

“The Path through the Three Scopes”

As taught by Ven. Geshe Sangey Thinley at Jam Tse Dhargyey Ling on Sunday 17 May 2015.

Firstly, it's very important to have a positive, compassionate motivation in whatever you do. This becomes even more important when engaging in dharma activities such as listening to dharma teachings. Correct motivation is the basis that gives real power to all your dharma activities. Let's ask ourselves now: are we generating this bodhicitta motivation like good bodhisattva's? It is a good practice to make a sincere Dharmic determination at the time one gets up in the morning, such as determining to engage in the practice of patience. This will ensure that your mind remains stable and calm throughout the day.

It is very important that one understands what is meant here by patience. In a Buddhist sense, 'patience' means a mind that is undisturbed and unaffected by what is going on externally around one. There are three types (or divisions) of patience referred to in the scriptures. The first of these types is the patience of enduring harm. With this type of patience we remain undisturbed by the harsh speech or actions of our enemies or those that would do us harm. In this case, even if all sentient beings in the world were out to harm one, one's mind would still remain completely undisturbed and patient. The second type of patience is the patience of enduring suffering. This suffering could arise from a lack of food or clothing for example. It includes disease, difficulty and all types of mental or physical suffering. The third type of patience is the patience of practicing dharma. This is the patience of a mind that remains undeterred when it meets obstacles and difficulties while engaged in dharma practice. Dharma practice is not always easy, but whatever difficulties one encounters, with patience one's mind remains determined to continue strongly in the practice.

As Shantideva said, there are many dharma practices but the practice of patience is supreme. Why did he say this? He said this because a patient mind is so powerful and so positive, that despite whatever difficulties one experiences, one will refrain from engaging in negative emotions and avoid creating negative karma. This is a very powerful practice to have. Although we say that there are three types of patience, this is really just a division of the three main types. There are actually many types of patience one can have. If you experience something that seems to lie outside of these three types of patience, it doesn't mean that you should just allow anger to arise. You should be patient no matter what circumstances arise.

It is important that we practice patience in a correct and unmistakable way. This is why we need to define and explain patience clearly. Why is this clarity so important? It is important because if you follow the correct path you will get the correct result. If you don't follow the correct path who knows where you might end up? If you want to go to Auckland, for example you really need to follow the right road to arrive at your chosen destination. Dharma is the same. If you want liberation and enlightenment, you have to practice the correct path or technique to get there.

Not only do we need to follow the correct path, but we need to do it in a complete way with all aspects of practice included. We can't just practice what we like and set aside what we don't. This will not produce the result that we want. If you want to grow a flower, the first thing you need is the right seed. You also need the right conditions; the right amount of water and sunlight. If you don't have these conditions in the correct amount, the flower will not flourish. The same is true of your dharma practice. You need to practice the correct path in a complete way.

We can feel confident that Buddhism provides a complete path because it includes all aspects or parts. Shakyamuni Buddha taught the dharma in three scopes - small, medium and great. He taught the Hinayana path and also the Mahayana path. Within the Mahayana he taught the sutric and the tantric paths. In the Tibetan tradition this path has an established and complete lineage which has been maintained in the correct way.

This is the same with all traditions. In the Christian tradition they have their version of the grounds and the paths. If one practiced the aspects of that tradition in the correct way then one could have confidence in gaining the correct result, which might be being born in a certain state. If one didn't follow all the aspects of this path then this could become a warped teaching and there would be no guarantee of a correct result.

In the Tibetan tradition we have the three paths of the small, medium and great scope. These paths all produce different results, but one shouldn't say that only the great scope is worth practicing. The scopes are according to what one personally wishes to achieve. If one wishes to achieve the result of the small scope, then that is the one you should practice. The same is true of the medium and great scopes. One should be honest about one's capacity for practice and choose the scope or techniques best suited to oneself.

