
The Condensed Lam Rim

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It would be good to spend some time in meditation. We have covered the techniques and practice of meditation before, however it is good to remind ourselves of the importance of adopting an upright and relaxed posture. Likewise, it is equally important to generate a positive motivation in our mind.

A positive motivation is a way of reminding ourselves of the ultimate goal of meditation practice. Of course, depending on individual levels of understanding and capacity there might be different types of motivations for doing the practice. For most people, the motivation is to focus on the temporary benefit, which is to calm down the mind. Most of us have difficulty with the mind being completely distracted, which is the cause of disturbances and anxiety in the mind. So for most people, the intention for meditating initially might be to try to achieve a calmer state of mind.

Furthermore, even though our motivation might be geared more towards the immediate benefits from the practice of calming down the mind, this attempt brings about a lot of other longer-term benefits as well. For example, in attempting to calm down our mind by focusing on the breath, we are aware that it is possible to settle down our mind and that our happiness and calmness depends very much on our own internal attitude.

When the mind is settled down and not influenced by distractions, it helps our positive states of mind to arise, such as kindness and so forth.

With the combination of having a calm mind plus a kind mind, we can achieve great benefits for ourselves and others. Without a calm and settled mind, we will not be able to succeed in whatever we set out to do. When the mind is in turmoil and distracted, even a mundane activity becomes difficult and unlikely to be fruitful. We do need to engage in something in our life, either spiritual endeavour or worldly endeavour. Either way we will not be able to achieve what we wish for if our mind is in turmoil and lacks focus and attention. Calming down the mind definitely helps bring the mind more into focus. When the mind becomes settled, it becomes more focussed and there is more clarity. Our temporary and ultimate goals can be achieved through calming the mind. The by-product of kindness will also benefit others. So we can see that there is a twofold benefit - for ourselves and for others - when we have a calm mind.

When the mind is in turmoil, it is hard to achieve what we set out to do. For example, when anger dominates our mind, then we can definitely see through our own experience that it is difficult to do anything in a constructive way. But when the anger subsides and the mind becomes calmer, peaceful and more subdued, then whatever activity we do becomes easier and much more manageable.

We can see from this one small example that we have to have a calm focussed mind in order to achieve our goals or

to benefit others. Meditation helps to protect our mind from different adversities.

When we meditate, the object we focus on is our breath. This is useful for those of us with a distracted mind that has a lot of discursive thoughts and distractions. For a mind that is full of conceptual thoughts, the best immediate remedy is to focus on the breath. This will help to calm down the mind by withdrawing ourselves from the distractions. Most of us, at some time or another, face the problems of having a distracted mind. So we need to adopt the technique of focusing on the breath.

As far as the meditation technique is concerned, it is really one of the easiest techniques because it is mainly focusing on the breath. It is not only an easy technique to engage in but it is also a very effective one. When the mind is disturbed, trying to use an analytical meditation is not really suitable. We may find that it is actually difficult to use our intelligence in trying to reason with things when the mind is already agitated and disturbed. Focusing on the breath does not involve much logic or reasoning, thus it is an easier technique. Using this simple technique will help give immediate relief from an agitated mind. We can actually experience the immediate positive result of this practise.

However, we must be fully committed to the practice for it to be effective. Before focusing on the breath, we need to make sure that we put some effort into withdrawing our mind from all other thoughts and concerns. Be it positive thoughts or negative thoughts, we need to withdraw from all of them. By completely withdrawing our mind, we bring it inward and then focus upon the breath. As we feel the physical breath going in and out, we try to adopt the mental image of the breath itself and imagine following the breath in and out, and just maintain a complete, one hundred percent focus on the breath itself. The main thing is to be sure that the mind is not half focussed on the breath and half still wandering away. If that happens, then we have missed the point of the technique. We must make every attempt to try to really completely withdraw and not allow the mind to wander off. When we notice that we have become distracted, we need to constantly bring the mind back onto the breath and make sure that it is focussed on the breath. This is how the technique becomes an effective technique. (*Pause for meditation*).

It would be good if we can regularly spend some time in meditation, even just for a short time. We notice, even from our short attempt at meditation now, that focusing on the breath will definitely make the discursive thoughts in our mind to subside. Consequently the thoughts and emotions in relation to the discursive thoughts such as attachment and anger will also subside.

However, merely quietening down those negative states of mind does not mean that we have completely overcome them. The meditation practice of focusing on the breath is not a direct antidote for overcoming negative states of mind. While the negative states of mind may not be manifest during the meditation, that meditation technique itself is not a direct antidote. Even in prolonged meditation of focusing on the breath we may notice that when we come out of our meditation attachment is still there, as strong as it was before. Even anger is still there. When the conditions are there, such as meeting with the object again, anger or attachment can rise up strongly.

