
The Condensed Lam Rim

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13 February 2008

The significance of having good connections with others

I'm very glad that we're able to gather here again. It is obvious that there is joy felt when we meet people that we know after we have been separated for some time. Why do we feel that joy? I think the reason we feel joy is because of the unique connection that we have with each other. By the same token, when we don't have good connections with others then that can contribute to a lack of joy and happiness in our life.

It may not be obvious right away, but when we really think about it, much of our sadness and lack of joy comes from not having a good connection with those that we live with. When we look into our social structure, it becomes quite apparent that without relating and having connections with others, we would not be able to survive on earth. We have different kinds of connections that support our survival. There is a connection between parents and children, connections between friends, connections between partners, boyfriends and girlfriends. There are a variety of connections that we all depend upon. Without good connections with others, we wouldn't be able to survive; it's not as if we can live completely isolated just by ourselves.

We have to acknowledge the fact that we need to depend on others. Thus good connections with others are essential in our lives. With my own experience of living alone, the need to have good companions becomes even more apparent as I age. Even people who practise the dharma need to have companions. Without having relationships and connections with others, we couldn't survive. Acknowledging the fact that we need to have good connections with others, will contribute to having a happy life. Now we need to further look into what are the causes to achieve good connections with others.

When I investigate and look into the causes and conditions for having good relationship with others, I feel personally that it comes down to having a genuine sense of love and compassion, a genuine concern for each other. It really comes down to that.

The role of genuine love and compassion in our lives

Love and compassion seem to be the main factors for having a good relationship with others. Look at how a genuine sense of love and compassion contributes to a good, harmonious relationship in general, then look at ourselves and our connections with others. We can see that to have a good connection with others on a personal level, we must definitely develop love and compassion within ourselves.

So, to look further into how love and compassion serve as the primary condition for a good relationship with others; we can take into consideration how a real and genuine sense of love and compassion contribute to caring for others.

Love, in the context of the Buddhist explanations, is a genuine sense of wishing others joy and happiness when you see that they lack joy and happiness. Love is defined as not being able to bear it when other people aren't happy, and that you want to take the responsibility of trying to bring them happiness. Compassion is the genuine wish of wanting others to be free from every kind of misery or suffering when we see them suffering.

When someone has that genuine sense of wishing to bring joy and happiness to others, and wanting to alleviate any kind of misery or suffering that that the other is experiencing, then that will definitely be appreciated, and a strong connection can be made with them. To understand how this works, let us consider ourselves as an example. When we aren't feeling happy or joyful, and if someone helps us feel joy and happiness again, then we would naturally feel very close to towards that person. Likewise, when someone helps to remove any suffering or unease we are experiencing, we feel tremendous gratitude and a strong connection to that person. We know how we immediately and naturally respond to a true sense of love and compassion from others, and this is true for others as well. When we extend our love, it gives others joy; and when we extend our compassion, this helps to remove their suffering. This is definitely appreciated. We can see how a genuine sense of love and compassion contributes to that strong, real bonding and connection.

A sense of real care and nurturing comes from a genuine sense of love and compassion, which is a particular type of attitude or wish in taking action when people need help. It seems that when we are in a destitute situation, when we really need help, then any help we receive is really appreciated.

When I was studying in India in Sarnath, near Varanasi, as a student I didn't have much to support myself and there were times when I went hungry. One day when I was walking from the institute towards the main shrine, or stupa, I was feeling quite hungry. As I was walking another monk called Geshe Yeshe Tobden was coming from the opposite direction. When we met midway he said, "I have a good meal that I can share with you. Would you like to have some?" to which I immediately responded, "Well, I would appreciate that as I am actually very hungry right now." That one incident of offering a meal has stuck in my memory very strongly because it was offered at a time when I most needed it; that is why I can never forget it. That is just one small example of how any help small or great offered when it is really needed, is definitely appreciated.

Another way to gauge whether love and compassion is unique or not, is to see if our so-called love and compassion towards others can be maintained in times of difficulties. We might claim that we love someone or have compassion towards someone, but if we shy away from them in difficult times and don't even try to help,

then the love and compassion that we claim to have are just merely words. It is not a real genuine sense of love and compassion. If we normally feel love and compassion towards others, then we must try to work towards making it a genuine sense of love and compassion that can withstand any circumstances, particularly in difficult times. That is when we most need to try to extend our love to others.

The need to practice patience

As we investigate and look into the importance of love and compassion, we can see that a genuine sense of love and compassion is definitely essential for a good harmonious relationship. Maintaining that becomes a real spiritual practice, which needs to be practiced from both sides. However, in order for that to turn into a really genuine spiritual practice we also realise that it is not an easy practice, the essential element of which is patience. We must develop patience in order to secure a genuine sense of love and compassion.