The purpose of choosing the small scope is not to attain happiness in this life, but to attain a positive rebirth. One establishes this through two primary practices: that of taking refuge and that of understanding the law of cause and effect, or karma. First, one takes refuge in the three jewels. This powerful practice helps to establish one in the path. Then, through studying the law of cause and effect, one starts to modify one's actions. One refines one's activities in order to attain a positive rebirth. The medium scope has a slightly vaster view. The understanding is a bit deeper. One understands that even if one attains future happiness through a positive rebirth, this is not a stable or lasting happiness. Sooner or later one will have to take rebirth again and experience more suffering. To attain lasting happiness, one has to gain liberation from samsara. This is achieved through developing the mind of renunciation, the mind that understands the suffering of samsara and wishes to be free of it. Renunciation practices entail the removing of karma and delusions and the seeds of those delusions. Eradicating these seeds leads to the attainment of liberation.

The great scope has a different motivation. It is no longer enough to only consider one's particular situation, one's own suffering. A vaster motivation arises, one that includes taking on the responsibility of guiding all other sentient beings to attaining a state of liberation and enlightenment. How is one able to do this? As an ordinary being doesn't have the capacity to do this, but if one attains a state of Buddhahood then one has all the method and wisdom necessary to benefit others. So, one strives to attain the state of full enlightenment to benefit all sentient beings. This is only a brief explanation of the three scopes, if one wishes to understand the differences between the scopes in more detail one should look at the Lam Rim text.

Now, it is important to realise that we have attained this precious human rebirth. We need to take this opportunity seriously and apply ourselves fully. One should engage in positive activity with all of one's three doors; one's body speech and mind. Firstly one should have the correct motivation in order to create virtue with one's mind. Then one engages in respect with one's body, placing ones hands together in prayer or doing prostrations. Thirdly one recites prayers and creates virtue with one's speech. Even if this is done for just a short time but sincerely and in a proper way, one can accumulate a vast amount of merit. Today, for example, the prayers we have recited have been a great opportunity for people to generate merit.

Another example is when we do a mandala offering. When one places one's hands in the mandala mudra, one offers the entire world system to all the Buddhas, bodhisattvas, lineage lamas and teachers. All the beautiful aspects of this world are offered and this creates extensive merit. Now, why are we always talking about the need to create merit? It's because if one creates positive merit or good karma, then whatever activities one engages in will be successful. If one doesn't have merit one can't expect to have success. We offer this whole world, even though we don't own it. Simply by virtue of being residents on this planet and experiencing it's features and benefits, we are able to make this offering. You could offer New Zealand, for example, by virtue of living in New Zealand. This gives you the right to make an offering of it to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

There are people with various dispositions who have different traditions and beliefs. This isn't to say that people shouldn't believe what they like, however you can compare people with strong belief in the dharma, and those that don't have belief. People with no strong faith in the dharma can have a certain type of happiness when they're young, however when they encounter problems, a lot of mental difficulties arise because they don't have the references to deal with them. Those with a sincere dharma practice who encounter difficulties don't find them harmful. In fact the problems become beneficial to their practice. In this way it is better if one has some ability to study the dharma.

When I refer to 'dharma,' I refer to any spiritual belief, not just Buddha dharma. Spiritual practitioners are of two types. There are ones who believe in a creator God, and those that don't. Those who believe in a creator God often have the idea that their suffering is dependent on the creator being. So they make prayers and offerings in the hope that God will relieve their suffering. They see their creator as responsible for all their experiences. Those spiritual traditions that don't believe in a creator being look at things from a different perspective. These traditions believe that whatever we experience is the result of our own karma.

All traditions have the same basis in morality, loving kindness, compassion and benefiting others, so what is the differentiating factor between Buddhism and other traditions? It's the view of dependent arising or dependent origination. Nothing exists apart from the laws of cause and effect, so all aspects of one's experience flow from the law of dependent arising. There is great meaning behind the phrase 'cause and effect'. If we fall over we use the ground to get back up. Just like this the law of cause and effect is the ground of understanding that supports us and allows us to change our view.

To explain dependent origination simply, when we look at something that arises, we say that it arises from its own causes. A baby, for example, is born from a mother. We can say that the mother was one of the causes for the baby to come into being. No one is born without having a mother, so we can refer to that as a primary cause. If we really think about and understand the law of cause and effect, we will refine our behaviour. Such reflection does this by allowing us to understand the results of our actions. If we are inclined to steal for example, an understanding of the harmful effect brought about by stealing will enable us to go beyond our wish to steal. Understanding that everything comes about through a cause becomes very a powerful guide to our behaviour.