We may at this point begin to wonder if our meditation practice has ever had any effect at all, or whether it has been

useful or not. If we are not familiar with the techniques or antidotes for overcoming negative states of mind, then we may be in doubt whether meditation has any effect on overcoming negative states of mind. There are meditations that serve as a more direct antidote to negative states of mind. For example, meditating on the faults or unattractive attributes of an object of attachment definitely overcomes the intense attachment towards the object. Again, even this technique does not completely uproot attachment from our mind. Nevertheless, for someone who familiarises themselves with that technique of focusing on the unattractive faults of the object, when they meet the object of attachment again, strong attachment is definitely not felt. When we become more familiar with this practice, then instead of attachment we may feel a little repulsed by the object.

This is also true for overcoming anger. The specific antidote for overcoming anger is to meditate on love. Once we familiarise our mind with love and compassion, then the attractive or the appealing aspects of the object of anger will become more apparent. This is definitely true. The technique that we adopt regularly in our meditation sessions here, which is to focus on the breath, can be regarded as a preliminary meditation practice prior to adopting the other techniques. For example, asking someone who is angry to meditate on patience just wouldn't work because the mind is already in a disturbed state. To focus or reason in this state of mind is difficult. For a very 'hyper' and agitated state of mind, the first thing to do is to try to calm it down. Focusing on the breath helps to calm down the mind so it can become neutral, where neither negative nor positive thoughts are arising. It is in that neutral state where it is possible to adopt a positive frame of mind, such as developing loving compassion or meditating on patience. To use an analogy, when the mind reaches a neutral state it becomes clear like crystal glass. When a glass is pure and clean, then any colour that shines on it will reflect that particular colour. When something has a clear nature, then whatever is shone upon it will reflect that. If you dye something white or neutral that has no colour, then it will adopt that colour.

Likewise, when the mind is agitated it is necessary to bring it to a neutral state before it can turn into a positive frame of mind. If the mind is already in a neutral state or already in a positive state, then we don't need to practise focusing on the breath all the time.

It is important to know the specifics of the techniques and how they work. If we do not have the skills in applying the techniques appropriately, then we will not experience their positive effects, and then we may start to blame the practice itself. If the mind is already agitated, then even though we may have heard that to overcome anger we must meditate on patience or on love and compassion, it may not be possible for us to do it. Then we have doubts. Focusing on the breath is a most useful technique to begin with to bring the mind to a neutral state first, and then we can adopt other practices.

If we adopt the technique of focussing on the breath properly and focus on our breath for a minimum of twenty-one breaths, then definitely the mind will settle down. When we do it sincerely, then the mind really becomes subdued and clear. This means we now have an appropriate state of mind to engage in further practise or virtue.

We can use our experiences as a practical example to try to guide others. For example, with a parent trying to guide their children in a positive way, if the child is already very

agitated and constantly upset and throwing tantrums, then trying to give them advice to study well and to behave well may not work, because the child is already disturbed and agitated. Even though the advice is good, the child's mind is not ready to receive that advice. They are not in a sound state of mind. Constantly bothering them by telling them that they should study or they should do their homework or they should behave well - no matter how many times we repeat that, it may not sink into their mind. Instead, notice their agitation and realise they are not settled. Use other techniques to settle them down such as making sure they have a good meal, or giving them a break from their studies. Maybe you can take them out for a small outing or vacation. Then, when they have been appeased, when their mind has settled down a bit and they are not that agitated, then try to reason with them about their studies and to pay attention. They will have a calmer state of mind and be able to accept your arguments.

So when parents come to me, fathers or mothers ask me what advice they can give to a child who seems to be agitated, uncooperative, not focussed on their studies or on work around the house. For those who seek my advice and if I feel comfortable in sharing my advice with the parents, then they must really want to deal with the situation in an appropriate way, especially when the children reach a certain age where they start to show some signs of frustration and being unsettled. This is the time that we need to extend our help the most. This is the time when the child really needs your help and support because at this time in their lives they are disturbed, uncertain, and losing their sense of direction in life. If at this time you distance yourself from them, then there is the danger of the child succumbing to all sorts of influences. Becoming homeless is also a possibility.

As a parent, if you feel responsible for your children, then when they are starting to show signs of being unsettled and losing direction it is time to pay attention to them, and give them your full support. The main point is that when they are already disturbed and agitated, then bombarding them with advice to study hard and work will not sink in. Instead, it could add to their anxiety and can add to their feeling uncomfortable. And this is when the danger of falling in with the wrong crowd, or falling into drugs or homelessness can occur. Whereas if you actually support them, maybe take them on small vacation, and make sure that they are feeling well and supported and are happy, then they can take responsibility for themselves.

Having shared this advice with parents, some of them have confirmed that this advice has benefited both them and the child. The children have grown up to be responsible citizens, finishing their studies, getting married and having children of their own.

4.2.2.1.2. The actual way to take the essence

4.2.2.1.2.2. Training the mind in the stages of the path held in common with beings of the medium scope

4.2.2.1.2.2.1. The actual training in the reflections: the way to develop the mind that strives for liberation

4.2.2.1.2.2.1.2. Reflection on the causes of suffering – the faults of cyclic existence

4.2.2.1.2.2.1.2.3. The way in which one approaches death and is conceived (in the subsequent rebirth)

4.2.2.1.2.2.1.2.3.2. The mind of death

4.2.2.1.2.2.1.2.3.2.1. Three types of mind

We are now covering how we experience death and rebirth. Under that main topic there are five subdivisions that are the

causes of death. Within these five subdivisions, we have covered the first in our last session, which are the causes or conditions of death. There are particular conditions that may cause death, but it is a form of protection that avoiding certain conditions can secure our life and strengthen our life force.