It is essential that we practise patience to maintain a genuine sense of love and compassion. Because without the practice of patience, even if we initially feel a genuine sense of caring and love for others, our love and compassion towards them sometimes seems to be quite dependent on how they behave towards us. When we start to feel that they are not appreciating our love and compassion, that's when the real test comes. If they start to aggravate us in any way through their physical actions or speech, then that's when we may lose our patience and become angry. The moment we become angry is when our love and compassion will go out the window. So, what patience means here is not allowing external conditions, such as negative attitudes from others, to disturb our mind. Maintaining our calmness and peace of mind and not retaliating or feeling disturbed in our mind by someone else's actions, is what patience means.

If we lack patience, then our mind gets affected by others' attitudes or actions. And because the mind then gets aggravated, the love and compassion that we feel for others will also be diminished. The importance of practising patience cannot be underestimated. It is really essential that we practise patience because this is what will help us to maintain a good relationship, regardless of any difficulties that may arise. Practising patience is not easy, however it is possible through familiarity. As we train our mind in practising patience it becomes easier to withstand and maintain our peace of mind whatever the circumstances. Otherwise what we see normally occurring in relationships is that initially there seems to be a very strong bond, even almost to the extent of an excessive attraction to each other. In that sort strong attraction there is definitely an initial element of love and compassion and concern. But then that initial love and compassion will start to slowly diminish and fade away. And then, if the practice of patience is not maintained, then whatever love and compassion that had been there earlier will start to fade away and completely diminish. And that's how relationships break up. So patience is essential.

Kindness - the key to happiness

Generating love and compassion can be combined into one word - kindness. What I am emphasising here is to practise having a kind mind or a good heart. Developing a kind mind within ourselves is not something completely alien to us. We already have kindness as a basis within ourselves, within our heart. It's just a matter of developing it further and increasing that kindness towards others. Likewise we also have the other positive states of mind such as non-hatred, which is the opposite of hatred; non-attachment; and lack of jealousy. So it is a matter of cultivating, developing and further strengthening them. However, we unfortunately also have the basis of negative minds: hatred, attachment, anger, jealousy and so forth. So we have both positive and negative states of mind within ourselves. If we look into the outcome of generating a positive or negative mind, we can see immediately that if instead of a kind attitude we have anger towards others, or even worse hatred, then our own mind is affected negatively. We are not really happy ourselves. As a consequence of feeling hatred or jealousy or strong attachment and so forth, we feel disturbed. It is very clear through our own experience that a kind, positive mind contributes towards a happier mind where as a negative mind does not. So, understanding that and relating to our own experience, it is in our best interests that we develop the positive states of mind; essentially a kind mind which contributes to a happy mind and a happy life.

The role of awareness and analysis

So, it is really important to actually sincerely look into ourselves and gauge from our own experiences. For example, what kind of feeling do we get within our own mind when we feel a genuine sense of love and compassion towards someone we normally feel connected to? What kind of attitude does that contribute to in our own mind, - a peaceful attitude or an agitated one? We come to understand and notice through our own experience that feeling love and compassion towards someone brings us a joyful, happy state of mind. But how do we feel when we feel anger towards someone? Do we feel peaceful, joyful or happy when we feel angry towards someone? We need to consider and understand the positive and negative effects of these different minds.

We need to investigate within ourselves and realise, as explained in the teachings, that there are certain states of mind that we need to discard, avoid and eventually abandon; and certain states of mind that we need to cultivate. Our mission is to gain real genuine happiness by distinguishing between the positive and negative states of mind. And that ability to distinguish between the positive and negative states mind has a specific term in the Buddhist teachings - we call it analytical wisdom. Analytical wisdom is a profound awareness and analysis that has the ability to differentiate between the positive and negative states of mind. As we work towards further developing our analytical wisdom - the ability to analyse and discern the positive from the negative, we can then cultivate and further develop the positive states of mind while abandoning the negative.

As we develop our analytical wisdom, our practice is said to become a very fruitful practice, because we can really pinpoint the main source of our problems and difficulties. We can then eliminate the source of the problems within ourselves - the negative states of mind - and we are able to cultivate the positive. The analytical wisdom that we develop becomes our main tool to achieve that. As a basis we already have that wisdom or intelligence, but as we develop it further and it becomes quite acute, then we will have a steady practice of constantly checking within ourselves and improving ourselves.

As we look into these different states of mind arising within ourselves, we come to notice through our own experience that, unfortunately we don't need to exert much effort to develop negative states of mind. They seem to arise spontaneously. Whereas when we discern and identify the positive states of mind, which is hard enough to do, it seems very difficult to try to really develop and cultivate them within ourselves.

Nevertheless, just because negative states of mind are difficult to abandon, this should not be a reason to be completely under their influence. To be under the influence of negative states of mind means they control you. So just because it is difficult to shun or abandon the negative states of mind, we should not allow ourselves to be under their control, otherwise there will be negative consequences.

For example, if someone gives into the negative state of mind of anger and allows anger to control their life, then we can see that they really suffer and there are many disastrous consequences and effects that come from that. So if we allow ourselves to be under the influence of that negative state of mind, and allow it to take control, then it overpowers us and brings negative consequences.

