

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

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Samdup Tsering

ལྷོ་ལམ་རིམ་རྒྱུ་ལ་ལག་བཅུངས།



3 September 1996

Make sure that you have generated the right motivation.

Last time we noted in our discussion how a cycle of twelve links can be completed within two lifetimes. Will anyone volunteer to review this point?

Jeremy: In the first life are ignorance, karmic formation, and causal consciousness, and in the second life are the resultant cause, name and form, six senses, contact, feeling, grasping and death.

Geshe-la: So you are saying finish three in the first life, then the rest in the next life. Who agrees with this?

Salome: Geshe-la said the first six are in the first life and the second six are in the second life. The first six are ignorance, karmic formations, consciousness, name and form, the six sense sources and contact in the first life.

Geshe-la: What we are discussing is an example of how a particular karma is created in this life, and how its result is ripened in the immediate next lifetime. In terms of the twelve links then the results of a karma created in this life must finish within two lifetimes - this life and the next.

We must think in terms of the causal order of the twelve links. Out of the motivation of ignorance we create a compositional karma, and the potential of that karma is then stored or left in the consciousness. So those three propelling causes - ignorance, karma and consciousness - have finished.

Then, the potential of the karma must be fully nourished or activated in order for it to ripen in the immediately following life. In terms of the twelve links, the three links or the branches of the establishing cause - craving, grasping and existence - must nourish the karmic potential before death. So besides the three propelling causes, the three establishing causes must also be finished in this life.

This inevitably leads to the next life wherein all the propelled and established results of the twelve links (birth, name and form and the rest) occur.

I don't know if it is clear to you but maybe one of you will volunteer to explain what has just been said.

Jenny L: In the first life ignorance is the basic cause which leads to karmic formation. Then as a result of that there are karmic imprints on consciousness so we have the first three - the propelling causes. Then to nourish those and bring about the next rebirth you need the establishing causes: craving, grasping and existence. Existence is the strong intention, just before rebirth, which leads to rebirth in the next life. In the next life are

name and form, six senses, feeling, contact, birth and old age and death

Geshe-la: If we focus on our present life then its karmic cause is virtuous karma. Now if we think of our current life in terms of the twelve links, then how many have been completed in this life? Answering that question also gives the idea of the way the twelve links are related to this life.

This life is the result of a ripening of karmic result. The causes of this result are the six causal links which cannot occur in this lifetime. So perhaps Wayne could explain how the other six finish in this life?

To restate the question, from the first moment you are conceived, or born, in a mother's womb until now how many of the twelve links have been completed?

Wayne: Name and form, sources, contact, feeling, birth and old age. Only death is still to come.

Geshe-la: This human life is the fruit of virtuous karma. The six resultant links always occur in the same lifetime.

- On first being conceived in the mother's womb, birth and name and form simultaneously occur.
- As the foetus gradually develops so do the six sense sources, then contact, then feeling which all have occurred in our life.
- Of the twelfth link of old age or death, old age has occurred but not death, so this link has not yet been completed.

The number of lifetimes over which the twelve links can be finished is a matter of whether the six causal links - three propelling causes and three establishing causes - occur in the same lifetime. If they occur in the same lifetime then the twelve links are completed over two lifetimes. If not then it will take three lifetimes for a complete round to be completed.

Completing the Twelve Links over Three Lifetimes

If the three propelling causes and the three establishing causes occur in the same lifetime, then the cycle of twelve links will occur in two lifetimes, as there cannot be any gap between establishing causes and establishing results.

But between propelling causes and propelled result there is no limit. It could be hundreds or thousands of lifetimes.

Once the karma is activated by the two of the three establishing causes, then without a gap, that is without the occurrence of a life with a twelve link cycle, the propelled and established result of the twelve links must

occur in that immediate next lifetime. In short a cycle of twelve links cannot finish within a single lifetime, since the minimum to finish a cycle of twelve links is two lifetimes and the maximum is three lifetimes. There cannot be a cycle of twelve links requiring more than three lifetimes to complete. Damien can you explain how the twelve links occur over three lifetimes?

Damien: *Life one:* ignorance, karmic formations, consciousness. At death another set of twelve links comes into play.

Life two: is the other intervening life or lives. At death in this second life craving, grasping, existence occur.

