

The Benefits of the Study Programs

By Venerable Geshe Kelsang Gyatso

The following is a transcript of a talk given by Geshe Kelsang Gyatso on the occasion of the inauguration of the Foundation Program at Tara Centre, England, October 1990.

“Beginning the Foundation Program at a Centre presents us with a great opportunity because this Program fulfills both our own and others’ wishes...”

Fulfilling Our Own Wishes

How does the Foundation Program fulfil our own wishes? By increasing our wisdom and our experience of Dharma. With wisdom and Dharma experience we can solve all the problems we encounter in daily life and we can protect ourselves from danger in the future. Since beginningless time we have had strong, bad habits that arise from our self-grasping and self-cherishing. We all want to better ourselves and to be happy and successful in life, but our bad habits lead us in the opposite direction. Instead of finding happiness we create the cause of more suffering. None of us wants to suffer and yet, because of our bad habits, we are continually strengthening our deluded minds, which are the cause of all our suffering. With wisdom and Dharma experience we can bring our deluded minds under control. We can reduce our attachment, anger, jealousy, and so forth, and subdue our self-grasping and self-cherishing.

By controlling our deluded minds, we will come to experience permanent peace day and night. We will bring about a permanent cessation of human problems in particular and of samsaric problems in general. In this way we will become our own protectors. With wisdom and Dharma experience we will also become our own doctors. Whether we are young or old, rich or poor, famous or of humble origins, without choice we all have to experience mental pain. Within one day we experience mental pain and discomfort many times, sometimes due to unpleasant circumstances and sometimes due to other people, even our friends. Sometimes for no apparent reason unhappiness, disappointment, dissatisfaction, or pain arise naturally due to the ripening of karmic imprints. We need a remedy for this pain. No one else can give us medicine that will relieve this type of pain, we have to become our own karma-doctor and cure ourselves through Dharma experience.

By increasing our wisdom and Dharma experience we will gradually solve all our problems and eventually we will achieve the ultimate happiness of full enlightenment, the bliss of Buddhahood. This is how the Foundation Program can fulfil our own wishes.

Fulfilling Others’ Wishes

How does the Foundation Program fulfil the wishes of others? If we increase our wisdom and Dharma experience, we can give teachings and spiritual advice to others and set a good example for them to follow. In this way we can lead others into spiritual paths. Generally, everyone, whether Buddhist or non-Buddhist, religious or non-religious, wants to help others.

For example, everyone naturally wants to help their parents, children, and friends, but the kind of help we can give is quite limited. Usually we give only material help, trying to improve the samsaric conditions and enjoyments of others. It is possible that this kind of help will produce some temporary

benefit, but it does not produce any lasting benefit. Moreover, if we act without wisdom, Dharma experience, clairvoyance, skillful means, patience, and so forth, we cannot be certain that our actions are actually beneficial. Addressing ourselves to the short-term needs of others may be beneficial, but equally it may be harmful. We have no way of knowing.

Since beginningless time mother sentient beings have been preoccupied with improving their samsaric conditions and enjoyments. As human beings, again and again they have sought happiness through material acquisitions, striving after food, clothing, money, reputation and so forth, but despite all this activity their problems remain. No amount of wealth or resources can actually remove the problems of cyclic existence. Even if I were to give my mother millions of pounds it would not remove her problems or her suffering, in fact it would probably increase them. Rich people have far more to worry about than poor people: how to protect their wealth, how to increase it, how to spend it. Very rich people live in constant fear of being robbed or attacked because of their wealth. Rich people's minds are filled with distractions, they are prone to pride and misconduct, and because of their life of indulgence their attachments, and consequently their dissatisfaction, are forever increasing. For such people it is very difficult to find the time or motivation to practice Dharma. Poor people by contrast tend to be much more contented. They have fewer worries and distractions, and they tend to be humble rather than proud. As a result, it is easier for them to quiet their minds, develop spiritual aspirations, and observe pure conduct. From this we can see that giving material help without wisdom and skill can be detrimental. Rather than helping others it may even increase their problems.

In *Training the Mind in Seven Points* Geshe Chekawa warns against practicing wrong benefit. Sometimes we have the intention to benefit others but because we lack wisdom and Dharma experience we inadvertently cause them harm. So how can we help others and actually fulfill their wish to overcome suffering and find happiness? Principally by setting a good example for them to follow, giving teachings and spiritual advice, and gradually leading them into spiritual paths. We need to help others to overcome their ignorance and develop a good heart. By constantly maintaining a good heart, anyone can overcome their daily problems and, by gradually improving themselves, eventually they can attain a permanent inner peace and complete freedom from all suffering and danger. Therefore, the best way to help others is to practice giving Dharma rather than giving material help. Even if a living Buddha were to appear in our lives and give us money and other material things it would bring us little benefit, but by giving us Dharma, leading us into correct spiritual paths through the power of his example and his advice, he will give us immeasurable help. He will eradicate all our daily problems and eventually lead us to complete liberation from suffering.