The law of cause and effect helps us to deal with our experience. If we understand that our experiences come from causes and conditions, we can relate to it in a different way. If one experiences suffering and understands that this is a result of karma, one can take responsibility for one's experience.

Why did Buddha teach the Four Noble Truths first? It's because this teaching was used to illustrate the point of dependent origination. This allowed people to understand their situation and how their suffering came about, and eventually to be free of it and attain liberation and enlightenment.

The first noble truth of suffering is divided into three types: The suffering of suffering, the suffering of change and all-pervasive suffering. The first two sufferings are feelings. All-pervasive suffering has a different aspect. After teaching the truth of suffering the Buddha went on to teach that the experience of samsara is fleeting and unstable. He then taught how samsara came about. After that he taught that there was freedom from samsara and then taught specific techniques for becoming free. That is, he taught the truth of suffering, the causes of suffering, the truth of cessation and the path. Our time here is short and we can't give a detailed explanation of the Four Noble Truths, but one should refer to the Lam Rim and other texts for more detail.

If we know we are suffering and what causes it, we can abandon the causes of suffering and stop it occurring. The point here is to implement our understanding into practice. As Aryadeva said, suffering can be divided into the suffering of body and that of mind. People who seem prosperous mainly endure suffering of the mind. Poorer people experience a lot of physical suffering.

How do we put this understanding into practice? We can't wish for happiness to arise magically. One needs to cultivate causes for happiness and abandon the causes of suffering. If one thinks happiness will arise without cause, one is mistaken. One needs to understand the dharma and then put those techniques into practice. If one has a physical sickness, one has to identify the type of sickness one has. One then goes to a doctor who correctly identifies which medicine is required. These two steps are all very well, but one still needs to take the medicine! The process for establishing happiness is the same. One needs to put the dharma into practice to create a positive result. Just as one needs to consult a qualified doctor in the case of a physical illness, we can use this analogy to consider mental sickness and see the Buddha as the example of the perfect doctor who can identify one's problem and prescribe the right practices to cure it. In this analogy dharma practice is the medicine.

The point here is that one actually needs to practice the dharma. If all we did when we saw the doctor was to exclaim "Wow! just look at this wonderful medicine" and not take it, we could not expect to be cured. Just so, if one has a perfectly qualified dharma teacher and does not put their teachings into practice, one can't expect to benefit.

Let's take the example of dependent arising. If we understand that everything that arises is based on causes, and therefore our suffering is based on causes, it would be foolish to have that understanding then to do nothing about it. What we really need to do is eradicate the behaviours that are the causes of suffering.

Think now about having attained this fortunate human rebirth. We need to think that having attained this birth it is our responsibility to be the best, most positive human being we can be. We need to make a determination to engage in positive activities and refrain from negative activities, therefore developing our mind in a positive way.

Question: Could you explain what is meant by 'cutting the root of suffering'?

Answer: If you have a tree and you need to remove it, you really have to remove all the roots. If you just cut the tree down, it could regrow from the roots. In this analogy, we ask 'what is the root of suffering?' It is grasping at self, or ego grasping. Eradicating the root of suffering (grasping at self) is a long and difficult process and takes many lifetimes of practice.

It is most important to have a happy mind. One's happiness and suffering is one's own responsibility. It's really up to you. As Shantideva said one needs to prepare the ground, as when building a house. Patience is like a foundation for the mind. Without patience the mind is easily disturbed and unstable. Therefore it is very important to protect one's own mind through the practice of patience. Please remember to dedicate the merit generated today to the people of Nepal. At least 8,000 have died in the recent earthquakes, and many more will suffer from homelessness as the monsoon rains are coming. It is important to dedicate for the people of Nepal at this time.

(Translated by Anton Weiersmuller: Transcribed by Paula Moros: Lightly Edited by Jampa Tsekyi)