
The Condensed Lam Rim

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As usual it would be good to spend some time in meditation. We can sit in a comfortable and relaxed posture. As is stressed regularly, we not only sit in a comfortable posture but it is also important to generate a positive state of mind.

Generating a positive state of mind initially requires internal observation. As we observe our state of mind, we come to notice that our state of mind can be either in a positive state or it could be in a negative state. Furthermore, as we observe our own state of mind, before engaging in any practice we come to notice that our mind is constantly very active and very busy focussing on external distractions.

When our mind is in a distracted state, this is an obstacle to our practice. The ability to observe our own mind is unique. Even when we have identified our mind as being distracted, we might still ask if there is any fault with that. If as a result of the mind being distracted we were to actually derive some real happiness and peace, then we could safely conclude that there is no fault with a distracted mind, and continue to let our mind being distracted. But what we have come to notice so far in our lives, is that a distracted mind does not bring real happiness and peace to our mind.

The way our mind functions is complex. When we look into what worries us and makes us anxious, we notice that there are a lot of unrealistic things that the mind gets concerned with. We think about endless options and hypothetical scenarios: 'if this happens maybe then that would have happened, and then if this goes wrong, then that could also go wrong.' We can be pessimistic about situations that have not actually occurred yet. Our mind makes up scenarios of things or events going wrong which haven't even happened yet. It is strange how the mind does that. It's as if we purposely inflict worries and anxieties upon ourselves without there being any real good reason.

An unskilled or unsubdued state of mind is a mind that seems to be constantly preoccupied with these worries, such as making up different scenarios about things and events going wrong. This brings an overall heaviness to our mind. Our mind is constantly busy and preoccupied with different scenarios that contribute to more anxiety and worries and eventually depression. For as long as we allow our mind to be dominated by those kinds of mental scenarios taking place, then it seems our mind is never really settled, never really happy. Of course, within those distractions going on in our mind there can be moments of happiness. But this happiness doesn't last long because we allow our mind to be dominated by the distractions.

Meditation is the technique to withdraw our mind from the seemingly endless scenarios we create. The real underlying problem we have is the constant distracted mind. For as long as the mind is in a distracted state, preoccupied by all these made-up scenarios of worries and so forth, there is no real peace and tranquillity in the mind. So when we are introduced the technique of meditation, we will be able to recognise that the practice of meditation is a unique and useful technique. Because what meditation does is, as we choose an internal object to focus on, the very act of trying to single pointedly focus on an object is withdrawing our mind from those distractions.

Meditation is the technique of settling down the mind, and making it calmer and more peaceful. We will begin to notice that as we become more familiar with the practice of meditation, it will contribute more and more to the calmness and clarity and peace in our mind. It is important to understand that. If we actually think about our situation, we can all agree that we don't lack the external conditions that contribute to our happiness and well-being.

As far as external conditions go, we don't really lack much in terms of shelter, food and clothing and so forth. Compared to many others, we have enough external conditions that contribute to our well-being. But even with what we have we are not really content, we are not really happy. Then it is right to ask the question, why is that so? If all our external material conditions are good, well then, why aren't we still experiencing real joy and happiness in our mind? What is lacking? What is hindering or obstructing us to experience real joy and happiness? This is a reasonable query which is worthwhile looking into.

Taking this query further and connecting it with what is actually disturbing our mind, the answer lies in that it is not so much of the lack of external conditions, but rather something lacking within us. We lack mental stability; we lack a focussed mind. The real obstacle to our happiness and inner well-being is that the mind is constantly distracted and constantly preoccupied with making up different kinds of hypothetical scenarios.

What is lacking is nothing external but internal. Internally, we lack the conditions to have peace and happiness within our mind. When we come to that realisation, we can reaffirm that the practice of meditation as a unique and useful practice. It is a technique that brings about the inner conditions for which we need to be happy. To put it very simply, meditation is a technique to distance our mind from distractions, allowing our mind to settle down to its natural state of being calm, clear and peaceful. The main point of meditation is to distance our mind from distractions.

As we further understand the effectiveness of meditation and how the technique of meditation actually works, we then begin to also realise that meditation is like a cure for our mental problems. Meditation is the medicine to overcome all the difficulties and problems in our mind. Of course this is a gradual process. The more we engage in a proper meditation technique, the more we reduce the anxiety and problems in our mind. As the distractions

reduce in our mind, the mind naturally becomes clearer and stronger and the peace in the mind increases.

