
The Condensed Lam Rim

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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As usual it's good to spend some time in meditation. For that purpose we shall sit in a relaxed, upright position.

Meditation is usually defined to mean focussing on an internal object, and familiarising the mind with that internal object so we can develop concentration based on the object. In Tibetan the terminology for meditation and Dharma can be interchanged and used synonymously. The reason these terms can be used interchangeably, or synonymously, is because of the meaning behind the definitions of meditation and Dharma. Meditation is defined as focussing on an internal object by removing the mind from external distractions, and thus bringing the mind inward. Likewise, the definition of Dharma is protecting the mind from the objects of delusion and bringing the mind inward to engage in virtue. So there is a similar context in how Dharma is defined.

If we think about the definitions of both meditation and Dharma it helps us check within ourselves to see whether our mind has become distracted or not, and whether it is following the objects of distraction or not. By checking our mind we can see whether the mind is focussed on an inappropriate object or not. Inappropriate objects can be defined as objects which, when we focus upon them, bring a disturbance to our mind. They agitate and disturb the mind so that we lose the sense of tranquillity and calmness in the mind. That is also how delusions are defined. From the moment they arise they disturb the peace and calmness of the mind. An appropriate object would be an object which, when we focus on it, helps the mind to be settled, calm and not in disturbance and turmoil. An appropriate object would be that which causes us to have a settled mind when we focus upon it.

The great Kadampa master, Karapa, said the reason why our mind remains in turmoil and disturbed is because we do not realise the appropriate objects upon which to focus. As long as we don't know what the mind should focus upon to bring about calmness and peace, and as long as we let the mind follow its natural whims and distractions, it is likely that the mind will mostly focus on distracted objects, allowing afflictions to arise in the mind. We then experience disturbances in our mind. It is very true that for as long as we are not aware of our mental state our mind is very vulnerable to disturbances arising. We can see how our mind is so easily influenced and becomes disturbed and agitated when we are not aware. That is very important advice.

Further, when we investigate our state of mind we can come to realise from our personal experience that what we experience is very much dependent on what we are thinking about, what kind attitude we have in our mind. When we notice that we have a negative outlook, or if some particular thought is disturbing us, the more we focus on that, the more we allow our mind to be influenced by that thought, the more it will be disturbed and agitated. When we actually

notice that we are in a negative state of mind, or that we are focusing on a negative object or thought, and, as soon as we notice that, we try to just leave that aside and not to think about that at all, we will immediately notice that the mind shifts. Because our attitudes have changed there is a shift in our mind, which brings about a restful, calm state. This is how we notice that having an agitated or disturbed mind is very much related to what we are thinking about, the attitudes in our mind.

The main point being made is that our mental state is very much dependent on our attitudes. Therefore it is very important that we check our attitudes, analyse what kind of attitudes we have and are able to distinguish negative attitudes from positive ones. If we have that discernment within ourselves, when we have really developed the analytical wisdom of discerning negative from positive attitudes, we would naturally focus on the positive which bring about good results for ourselves. Someone with intelligence will naturally focus on an attitude or thought that brings about a calm or soothing state of mind within him or her. No one in their right frame of mind would want to intentionally focus on something that disturbs them.

We can give an external, practical example on a physical level. None of us wishes to experience pain. Someone who knows objects that cause pain, such as fire, would not intentionally experience the pain of fire by putting their finger or hand in a fire. They wouldn't do that; it would be completely stupid and foolish. A wise person would not put their hand into a fire knowing that it would cause them physical pain. They would refrain from that action. Now someone who wasn't able to discern that, such as a small child, who has not developed that ability or intelligence, may put their hand or fingers into a fire and experience the pain. This is because they are not aware; they don't have the intelligence yet. When they have developed that intelligence they would not purposely put their hands into the fire. It is similar with thoughts. If we are able to discern with our analytical wisdom what is positive or negative, distinguishing between what causes us mental pain and happiness we would naturally, if we are someone with intelligence, apply ourselves to the positive attitudes that will bring about the positive result of a happy mind.

