
The Condensed Lam Rim

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As usual it would be appropriate to spend some time in meditation. In order to engage in meditation one must first of all make sure one has the correct conditions. One of these is to have a good, comfortable, sitting place. The cushion should be comfortable. Ideally, the cushion should raise your buttocks a little. Being a little bit elevated seems to help the meditation posture. This is assuming that one is sitting in the full or half lotus posture which is the traditional meditative sitting posture. Now, with the sitting posture or meditation posture the teaching says to sit either in the seven-point posture of Buddha Vairochana or whatever else is a comfortable posture. Since the text has given that choice it is in our interest to have the most comfortable posture. However one may think that the most comfortable posture is lying down. (*laughter*)

The instruction of how to sit in the seven-point meditation posture says that whether one actually adopts that posture for meditation is up to the individual and the capacity of the individual. However, even if one is unable to sit exactly as instructed it might worthwhile to know about the traditional sitting meditation posture anyway. So we will go over the seven point instruction of the meditation posture.

The first point is sitting in a full lotus or vajra posture. The lotus or vajra posture is sitting cross legged, where you put the right foot on the left thigh and the left foot on the right thigh. The legs are actually crossed over. To explain the literal translation of Vajra, it means diamond and has the connotation of being indestructible like a diamond. That interlocking of the legs and sitting in that posture helps the stability of our practice. The posture itself establishes firmness that wards off any harm that may be inflicted upon one's meditation, particularly non-human harm such as spirits and so forth. This goes along with the traditional belief that when someone is inclined to practice meditation, there may be others out of jealousy attempting to harm the meditator. The posture itself signifies stability and firmness which can withstand any harm.

The second point is the instruction on how to place the hands. The right hand is above the left hand and the thumbs are touching, forming the shape of a triangle which is placed at one's navel. The specific instruction is to place the hands (from the Tibetan measurement) four fingers span below the navel so the tip of the thumbs would be at the navel centre. This has the significance in advanced meditation to help the inner fire or inner heat that is at the navel chakra to increase. A further significance of the hand gesture is that the tips of the

thumbs have particular vein endings (called the *nadis* in Sanskrit) that carry the subtle energy. The *nadis* or channels allow bodhicitta (the altruistic wish to achieve enlightenment for the benefit of sentient beings) to flow thorough the body and thus increase bodhicitta. The thumbs touching together allow the subtleness of that positive energy of the altruistic mind to be generated or to be reinforced. That hand gesture itself with that significance allows the altruistic mind that is based on love and compassion to arise more spontaneously or easily within one's mind.

The third instruction for correct posture is to make sure that one's spine is straight. The significance of having one's back straight is that straightens out the *nadis* (channels within the body). Straightening out of the *nadis* allows the wind energy to flow well within the body. When wind energy flows well, that allows the mind to become more focussed thus whatever meditation one does becomes more focussed. If the wind energy is disturbed and not straightened out that makes the mind disturbed and the meditation will not be good. That is the significance of having the back straight.

The fourth instruction is how to place one's arms and shoulders. The arms are not touching one's body. They are in a bow shape and the shoulders are not stiff and hunched or too relaxed, but in a natural relaxed state. One needs to find the balance between not being too stiff or being too relaxed. The shaping of the arms like a bow so they don't touch the body helps to regulate the air flow between the arms, and regulates the body temperature so that our body does not becomes too hot or too cold.

The fifth instruction is how to place one's head and neck. The head should not be bent forward to the point where it is drooping down. That would be improper and would induce drowsiness in one's mind, and eventually sleep. Falling asleep is one of the main obstacles to successful meditation. The head should also not be lifted up too high. If the neck is bent back and the chin is raised too high then that induces excitement to occur in one's meditation. The proper manner of placing one's head is slightly bent forward as if we were to look down we will see the tip of one's nose. That would be again finding the balance between not being too bent forward or up too high.

The sixth instruction is how to place one's eyes. The eyes should not be closed completely nor should they be wide open. They are slightly closed and there is some visibility of light and if one were to look one could see the tip of one's nose. There is some visibility but they are not completely open. The significance of the placing the eyes in this manner is similar to placing the head. If the eyes are too wide open that can cause excitement to arise from coming in contact with external objects and so forth. If the eyes are completely shut then that can cause drowsiness or sleep or a stupor that is like a dark, sinking state of the mind and that would be an obstacle to meditation. Having the eyes in that balanced way helps us to be free from these two obstacles of excitement and drowsiness or sleep.