Life three: birth, name and form, six sense sources, contact, feeling, ageing and death.

Geshe-la: To add to Damien's answer, each of us might have various karmic formations stored in our consciousness before we were born into this human life. We were born as a human in this lifetime, because we had the karmic imprint to be born in the human realm, and it was activated by this life's cycle of craving, grasping and existence. However we may still we carry a karmic imprint to be reborn in hell realms, which can still ripen its result if it meets with the three nourishing conditions.

Jools: So Damien said another twelve links kicks in when it's more than two lifetimes?

Samdup: Between the propelling causes and propelled results of one set of twelve links you can have many lifetimes, or sets of cycles of the twelve links.

Geshe-la: We may have the karmic imprint of negative karma in our mind, but if at the time of death we can produce a virtuous state of mind, then this can postpone or delay the result of that ripening of the negative karmic imprint. This is because a virtuous state of mind cannot nourish the negative imprint. It is in this way that we can continue taking higher rebirth. That negative karmic seed is like a seed that will only sprout if given the right nourishing conditions such as moisture, manure, heat and so on.

Jools: If we have this huge backlog of lives that have not resulted yet, then can you become enlightened and still have this backlog?

Geshe-la: Even if you have reached permanent liberation from cyclic existence you can still have the virtuous karma to be born as a human which you have created in the past.

It is incorrect to say that when you are fully enlightened or reach a state of arhatship, or full liberation, that you abandon all the karma created in the past. It is however, correct to say that you have abandoned all negative or non-virtuous karma, but not the meritorious or virtuous karmas. On attaining liberation you have not abandoned the karma to be born as a human.

In this sense we talk of purifying negative karma. What does this mean? It means preventing the negative karma from producing its result. To prevent any karma producing its result does not necessarily mean that we have to abandon that karma. But by removing delusions we sterilise that karma, so that it is ineffective, and can

no longer produce its result. This is why we say that delusion is the main cause of creating karma, and then the main cause for yielding the conditions to ripen that karma so that it can produce its result. Geshe-la recalls that we have covered this same topic in the past.

Jenny L: Is there a cycle of twelve links for every action of body, speech and mind?

Geshe-la: It is not necessary that every action we create by body, speech and mind will be the karma of the twelve links. The karma of the twelve links must be one which is capable of propelling a life, e.g. a virtuous karma which will give a good rebirth such as a human one. We can create a verbal karma which is not strong enough to propel a good rebirth by itself, but which can be a cause to achieve good speech in a future life.

We must understand that there is a cause for any specific result. First we must know what we seek in life, then know what is the right cause to achieve it. For example, if you wish to be born as a human being, what is the main cause to be born in a better rebirth? It is moral ethics. The cause of comfort in this life is good living conditions, which is the outcome of giving. If we wish to be good looking and to be surrounded by friendly people, the cause is tolerance and patience. Also if we wish for that life to be a glorious one then the cause is the practice of effort, or perseverance. The cause for less distractions, and more calm and peace in the mind is to practise concentration. To have clear discriminating wisdom we must practise wisdom. So specific karma produces a specific result, and is not necessarily a cause for future rebirth.

In between the propelling causes and the propelled results it is possible to have a gap of many cycles of lifetimes. Between the establishing causes and established results of a given cycle of twelve links there cannot be any other cycles of twelve links.

In the Lam Rim commentary this is clearly explained. Please go over it.

Edit methodology

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Edited version checked by Alan Molloy

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10 September 1996

Once again generate the proper motivation.

We have discussed the way a given cycle of twelve links takes a minimum of two lifetimes and a maximum of three lifetimes to complete. It is important that everyone is familiar with the idea of the twelve links, which explain the way sentient beings are endlessly reborn within cyclic existence. We see that within one cycle sentient beings accumulate the karmas of many other lives yet to be born. The aim of contemplating the twelve links is to generate a renunciation of cyclic existence, which is the aspiration to attain the state of liberation from cyclic existence.

Through studying and learning the dharma we should try to detach our minds from cyclic existence, because there is no true essence within cyclic existence in terms of one's own body, wealth and friends. We may not be completely successful in losing our taste for cyclic existence, but if at least on a very artificial level we understand that while it might appear to be very useful, meaningful and pleasurable, this appearance is a delusion. If we see it in this way then cyclic existence has no true essence.