The main purpose of the Foundation Program is to help us to help others in this way. From this we can see that to fulfill our own and others wishes we need to rely on the Foundation Program. At present our wisdom is like a young child, or a new moon. We may have developed some wisdom from listening to teachings and reading and studying books, but this wisdom needs to be developed much further. By relying on the Foundation Program, we can gradually increase our wisdom until it is completely mature, like a full moon. With this kind of wisdom we will have a firm, stable confidence when teaching Dharma to others.

Integrating Dharma into Our Lives

Our present understanding and experience of Dharma is quite superficial. We are like someone who has entered a huge food store and seen many things but sampled only a few. We may have received many different teachings from many different Teachers, but we have taken in very little, just a few morsels. Therefore, our actual experience remains superficial. There is a gap between us and the Dharma. It feels as if Dharma is there and we are here. Our mind is not mixed with Dharma and so we cannot apply it in our daily lives. As a result, our ordinary everyday problems remain.

For example, we may have received many teachings on Lamrim and read many books. Intellectually we find it relatively easy to understand and we accept it all, but we find it difficult to integrate into our daily lives, and so we cannot use this Dharma to solve our daily problems. When we study Dharma our mind remains passive, like someone watching television. It does not engage in the subject and mix with it.

Therefore, our daily life and our Dharma remain completely separate and unrelated. Why is this? It is because we are not studying systematically according to a specially-designed program. If we just pick at Dharma randomly we will never gain a deep and stable experience, and our wisdom will never become like a full moon.

A Special Study Program

At present in our Centers we have a Foundation Program and a Teacher Training Program. This is not a new tradition. In the past there have been other Programs specially designed for Dharma students according to their particular circumstances. All these Programs involved studying a certain number of texts, memorizing material, passing examinations, and being awarded a degree or certificate. For example, the ancient Kadampa Geshe had a Program in which they studied six texts. Later Je Tsongkhapa introduced a Program based on ten texts, and later still Tibetan Monasteries such as Ganden, Sera, and Drepung introduced a Program based on five texts. I studied this Program at Sera Monastery.

When I completed it and was awarded my Geshe degree, I felt as if I had reached the summit of the highest mountain. My faith and experience had increased considerably and I felt great confidence in teaching others. My mind was very happy and I felt completely free from problems. Inspired by my own experience, I developed a strong wish to introduce a similar Program for western Dharma students so that they could reap the same results. However, I understand very clearly that the Program designed for Tibetan Geshe is not suitable for westerners. For one thing, most western Dharma students are lay people and so they cannot study the Vinaya, which is one of the five subjects studied by Tibetan Geshe. Other subjects studied by Tibetan Geshe are quite technical and, although they are very profound and beneficial, they do not have immediate application. The nature of western people is to study something one day and to want to put it into practice the next. This is a very good quality because they are always trying to gain practical experience of what they study.

Bearing all this in mind, I have designed a special Teacher Training Program to enable westerners to complete their study and practice. I have chosen eleven subjects, some of which are philosophical subjects from the Geshe Program, and some of which are subjects for practical application, such as Lamrim, Lojong, and Mahamudra. The Foundation Program is based on five of these subjects, all derived

from Buddha's Sutra teachings. If students who complete the Foundation Program want to go on to complete the Teacher Training Program, the subjects they have already studied will count towards their Teacher training, and they will not have to study these again. Therefore, they will be almost halfway through the Teacher Training Program. Usually, when the Programs are introduced at a Centre, the Foundation Program will be introduced first. When the first class has completed the whole course, it will then continue as a Teacher Training class and a new Foundation Program class will be started. Of course, individual students can choose whether to join the Teacher Training Program or not. If a student is satisfied with just the Foundation Program he or she can stop when this course is completed, but the class itself will become a Teacher Training class.

Both the Foundation Program and the Teacher Training Program have now been running successfully for a few years at Manjushri Centre and Madhyamaka Centre. I am very happy with the results. When I read the examination papers it is clear to me that the students have understood the subjects well and that they are deriving great benefit from the Programs. I realize that these Programs are very meaningful and that they are the best method for increasing wisdom and Dharma experience.

The Need for Qualified Teachers

Buddhadharma is beneficial to others only if there are qualified Teachers. Without Teachers, Dharma texts alone are of little benefit. To become a qualified Dharma Teacher requires special preparation and training. It is not easy to become a Dharma Teacher because special qualities are needed: wisdom, correct view, faith, conviction, and pure conduct as an example to others. Also, a Teacher needs an inexhaustible reservoir of Dharma knowledge and experience to teach from, otherwise he or she will dry up after one or two years. If a Teacher lacks qualities such as wisdom, experience, faith, and pure motivation, it will be difficult for others to develop faith in them or their teachings, and there will be little benefit. Also, without proper training and preparation there is a danger of Teachers mixing worldly, samsaric activities with their teaching activities. Therefore, we definitely need to train well if we wish to be a genuine benefit to others.

