
The Condensed Lam Rim

ལྷན་ཁྲིམས་ལྟོགས་ཀྱི་རིམ་པ་བཞུགས་སྒོ།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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As usual it would be good to spend some time in meditation, so we should adopt an upright, comfortable position. It is also important to adopt a good motivation. If one's mind is in a disturbed state, transforming that into a virtuous state of mind is basically what generating a positive motivation means.

The purpose of meditation is to transform an unhappy state of mind into a happy one. We can see from our own experience that this is indeed possible. For example once we see the disadvantages of anger, we can transform an angry mind into a state of mind that is free from anger.

When we investigate our experiences, we can see there are many things to learn. We need not spend time and energy going out for entertainment somewhere else: looking at our own mind can be good form of entertainment. Many different things go on right here, within our own mind. We can adopt those that are positive and use them to our benefit, and we can try to discard those that are not so conducive to our well-being.

In fact Dharma or spiritual practice, particularly in a Buddhist context, means investigating what is going on in one's mind. As explained in the teachings, the practice of Dharma serves as a mirror for us to see our own mind. When we clean our face, we have to rely on a mirror to check whether we have any dirt on our face. Likewise the dharma serves as a mirror to for us to see if we have any delusions or negativities in our mind. By means of the Dharma, we are able to identify them and clear them away.

In fact it is really important that we acknowledge the negative states of mind we may see within us. Acknowledging any negativity in our mind is the first step. The next step is to try to remove that negativity from our mind. Most of us already have the capacity to notice all these negativities and shortcomings within us, but the reason we don't seem to be able to transform them is that we don't do much about them. Often we are in the situation of seeing our negativities and shortcomings, but not doing much about them—just leaving them as they are.

For those who are completely oblivious to their faults—who don't have the capacity or ability to notice their faults—there is really not much they can do about that. But most of us have the capacity to notice our faults, and it would be quite foolish not to try to do something about them. The reason they are called faults is because they harm us. If we noticed that something was harming us and just let it be, that would be foolish. Leaving aside the benefits for further lives, even in this life if we see that something harms our life or well-being and we don't do

anything about it, despite having the means to, that would be considered quite unfortunate.

What we should try to do is secure positive states of mind in relation to our own well-being and our relationships with others. To summarise, the positive attitudes are basically love and compassion. These are the most valuable assets, the most precious wealth one can have. We should always try to maintain love and compassion within ourselves, not the opposite, which is hatred and resentment.

In terms of our relationships with others—our partners or any others we associate with—we should try to remind ourselves of the need to promote the feeling of love and compassion towards them. Although there may be things we don't always agree with, which may lead to occasional disagreements, we should not allow those instances to hinder the basic love and compassion we feel for the other. Of course in our relationships, there are bound to be occasional disputes over small things, but when love and compassion is strong, those small disputes will not destroy that love and compassion.

Otherwise one will constantly dwell on the argument or small conflict one had with someone else, and think about the best way to get back at them. So the next time you see them, you will already have prepared yourself to say something in relation to what they said earlier, and have a sense of unease in your mind. When one utters those words, of course the other will respond, and the argument and uncomfortable feelings will just increase. Then that will disrupt your feeling of love and compassion towards the other.

The main point I was making earlier is that we need to remind ourselves of the main purpose of engaging in the practice of meditation. The ultimate purpose of meditation is to gain some real joy and happiness in our mind—there is no purpose other than that. That will contribute to others' joy and happiness as well. The way to gain joy and happiness in our mind is by removing the opposite qualities—the negative states of mind that disrupt that joy and happiness. This is the practise of subduing the mind. So in order to gain a joyful and happy mind, one needs to exert effort to subdue the delusions.

Then one can gain an understanding of what it means to protect one's mind. It is often emphasised in the teachings that one needs to protect one's mind? But what does that mean? Basically it means to protect one's mind from negative states. Using an analogy, when we are near a precipice, we are warned to protect ourselves from falling over it. So protecting oneself from the precipice means to protect ourselves from tripping and falling over the edge of the precipice.

The main point is that we need to practise meditation or Dharma which means applying the appropriate technique of meditation with the understanding that it will contribute to our well-being and happiness. Meditation when done properly will definitely help to increase the sense of purpose or direction in our life.

The alternative is very unfortunate—many people lose hope, lose direction, feel discouraged or experience low self-esteem. Whatever venture or activity we engage in, if

we allow such a state of mind to dominate us, it will become a habit and we'll think: 'I'm hopeless, I'm not good at anything, I won't be able to manage'. When that sort of thinking becomes a habit, it can influence us to the point of overpowering us, and we will always feel low and discouraged. That would not help our situation in any way.