If we look at our life overall there is nothing which is reliable, so any security or safe direction is all entirely dependent upon ourselves. As it is said, we are born alone and so we leave this life alone. No matter how attached we are, there is nothing in this life which we can take with us when we die.

If through our spiritual practice we could produce some renunciation, or detachment, or distaste, towards cyclic existence, then this will not only lead us to the path of liberation. Even in the short term, such detachment can reduce the worry and confusion in your mind, and so you will find more happiness and peace.

The Twelve Links Integrated into the Three Scopes of Lam Rim

In fact this practice of the twelve links encompasses all the practices of the stages of the path. The great Geshe Purchuk based all the three scopes of the path on the twelve links meditation.

On the basis of meditation on the twelve links an understanding of the lower three realms and their sufferings can be developed. As regards the understanding of the lower realms we can contemplate how out of ignorance of cause and effect we create negative karma, leaving a karmic imprint on our consciousness. This imprint is nourished by the links of

craving and grasping. When it is fully nourished it is the link of becoming or existence. In this way we are born in the lower realms which is the link of birth. From that moment onwards the experience of suffering in that realm begins. It is immense and continues for as long as one is in that realm.

As one contemplates the lower realms on the basis of the twelve links, one feels very frightened, and in order to be free of the lower realms one takes refuge in the three jewels and adopts the practice of the law of karma. This practice of taking refuge and practising the law of karma out of the fear of being born in the lower realms is the stages of the path of the person of the lower scope.

Likewise the twelve links can be used to contemplate the higher realms. Here the nature of suffering and the lack of true happiness are also apparent, so the higher realms are also unattractive, and on this basis renunciation is generated. With this thought of leaving cyclic existence, the path to be followed is that of the three-fold trainings, and this is the stages of the path for the person of middle scope

Being born over and over again is the fate of all beings trapped in cyclic existence. Thus, in this way one can generate sympathy and compassion for other beings. The reason for feeling compassion is not because one directly sees their suffering, but rather that simply being born in cyclic existence, and engaging in the activities of cyclic existence, is a reason to feel compassion for them. The other being does not have to be undergoing some painful experience. They may even be creating negative karma. But, influenced by love and compassion you generate the bodhicitta mind and then engage in deeds of the six perfections. This is following the path of the person of great scope.

So you can see how the subject of the twelve links can lead one to follow all three stages of the path.

We are studying this twelve links topic not just to increase our intellectual knowledge. Our purpose is to motivate us to follow spiritual practice.

The teachings can only benefit us if we take them into our hearts, and not just to learn new things to talk about or to count. The only benefit is if the dharma, or what we learn, is thoroughly mixed with our mind. It is like adding different flavours to your cooking. You know this has been successful when what you cooked tastes good.

Similarly when what you practise is fully mixed with your mind, then there is some true benefit from it. In terms of our immediate experience of life through dharma we find more happiness and comfort within us. It is said that the dharma serves as the true friend of this life, providing joy and happiness, and solving all problems.

Guru Shakyamuni Buddha said “there is liberation to be found in the household life.” He said this because in the householder’s life there is the opportunity to practise dharma and develop dharma realisations. In this practice one is instructed to counteract delusions since they are the source of all immediate and future suffering.

For example, to find more benefit in a relationship with a partner, it is important to minimise, or reduce, the mere desire for each other. Desire can not only bring unnecessary problems and sufferings to the mind, but will also cause the other to see one as very selfish, lacking love and care. It is very obvious that with desire your mind will always be very suspicious of your partner, because you cannot simply relax. Without desire, you can show more support and love, and be more inwardly relaxed.

The dharma, or spiritual approach, focuses on the mind and its actions. Spiritual practitioners are always very aware and mindful of their actions. At the end of the day you recollect what you have done during the day. If you have committed any negative actions in that day, then you have created a cause to be born in the lower realms. If you take this seriously, then you cannot sleep without purifying it, since you might die during the night. Then if you die all that is required is for the links of craving and grasping to nourish that karma. Therefore if you contemplate karma in conjunction with your own mind and life, then naturally your contemplation would motivate you to practise the law of karma.