Diligence and meditation

Having identified negative states of mind, the next thing to do is not to allow ourselves to become completely controlled or influenced by that negative state of mind. We need to distance ourselves from the negative state of mind and control ourselves rather than give control to the negative state of mind. That is important.

The technique or the method for not allowing ourselves to be influenced by a negative state of mind is to first of all be able to have control over our own mind. To achieve this control we must be able to make our mind serviceable, where, through meditation we can use our mind for service, for performing positive actions. Without the practice of meditation, we cannot make our mind ready to serve others.

Meditation here refers particularly to the practice of being able to focus our mind on a chosen object. We need to maintain our concentration on that object. The ability to concentrate and to maintain that concentration on a chosen object, is where we gain the serviceability of the mind so to be able to control the mind.

We need to maintain a concentrated focus on an object, and then through this practice we can use different meditation techniques to overcome different negative states of mind such as anger. There are particular antidotes explained in the teaching specifically to

overcome anger. Likewise, there are specific antidotes which are prescribed in the teachings that help overcome jealousy, pride, attachment and so forth. The teachings prescribe as many antidotes as there are negative states of mind. Once we develop concentrated focus, then we can use the particular antidotes prescribed in the teachings to be able to overcome particular states of mind.

how the actual practice of meditation is done, can be explained in our future sessions.

Question: What kind of objects can we use for meditation?

Either a neutral object or a positive object is said to be chosen as an object of our focus in meditation. That object can be a thought or an image or any kind of object we like to choose. Having chosen either a neutral or positive object then we focus on that object with our mind and maintain our focus on that, not allowing other objects to disturb our mind. Familiarising ourselves with that practice is simply called meditation. So having chosen an object, and completely focussing on that object single-pointedly for whatever time we can, even for a few moments, then during that time we begin to experience a calm and peaceful mind. And the reason why that happens is because we are actually taking control of our mind at that moment by single-pointedly focussing on just one particular object. When we focus on one chosen object, that distances our mind from the normal distractions that go on in our mind. There are hundreds of different thoughts and ideas that can be labelled as distractions that occur in our mind constantly. The normal disturbances we have in our life, the frustrations, depression and so forth we experience, are basically the result of many different conflicting thoughts that arise in our mind constantly. Disturbing conceptions arise constantly in our mind, so when we maintain focus single-pointedly on an object we are distancing our mind from those distractions. As a result we are not influenced by those distractions and we experience a peaceful state of mind as a result. However, this is not something that happens as an immediate result of meditation. It is a gradual process of that will enable us to experience that.

Question: How can we be stern, particularly with children, without anger?

It really falls on the actual initial motivation or attitude that we have. So if we initially have a good attitude and motivation to help the kids, then if we act with that basic good motivation, then whatever action that we take is said to be a positive action for their benefit. With a good motivation, even a wrathful aspect can be useful to them. But if we don't have a good attitude in our mind, but instead immediately respond to whatever they've done, then it is most likely that our reaction will come from our habit of getting angry. But if there is a real genuine sense of love and compassion, then sometimes we may show a wrathful aspect. Love and compassion is said to be only beneficial for others. Likewise, a mother being stern with kids with a generally good attitude will benefit them. If her basis is anger and agitation, then whatever action she takes becomes a real wrathful action. And because it's a wrathful action based on agitation and anger, then whatever action she takes will not be fruitful and will not be appreciated by the other. It will even disturb the

mother herself. So in both cases, then there is internal wrath as well as external wrath, and both have negative consequences. As a result of that, the kids might escape from home!

Question: Even with a sense of expectation, can compassion still work?

As mentioned previously, in any relationship there is definitely an element of love and compassion. Of course in Buddhism we would say that in a relationship that is purely born out of attraction, then the dominating factor would be attachment. So the degree of attachment would be greater than the genuine love and compassion. But nevertheless, as mentioned previously, even with normal relationships there is definitely a basis, an element of love and compassion there. However, a lack of patience destroys even that very basic genuine love and compassion that may have been there initially.

You seem to differentiate between a love and compassion which is conditional and a love and compassion which is unconditional. However even what we call conditional love and compassion actually has a basis of unconditional love and compassion right there. It's not a separate kind of love and compassion that we should shun and call ordinary. What we call conditional love and compassion, according to Buddhism, is a love which has the strong element of attachment. But still it has the basis of genuine love and compassion so it's a matter of removing the element of attachment and developing the genuine love and compassion further. Yet even that basic conditional love can be shattered when there is a lack of patience. Has that become clear?

What determines whether the love and compassion is conditional or not, is whether the love and compassion towards others withstands hardships or not. If we shy away from others when hardships arise, then our love and compassion is based purely on just a fleeting attachment and thus is conditional. However, if our love and compassion towards others can withstand difficulties and hardships, then it has been genuine from the beginning.

We can conclude here for the evening. Before we end this session we can spend a few moments in contemplation. Sitting in an upright and relaxed posture we contemplate on the mantra of Buddha Shakyamuni. As that is being recited we should just try to focus on that sound, and maintain our focus on that.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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