The seventh point of the instructions is how to place one's jaw and one's lip. It is said the jaws should be left in their

natural state. This means they are not clenched tight nor do you leave them loose. It is the same for the lips. One should not leave the mouth wide open because constant air coming in would dry out your mouth, which would then be uncomfortable in prolonged meditation. If one has one's lips completely closed that may be an obstacle to some flow of air and make it uncomfortable. Likewise with the jaws; if they are too clenched that would bring about tension. If they are too wide open that is also inappropriate. So, just leave them in a natural state where the teeth are barely touching or in their natural state. The specific significance of placing the jaw and lips in this manner is that it also beautifies the face and it is actually more pleasant to look upon were someone to look at your face.

The instruction for the tongue is to place the tip of tongue at the roof of one's palate behind one's front teeth. This has a practical significance. It prevents excess saliva forming in one's mouth. With prolonged meditation if lots of saliva forms in one's mouth it would drip out and it would be very uncomfortable, and messy as well. Further, when in prolonged meditation one's mouth may also become dry so placing the tongue on the roof of one's mouth helps to moisten the mouth while preventing excessive saliva.

This seven-point posture is called the seven-point posture of Buddha Vairochana. Buddha Vairochana is one of the Buddhas from the five Buddha families. It is said that Buddha Vairochana's meditative posture is the most significant for stabilising concentration because within the five Buddha families, the particular posture that Buddha Vairochana adopts is symbolic of having a very firm and stable concentration. Those of us who are engaging in the practice of meditation and wishing to master meditation, intend to master the most perfect concentration, don't we? To signify being able to master or nearly master meditative concentration or stabilisation we adopt that posture. Another significance of adopting that posture would be, as instructed in the teachings, that merely adopting this posture leaves a good imprint on our mind of the enlightened state of Buddha Vairochana. That has significance as well.

Having the appropriate posture for meditation, the next part of instruction is to set the appropriate motivation in one's mind. This is a virtuous motivation. Depending on the individual's capacity, the teachings say the most advanced, positive or virtuous motivation that one can adopt in one's mind is the motivation of bodhicitta. Those who are familiar with developing the bodhicitta motivation or attitude adopt or generate that motivation as the most virtuous. Those who are not familiar with that may adopt whatever one is familiar with as a virtuous frame of mind.

Having adopted the proper posture as well as the appropriate motivation in one's mind, which is a virtuous motivation, what one attempts to do in one's actual meditation is to develop concentration or mental stabilisation. It is said that the process to gain meditative concentration involves two main points. Firstly, one makes sure that one has a clear and sharp mind as well as, secondly, being able to focus single-pointedly on the

chosen meditation object. In order to be able to engage in meditation one has to have these two qualities of a clear, sharp mind and a mind focussed single-pointedly on the object. In order to achieve this one needs to overcome the two main obstacles to one's meditation. Those two obstacles are known by the technical term of stupor and excitement, or dullness and excitement. The main obstacle to having a clear and sharp mind is dullness or stupor, but particularly dullness. The main obstacle to having a single-pointedly focussed mind is excitement. So, excitement and dullness are described as being the main two obstacles to meditation. The conducive conditions to overcome these obstacles are developing introspection and mindfulness. These two become the main tools, or conditions, for overcoming the obstacles.

The instructions then deal with how to focus on or view the object. After having chosen the appropriate object to focus on one takes a mental image of the object. The mental object that one chooses to focus on to develop single-pointed concentration is in the nature of light and also has the propensity of being heavy. Those two aspects of the objects have particular significance in order for our meditation to develop further. If the object is in the nature of light and clear it helps to prevent dullness and all the obstacles that come from dullness such as drowsiness and stupor. That is overcome by viewing the object as being in the nature of light, being clear and luminous. Seeing the object as having the propensity of being heavy, helps to overcome the obstacle of excitement in one's mind. All of these specific instructions are very important to keep in mind for those who are doing meditation.

