
The Condensed Lam Rim

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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As usual, it would be good to spend some time in meditation. For that purpose we find a comfortable and relaxed posture. Just as we realign our physical posture and become fresh physically, it would be good to also freshen one's mind.

While it may be relatively easy to straighten out and freshen one's physical body, we might find that it is not as easy to straighten out and freshen our mind. We can use an external analogy to describe straightening out our mind or body. When a stick is straight it can remain stable. When it's crooked there is some sort of flaw in it. When we use that terminology about a person, a 'straight person', that's very similar to the Tibetan connotation, and means an honest person. Whereas a 'crooked person', in English and Tibetan, connotes that they are not an honest person. So having straightened something out has the connotation of making it free from faults or flaws.

Straightening out the mind means to bring the mind to a state where it is free from the disturbance of distractions. We can use another external analogy of a flame: the flame of a candle, or butter lamp will remain straight if it is not affected by a draught. When it doesn't flicker its brightness comes forth more vividly. Therefore the room, or where ever it is, becomes clearer. However, when there is a draught and the flame flickers that flickering hinders visibility. Likewise, when the mind is straightened, free from the distractions, it becomes much more stable and the clarity and freshness of the mind becomes more apparent. Whatever we undertake in our life with that fresh and clear mind is much more manageable. Even though that is the reality, we may find that it is not easy to straighten out the mind and bring it into a clear and fresh state. That is because we are influenced by the distractions; the discursive thoughts that we have constantly in our minds.

For as long as our mind is focused on an object the mind can remain in that clear and fresh state. But as soon as discursive thoughts arise they distract us, and our mind is not able to remain focused on the object. Right?

We have explained that a straightened out mind is a mind that is not distracted by discursive thoughts. If in meditation practice the mind is completely focused on its object and not disturbed by any kind of discursive thoughts it would be a straightened-out mind, and that is the result we attempt to gain from meditation.

At this point one may have a doubt or question: 'How could one free one's mind from all discursive thoughts when, in fact, it is the very discursive thoughts in our mind that initiate us to engage in anything?' In our every-

day life we do follow our discursive thoughts in the thinking process and so forth. By following those thoughts we do achieve a certain amount of external stability. Even though there is some truth in that, and we depend on discursive thoughts in our daily life, we must try to be a little bit more far-sighted and get a deeper understanding of what being free from discursive thoughts really means.

The discursive thoughts that are being referred to here are those that are identified as faults that we need to abandon, or try to get rid of from our mind. They are thoughts, or states of mind, that do not contribute to our well-being in either the short term or the long term. Some thoughts may bring some temporary gratification but soon after we experience that gratification by following those states of mind they bring about more mishap, more destruction, in our life. Those are the thoughts that are considered faults. They are the discursive thoughts that disturb us.

The discursive thoughts that are disruptive and cause destruction, distress or unhappiness in the mind are the thoughts that lead us to engage in certain external stimuli that seem to gratify us for the time being. We rely completely on that external stimulus and put our trust, our time and energy into those stimuli because we hold the belief in our mind, 'That object will give us real happiness or satisfaction'.

While it may be true that we gain some temporary pleasure and satisfaction from the object, however the total trust, total reliance on that object to make us happy, comes from a misconception that obstructs true happiness. An external object has a transitory nature. Changes occur in external objects and when changes occur in an external object that initially provided some sort of happiness and enjoyment, we will experience great disappointment. Then there is sadness and feeling very lost. One of the worst outcomes of putting complete trust into an external object to satisfy oneself is that when that object or situation changes and one is no longer able to rely upon that object, there is a tremendous sense of loss in one's mind. One may even lose the direction in one's life. That is how following the harmful discursive thoughts become very destructive for us.

This is particularly evident in the younger generation. When I say 'younger generation' I am referring to teenagers from the age of fourteen up to young adults of twenty-one, twenty-two years of age. That seems to be a very vulnerable time where there is no real certainty in one's mind of knowing what is best for one and one's long-term interests, and so forth. Teenagers and young adults seem to go through a lot of experiences where they keep relying upon external factors for their satisfaction or enjoyment. Because of the total trust and reliance that they put in external factors, and not being clear about their direction in life, it is a time that seems to bring about a lot of distrust. When they experience one disappointment after another they seem to lose self-confidence. They seem to lose direction and the energy to do things in life.