Even if the situation is difficult, such as a practice or meditation that may not be easy, feeling discouraged about it will not help us to practise better. When you think about it in that way, there is no point in feeling discouraged and hopeless, because rather than helping our situation, it will only worsen it. In fact it is very dangerous: feeling low self-esteem and hopelessness is not only uncomfortable but is quite a dangerous mindset. We need to try to remember the good values we have within ourselves and try to promote those good values; we need to try to encourage ourselves with a sense of capability, hope and purpose.

The very technique of meditation involves familiarising ourselves with a positive frame of mind, which means withdrawing our mind from distractions and finding a space within us that is calm and tranquil. When we meditate, that is what we are familiarising ourselves with. At the same time, we are trying to oppose the disturbing or negative states of mind, such as hatred, anger and desire. The very practice of meditation involves those two aspects: familiarising ourselves with positive, and opposing the negative states of mind.

For those who are not familiar with the technique we are adopting here and to remind those who are familiar with it, the technique involves withdrawing our focus from all internal and external distractions. For the time being, we leave everything aside, and bring our full attention to the breath: this is the object on which we maintain our focus.

Full attention means that we are not half-focused on the breath and half-preoccupied with other things. Rather bringing our full attention to the object. When we notice our mind beginning to wander, we constantly remind ourselves to bring it back to the focus on the breath. As beginners, although initially we may find it difficult, if we do it gradually, engaging more and more in this practice, we will notice that our attention and focus on the breath becomes more and more natural. Thus the mind will naturally become calmer and more settled and will naturally be less preoccupied with other things. But initially we must make the commitment and determination to fully engage in the practice. So, for the next few minutes we will focus on our breath, as mentioned, with our full attention, and maintain our focus there. *(Pause for meditation)*

That will be sufficient for now. Just as we attempted now, it would good for everyone to incorporate some meditation in their daily life. Initially we need not be too concerned with the duration of the meditation. What is more important is to have a really acute focus, even if it is only for a short time. I think the saying in English is "quality is more important than quantity". If the focus is not very clear, the meditation will not serve much purpose, even if one sits for a long time.

If one does have a reasonable amount of time to do meditation, a useful technique to adopt is to spend a few moments really trying to develop an acute focus on the object, then to maintain it for a few minutes. After that, one can relax one's attention and focus. That doesn't mean allowing one's mind to become distracted again and wandering off but rather one just relaxes the focus on the object. After relaxing for a few moments, one can go back again to the focus on the object. In that way even in a short time, one is actually training one's mind to have a very sharp focus.

Developing a sharp focus even for a short time is much more important than spending a long time in half-focussed meditation, especially in relation to the procedure for developing calm-abiding or mental quiescence. Basically calm-abiding or mental quiescence is a state of mind where one has developed an unwavering, stable, single-pointed concentration on a meditation object.

The teachings state there are nine stages in the process of developing calm-abiding. A sign of having attained the first stage mentioned in the teachings is the ability to focus on a chosen object unwaveringly, free of the two main obstacles of excitement and dullness. One would be able to maintain one's focus on the object free from dullness and agitation for the duration of reciting one mala or rosary of the mantra 'Om mani padme hum'. This is given as an indicator of how long one would need to maintain one's focus on the object without any distraction. That is the first of nine stages. Then one proceeds to the second stage, third stage and so forth, up to the ninth stage of developing calm-abiding.

We can begin to relate to the first stage in terms of being able to focus unwaveringly, without distraction, on the object for one minute or so. If one is able to do that, one can proceed to the next stage of meditating without distractions for two minutes. Then we increase the duration to three, four minutes and so forth. But if we are unable to maintain our focus for even one minute, then to attempt to meditate for a longer duration really has missed the point, if we hope to develop concentration.

The whole point of that first stage of developing calm-abiding is to achieve single-pointed concentration. Without developing the first of the nine stages, one cannot possibly develop the second and third and fourth stage, and thus develop calm-abiding. For someone inclined to develop single-pointed concentration from the practice of meditation, it is important that from the very outset, one adopts the correct technique. Otherwise, even if one spent a long time trying to do some meditation, it would not serve the purpose of enabling one to develop single-pointed concentration. There are also retreats where you do recitation of certain mantras; if that is done with a good motivation, there will be some benefit from reciting the mantras, but it would still not serve the purpose of developing single-pointed concentration.