We used the analogy of how someone with intelligence would refrain from inflicting pain upon himself or herself. That is very true. We avoid, at every level, any physical pain or suffering. The physical pain we might get through injuries or illness is something that can be remedied through external means such as medications, health or diet and so forth. There are external means that can soothe or help in the event that we do get physical pain. There are external factors that can help to ease that pain. Nevertheless, even though there are external remedies we still put every effort and energy in trying to avoid physical pain even if there are remedies.

Now we come to the mental level. If that is how we behave on a physical level why, if we are in our right mind, wouldn't we want to avoid any causes of mental pain? Mental pain is something that cannot be remedied by external factors. There is no medicine which can completely remove mental suffering and mental pain. There are of course things that can help to soothe the pain a bit but cannot remove mental suffering. If there was a medicine to cure our unhappiness, in other words if there was a happiness pill, we would by all means, take it. However there is no pill that can bring about real happiness. But it is

not as though there is no remedy to our mental suffering; there is a remedy, which is internal. The mental pain we are experiencing is internal and the remedy lies internally as well. The remedy for mental pain lies within our mind. That remedy is identified in the teachings as meditation.

This is why I particularly advise the younger generation to take very good care of their mind. It is very easy for a young person with a naïve mind to go out and immerse themselves in all sorts of things and then get caught up in problems. It is very easy for the mind to be influenced and habituated to negativities that bring about unsatisfactory results. Thus it is very important for young people to really protect their mind from the outset. They must make sure their mind does not get influenced in a negative way. If one can learn, from the outset, to protect and train one's mind to engage in positive ways, that can definitely be achieved through familiarity. The main point I'm making is that in order to remove internal pain and bring about real internal happiness, one must use meditation as a technique.

The disturbance that is experienced on the mental level by younger people, can lead to clinical depression or a mental illness. I feel what is considered a mental illness such as a clinical depression is not something that comes about just like that. From the very beginning I feel it is not necessarily inherited or in the genes. I feel it is definitely a case of letting the mind to be slowly influenced in a negative way. What happens is that if at the outset we are faced with small difficulties and problems and we allow our minds to worry about that and then carry on worrying and getting more frustrated we get more and more familiar with that sort of mental state and reacting to situations with anxiety, worries and frustrations and so forth. If that is all we are familiar with then that slowly escalates to make the mind become more and more depressed and eventually one reaches a state of what is called clinical depression, which is defined as a mental illness.

The way to prevent this is to familiarise the mind with positive attitudes. When worry and difficulties arise, from the very onset, we must try to learn the techniques to overcome this and try to make the mind more courageous and stronger rather than giving in to difficulties and becoming depressed. Making the mind more positive and courageous can come with familiarity, it can come from meditation. The practise of meditation, focusing the mind and so forth, can definitely develop and increase those positive qualities in the mind.

Some students and friends confide in me that they are having difficulties with their teenagers when they have reached fourteen, fifteen or sixteen years old. This is exactly what I'm referring to. I definitely see that it can be a difficulty and one must understand what that difficulty is. I feel that one of the reasons why that difficulty arises at that age, and of course I'm talking in general here, is that parents slowly seem to distance themselves from their children when they reach that age. They are left to themselves a bit too much. Of course the reasons that are given by parents who distance themselves from teenagers who have reached the age of seventeen or eighteen is that at that age they need their own independence. They need their freedom. So parents leave them alone to deal with themselves. Some parents also have an attitude that their children are adults at that age, and so they should do things for themselves and take care of themselves. That attitude is prevalent, and, if taken to the extreme can, I feel, develop into the children feeling neglected by their parents.