We can see how the practice of meditation actually brings about positive effects within us. The meditation technique does not involve external tools that we use to change our mind. Meditation is something that is developed within us by each individual. When we think about the practice of meditation, we should feel empowered that we have the ability to change our own mental state from a diseased mind full of problems, into a healthy mind. That cure lies within us. It is not something that we are searching for externally.

It is empowering when we realise that all the problems and difficulties we have are actually caused by our own mind. Being in a distracted state of mind and not having the right attitudes, will cause mental problems for us. But just as we have caused the problems ourselves, likewise we also have the cure for that within ourselves. We should recognise that we have the power and the ability to cure ourselves. That is something really unique about the practice of meditation. This is something we should remember and constantly remind ourselves of, so that we are encouraged to practice meditation.

Negative states of mind are nothing else but the creation of our own mind. The antidote to overcome our negative state of mind is a controlled state of mind, a clear mind, which is developed by our own power and is not something external. It is important to protect our own mind, we can relate to that. We can relate to protecting the positive side of our mind and reducing the negative states of mind, which are anxieties, paranoia and so forth. Firstly, we are trying to transform our mind from the negative to the positive and secondly, to protect and secure the positive states of mind. Meditation serves both purposes.

Having briefly introduced the benefits of the techniques of meditation, the great purpose and the great meaning that we can derive from the practice of meditation, we will now actually engage in the practice of meditation for a few minutes. The internal object we focus on is the breath. The breath is actually a very easy object to focus on, because it is something tangible. It is not something vague; it is basically our own breathing that we do naturally, every minute, every second we breathe in and out. Basically, focusing on the breath, the air that we breathe in and breathe out - that is what we are focusing on. As an object to focus on, it is not vague or obscure; it is something quite simple. However, while it is actually quite a simple and an easy object to identify and focus on, the benefits are said to be incredibly great. As we focus on the breath, that very focus actually helps to tune our breathing as well, it helps to neutralise the wind energy within us. This has a positive effect, first of all it makes the body more subtle and lighter and that in turn benefits the mind. It is said the wind energy or the wind element has a strong connection with the mind. As the breath is regulated and is in a natural state, then that brings well-being within the body and to the mind. As we focus on the breath to sharpen our focus, it has positive effects on our body as well. So that is why the breath is said to be a unique and appropriate object to focus on.

Now for the purpose of the meditation. As mentioned previously, since distractions effect us in a negative way, in meditation we purposely distance our mind from all distractions, not allowing the mind to be distracted. We bring the mind inward and focus on the breath.

(Pause for meditation).

Just as we have attempted now, it would be beneficial if we regularly do some short meditation practice. The meditation technique helps us to familiarise ourselves with good conduct; it accustoms our mind to a good way of thinking. If we could keep up a consistent practice on a regular basis, then that would bring us some real benefit. It doesn't need to be long; the main thing is to make it a constant practice in our daily lives. Small efforts can bring a good result.

For example, certain birds when they make a nest constantly bring in small bits of mud-like pieces to add onto their nest. Eventually they make a nice, strong firm nest out of many small pieces. In my hometown in Tibet where I grew up, there is a monastery. We noticed that under the ceilings and eaves there were particular types of birds that would construct these nests. It seems that in the winter they don't reside there, but in the summer they would come back. At a particular time of the year they nest there, and then they leave, but then they come back to their own nest. They somehow recognise their own nest and come back to it each time; that seems remarkable. In spring when this particular cookoo bird makes it's sound, there is a particular tune that it makes and we interpret it as good auspicious phrases such as 'have long life', 'be well', 'no sickness' and 'bring wealth'.

The main reason I bring the example of the cookoo's nest was to point out that in a small animal such as a bird, the brain is much smaller than ours, and the intelligence much less. But even such a small being, through their effort and their intelligence can build a nest. They also seem to have some intelligence to be able to come back to their own place, and some sort of unique memory too. These examples show the ability of the mind and the power and effectiveness of continuity. Bringing small mud balls again and again to build up a nice strong nest that they can come back to and use for many seasons, shows the positive effect of constant work. Likewise, if we familiarise our mind continuously with regular meditation, then that would definitely bring about an effect. Because we as human beings definitely have a much higher level of intelligence, there is no question that we can develop great positive results for ourselves. It is good that we use examples of animals, because as humans we are known to be superior only because of our higher level of intelligence. So it is a matter of using our intelligence in the right way. It is quite remarkable that many small pieces of mud can transform into a nice house in which birds can nest and have baby birds.

