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## 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. Meditation is something that we need to adopt in our lives because we want to have a happy mind. Striving for a happy mind is a reasonable endeavour. The most supreme pleasure is a happy state of mind.

When we look into how we normally try to achieve a happy mind, we seem to focus mostly on external conditions, such as accumulating wealth and comforts. If we did achieve happiness from accumulating desirable external conditions, then we would definitely have reached happiness by now, as most of us have gone beyond middle age and spent a significant amount of energy and time in acquiring external conditions. Of course a young baby has not had enough time and energy yet to acquire all this, but for most of us here, we have already spent a lot of time and energy on accumulating external conditions.

If we have not really achieved happiness, then it is worthwhile considering a different strategy. If we spend yet more time and energy for the rest of our lives just pursuing desirable external factors and conditions, then clearly that would not bring about real happiness. However, while it is still important to spend a significant amount of time and energy in acquiring external conditions for our well being, only focusing on external conditions does not bring us ultimate happiness.

Thus, we have no choice but to find an alternative strategy to achieve happiness. We hear that there are many wealthy people who are not really happy. If our happiness depends solely on external conditions such as wealth, then the wealthier someone is, the happier they should be. However when we hear that even wealthy people are not really happy, then that makes us realise that just having favourable external conditions is not enough to make us happy.

For wealthy people who have plenty of resources, it seems that their wealth makes them more anxious and gives them more worries. It seems that the wealthier someone is, the more problems they seem to face. That is my observation; I don't know if it is true or not.

Australia has plenty of resources and good external conditions. However these good conditions don't seem to provide well-being and happiness within our minds. Why is that? What is missing? Something is lacking in our internal conditions.

A genuine sense of contentment and well-being within our mind is lacking. A settled mind is missing from our inner conditions. Distractions hinder a settled and

subdued mind. So if a wealthy person is facing problems, or facing worries or anxiety because their minds are filled with distractions, this causes them more worry and anxiety.

The main factors that cause us distress and cause a lack of genuine happiness within our mind are the various distractions that we are preoccupied with. When we realise this, then it is worthwhile considering a technique that lessens those distractions within our mind. This is where the technique of meditation comes in. The technique is to withdraw our mind from the distractions and place it on a virtuous or neutral object. This will familiarise our mind with the object single-pointedly, which definitely brings some real relief to our mind.

This is experienced by people who are familiar with meditation, however even for someone who has never really make an attempt to meditate, they seem to be astonished at how calm and how peaceful the mind becomes when they first engage in the meditation technique, and how much joy and happiness this brings them. Someone at a long life initiation told me that he had never really attempted to meditate before but at this initiation he really kept his mind focussed the whole time, for an hour and a half. He confided in me that he had never experienced so much joy and happiness in his mind as he did during that hour and a half period. It seems he has confirmed that when the mind is focussed, then it can really bring some joy and happiness.

If we really put time and energy in our practise of meditation, then we definitely get a positive experience from that. We can definitely get relief from mental disturbances and experience some real positive benefit. Now some may wonder why they don't get that same sort of relief later on when they try to practise meditation. The fault may lie in not continuing their practice properly. They may have initially had a good experience from the practice of meditation, but that may have been because they were really serious at that time and they put a significant amount of time and energy in their practice and it was done wholeheartedly. But if we are not careful, we might start becoming complacent and just take meditation lightly.

If we take it lightly and if we don't really put a significant amount of time and energy or seriousness in our practise, then we will not get any long lasting positive effects. The main point is that having been introduced to the proper technique of meditation, we need to apply our practise with whatever amount of time and energy we can. We need to try to maintain our meditation practice, and then slowly increase our time and energy. As time goes by, we will become more familiar with the practice and then we will be able to get a continuous benefit. Otherwise, we may have initial spurs of enthusiasm and energy and get a good positive effect, but then completely let go of that practice later on.

Meditation becomes the tool to work with so we can develop the inner conditions that lead to a happy and joyous mind. A happy and joyous mind has a positive effect on our body as well and we will be in good health. In summary we can say that we are striving to be healthy

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and happy. We achieve this by having a healthy body and a healthy mind.

We have to be really diligent and careful when looking into what contributes to our physical and mental well-being. If something seems to be pleasant physically but harms our mental happiness, then we need to take a closer look at it. If it contributes to our physical and mental well-being, then we need to definitely adopt it. If something harms us physically and mentally then we definitely need to abandon it. However, sometimes we have some physical pain or hardship but something makes our mind joyous and happy. If our mind is happy, it seems we can withstand even physical hardship and difficulties. Our primary goal is the well-being and happiness of our mind.