Many teenagers, especially those around seventeen or eighteen years of age, may experience clinical depression which can lead to disastrous results because, as I mentioned earlier, they may feel a neglected, especially by their parents. We must remember that it is actually a critical age where physically they seem grown up, they have a man's or woman's body, and may even be taller than their parents, but mentally they may not have completely developed yet. They are at a very critical age, they are expected to be adults, they think of themselves as having to be an adult, but, in fact, they may not have that capacity yet. They may not yet have the capacity to look after themselves properly.

On a practical level, they may not yet have their own savings while they need to further their studies. If they are left alone and told to take care of themselves, where can they find the money? They may not yet have the courage or the confidence to live alone and work. It is a stage where, because of their circumstances, they feel so much pressure on them and yet they don't know what to do, where to go. Their parents tell them that they are grown up and they have to take care of themselves. They might try to live with friends, but that doesn't always work out well. There might even be bad influences from their friends. In this way they can lose direction in their life. In this way they can slowly develop into what is called chronic depression.

Of course I'm generalising here. I'm not saying all teenagers reaching that age are vulnerable. There are some who may be very well capable of taking care of themselves. The crucial thing here as a parent, and what I advise my friends who have teenagers of that age, is to really look into the situation. Do you know your children's capacities well enough? Do you know that they have the capacity to live by themselves, support and take care of themselves? Do they have the physical and mental capacities yet to live in the world by themselves? They may even wish to go out and have the experience of living by themselves. If you see that they are capable then, by all means, one can allow that. But just because they have reached the age of adulthood, to inflict the freedom upon them when they may not be ready yet, is not, I feel, appropriate. I feel that to be most unfortunate. I think the word 'freedom' should be avoided if it is used as an excuse to let them go off by themselves.

On a practical level, another factor contributing to the anxiety of a teenager at that age is the friends they associate with. It is an age where they are in need of a more intimate friendship. A boy of this age wants to have a girlfriend, and a girl wants to have a boyfriend. It is an age where it is suitable for them to experience that. But if that is not accepted at home, if for example your daughter is not allowed to bring her boyfriend home or if your son is not allowed to bring his girlfriend home, then where else can they take their boyfriend or girlfriend? There is nowhere else they could go and that adds to the tremendous pressure, where they feel the need to express themselves in a relationship but they cannot bring their own friends home. That can add to their anxiety and may be a contributing factor leading to disastrous circumstances. Rather than completely discouraging them from bringing their boyfriend or girlfriend home, they should be encouraged to bring their friends home. One can actually monitor their girlfriend or boyfriend and see if they are suitable.

Without even knowing their friends how could one actually judge whether they have good friends or not? You should make them feel welcome and, as time goes by, you will notice the character and mannerisms of your daughter's or

son's boyfriend or girlfriend. Then one can skilfully give advice. That's why I feel that it is important that one encourages them and supports them in that way too.

That's the advice I recently gave to someone. Another important factor is that the parents themselves have to consider whether they want the relationship or not. If we were to ask the parents whether they like being in a relationship or not, and whether they like to go out with their loved one or not and if the answer is an obvious yes, then how would they feel if they were deprived to having that relationship? Would you be able to bear that or not? It is exactly the same for your son or daughter. They are at the stage where they are in need of companionship and a relationship. One should support them by thinking in this way.

Though it may seem that I have side tracked from my main point this is actually all related to meditation. The main goal, as we develop ourselves in meditation, is to familiarise ourselves with positive attitudes. This discussion was in relation to generating positive and understanding attitudes in our mind.

Before we completely run out of time let us now engage in some meditation. As mentioned earlier, we first sit in a relaxed position. As we physically sit in a relaxed position we need to make sure that our mind is free from distractions, external or internal distractions. With a positive attitude in our mind, we bring our mind inward to focus on the internal object of our breath. As we focus on our breath we keep the rhythm of the natural breathing and we breathe in and out naturally without force. We keep our mind on the breath and just keep our attention on the natural in flow and out flow of our breath and keep our mind a hundred percent focussed just on that. We do not allow the mind to be distracted by any other thoughts or ideas. In this way, for a few minutes, we keep our mind on the breath. (*Pause for meditation*).