If we are told “give up this life now” then it is extremely difficult. To stop the affairs of life is almost impossible since in daily life we become preoccupied by so many things and activities. Therefore it is important to find some time to focus our mind, in meditation, on spiritual practice, and in that we generate some sense of renunciation. We can do this by meditating on the twelve links topic.

Although we are born in degenerate times, and all that surrounds us is against what dharma teaches, if we take this opportunity to utilise this life in the right way by practising dharma, then we have had a most fortunate life. We have created the causes to improve the status of our future life, by meeting all the favourable conditions - conditions that we have created for ourselves.

By continuing our practice from lifetime to lifetime then we can attain our goal of buddhahood. The only way to attain this goal of buddhahood is by making each life a step closer to the goal. It is like an aeroplane taking off. It has to run for a certain distance, then after it leaves the ground it must gradually rise to a flying altitude. Stage by stage, like a plane climbing to cruising height, we shall reach the final goal of buddhahood.

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1 October 1996

Try to cultivate the best possible motivation which is bodhicitta. Think that listening to this lam rim is to follow the teaching in daily practice, in order to achieve the full state of enlightenment for the sake of all beings.

Most of us have some understanding of the bodhicitta mind, as we have heard a lot about the teachings on bodhicitta, but understanding alone is not enough. We have to blend our understanding with our own daily practice to cultivate bodhicitta mind, because the purpose of cultivating this bodhicitta mind is to calm our mind. That purpose cannot be achieved just by learning about bodhicitta, but has to be cultivated in the mind through making an effort in our practice.

In our spiritual practice we are challenging a destructive force within us, so therefore it is very important to first of all clearly recognise that enemy, which is the opposite of bodhicitta. The enemy is the self cherishing attitude. In order to recognise it as the enemy to be overcome, we have to know all its faults, and the disadvantages of having that attitude in our mind.

Therefore we have to investigate, and compare the advantages and disadvantages of the bodhicitta mind, and its opposite, the self cherishing attitude. We may not have genuine bodhicitta, but we do have a substitute - the good heart, or loving kindness towards other beings. So in cultivating this bodhicitta mind we have to see the advantages of cultivating this good heart as much as possible, and in as many ways as possible. We also have to see the disadvantages of the self cherishing mind in as many ways as possible.

We should try to see these advantages and disadvantages in the context of the short term and long term benefits to this immediate life, and to life in future in terms of benefits to other beings. As we think on the consequences of having these two types of attitude or mind within us, we see clearly that this self cherishing attitude is the root of all our problems, even immediate ones like the unhappiness, restlessness, and dissatisfaction in the mind.

If we investigate this self cherishing mind very closely, we see that as long as we do not challenge it and allow it sit within us without bringing any harm to it, then there is no end to our problems. We shall not find lasting peace and happiness. On the other hand if we think of the bodhicitta mind, or show good heart to others, it has the immediate effect of enhancing the peace and happiness within our mind. Whenever we generate that

mind, our experience becomes very peaceful, and enjoyable. Cultivating such a mind is the source of ensuring happiness and a better rebirth in the future. So at all times it is important to see the bodhicitta mind as a source of happiness for ourselves, and others.

As we follow the spiritual path we have to constantly remind ourselves of its purpose. The goal of the spiritual path is calming and controlling the mind, so one has to be very clear about why our mind needs to be controlled. Whose responsibility is it to control the mind? It is the responsibility of each human being.

What is the means of controlling the mind? It is the dharma or spiritual practice. It is in dharma practice that we learn about our mind, and about the negativities within our mind which we call delusions, or afflictive emotions. Whenever these afflictive emotions occupy our mind, we feel very disturbed and lose all inner peace and comfort.

The advantage of practising dharma is that we can always be very aware of our mind, and through this awareness we can see that even if we cannot stop delusions arising, we can recognise them when they do arise. Then we are not completely overpowered by them. By retaining some mindfulness and alertness we can, to some extent, minimise their detrimental influence on us.

In general, the basic or most important factor in achieving any goal in our life, is the soundness of our mind and body. Without that soundness we cannot achieve even our own purpose, let alone helping others. Therefore it is essential to have a very clear and sound mind when we engage in spiritual practice to try to develop positive qualities and minimise the negativities in our own mind. We do this not only to bring some peace and satisfaction within our mind, but also to achieve whatever goal we are pursuing, whether for our own or others' benefit.

