

Accumulating Good Karma is Beautiful Geshe Gedun Tharchin

In the mind training or mind transforming practices (*lojong*), it is taught that there are two things which should be done-develop appropriate motivation and dedicate the merit from practices to the benefit of all beings. Before coming to this summer school, for example, we should have produced a good motivation and at end we should make the dedication. So, motivation and dedicating merit are very important in Tibetan Buddhism.

Motivation is a kind of alchemy which transmutes actions into something positive or negative. Everything we do-having breakfast, sleeping, whatever-can be transmuted into dharma [pure, religious or spiritual] action. The important thing is the motivation. We may be involved in an activity we do not consider to be dharma like cooking for example, but cooking can be transformed into dharma. How? Through motivation. The right kind of motivation can transform any action into dharma.

In order to develop and maintain such motivation we need mindfulness or awareness. Awareness, in general, is a technique. The real spirit of dharma is not simply mindfulness or awareness, it is positive motivation, keeping going, maintaining awakening. We can also call that karma.

Usually, karma is referred to as a kind of destiny, but it isn't. Karma is action. In English that is literally the translation. It simply means 'work'. Putting your cushion from here to there is karma. Karma is not that complicated. It is not something done in the past; it is present. We are doing it. In Buddhism we hear 'karma, karma, karma', but where does karma lie? In the motivation. I am trying to give you an idea of how karma works, the process of accumulating the karmic actions, karmic imprints.

Motivation has two levels-causal and resultant-this is a kind of translation from the Tibetan. Causal motivation is fundamental, and resultant motivation is that which is present in the moment of action. Here we are at the Leicester summer school. What kind of intention did we have before coming here? Whatever it was is the causal intention regarding this summer school. That intention is very important, very powerful; it is the key to transmuting this five-day schedule into, what? How powerful will the dharmic action be? What sort of dharmic action will result? The causal motivation or intention regarding this summer school has already taken place. Now we are in the process, in the moment to moment living of it. With what kind of intention did we have breakfast this morning? Morning meditation, meetings, tea breaks, lunch-they take place one by one. What kind of intention did we have before each one? We can analyse it.

Sometimes it is easy to calculate how much good or bad karma is being accumulated. The fundamental intention that we have before each activity will transform one hour, say, or more into either dharma or nondharma. So, this is causal intention.

Then there is resultant or momentary intention. We might have had a good intention before this meeting, but during it some disturbance or wrong intention comes into our minds. However, that doesn't matter so much. Between these two-causal and resultant-causal is the more important; it has the greater power to transform. Positive karma still accumulates from the power of causal intention. So momentary intentions are secondary.

The *Bodhicharyavatara* by Shantideva points out that the root of dharma practice lies in intention; the spirit of it is positive intention. I would like to emphasise that it doesn't

necessarily matter what you are doing, the important thing is how it is done and with what kind of motivation. That is the point. And awareness is the key to keeping positive intentions alive. A book by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium*, has within it a chapter entitled 'No Magic, No Mystery'. This is very much His Holiness's style-no magic, no mystery-and the book contains a detailed analysis of motivation or intention. I feel this is a very important element in Buddhist practice-a state of mind and heart which covers not only something in the beginning but also during. The first motivation is the one which determines what follows-whether it becomes positive, negative or neutral; it determines whether positive or negative karma is created.

People want to know what karma is. They ask, 'Is karma destiny?' No, it is not destiny, neither is it complex. Actually, it is quite simple. There was a famous Tibetan yogi who in the early part of his life had been a robber. He lived on a mountain and robbed travellers who passed by. One day a poor man happened to cross his path and the poor man asked the robber, 'Who are you?' The robber gave his name. The traveller was terrified, so much so that he fell down dead. This greatly saddened the robber, 'Oh, just hearing my name is enough to kill people.' It was a turning point in his life and as a result he became a meditator, a yogi. In fact, this once notorious robber became an extraordinary yogi. He utilised a particular method with black and white stones. Every evening he would reflect on how much negative and positive karma he had produced that day, 'I had this intention and that action followed. This was positive, that was negative.' In the beginning he picked up very few white stones; they were mostly black. Later on, however, more and more white stones were used and not so many black.