That should be sufficient for now. Does anyone have any questions?

Question: My question is in relation to space, permanence as it relates to space, space as to taking up a position in space. Particularly in view of last night's teaching. Space as opposed to space in outer space?

Basically outer space or space, as in taking up some other space, are in fact the same according to some Buddhist schools. According to these schools they are both permanent phenomena. In relation to yesterday's teaching there are also some schools that consider space as being a functional phenomenon. They see it as permanent but still functional. That is the argument that was put forward.

The definition of space is that it exists everywhere. If, for example, you put a nail in the wall the fact that the nail can go through the wall is because of space existing in the wall. When we talk about someone taking up some space it is not as if that space disappears or is gone. The space still remains.

In relation to last night's teaching the non-Buddhists believe that space is partless and directionless. In Buddhist schools space is considered as having parts and direction. This must be obvious. I suppose it would also make sense in worldly conventions where we talk about the eastern part of a space, the northern part of a space, the western and the southern part of a space. I feel that that should be obvious otherwise an aeroplane would not be able to fly from one part to

another part. Ascertaining that there are parts to space should logically make sense.

Question: When people are younger can they develop mental problems of not knowing what to do with their life? Or, can not knowing about how to live their life lead to mental problems?

That was mentioned earlier. Not knowing their direction and having too much confusion in life can initially lead to mild depression. Then, if this is not taken care of, it will slowly lead on to more severe depression which can lead into mental illness. This was mentioned earlier as what can lead teenagers or youngsters into mental illness. Of course other reasons, besides not knowing their direction in life, can cause mental illness or depression. It could be a relationship not working out and that is something that happens even to adults.

Question: It is strange phenomena. If I read the Dharma it creates problems. My mind may not understand and so in my heart it creates problems?

That can be the case for some people. It is not that the Dharma itself is at fault here. Instead, the person who is trying to apply the practices isn't skilful enough to apply them. When you read the Dharma you might feel very inspired to engage and follow all the practices. But we may not have the capacity to really apply all those practices right away. The advice is to apply only what one can manage and one has the skill to be able to do. Yes, it is true that if one is not able to apply the Dharma properly it can create problems.

There are obviously stages in the practices that one is not able to apply appropriately to one's life. That can also create problems. But if one were to engage in the practice by following the right steps it will solve problems rather than creating problems. We notice this even in mundane studies. If a very thick textbook is given to a student and they are told they must read and study this, they may not know what to do. They may try to look into it and not knowing where to start they may read the middle or the end or try to skim through it and not look at the stages properly. They might get quite overwhelmed and say I can't possibly study this.

Friends' children who have difficulty studying have confided in me they feel quite overwhelmed when a thick textbook is given to them and they are expected to study it. On a practical note, I advise them that maybe they are trying to read it and grasp the whole topic right away. It would be wiser to focus on just the first part of the text and try to grasp that. Don't even look at the second part yet, leave that aside. As you get familiar with the first part of the text that would naturally help you to understand further parts of the text.

That is the case isn't it? We learn step by step. The very term 'study' means trying to learn something that one didn't previously know. There is no point in learning something which one already knows. The very term 'studying' means to try to learn something which one does not know. So that, of course, involves a bit of hardship and difficulty initially but as we get familiar with it will become easier. We do get new knowledge from our studies.