If we complete the Teacher Training Program, we can begin to teach immediately. Alternatively, if we wish to lead a meditative life, we will find that the Program has prepared us well. At the very least we will be great Buddhist scholars with a deep and stable experience of Dharma. These Programs, therefore, are real wishfulfilling jewels for Dharma practitioners. By participating in them we can improve our wisdom and Dharma experience and use Dharma to solve our daily problems. We can become our own protector by protecting ourselves from danger and suffering, and our own doctor by curing our mental pain with Dharma medicine.

We shall be able to set a good example for others to follow and help others by giving teachings and advice. Eventually we will be able to give extensive teachings and benefit others in many ways by organizing special Programs and so forth. In this way we will make both our own and others' human lives extremely meaningful.

A Special Way of Understanding

During Foundation Program classes the Teacher will read from the text and give additional explanation. This has two purposes: to clarify difficult points and to pass on the oral lineage. Thus, when the Teacher is reading from the book he or she is not just reading to us, they are also transmitting the lineage of the

text to future Teachers. The texts themselves are quite clear. The Lamrim and Lojong texts in particular are quite easy to understand. However, when we are studying on this Program we need a special way of understanding. This involves listening, contemplating, discussing, memorizing, and meditating.

Discussion is a particularly important aspect of the Program because we can help each other greatly by sharing our experience and understanding of Dharma. Sometimes we can discuss in pairs and sometimes the whole class can discuss together. When we discuss we should always have an open mind and be motivated by the wish to help our partner. If you have some special experience or understanding, try to share it. Always conduct your discussion as if you are giving something precious to a friend. When you ask questions of your partner you should do so only with the intention to learn from them or to clarify a point, not in order to find out how much or how little they know; and when they reply you should listen attentively as if you are receiving something precious from a friend. Do not get involved in heavy discussions and avoid explicit disagreements. If your partner says something wrong, quietly point it out, but be careful not to cause offence. Some people do not respond well to being contradicted, so bear this in mind and speak gently and considerately.

Sometimes if someone says something wrong we can mentally disregard it whilst appearing to agree. This helps to keep the discussion peaceful and friendly. Actually no one has a bad nature, but sometimes people can appear to be upset or disappointed. If your partner has difficulty understanding or accepting your point, be patient and try to help him or her understand gradually. Our discussion should not be like fire crackers – a lot of noise with no real meaning – but should be meaningful and conclusive. We should try to conclude each discussion with a clear decision about the meaning of the subject in question. Later, when we take the examinations, the conclusions we have reached in discussion will be very helpful. Discussion helps us to formulate our ideas and come to clear decisions. Then we have certainty and confidence. Otherwise, without regular discussion we will be left with doubts and discomfort about the subject.

We should try to memorize the important points of the subject and combine whatever we understand in a practical way with our daily activities. We also have to observe the various commitments of the Program. These commitments are designed to help us accomplish our aim. Without them there is a danger that we will be distracted by laziness or other circumstances and not complete our studies.

The Kindness of the Students

I very much appreciate the fact that you have all joined the Foundation Program today; you are very kind. With a Program like this Dharma Centers become meaningful. The actual function of a Dharma Centre is to give teachings to the people in the area and, by sharing with them our experience of Dharma, to help them to solve their daily problems. If all the people who have enrolled today follow this Program patiently, observing all the commitments, passing all the exams, and so on, this will be a great kindness to others.

When you have completed the Program, you will really be able to help your Center, as well as all the people in your area. In this way you can fulfil your own wishes at the same time as benefiting others. This is no small job; it is a great achievement. Now that you have joined the Program, you should never give up. Sometimes you will encounter difficulties and problems, sometimes you will be bored, and sometimes you will feel discouraged, but these are all small problems. If you leave them naturally they will pass and later you will feel good again.

For as long as we remain in samsara we will experience problems, but they are no reason to give up something so precious and meaningful. Having undertaken this great task, we should never give it up. Sometimes five years or seven years may seem like a very long time, but if we practice steadily every day without giving up, gradually we will reach our goal. If we start today, tomorrow we shall already be a bit closer to completing! We should think like this and then one day we shall have completed our training. How wonderful that will be! We shall be able to give pure teachings with confidence on any subject we have studied, and people will believe us and develop faith in us because we have prepared so well. They will appreciate us from many points of view: our teachings, our personal experience, our ability to help them solve their problems, and so forth. These are benefits that we shall experience just in this life. In reality, future lives are much more important. We shall experience the beneficial results of studying on this Program for life after life until we reach enlightenment. The benefits are inexhaustible.

I have already prepared most of the subjects for the Programs. If there are any parts of the texts that are not clear it is my responsibility to clarify them. If you find such points during your discussions, write them down and send them to me and I will give you answers. For example, the Lamrim teachings originally come from Atisha, Je Tsongkhapa, and my root Guru Trijang Rinpoche, but the particular text that you are studying was prepared by me. Similarly, the Guide to the Middle Way was written by Chandrakirti, but I wrote the commentary to it that you will study. Therefore, it is my responsibility to clarify any unclear points and to help you with any difficulties you have with your studies. Also, it is my responsibility to prepare examinations for you. Your responsibility is to keep the commitments and complete the Program. So, I would like to say thank you to all of you and encourage you to complete your studies happily.”