I often encourage the parents of teenagers and young adults to put some effort and energy into taking care of

their kids in that age period. That is the most vulnerable age that children go through, when support and help is most needed. The reason I emphasise and stress this is because I have a feeling of care towards the children and their parents. It may seem out of place for me to give that sort of advice but I do it with the best intention.

I was, of course, generalising when I mentioned earlier these possible occurrences in young adults' lives. Not all the young adults or teenagers go through that state of confusion and uncertainty and so forth. But when I look around and observe, it seems there are many who are in this situation. That seems to be what's happening in most cases. I can't be certain whether that's the reality or not, but it's what I observe.

When teenagers, or anyone else for that matter, feel they have lost direction in life, they may end up not wishing to study or work. They may lose interest and the self-confidence to study or work. They may even think, 'Well, as long as I can get through the day, it doesn't really matter that much'. However by losing self-confidence and drive in one's life, one can actually start to feel depressed and unhappy. That is the main thing that one needs to protect oneself from.

Besides teenagers and young adults, I feel that this also happens with mature age people. Some mature age people also have problems of putting too much reliance and dependence on external objects. Some may go on a trip in order to enjoy themselves but when they come back and the partner or friend that they went with suddenly leaves them, they feel very lost. They feel completely alone. Some of them complain to me that they are feeling sad and distressed. But it's not my doing; it's something that they have to be responsible for themselves.

In relation to taking care and responsibility for one's children who have reached teenage years, some parents come to me and seem to complain that their children are not paying attention to them and following their advice. What I remind these parents is that without really checking what's bothering their children and trying to pay attention to their needs, to expect them to listen to whatever one says may not be suitable. Just by repeating the things that they should do and how they should behave, will not really help them. That could, instead, be a cause to alienate them even further from their parents. If, as a parent, one wishes to extend one's care for one's children then it is during those difficult years and difficult stages that children most need support and care. That is what I remind parents. Some parents seem to heed my advice and try to find different techniques, different ways, to deal with their children and try to be more supportive and pay more attention. When that is applied, some parents confide in me that it works. This way seems to be helpful for their children.

I share particular advice with parents who come to me to complain that their teenage children don't heed their advice when encouraged to put time into completing their studies or finding a decent job to make some money. When that kind of advice is not taken heed of by children, parents may feel a little bit frustrated. I remind parents that if they find that their children are not paying

attention to work and study then that is an indication that something is disturbing their mind. They are not really happy. There is something lacking in their life. Thus to be supportive, to perhaps make them feel a little bit more joyous, happier in their mind, one could suggest going on a holiday together or taking them for an outing or two. In that way, by supporting one's child to make them feel little bit more joyful and happier in their mind, they might, naturally from their own side, start to take more interest. When their mind is more joyous, happier, feeling a little bit more content then interest in working or studying may come more readily.

The main point that I am stressing here is the importance and relevance of the practice of meditation. Having mentioned the disturbing states of mind that are caused by the distractions of discursive thoughts, the technique that is useful or meaningful to try to distance oneself from and overcome the influence of those discursive thoughts is the practice of meditation.

When one begins to get some real, deep sense of the benefit of the practice of meditation one will willingly take up that technique and adopt it in one's daily life. It becomes one's most prized possession. Those who have reached a mature age, in their 60s or 70s, have confided in me that they have found the meditation technique too late in their life. They say, that it would have been great if they had been exposed to the techniques of meditation earlier in their life. Now, although they have time and energy to meditate they feel that because of the lack of familiarity in the earlier part of their life they have missed out. It becomes very clear in their mind that the lack of a meditation technique was the cause for all of their distress in the early part of their life. Thus for young adults and the middle aged, indeed whatever age we are, the practice of meditation is very relevant and can really benefit us.

Things may seem okay for us right now. When we put some time and energy into the practice of meditation now, we are sowing seeds in our mind for the time when the practice of meditation becomes really necessary. That is when difficult situations occur or suddenly there is so much time on our hands that we don't know what to do. If we have practiced meditation in the earlier part of our life, then that familiarity, that energy and effort becomes a source of real solace and real benefit in the latter part of our lives. This is how we can really start to see the benefits. When we look into the practice of meditation as a long-term investment we can relate to it as a meaningful practice.

We can look back at the lifestyle that we have adopted earlier in our lives. There are many who comment that when they look back into the earlier part of their life, after the age of 10 and onwards, it becomes clear to them that they seem to have wasted much time and energy. So much really fruitful time of their life was used in many meaningless things. Then a sense of regret comes into their mind and they feel it is pitiful that they have wasted so much time and energy in their life. That becomes quite apparent when one looks back into the earlier part of one's life.