Generating strong self determination within our mind makes us a very strong person, in the sense that outer circumstances have less influence on our daily experience. So much so, that with a strong determination within ourselves, we can even give our life to pursue a goal.

We are focussing on this, just to remind you that the purpose of learning dharma is to practise it. Our approach should be such that the more we learn, and the more we feel positive about dharma, the more we develop faith in it. This does not mean blind acceptance. It is said that it is natural that if we sincerely put into

practise what we learn, we see benefits of dharma. Because we see the benefits of dharma, as we learn more, our faith will increase, and our motivation becomes stronger.

The fact that we are so vulnerable to outer circumstances in life shows our inner weakness. We can overcome that weakness by cultivating strong faith in dharma, a faith based on daily practice. Then you will be able to endure, or even be prepared to endure difficulty, and hardship, and not be readily affected by the various outer events that you face in daily life.

The sign of progress in practising dharma is identifying some kind of object of trust within one's own mind. Because it is said that if we have to identify the dharma then it has to be a quality within oneself: like dharma as a refuge, as an unfailing protection which will prevent us from falling over a cliff. So we have to see that kind of protection within oneself. As said before, following dharma practice properly means that we always have the motivation that we hear or study dharma in order to put it into practice. Practice means that after hearing or studying the dharma, we have to contemplate its meaning. Then when we gain a valid understanding of what we have heard or studied, we have to then sit or meditate on it.

Our practice becomes very fulfilling if we integrate these three things - hearing, thinking and meditating - together in such a way that one automatically leads to another. For example the more we hear, the more there is to contemplate, and the more we contemplate, we see the more there is to meditate upon. So in this way what we have found in our practice becomes deeply ingrained in the mind and is a valid truth and not a superficial experience.

What is most important is that as we follow the practice we have to see it as a true means of eliminating the suffering and problems in our life. Because dharma is something like a protection, a very trusting guide, which we have to see within oneself. It does not matter where we live or what we do: sleeping, walking, sitting, whether we are alone or with others, there is always some sense of protection, of being secure and free.

To find the protection of dharma within oneself is very reliable and lasting. We cannot find such a means of protection outwardly. If we examine our own daily experience, where we always tend to seek or rely on outer circumstances for happiness, we find there is no control over our own experience. Outer objects are like a rainbow that can change very quickly. It is like someone who is always fond of and wants to be close to his or her friends. Whenever he is surrounded by them he feels happy and in a good mood. As soon as they are gone he feels very sad. He cannot find lasting and reliable outer objects of happiness.

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8 October 1996

Benefits of Utilising the Bodhicitta Mind

Try to cultivate a correct motivation, which is bodhicitta - aspiring to attain buddhahood for the sake of all beings. It is because of this ultimate goal that we should sincerely think "I shall study and practise dharma."

With this motivation we set the goal for our practice. In other words, we have some desired goal or wish that is to be fulfilled as a result of this practice.

The next thing is to realise that simply wishing for, or aiming at something is not enough. There must be some action to achieve that goal.

Here we are talking about the benefits of utilising the bodhicitta mind as a motivation behind all our actions. If done out of the bodhicitta mind, any action - sleeping, eating, walking - can result in bringing happiness and peace in our own life, and also do the same for others.

Of course possessing genuine bodhicitta is wonderful, but we all have within us a substitute - some degree of care, or concern, or feeling of loving kindness towards others. So when we talk of the benefits of bodhicitta, or of motivating all our actions with bodhicitta mind, we are really talking about our caring attitude towards other beings.

There is no more profound, or beneficial, spiritual practice (or meditation) than trying to infuse this caring attitude of bodhicitta throughout all our actions. If we do this, not only shall we make progress in our spiritual path, but we shall automatically progress in our ordinary, or mundane, life as well.

In terms of our spiritual progress, with the strong cultivation of the mind of bodhicitta then all other realisations will follow. We shall be more conscious and understanding of the law of karma (of cause and effect), and of living within that law. As a benefit of practising the law of karma, we shall naturally be transformed into a better, more honest person who will be admired by others. We shall be able to show tolerance or patience or sympathy or compassion whenever it is needed.