My approach is that we always go through the text in a very slow way, because there is no rush. I'm definitely staying here and you are all living here as well. If we go through the text slowly, that is a good approach. I have related a story a couple of times about the effectiveness of going slow and when you are going slowly, there are times you can overtake and make great advances as well.

The story is about two students I remember from the time when I was studying in India at the Sanskrit university of Sarnath, near Varanasi. We had an annual running competition. There was one particular student whose name is Uken. He was known to be a little foolish and was known as 'Uken the simpleton'. The other student's name is Pema Gyalpo. In the race they came last. Uken the simpleton was telling Pema Gyalpo, 'we are at the end of the line anyway, others have gone ahead of us so we might as well just take it easy and go slow'. Pema Gyalpo thought 'okay, go slow'. Uken also had some small tasty snacks he had with him that he was sharing with Pema Gyalpo. But just as they were about to reach the finish line, Uken jumped ahead and got a few more marks, so he was not the last. He was known to be a fool, but he fooled someone else. Pema Gyalpo was known to be a smart student and Uken was always known as the simpleton and later the other students started to tease Pema Gyalpo saying 'You have been fooled by Uken the simpleton!'.

Question: A couple of weeks ago, you spoke of pride and its antidote as equanimity. I wonder if we experience of a sense of balance in life when meditating on equanimity?

Answer: Actually the specific antidote for overcoming pride was not so much on equanimity, even though equanimity may be of some help. Pride is a sense of elevated attitude, a pompous feeling of thinking you know a lot, that you are greater and so forth in relation to either wealth or knowledge. If it is in relation to knowledge specifically, then pride is a state of an attitude where one feels 'I know a lot, I'm quite intelligent and knowledgeable', and thinking about that brings up the pride.

As an antidote to overcome that, it is mentioned that if we think about the different components within ourselves, what makes up our body, there are so many different components. There are eighteen different constituents that make up our body. Also think about the multitude of the cosmos and the universe. When we think about that, then we will begin to realise that we are ignorant about the basic fact of what compounds make up our body, and what makes up the cosmos and the universe. When we think about that, we realise that there are so many things that we still don't know about.

Thinking about this helps us to reduce our pride. If we were to look inside our body with the naked eye and without instruments, we would not be able to see it. Even if we were look from the bottom of our feet, there are so many things within our body that we are ignorant of, that we don't really know about. As we come to the head, I refer to what psychologists have mentioned, there are so many parts of the brain that we still do not fully understand. There are so many different parts of the brain and they are over hundred different names of different particular points of the brain.

Question: In meditation on breathing, what if we get attached to breathing in and breathing out? What if the breathing stops? What do you meditate on?

Answer: So of course if the breathing stops the meditator ceases to exist in that state, there is no more meditator left. You are finished! Joking aside, even though we

emphasise the focus on meditation on the breath, which of course caters for most of us, as we are beginners in meditation, we get a calm effect in the mind. This brings the mind to a neutral state to enable us to effectively focus on something positive.

The analogy used is like a white cloth. If the cloth is already dyed red or black or some other colour, it is hard to change that because it is already dyed. But a white cloth or a no colour cloth is in a suitable state to be dyed whatever colour we wish. The mind is similar to the cloth. Naturally, for ordinary people our mind is always agitated and disturbed, so for it to immediately transform into something positive can be difficult. Thus the practice of focusing on the breath will first of all neutralise the mind. We can use this neutral state to focus on something positive.

However there are some meditators who choose the breath as the main focus object in their practice so they can develop what is called 'calm abiding'. The acquaintance of the mind with calm abiding is the result of meditation where the mind is completely single pointedly focussed on an object for as long as the meditator wishes. To achieve that state you need to focus on an object and there are some meditators who choose the breath to achieve that. The breath itself becomes the main focus of their practice.

There are different antidotes for overcoming different disturbances in our mind. For someone who has a particular negative state of mind or has lots of uncontrolled thoughts and ideas and conceptions, then the practice of focusing on the breath becomes an antidote to reduce that hyperactive mind, as well as reducing all the conceptions. For example, when someone's mind is agitated and you ask them to meditate on love, compassion or patience, then that doesn't work so well. But if you ask them to just focus on the breath, that then becomes manageable. As they focus on the breath, their mind naturally calms down. It can then be used effectively to practice developing love and compassion. Meditation is not an end to itself, it is a means to achieve further ends.

We can now spend a few moments in meditation. This time, as we bring our attention inward, we recite and focus on the sound of the mantra of Buddha Shakyamuni.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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