
The Condensed Lam Rim

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As usual it would be appropriate to do some meditation. For that purpose we sit in an upright position. A relaxed physical posture helps the mind to also relax and focus.

Whatever we choose to focus on as a meditation object, the main thing is to keep a single-pointed focus on the object by training the mind. As a result of being able to maintain our focus on the object, we will notice that the mind is calmer and more tranquil and that brings a peaceful feeling in the mind, a joyful feeling. As we master the ability to keep our mind single-pointedly focused on the object, there will be this pleasant result of the mind being calmer and more peaceful and joyful. It is important to investigate how that comes about: why is that so?

The reason is that the mind is distanced from disturbed states. In everyday life, the mind is distracted and we experience a disturbed state of mind that brings a lack of peace and joy. However, when we are able to maintain our focus in meditation, because the mind is distanced from disturbance, it naturally takes a rest and is more tranquil. To summarise, when the mind is disturbed because of distraction and so forth, it does not experience calmness and peace; whereas when the mind is not disturbed, as a result it experiences peace and calmness.

When we are able to come to that conclusion through our investigation and experience, we need to constantly remind ourselves of the importance of maintaining a focused mind through our training and practice. If we allow our mind to remain in the normal state of everyday life, whether we are aware of it or not, our mind will be influenced by the distractions – it is most likely to be in a disturbed state.

A disturbed state of mind does not necessarily mean that it is agitated; it can also mean that it is constantly busy and distracted. If we just allow our mind to remain in that state and don't do anything about it, naturally we become more and more familiar with that. Our life is then under the control of a disturbed state of mind. As a consequence, we are not able to really enjoy our life, even if the external conditions are relatively good for us in comparison to others. Even if we have good living conditions – our house and family – we may still feel a lack of real contentment and happiness. We may not be able to enjoy the good conditions around us because the mind itself is disturbed and by not doing anything about it, we are allowing that situation to continue. This disturbed mind will continue to rule our life and we will not be able to enjoy anything.

Whereas when we make an attempt to discipline our mind, to focus and concentrate it in our practice of meditation, we will definitely notice it becoming calm and tranquil. As we familiarise ourselves with that practice, the overall attitude in our mind will be more in tune with a calmer and more peaceful state, bringing us more happiness and joy.

The technique we just described for training our mind is choosing an object to meditate upon and attempting to train our mind to focus on that. If we can familiarise ourselves with this technique of meditation then in times of real distress, when we tend to be disturbed and agitated, it will help us. Normally when we are in bad mood, we try to shut off everyone – for example by going to our room, shutting the door and not wanting to let anyone in while we sulk inside. That doesn't really help the situation or us. If shutting everyone out and staying in our room were to really help us become calm and peaceful, that would be one thing. However, through our experience, we know that when we shut everyone out and lock our doors and say that we don't want to see anyone, we will not be really happy or joyful once we are alone; rather, we will maintain the heaviness and disturbance, whatever it may be, in our heart and mind.

It is more worthwhile if we can actually use such solitude in our practice of meditation, making it a time when we can sit down and try to distance our mind from the distractions that are disturbing us. After spending a few minutes by ourselves in meditation, we will notice the immediate calming, positive effect it has on us. This is much more worthwhile as a technique to bring about joy and peace in our mind.

If we reflect on our normal daily life and on what happens when we get frustrated, we will notice that the reason we experience mental disturbance and frustration is that we have what is called an unsubdued mind. For as long as we allow our mind to remain unsubdued, we will experience its negative consequences over and over again. So if we want some genuine peace and happiness, there is no alternative but to make an effort to subdue our mind. We need to have a subdued mind in order to have a peaceful mind.

If we look further into the negative consequences of an unsubdued mind, we can see that for as long as we have an unsubdued mind, we will never feel content with what we have but rather we will tend to pursue external objects of desire and distraction. As a result of not being content with what we have, we will always seem to notice more attractive things out there; there will be no end to the attractive things we want. Progress in a worldly sense basically means creating more objects of distraction; becoming materially advanced means producing more objects of distraction. Advertising companies make sure that there are always objects of distraction around us – year after year, more and more new things are created. There is no end to the objects you desire if you are constantly looking out and trying to get the latest things, the latest model, whatever it is.

Beyond material objects, one may be discontented with one's relationship. Whoever we may be with, there will always be someone else out there who seems much more

attractive and better in every way. So a discontented mind is a mind constantly seeking out more objects of distraction, with the notion that one will get more satisfaction. But there will be no end to the objects of distraction. If you acquire what seems to be nice and attractive this year, soon there will be something else appearing that seems even more attractive. In this way, the mind will be constantly disturbed by the objects of distraction and desire.

On the contrary, if we begin to work on subduing the mind, this will naturally make the mind more contented. A contented mind means being happy and satisfied with what one has – with one's belongings, relationships, status and work situation, if it is a reasonable means of providing one's basic necessities.