What is interesting is that when he was a robber, he couldn't get enough food. Then, when he became a yogi the food could not get to him, so much was brought by devotees. The Tibetan saying is: *The mouth couldn't reach the food. Now the food cannot reach the mouth.* Karma is clear here. When he was a robber he was involved in bad karma. He worked hard but it was hugely difficult even to find enough to eat. Later he started to accumulate good karma and suddenly, not only did he get plenty to eat, there was too much. What concerned him in his practice was intention. How many positive intentions today? How many negative intentions?

These practices are for all the activities which occur throughout the day. It is not a question of, 'I'm practising the dharma for an hour now, and now I'm resting.' That is impossible. Sometimes we may think like this, 'Now I'm practising. Now I'm not practising, I'm reading.' But this is dualistic. There is no difference between practising the dharma and our everyday lives, whether preparing breakfast, going to the office, driving, or whatever-all these things should be carried out with *dharmic* motivation.

We may practise the dharma with three different levels of motivation-with the motive of attaining good conditions in a future lifetime, with the motive of realising nirvana, or with the motive of dedicating one's life to the causes of Buddhahood, to full enlightenment, to the awakened state. Out of these three motivations any action could become *dharma* practice. On the other hand, being able to sit like a Buddha statue is not *dharma* practice, and *dharma* practice is not for making oneself relaxed or getting rid of headaches, 'Oh, I have a headache, I need to meditate.' We don't need to practise the dharma for this; there are better methods for getting rid of headaches. Using the dharma with this kind of intention is very poor. Feeling relaxed or being relieved of a headache

may, of course, be an outcome of meditation. When we buy Coca-Cola the tin comes with it. Our intention is to buy the drink not the tin, but we get the tin anyway. There is no need to meditate in order to cure a headache-better to meditate for nirvana. If practice has the power to cure your headache, it will do so. Even if you don't want your headache cured, it will be. Practising the *dharma* for that purpose, however, is imagination for me, and maybe for the Tibetan people.

In Buddhism we also have the three jewels-Buddha, Dharma, Sangha-and these are considered the protectors for all who wish to reach liberation, nirvana. But the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are not for resolving the problem of a headache; they are not protectors for simple things.

I feel it is a very important for Buddhist practitioners to get to the essence of the practice and not be wasting time on side issues. Buddha, Dharma, Sangha are the protectors for all those who are seeking liberation. If you use the three jewels-Buddha, Dharma, Sangha-for resolving very small problems, that is actually the misuse of dharma, that is also negative karma; it is not right karma. Let me make it clear, karma is not something we plant and which comes about without our knowing. It is quite evident that karma mainly depends on motivation. Motivation is the fundamental cause of how we are going to feel; what we experience is a result of previous intentions. If we have enough mindfulness we can clearly see this from our own experiences. It is not that things come without our knowing them. Happiness and unhappiness are our experiences. We begin to see that this good state of mind or this unpleasant state of mind was caused by this or that intention. This is how to check whether or not karma works.

Buddhism teaches that we can overcome any physical problem with mental strength. Physical problems, small problems, are nothing for real practitioners; they are conditions for expanding the potential of their practice. Do we practise the dharma in order to resolve a small headache? No! If serious practitioners have headaches or some other kinds of pain or difficulties, these things become the conditions for expanding their spiritual strength of dharma, for realisation. This strength, this inner quality, has the power to overcome any external or physically-related problem. That is one special characteristic of dharma practice. To use that quality we need to know exactly how dharma works, what the process is, what it is really meant for, and how it affects us within.

The realisation of impermanence is the beginning of dharma practice. Great masters often talk about 'the clear light of impermanence', not emptiness. To talk in terms of emptiness may be too difficult for us to start with. Reflecting on impermanence, however, shows the route to dharma. If we reflect on impermanence when we start practising, that really opens up dharma action; it clarifies our aims of the practice. Otherwise we go to other goals-tiny goals which interrupt the real one. Reflecting on impermanence therefore will disclose the clear route to nirvana, not to these small things. Impermanence and the law of cause and effect is the start of practice.