Following on with the instructions, whatever virtuous object one chooses to focus on one first familiarises oneself with that object. Initially, familiarising oneself with the object would mean looking at the object and seeing the object clearly. After one familiarises oneself with the object one induces a mental image of the object. It then becomes an internalised object rather than an external object. Having viewed it as external object and after familiarising oneself with that object one has to eventually internalise the object by transforming it into a mental image. It is that mental image that one needs to focus on in the actual meditation practice for developing single pointed concentration.

Mindfulness plays the role of remembering the object clearly. Having a constant recollection of the object, keeping one's focus on the object and not allowing one to be distracted, is the particular job of mindfulness. When one is trying to have a focused mind, one uses another part of the mind to periodically check or analyse one's mind to see whether one's mind has become distracted or not; and that is the particular job or function of introspection. Looking within oneself and making sure that one's mind is focussed, or not, is the function of introspection. Thus with mindfulness and introspection one maintains one's focus on the chosen object. For as long as one continues to unwaveringly keep focus on that object, one will engage in a proper, good meditation. Familiarising the mind and practising in that way will eventually result in a very firm and stable single-pointed meditation.

Having engaged in a proper practice of meditation, the result is to achieve a concentration which is a single-pointed focus on the object without the mind wavering. That is what is called a concentrated state of the mind. This is something that can be achieved through the continuous practise of meditation. There might be some misconception or misinterpretation of what concentration really is. Some may think that concentration is actually mindfulness, yet others may feel that it is the mind itself. In the study of the mind in Buddhism there are many different levels to the mind. There is the primary mind, which is what we call consciousness, and then there are other factors or particular aspects of the mind that are called mental factors. Concentration is a specific state of mind that we call a mental factor, and it is neither the mind itself nor mindfulness. When one develops concentration it is a particular state of mind that focuses undistractedly on the chosen object. That state of mind does not allow anything else to distract it from the object. It is the ability to maintain one's focus on the object for whatever duration one chooses. One develops this mental factor of concentration as the result of meditation.¹

Having gone over the instructions for meditation one should now be aware of the particular, conducive attributes or conditions to engage in a proper meditation practice. One is now able to identify the obstructions or obstacles to one's meditation practise. Having that knowledge and understanding is the first step to actually engaging in a practice of meditation. With that good understanding and further developing the understanding of a proper technique of meditation the next step is to engage in the practice of meditation, which will be useful for us.

In the practice of meditation the main goal is ultimately to subdue the mind, by first of all removing the mind from all the distractions. We bring the mind inward to subdue it and thus make it serviceable in order to engage in virtue so as to develop a kinder mind.

Having mentioned that the ultimate purpose of practising meditation is to subdue the mind one may wonder then what is the opposite of a subdued mind. What does it mean to have an unsubdued mind? An unsubdued mind basically means a troubled mind, a disturbed mind. All of us have experienced a disturbed mind regularly in our everyday life. We have experienced a lot of thoughts or distractions occurring in our mind. The disturbances that occur in one's mind, all the fleeting, meaningless thoughts, have no real essence. When one investigates further and asks how those disturbing thoughts arise; why is the mind so unsubdued and troubled? Why is it so distracted? As mentioned previously in other sessions, that comes about because we don't have control over our own mind, rather we allow our mind to control us. And the mind itself is unfortunately under the control of the delusions or the disturbing states of mind. Being influenced by the delusions makes the mind distracted and disturbed.

¹ Translator: In my translation I used the word 'concentration'. In some texts the translation is mental stabilisation. Whichever you are familiar with, it comes to the same understanding: mental stabilisation or concentration.

In order to reverse the situation of the mind being completely out of control, we have to take control of our mind. In our normal state we just allow the mind to wander off in any direction that it wants to go. We don't take any control of it and that is when the delusions control the mind and that is what distracts the mind constantly and leads to problematic situations for ourselves.

