cyclic existence you are alone. When you are born from your mother's womb you are born alone. When you suffer from any illness, that experience of pain must be tolerated alone. You cannot give part of it away. When you die, neither you nor anyone can stop it. No friend, no matter how close can save us from the frightening experience of death.

Despite this we are always seeking friends on whom we feel we can rely. There are rare examples of people who have a very good friend, and receive true benefit from that friendship. In most cases however, friendship brings both happiness and suffering to our life. If we examine most friendships over one month, we will find that it is fortunate if there are ten days of a sense of happiness arising from that friendship. The other days are a source of suffering to each other.

This instructs us to utilise our time on spiritual practice. The beginner may choose to read a variety of texts to give a broad understanding, or out of curiosity. However if your mind is quite stabilised with your own spiritual belief, then you should focus on the spiritual texts which present clearly, and without error, the complete path to enlightenment – such as the Lam Rim. By reading such texts, which cover the entire spiritual path, one gains much merit, and knowledge of the stages of the path becomes more solid, direct and focused. By reading such complete, deep and authentic Scriptures, one gains experience of the path.

The Preciousness Of Lam Rim Teachings

You should really try to realise the preciousness of the Lam Rim teachings for subduing your mind. The Lam Rim teaching is supreme and there is no other text which is as effective. Other texts may help you to increase your

intellect, learn new lists or terms, but they do not help you to subdue or calm the mind.

Given this very special benefit of Lam Rim teachings in calming the mind of sentient beings, you can see how fortunate you are to have these Lam Rim teachings flourish in this country. Not only are these teachings flourishing in this country but you are able to hear and study them. You are indeed very fortunate. Such opportunities clearly show that you have created some very special karmic cause in past lives.

Furthermore not only do you have this opportunity to study Lam Rim, but considering your very busy schedules, you give yourself some time to actually meditate and gain some experience of renunciation and bodhicitta. Even if these experiences are not fully cultivated, at least there is an effort to actualise renunciation or bodhicitta. That in itself is a very worthy cause.

Therefore whenever there is an opportunity it is best to seize it to study and practice Lam Rim. Lam Rim is not only beneficial in accomplishing long term goals. Even in the immediate sense if there is something which upsets your mind a great deal, then just opening a Lam Rim text, reading and meditating on it will help to overcome those problems in the mind, no matter how short the time you spend.

You have this great opportunity at hand. So use it! If, for example, you are thirsty and have the choice of clean or filthy water in front of you, you do not drink the filthy water. That is not skilful. Therefore realising your opportunity, and the preciousness of the Lam Rim, regard it as your main practice. It will be beneficial.

Even Having Friends, We Still Suffer Alone:

When we talk of the fault of lacking friends, it is too narrow to understand this in terms of merely finding a partner for a relationship. Some people have a husband or wife, but still suffer from loneliness despite the hundreds of people outside their house. This fault is inevitable as long as one is subject to cyclic existence. We are talking of something much deeper than just finding a partner. Shantideva said:-

¹Liberation.. p.485 The title used in the text is The Bane Of Having No One To Help You.

You are born alone,
you experience suffering alone,
when you die, you die alone
so what is the use of a friend?

In a broader sense we can relate this to the law of karma, and this is important, because it then inspires us to follow the spiritual path. When you undergo suffering you must experience it by yourself. You cannot take some of that suffering out and give it to another.

So this means you should not create negative karma at any cost - even for the sake of your friends or relatives. Because the consequences of such actions will fall upon you; you must experience them and you cannot hand them over to your friends. Similarly at the time of death we must die alone. We cannot take any of our friends or relatives with us. We are following our own black and white karma which always accompanies us. If we contemplate this properly, it will inspire us to follow the spiritual path, and become more self guided. It will arouse some courage in our minds.

Always try to relate the teachings to one's own life, to one's own continuum.

422.212: The Specific Sufferings Of Samsara

སྔོ་སྔོའི་སྤྱལ་བསྐྱལ་བསམ་པ།

Now, having finished the faults of cyclic existence in general, we move to the specific sufferings of cyclic existence under which we study the sufferings of each realm.

422.212.1: Thinking About The Sufferings In The Lower Realms

ངན་འགྲོའི་སྤྱལ་བསྐྱལ་བསམ་པ།

Sufferings of the three lower realms which are literally the three bad migrations to the realms of hell, hungry ghost and animal realms.

422.212.2: Thinking About The Sufferings Of The Upper Realms

བདེ་འགྲོའི་སྤྱལ་བསྐྱལ་བསམ་པ།

Sufferings of the three higher realms or the three happy migrations to the realms of human, demi-god and godly realms.

These six realms are called the six realms, but if we group the godly and demi-god realms together as the realm of gods we only have five realms instead of six.

The sufferings of the three lower realms have already been explained in detail in the lower scope. We shall not go over this again. Having contemplated all the various types of suffering in the lower realms one will certainly renounce them, because one certainly does not want to be

born there. We have learned that we can prevent falling into the three lower realms by eliminating non-virtuous actions, and adopting virtuous actions. Therefore we can be certain that by following virtuous practice, we close the door to the three lower realms.

Next we consider whether there is any suffering in any of the three higher realms. Even in the higher realms, there is no escape from suffering. This shows the nature of cyclic existence. There is always suffering. The text now shows the suffering of the three higher realms.

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