We need to keep these goals of practice in sight. That doesn't mean we have to avoid anything in our everyday lives. Motivation is all that needs to change. If anything else has to be changed it changes by itself. There is no need for us to think about it. If it changes here in the intention that changes everything.

It is very important not to abandon our everyday activities while practising dharma.

These two things support each other. We are in *samsara*, this very high-tech modern society. Without a mobile phone you can't be Buddha; you can't do anything! I recently led a small retreat in Assisi. There were some practitioners there who wanted to follow the renunciate's life. I told them they should just become beggars, that the beggar's life is the best for dharma practice. A woman said, 'No, no, I can't. This is too much.' I said, 'You should be a modern beggar; not that other type who have to live on the streets. The modern beggar discards the computer and mobile phone. In this society these are now almost considered to be prerequisites, indispensable to life, to survival-unless, of course, you have a very good secretary who takes care of everything for you. The woman was very impressed. She said, 'Oh, I never thought about that.'

It is nothing these days in this society to have a mobile phone. Every year many are just thrown away for the latest models. Computers are the same; they are very cheap.

If we have a real sense of dharma and enough awareness, mindfulness, then we don't lose anything. The robber who became a yogi put a lot of effort into being a robber but couldn't get enough to eat. When meditating and counting black and white stones every day, however, he got more than enough food. You might say, 'Oh, how could he get food by just counting stones every day?' Most people calculate everything, 'If I do this, I will get that.' You try and plan but then you might think, 'I won't have enough for the next five years!' But karma is not like that. You cannot programme the future. Just accumulate good karma and mysteriously things will come, naturally.

I sometimes say to my friends, 'No programme. No project. Just try to accumulate good karma.' I think this is beautiful; it frees us from a lot of stress and problems.

So, this is how karma, motivation, dharma practice and everyday life work together. If we don't know how they work as a whole, we see contradictions, and that leads to confusion. As long as we see dharma practice and everyday life as a contradiction, we shall not understand what dharma means. Dharma can never contradict anything. It can go smoothly even with someone like bin Laden, no problem. We may think bin Laden is a very bad person, but still dharma can go with him. There is nothing to contradict the dharma. As long as we say, 'That is in conflict with my dharma practice,' we have not yet understood how to practise. All this depends simply on our understanding, our capacity to catch the essence of dharma. Then we can practise dharma very easily.

It is also very important to know what *samsara* is. We are practising in *samsara*, not outside of it, and dharma is not contradictory to it. Dharma actually helps *samsara*, purifies it, transforms it. In Buddhism we are taught of the nonduality of *samsara* and *nirvana*. We do not need to be on a high level in order to understand this nonduality of *samsara* and *nirvana*; it is just a matter of being here, knowing how to integrate dharma with *samsaric* conditions.

Everyone can work fully in the dharma whatever they do. How do we continue with our normal lives and integrate them with the dharma in a complementary way? This may be difficult, especially if you are very busy, and yet the important thing is not to think in terms of time for practice as opposed to the rest of the day when you are not practising. That is the biggest problem. There is no time when you cannot practise the dharma. That is where intention comes in.

The highest intention or motivation is the *Boddhicitta* and there are four preliminary steps of *lojong* or training of *boddhicitta* practice. The first thing to acknowledge is the

human potential to produce goodness for others. The second is to realise that things are impermanent-good things are impermanent, bad things are impermanent, bodies are impermanent, absolutely nothing lasts forever. So it is important for us not to waste time. People say that time is money. The practitioner says that time is dharma. The next thing to understand is the karmic process-what action results in what. This is in terms of one's own experience and one's own behaviour. And finally one needs to understand samsara-its characteristics, its conditions and what it is. If we do not know samsara, we are confused. We are in samsara and have to know that. The dharma is practised in samsara, and when we are meditating, we are still in samsara.

These four are preliminaries in the sense of training to be a practitioner of the awakened mind (*bodhichitta*). People say, 'To have the awakened mind (*bodhichitta*) is very difficult, very idealistic, complicated,' as though it were an impossibility. It is only impossible, however, if there is a lack of preliminary practice. If we practise the preliminaries well enough, there will be no problem; it will not be difficult to get the result. The awakened mind (*bodhichitta*) will literally come to us like the rays of the sun.

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