So there are a great number of benefits relating directly to our daily life, in terms of bringing harmony to our relationships with others. We know from our own experience that the enjoyment of a good life is sustained by harmony in the family, and with friends. With a very positive mind, then not only is our life happy, but whatever work we do is fruitful, with our actions being more certain of achieving their desired goals.

As said before the most essential part of our spiritual practice is cultivating the thought of caring for other

beings: the attitude of helping or benefiting others. With such a caring attitude towards others, we are naturally integrating dharma into our practice. For instance, without a genuine feeling of love towards a friend we shall behave thoughtlessly. However with this genuine feeling of love we shall be more mindful of our interactions with them. We shall be inspired to act in such a way that benefits them. This action of preventing harmfulness and benefiting others is a virtuous or wholesome action, which is what the practice of karma means. Practising karma doesn't just mean avoiding non-virtuous actions such as murder.

The most important thing which constantly reminds us to practise dharma, and which changes our way of thinking and performing actions is our mind, which is always with us. So it is very important that we always watch our mind, just as we watch other people before befriending them. What we learn from the teachings is that if we possess a very positive state of mind then that is a source for happiness for us, just as it is an advantage to have a sound and healthy body.

We can learn a lot by listening to dharma, but whether we gain any benefit all depends upon what we do with the teachings after we have heard them. Putting dharma into practice, means transforming our mind. Then because the mind is the source of all of life's actions, we are bringing more positive qualities to our mind and attitudes, which will automatically change our actions. If we have changed our way of thinking or our perception of others, since meeting dharma, then we can see a change in our actions. Even in such a trivial action as walking there will be more mindfulness. For example, before meeting dharma there is less mindfulness of where one walks, and so one might step on ants.

Having cultivated thoughts of concern for other beings in our actions, so we then have more understanding of other beings. We shall realise that even a tiny ant can, like us, experience pain and fear. If despite our effort we commit a negative action then we can feel some regret for that action, and recognise that it was wrong.

There is little point in listening or studying the teachings without trying to put them into practice. There are endless opportunities for practice in daily life. For instance at work, having concern for the welfare and well-being of others, we shall be more honest with our time and work. We shall understand that while we are there, we are being paid wages for our work, and if we are not fulfilling our job or responsibility then indirectly we are stealing, because we are accepting payment for

something which we have not done.

Similarly if we practise dharma sincerely then it will have no negative aspects in the eyes of other people. Because we have a caring attitude, and perform all our actions with this attitude, our actions of speech and body will all be wholesome and minimise the un-wholesome. The people around us, may not be Buddhist, or they may be unsure about following Buddhism, but by observing your wholesome behaviour which is a result of practising dharma, they will be convinced by the change in your attitude. So they will admire your practice, and dharma.

As soon as you make connection with the dharma and with meditation, you change the way you talk, your facial expressions and the way you act. These are universal virtues, so naturally you will be admired for what is actually the practice of dharma

The essence of practice comes down to mental attitude. With positive mental attitude one's behaviour becomes very mindful and very discriminating of every action, even to the right and wrong places to step on the ground.

When we consider this caring attitude as the heart of our spiritual practice, then we can see that this spiritual practice encompasses all our actions. By refraining from negative or non virtuous actions - even stepping on ants - not only are their lives saved, and harm prevented, but these actions are not the cause of bad consequences in the future, such as dying under the footsteps of others, or not receiving protection in life.

Try then, to integrate this mental attitude of good heart and loving kindness with all the actions which you perform in life.

Starting next week you will do six weeks of meditations then Guru Puja. Geshe-la advises that you meditate on the Twelve Links in addition to some discussion. Geshe-la recommends the Three Poisonous Minds - desire, hatred, ignorance - as the discussion topic. Focus upon identifying these three and finding the antidote for each one of them. Also recite Shantideva's *Bodhisattva Charyavatara* but unlike in the past where two groups took turns to read out the text and listen, everyone will recite the text together. This will make more time for discussion.

Divide the one and a half hour session into meditation, discussion and recitation. These seven weeknight sessions are part of the commitment for joining the study group so do your best to attend all of them, and during sessions try to be helpful and friendly and open to each other since the idea is to share knowledge. Everyone is doing these sessions to progress with their meditation and study of dharma.

Also doing the sessions in an atmosphere of friendship will make it very enjoyable. In this way, one can get to liberation without sacrificing the pleasures of samsara.

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