As we generate contentment with what we have and as we work on subduing our mind, we will find that we have a much happier mind. Even when we encounter objects of distraction, they will not influence us, because it is not the objects themselves that harm us but our attitude that allows the objects to distract us. We may blame external objects as the source of our disturbances, but they are not to blame. There will be no end to the distractions out there – there will never be the 'last best thing' that will satisfy us; there will always be something else.

Rather than waiting for our external conditions to be perfect, we need to work on our attitude and develop a more subdued mind through our practice of meditation. The practice of meditation teaches us the techniques of having a less desirous and more contented mind. As we begin to feel the effects of a more contented mind, we will begin to really enjoy what we have and be happy with that. This is how, from a practical perspective, the practice of meditation will help us.

You should not misinterpret what I am trying to say here. I am not implying in any way that you should not work to try and better your external conditions by getting a job and making money to provide the basic necessities and comforts in life. It is definitely a good thing to work and gain money in order to have comfort and, if one has excess money, to use it wisely. The main point I am emphasising here is not to delude ourselves with the misconception that it is merely our external conditions that will bring us happiness and joy. That would be the fault. If one had the attitude that one's happiness and joy depended on external conditions, then for as long one had that attitude, there would be no end to the things we felt we must get and we would never feel content and happy. However, if we train our mind to have the right attitude, to be content with what we already have, then if we gain more things, they will just add to the contentment we have already developed.

The essential point here is to develop a contented attitude within our mind and not to lose our peace and happiness. That is the main thing we must secure. Happiness and joy come from within us through training our mind. As we secure the joy and peace we gain by cultivating and improving our mind, we will be able to maintain that inner peace and joy regardless of external conditions. If external conditions are good, that will add to the peace

and joy one already has. But even if the external conditions are not perfect, we will be able to maintain joy and peace in our mind because of our attitude.

We will have noticed that there are some wealthy and really happy people who have a generally good attitude; they were born with a good compassionate attitude and, as they gain more wealth, they use it as a means to help others. These people are very generous with their wealth, helping others, putting it to good use. The more they help others, the more joy it brings to their mind.

So wealth itself is not the problem. Rather, the problem is our attitude towards wealth and how we use it. Some who have wealth maintain their joy and peace of mind by being actively engaged in the practice of training their mind to have the right attitude – they gain contentment through the practice of meditation. Consequently, when they gain more wealth, it does not disturb their mind. They maintain a contented and happy mind while using their wealth appropriately for their immediate and extended family and generally helping others. In that way we can see that wealth can be put to very good use.

The main point here is that regardless of external conditions, real peace and joy come from developing our mind. We need to try and increase this sense of joy and peace that we gain through the practice and always try to protect it and not lose it. That is of crucial importance to our daily life.

Having explained some of the main benefits of meditation, we can now spend a few minutes in the actual practice, reminding ourselves to sit in an upright comfortable position physically, withdraw our mind from external distractions, and determine to focus on the object of our meditation, which in this case is our breath. The breath is an ideal object for those of us beginning in the training of meditation, as it is an object we are familiar with. While the natural inflow and outflow of the breath may not be a very esoteric object to focus on, we get an immediate, positive effect from focusing on it: it is an easy object that we can identify with and it is uncomplicated. The main point of the practice is to determine to focus on the breath and try to maintain that focus. As we sit in an appropriate posture, we withdraw our mind from distractions and maintain our focus for the next few minutes on the natural inflow and outflow of our breath. (*Pause for meditation*)

Just as we have attempted to do some practice here for a few moments, it would be worthwhile to try to maintain a similar practice in our daily life, to familiarise our mind with the practice of meditation. After some time and with more familiarity, we will definitely be able to gain a longer term positive effect of the practice of meditation – a more peaceful mind.

So it is essential that we begin to work on ourselves to gain a genuinely happy, calm state of mind. As we develop this state of mind, we will find that it naturally has a positive effect on those around us. Just by having practised meditation, it will have a naturally positive effect on those around us, without us having to use too many words. Even when we do speak with our friends about meditation, we will be able to discuss how to practise, how to progress and further our practice.

Whatever small experience we have when begin our practice, when we share that with others, that becomes really effective and can benefit others, because it is based on the experience and results we gain from our own efforts: when we share that with others it becomes a genuine sharing and will then carry weight and have real benefit for them.

If we want to share something positive with others, this is what we can share: whatever practice we have done, we can share the effects of that with others. In general, we can have conversations with others who are like-minded, about meditation, how to overcome and combat the difficulties and frustrations in our life, and so forth. In that way, it will be of mutual benefit when we speak with others, rather than talking about topics that will just increase desire or anger.