One may ask the question why do we need to develop single-pointed concentration? If you have attempted to do some meditation, you will have noticed that when try to focus on the object, rather than being able achieve that, all sorts of past memories and thoughts seem to arise. That is due to the fault of not having developed single-

pointed concentration. Thus for someone who is keen to develop their meditation technique, that is what is meant by 'losing the object'. When one's mind is distracted by things other than the focus on the object, one has lost the meditation object.

What I am attempting to share with you is the proper technique that will lead to the development of single-pointed concentration. Of course achieving single-pointed concentration is a gradual process, but even with the gradual process we need to start with the proper technique.

As we have some time left, we can either use it for some questions if anyone has a question, or we can go over the text. If anyone does have a question you can raise your hand.

Question: Venerable Michael, I wonder if Geshe-la can explain the aggregate of compositional factors?

Answer: We will go over the five aggregates for those who are not familiar with them. First there is the form aggregate; then there is the aggregate of feeling; then the aggregate of discrimination; the fourth is the aggregate of compositional factors; and the fifth is the aggregate of consciousness.

The reason why the five aggregates have been presented in this sequence is significant. If we relate it to our actual experience of perceiving things, when we come in contact with an external object, we see its form through our eyes. Then there is an appearance of the object as either appealing or unappealing. In relation to this, a feeling arises. If it is an appealing object, a pleasant feeling arises. If it is an unappealing object, an unpleasant feeling arises. That is why, after form, the second of the five aggregates is feeling.

After feeling arises, one's discriminating awareness or recognition causes one to become aware of particular characteristics of the object. For us, as an ordinary person, there is a mistaken discrimination that arises in relation to the object. Due to that mistaken discrimination, one of the two mental states of either attachment or anger arises which falls into the aggregate of compositional factors. The fifth aggregate, which is consciousness, is a particular consciousness that is tainted with delusions: a deluded consciousness.

Thus in relation to our experience of interacting with an external object, the form aggregate refers to coming in contact with an external object such as a form; as a result, a pleasant or unpleasant feeling arises within us. Due to that, a state of mind arises that discriminates or sees particular characteristics of the object. When one has defined the particular characteristics of the object, other states of mind arise. Within the category of mind and mental factors, the rest of the mental factors not specified earlier all come under the category of the compositional factors. Then the consciousness aggregate is the main state of mind that arises in relation to any particular object.

So we can use an external object such as form to show how the sequence of the five aggregates occurs. Basically this is how the five aggregates function. If we relate the five aggregates to a person, then we call them internal aggregates. The form aggregate is our physical body. The

rest of the aggregates are more on the mental level. We can have pleasant, unpleasant or neutral feelings; all of these different feelings that we experience comprise the feeling aggregate within us. The aggregate of discrimination is our ability to discern different characteristics of things, external or internal. The aggregate of compositional factors, combines all the different states of mind called mental factors, such as the negative states of mind of anger, jealousy, hatred and attachment, and from the positive side there are the compositional factors such as love and compassion.

The aggregate of consciousness relates to the six consciousnesses within ourselves. Thus the combination of the five aggregates is what is called a person. That is why the definition of a person in the teachings is 'the 'I' which designated upon the bases of any of the five aggregates'. So, a person cannot exist without being designated based upon all or any of the five aggregates.

Yet as one goes further into the teachings, after having defined what a person is, we then relate to each of the five aggregates and ask whether any of them is the person that appears to us. Each aggregate in itself is not the person. However, for a person to exist there has to be the five aggregates as the basis. Without the basis of the five aggregates as a basis of designation, a person cannot exist. That is how the investigation is presented in the teachings—first recognising what the self is, and then based on that realising what selflessness is.

Question: Geshe-la, is the aggregate of determination one of the five omnipresent mental factors, if so isn't in then also the aggregate of compositional factors?

Answer: Yes, to be specific, discrimination is one of the five omnipresent mental factors. However feeling and discrimination are listed separately. Therefore except for feeling, discrimination and consciousness, all the rest of the mind and mental factors fall within the compositional factors. That is why as an aggregate it encompasses all the rest of the mind and mental factors that are not specifically encompassed by the five aggregates.

Furthermore, when we talk about the five external objects, form falls within the form aggregate. However because the impermanence of the form aggregate is part of our existence, when we talk about the impermanence of the form aggregate, that is again subsumed within the compositional factors. As mentioned in the teachings, everything in relation to ourselves, as a person, needs to fall within the five aggregates. Basically that which is not form, feeling, discrimination or consciousness—the rest of the factors in relation to our existence—are encompassed within the compositional factors.

Before we conclude for the evening, we can again spend a few moments in meditation, and this time we will focus on the mantra to be recited, which is Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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