Feeling overwhelmed by not being able to do something and then letting that cause an anxiety in the mind before we even begin, becomes a handicap or shortcoming for us. I get similar comments from people who have jobs. Their

complaint is that before they even finish working on the small pile of papers that they have on the desk, the boss sometimes brings another pile and puts it on top on the papers they already have. That becomes a concern and a cause for anxiety to arise in the mind. Just when you feel that you have a grasp of what you have got on your desk this other pile comes along. Again it is a state of mind, an attitude that thinks that you have got to finish them all by the end of the day. That is not the case even if your boss puts down many papers. You can only do what you are meant to do in the time that you have. If you are in the right frame of mind and you work honestly you would finish only what you can in the time that you have in the office. If there's left over work you just have to put it off for the next time. Rather than thinking that one must finish everything just keep the realistic attitude of, 'I'll just do what I can in the time that I have'. That should be sufficient and good enough.

There may be other contributing factors. The person who leaves it on the desk must be your superior and when they leave it on the desk they may leave it with a look on their face that says, 'You've got to finish this'. That, of course, adds to the pressure. They take it that their superiors leave it on their desk with the look that they have to finish it and they take it upon themselves to really feel the pressure. But one must try to be realistic. We come back to the point of having a calm mind and a realistic attitude that we can develop through meditation. That is something we can use anywhere, in our work, relationships and so forth. Wherever we are, a relaxed and calm mind with a realistic attitude should help us to maintain our sanity

My experience in my early years in school with exams was that if the mind is full of anxiety and worries it seems that whatever one tries to finish, everything seems to be cumbersome. It was very difficult to try to finish the exam and whatever one knew seemed to fade away. Whereas, if one can maintain a relaxed calm mind the exam or test seems to go much more smoothly. That is something, of course, that everyone would have experienced.

I recall in my early days in the university in India there were two nuns beside me who were doing the same exam at the same time. They seemed to be completely overwhelmed and even shaking. They were saying that they felt that they couldn't grasp anything and it was all too much and they didn't know where to begin. They seemed to be in a real dilemma about being able to do anything. I advised them that maybe there was one question that they could possibly do. Just try to focus and answer whatever question it seems that you are familiar with. Don't worry about the others yet. Just answer that question slowly and calmly and maybe the others might slowly make more sense. They followed this advice and chose one easy answer and started to answer that and they become much more relaxed and calm. Apparently they did quite well after that.

There is another interesting story about being too anxious or overzealous that comes from the time I was studying at the Sanskrit University in India, Sarnath. There was a particular student who came from Sikkim who was considered to be quite bright. The particular exam was on Sanskrit and he was known to be quite good at Sanskrit. However, in the exam somehow through his overzealousness or being a little uptight or anxious he wrote something which was not an answer to any question. In that way he didn't get good marks. He actually failed. Those of us who were not considered as skilful and intelligent in that field actually passed the exam.

He was interpreting a particular word and had misunderstood that word and written a completely different definition that was not related to the topic. He himself later commented that he seemed to completely miss the point and started to write something completely different from what was intended. In that way he lost marks. It was actually a very simple word that would be translated in English as 'and' but in Tibetan that word 'tang' can sometimes be used in a poetic sense too. In this context it was not used as a poetic term but he somehow used that word in a very poetic way when it was not meant to be. That is how he actually lost marks.

The key advice when doing an exam seems to be to have a relaxed and calm mind so that you can see and read the questions and understand them. When you initially read the question you might be full of anxiety and overwhelmed. So, initially, it seems to be very hard to understand the question and see it well. But teachers advise you to take the time to read the question and make sure you have got it right before you attempt to answer it. That is the teacher's advice to us on that. Likewise, if we take the time to be a little relaxed and calm and try to read the question well then it seems to make much more sense. One can begin to understand the question more.

Before we conclude for the evening let us again spend a few moments in meditation. This evening's class, even though it may seem a little bit off the topic and distracted, was actually more like a close, intimate family discussion. That's how I see it: considering ourselves as a big family and having a family discussion. It may be appropriate even though it was off the topic. I hope it was worthwhile and good.

Before we conclude for the evening let us do a further meditation. Keeping your mind focussed, bring you're the mind inwards free from distractions and focus on the mantra to be recited, which is the mantra of Buddha Shakyamuni. We focus on the sound of the mantra.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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