Prior to gaining real peace and calmness in the mind from our sustained practice of meditation, we can gain small experiences of having a relatively calm peaceful mind. As a result, when any disturbance arises in the mind or any situation occurs that is likely to disturb our mind, we will be able to notice it and identify that situation as soon as the disturbing attitude arises. By identifying it, we will be able to be cautious, to remind ourselves that we shouldn't allow ourselves to let the disturbance influence us, thinking: 'I shouldn't allow myself to be influenced by these disturbing conditions. I must protect myself'. We would even feel a fear of what the consequences would be, giving rise to a feeling of urgency to protect ourselves. However, without any training of our mind, if we just let ourselves be in such a situation, there will not be even the slightest intention in our mind to try to protect ourselves. We would just go along with the distractions and disturbance. It might not seem so disastrous in the beginning, but later on it would lead to a disastrous situation. So the practical benefit of meditation is that we can try to protect ourselves before a situation gets too bad.

I cannot emphasise enough the importance of not losing the joy and whatever happiness we have in our mind. The encouragement to practise meditation continually is the need for us to hold on to that joy and peace in our mind. If we don't have some mental training, even the slightest external conditions could disturb us. By not training in the practice of meditation, we are allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, to be influenced by external circumstances. When the slightest thing goes wrong, it can disturb our mind and cause us to completely lose the joy and happiness in our mind. Then the mind becomes really depressed and frustrated and, as a consequence, we might lose our inspiration for living. If we lose that inspiration for life, we have lost the essence of ourselves. So whatever circumstances may occur in our life, if we can maintain that inner inspiration, which comes with inner joy and peace, then we have gained something of real value.

That is something that will survive, whatever happens to us. That joy and peace is of immense value, much more valuable than any other valuable thing we may possess. That is why I often remind people that losing some precious object is no big deal compared to losing the joy

and peace in one's mind. Mental joy and peace is invaluable; no external object could replace the value of the peace and joy that we can cultivate within our mind. Once we cultivate joy and peace in our mind, instead of being influenced by any negative external circumstances that may arise, such circumstances would become a condition to strengthen us further, to give us more strength and make us more courageous. The external difficulty will somehow encourage us and strengthen us rather than depressing us; it will encourage our mind to become more compassionate more joyful and happier. When that begins to happen, we will be experiencing the real effect of the practice of meditation.

I will share a personal experience from my own life. An Indian lady once asked me 'How come you seem to be very joyful and happy most of the time?' My response was that it was because I had lost everything regarded as valuable in my life – my country, my possessions, having to leave my family and relatives behind – I had had to give up everything. At first, she didn't seem to understand and she was taken aback. Then she understood and said: 'What it actually means is that you have given up attachment to those things and that is what brings you joy, isn't it?' So she understood the main point.

In fact, at that stage in my life that is exactly what had happened. I had to flee my home country, leave all possessions behind – even family and relatives – everything of external value that one could think of had to be given up. But because I did not have strong grasping for those things, somehow I was able to endure that hardship, which brought more joy and peace in my mind. That definitely did help in my situation.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama has also mentioned that difficult circumstances were the times when he learned the most: that was when he got the most practice and gained the most insight and knowledge. What His Holiness the Dalai Lama shared with us seems to really be the case when one has the right attitude.

Other masters have also indicated that the best remedy to overcoming problems and difficulties is by embracing them. Ironically, embracing difficulties – willingly accepting hardships – somehow seems to be the best remedy to overcome them.

Let's look at the opposite response. If, when one has difficulties and problems, one allows them to burden oneself and allows oneself to become depressed, that doesn't help the situation, does it? Will becoming depressed over a difficulty help us? If we become depressed, the problem escalates and we have more problems. So, with the right technique, if we can embrace that difficulty and use it for learning and progressing, that is the best way to overcome the actual problem.

We could use sportspeople as an example of gaining through enduring hardships and difficulties. We all know that those who excel in sport are those who are able to endure hardship. I heard a tennis-player say that when he was training in intense heat – up to about 60 degrees Celsius – his trainer put ice packs on him but he still kept training. In doing all that difficult training, later he actually won the competition. If he had said during

training that the heat was too much that he couldn't train, it was too hard and just left it, he would not have gained the result of winning the competition. That is just a mundane example of enduring hardships and willingly carrying on, despite the difficulty.

Rather than just being a spectator, we can try to use our mind to learn from observing sports. Another practical thing we can learn is how much energy, effort and hardship a sportsperson has to go through in training and so forth to gain a top position. Then once they enter a competition and win, they can get so much money and fame. Depending on how they use that, it is something that they have gained from their efforts. What we can learn is how much hardship they have to go through in order to win. It seems that most sportsmen and women have a very early routine of waking up around four or five o'clock in the morning to go jogging and training. They wouldn't really excel in their field if they were to lie in bed and sleep-in in the morning. If they were to sleep-in and be lazy, they would not have accomplished their goals.

One of the disadvantages of laziness as described in the teachings is losing whatever goals one wants to achieve.

Before we conclude for the evening, we can spend a few more minutes in our practice of meditation. This time, as we withdraw our mind from the distractions, sitting in an appropriate posture, we keep our mind focused on the mantra to be recited, Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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