The first step to reverse this is to recognise that the mind is under the control of delusions and if we allow the mind to go in that way we are allowing the mind to influence us rather than the other way round. To reverse that situation we must actually take control of our mind. Taking control of our mind means to withdraw our mind from the objects of distraction, whatever those are, that induce the delusions to arise in our mind. We withdraw our mind by having chosen a neutral or virtuous object to focus on, such as our breath or any other virtuous object. We keep our full attention and focus upon that object and in doing so we now have a grip on our mind. If we place the focus or attention of our mind on a chosen object which is either neutral or virtuous, for as long as we do that it will naturally bring a calmness or a soothing effect in our mind. We get that immediate effect. This is because the mind is now temporarily diverted from the distractions of the delusions thus we get the immediate benefit of the mind becoming more settled and calmer.

Remembering the instructions that were given earlier, we should attempt in every practise of meditation to try to put those instructions to use. We will now take a few minutes for meditation practice. Initially, for beginners, the breath is used as an object to focus on. In order for the practise of meditation to become worthwhile and successful we need to give it our outmost attention. We need to give it one hundred percent of our focus and energy. Those who are more advanced may chose other objects of focus on, but for beginners it is usually advised to use the breath.

We must first make the determination that for the next few minutes I must not allow my mind to become distracted by other thoughts, other ideas and so forth that may arise in my mind. I will not give my attention to that; rather I will keep my focus one hundred percent on the breath. For the next few minutes I will practise what I have learnt. Again the two main tools are introspection and mindfulness. Having withdrawn the mind from other distractions, thoughts and so forth, and placed the mind on the object of meditation we keep our mind focussed and making sure that we keep our focus is the function of mindfulness. We use that mindfulness to maintain our focus on our breath. Then, once in a while just to make sure that our mind is in fact on the breath, we use one part of our mind to check whether the mind has become distracted or not. As soon as one notices one's mind has become distracted we bring it back again onto the object. In this way, by using the two tools introspection and mindfulness we try to maintain our focus on the breath. For the next few minutes we will engage in our practise in this way. (*Pause for meditation.*)

A practical piece of advice for beginners is to keep two main factors in mind. The first is to withdraw our mind

from the distractions. Once one has been able to withdraw one's mind from the distractions, then that's a very good step. The second important point is to maintain our focus on that chosen object. We use these two main elements as a reminder for ourselves. Has one's mind withdrawn from the object of distractions or not? If not then spend sometime to withdraw and settle down the mind. If you are thinking about other things bring your mind away from that. Once the mind becomes a little bit settled, away from the distractions one then uses one's focus and energy to focus on the object. Then, while focusing on the object, try to maintain one's focus for whatever duration one may be able to. For beginners maybe a few seconds or a minute or two, that's fine. If you are able to focus for a minute or two in a precise, focussed way, be content with that. You can come out of the meditation and then the next time when you engage in meditation using the same technique try to engage in the proper focus of the object, withdrawing the mind first and then focusing on the object.

If, as you practise meditation, you find that initially your mind, no matter how much you try, keeps becoming distracted then it is better to leave it for a while and not to try to fight yourself-it is better not to try too hard to induce the meditation practice. Just to sit in the meditative posture and thinking that I am actually doing meditation, while in fact one has become distracted will form a bad habit if one continues. Whenever we try to go into meditation our distracted mind will constantly be there and we may be deceived into thinking that we are actually practising meditation while in reality the mind is constantly busy and distracted.

It is very important from the initial start of a practise of meditation that one make sure that one puts effort in getting quality rather than quantity. It is not so important to have long sessions in the beginning. In fact the instruction says to have short sessions in the beginning. It is very important to keep the mind focussed even if it is for a few minutes. Be content with that one or two minutes, or whatever duration one is able to focus, and come out of meditation and start again. Then that will stabilise a good meditation habit. If you use that method or technique from the start it forms a good habit, not a bad habit, of inducing a focussed mind and then engaging in a proper practice of acquiring concentration or mental stabilisation. That is an important point that one should remember.

The instructions for meditation which have been given should be sufficient for this evening. From the next session onwards we will engage in the actual practice of meditation for part of the time followed by slowly going through the topics of the text. So, for this evening, we will conclude here. But before we conclude the session we can spend a few more minutes in a concentrated focussed state and this time the object we focus on is Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra. As one hears and recites the mantra together one just focuses on the sound of the mantra and keeps one's mind focussed on that.

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