Whatever age we are, it can be quite interesting to look back and see how one has spent the earlier part of one's life; what attitudes we had, how we have changed and what is occurring now as a result of the past. For many people, recalling the activities that they engaged in the earlier part of their lives, such as their early twenties and thirties, may cause a little bit of distress. When they recall those times and the activities that they engaged in they feel a little bit distressed and unhappy even now, after many, many years. That's why it is worthwhile at an early age to put some time and energy into the practice of meditation and prevent all that.

I can attest from my personal experience that the period between the fifteen and twenty-five years of age is the prime period in life where one's intelligence is really maturing. Around fifteen one's intelligence, the ability to think and analyse, has developed. When it is used in a positive way, one can use one's intelligence and reasoning very profoundly. This can help to increase one's knowledge, one's understanding of life and reality and so forth. From my own experience I have noticed that, from fifteen up to twenty-five, when one's energy is used for study and so forth it can be very, very powerful; a very good time to comprehend and put forth energy for study. After twenty-five, even though the level of understanding remains and the memory is still there, the sharp intelligence seems to diminish. I use that personal experience in my own life as a basis to encourage young people to put some time and energy into study when intelligence is at its peak. That is why I emphasise this point.

The advice that I give to teenagers is, 'You are at a prime time in your life. If you use your intelligence for your studies now it is the greatest opportunity that you can have to acquire some real knowledge and understanding, which will assist you in your life'. This is what I emphasise. We cannot, of course, dismiss the fact that as a teenager, or at any age but particularly as a teenager, the need to have companionship and friends is quite strong. One wants to associate with others and have friends and companions. Fine, this is rightly so as everyone needs companionship. However while it is important to have friends and maintain one's friendship with others, one should try not to be completely influenced by the mere infatuation of a relationship. Try to spend some time and energy in one's studies as well. The deeper commitments of relationships can wait a bit. Don't put all of one's time and energy into that because one will lose out if one spends one's energy and one's intelligence just for the pursuit of companions, relationships, partying and so forth. The prime time of one's life will be completely wasted. So, with a sense of responsibility, I share with teenagers my advice for them to put time and energy into their study.

The main thing is not to lose the opportunity of being able to study when you have that opportunity. It is the same in relation to work as well. When there is an opportunity to work, even though it may be a little bit difficult and some times it might be stressful, it is good to maintain one's job when one has a job and is earning some money. It is good to be able to contribute towards a saving for one's life. In the earlier part of one's life when

one has a job, if one becomes a little bit lazy and seeks more time off then one loses out on getting good wages and one may actually be wasting one's money on meaningless activities.

It is ironic that when one has actually reached an age where one does not need to work any more, retirement, people feel so bored with their life that they would go out to work even if there were no payment (*laughter*). It seems ironic that when one was actually getting a good wage one was not really interested in work. But later on, when one doesn't get any payment, one becomes interested in work just to fill the emptiness in one's life.

All of these shortcomings in life, whatever aspect we look at, arise from a lack of using the real potential of one's mind, one's positive energy. This can be utilised through the practice of meditation. In brief, we can say it's the fault of not having meditated in life.

The accumulation of one's practice of meditation now will lead to the point that when one comes to the age of retirement and one has plenty of time on hand, one will not be at loss as to how to use that time because one will be able to practice meditation, read the texts and spiritual books. That will give solace, happiness and joy in the mind.

Even though I have mentioned a few times that we will do some meditation somehow we got sidetracked with more information. I apologise for that. Now we will come to the actual point of spending some time in meditation.

To summarise all of the earlier points, the distractions are what cause distress in our minds, and they hinder the basic potential we have in our mind. Thus, in an attempt to be free from the distractions, or the discursive thoughts, what we do in the practice of meditation is to intentionally withdraw our mind from all distractions. That means that when discursive thoughts or distractions occur in the mind we do not allow them to influence us and we remind ourselves to be completely withdrawn. In the meditation technique we practice here we choose the breath as our object to focus on. For the next few minutes we commit ourselves to placing our full attention and focus upon the breath and nothing else. We try to maintain, for as long as possible, a steady focus and attention on just our breath. We will spend the next few minutes in this way. (*Pause for meditation.*)

As we have run out of time this evening, we will spend the last few minutes focussing on the sound of Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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