The next subdivision from this category is the mind of death, which examines what kind of state of mind occurs at the time of death. In describing the state of mind at the time of death, there are three main states of mind that can occur, either a virtuous mind, a non-virtuous mind or an ethically neutral state of mind.

The mind of death relates to a specific time during the death process, just prior to the breath stopping. We are not talking about the subtle states of mind of death, which occur later in the death process. We are referring to the state of mind just prior to the breath ceasing. If the person has been familiar with virtue in their life or past lives, then at the stage of death the mind will naturally be inclined to be in a virtuous state, because is due to the familiarity the person has had with virtue, which means they have acquainted themselves with a kind state of mind. The more we acquaint ourselves with virtuous states of mind through meditation, then the more likely it is that virtuous states of mind will occur spontaneously at the time of death. This shows the importance of familiarising ourselves with virtue while we are alive and while we have the capacity to do so. Spending time in acquainting ourselves with virtue, meditation and kindness will help us prepare for the actual time of death. All we have done during our lifetime adds up to prepare the mind to go on automatic pilot.

Practising now will help us at the time of death, for example meditating by focusing on the breath. When we do this sincerely with our full attention, then we won't have negative states of mind such as anger, attachment or strong desire because the mind is withdrawn from all other discursive states of mind. With the familiarity we have built up, we will have similar experiences at the time of death, as the mind naturally is withdrawn. If we can focus the mind on a virtuous object, rather than the breath (which is neutral), then the mind will be in a perpetual virtuous frame of mind. This virtual state of mind at the time of death is essential for us in the death process to proceed onto the next life. At that moment, the real protector is our virtuous state of mind. It is important that we completely embrace that and understand that fully. Then we can look forward to the kind of mind frame we need at that time.

There is nothing in the external world that can help us in that crucial juncture of our journey from this life to the next. Other than our own positive state of mind, nothing external can help. First of all, nothing can prevent the death process; we all have to die someday, so that's why it is appropriate to talk about it, and be prepared for it. Nothing external can either prevent or help that process completely. The main factor that helps the death process is our own virtuous state of mind. Securing a virtuous state of mind at that time depends on how familiar we are with that virtuous state. For example, at the time of death the mind of someone who has familiarised themselves with meditation on love and compassion will quite readily be in a state of love and compassion. Furthermore, if we have familiarised ourselves with generating strong faith in the enlightened beings and holy objects, then at the time of death the mind is also be imbued with strong faith. This is a virtuous state of mind that can protect us.

A virtuous state of mind is the main factor in helping us through our death process. When we are going through the death process we may have physical discomforts that may be obvious to others, but because of our practice, internally we will feel at ease and feel at peace within regardless of external conditions. Even if there is some physical pain and discomfort, mentally we will be able to embrace our situation. Even external conditions will not disturb a virtuous state of mind. A virtuous state of mind has faith, love and compassion and this will help us feel at ease regardless of our external situations. It is important that we pay attention to this. As the common saying goes in Buddhist teachings, the real protector is within our own mind.

In addition to the Buddhist point of view, we can find similar explanations from other traditions in relation to the saying that the real protector is within our own mind. Just like the Buddhist explanation, other traditions such as the Christian tradition explain that particularly at the time of death, a strong faith in God will protect us from going into the hell realm, and we will be reborn in the heavenly realm. But if we do not have faith in God then we will be reborn in the lower realm. Faith is also considered to be important in that tradition.

The benefit of having a positive attitude at the time of death, I can say from my own limited experience in relation to others, that even if you are not Buddhist it seems that the advice about having a positive frame of mind is helpful is something apparent even with those who are non-Buddhist. People tell me that the advice that I have given to others at the time of imminent death has helped them. They acknowledge the fact that they are going to die soon, and then they find all external things are irrelevant at that time. This is the time when they seek some advice. Even when they were not really Buddhist, the advice I shared with them apparently seems to have helped them. Later their carers, or relatives informed me that they had died peacefully, so this advice definitely seems to be beneficial.

Generating a strong faith in another tradition such as in the Christian tradition of having strong faith in God is something valuable and worthwhile. His Holiness the Dalai Lama at the recent teachings in India, which we attended, confirmed this. He was saying that people who believe in God and have the single-pointed faith of thinking that God is the source of their happiness and is the one who protects them, have a precious state of mind. It seems to be useful for those who follow that faith. It's not only a valuable state of mind, but that sort of mind can also accomplish great things. For those who have faith in God, that state of mind at the time of death, when they have that single pointed focus on God, that is what protects them and will also definitely help them to have a peaceful death. They will pass on from this life without any regret. When they have strong faith in God, it seems to prevent all sense of fear. Because they have total faith and believe that God will protect them, then that also prevents their mind from being fearful.

Before we end the session for the evening, we can spend a few minutes in meditation. This time as we sit in an appropriate posture, we focus our mind on the sound of Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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