In summary, since we all have a natural wish to be happy and healthy, so do others. When we consider the well-being of others, we try to provide them with physical and mental well-being. For example, parents want to try to provide an environment where their children will be physically healthy as well as having the conditions for a happy mind. The best environment for children encompasses physical and mental well-being. To summarise, when we find conducive factors for physical well-being we adopt them. If anything is harmful to our physical well-being we abandon that. Similarly with the mind, if something is conducive to our mental well-being, then we adopt it; what is harmful to our mental well-being, we abandon.

Well-being consists of both physical and mental well-being. I encourage everyone, especially young people, to actually put effort and energy into developing physical well-being, which is dependent on external conditions. Studying and securing a good work situation to have a good livelihood is something that we need to pay attention to. We must not neglect this. However, while we spend time and energy in securing a good job to provide for ourselves, we must not neglect developing the inner conditions.

The inner conditions for our mental well-being can be summarised into having a kind mind. If we have a kind attitude, then that is the main cause for having mental well-being. I encourage young people to try to develop and maintain the internal conditions of a kind heart while they rightly put energy and time in acquiring favourable external physical conditions. Keeping that in mind, if we can secure both then that is the best. But even if we haven't achieved enough favourable external conditions, if we have developed internal resources then we won't fall prey to anxiety and distress and unhappiness so easily.

Having an intact internal condition that contributes to mental well-being is something that I can attest to from my own experience. Even in the most difficult external circumstances, maintaining some mental balance and mental well-being is invaluable. When I escaped from Tibet, it was the worst situation in my life where I had to leave everything behind. I couldn't take anything with me. I had to leave behind my family, friends, and all my physical belongings had to be completely left behind as I was on an escape journey.

However, during my escape I remember that my mind was free of angst, anxiety and worries. Somehow the mind was still in a joyous state. The only concern that I had was being able to continue with my studies and spend time and energy in meditation. That was my only concern, but otherwise I wasn't concerned about losing my material possessions; that was not a concern and worry for me, and it didn't bother me at all. There were times when I felt that rather than escaping to India, maybe I could spend the rest of my time in some wilderness cave or somewhere where I could just meditate. But then of course the practical concern was how would I get food. So that immediately prevented me from making that attempt. The main concern I had was to quickly find a place where I could continue with my studies.

Even after successfully arriving in India after my escape, it was not a safe haven where all problems were solved. I still had to go through a lot of difficulties and endure a lot of hardship. In terms of physical conditions, I even went without wearing proper shoes for about two years. The food was scarce, but when I reflect back upon that time, I must say that I felt quite astonished and surprised that I didn't have any worries.

Even when the worst external conditions presented themselves, somehow I was free of worries. Why was that so? That is when I really looked back at all the situations of my past - my main concern of wanting to study and trying to practise meditation, and trying to develop a good heart. These concerns seemed to have overpowered the external hardships I was experiencing. I was able to endure those difficult external conditions and they did not affect my mind, so I didn't have worries, anxieties and so forth.

The reason why I share this is because in my own experience with difficult times and difficult circumstances, I know they can be withstood. Our mental state can still be happy. I share this with you because I feel that many of you who do face difficulties and problems can solve them by adopting different attitudes, such as developing the inner resources. Of course I cannot do that for you, except to share my experiences and assure you that this is definitely possible. When we shift our attitude to the right positive attitude, we can overcome problems.

Shifting our attitude into a positive attitude means developing an attitude of tolerance and acceptance of our own and others' difficulties. When we see and notice others going through difficult times, we can try to develop a little bit of compassion and understanding towards them. We can reflect upon how 'just as I want to be happy, it is exactly the same for all of us'; everyone else also wants to be happy. If we are ignorant of developing the right conditions to be happy ourselves, then it is the same for others; others also lack that understanding. By reflecting on others' sufferings and the need for their well-being, it then lessens our own extreme obsession of focusing on ourselves alone. Your conditions are just one person's welfare. We can overcome self-centredness and self-obsession, release our mind from that, and develop a bit of kindness and compassion for

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others. This positive attitude definitely brings well-being and solace in our mind.

In this country we find that many people experience relationship problems. Where does that come from? Too much self-centredness, too much self-interest and self-focus seem to cause problems in the relationship. Better relationships come from opening our mind to think about the other person and trying to develop a little more kindness and more understanding. These things definitely help us to have better relationships with others.

I am emphasising the need in a relationship to really support and help each other. If there is a mutual agreement to really care for and nourish each other, then the relationship can be more fruitful and more harmonious. I often joke with people that when they first got engaged and then married, they must have experienced a lot of joy and happiness in maybe the first few weeks. So if people experience joy and happiness in the first few weeks of marriage, then they should try to maintain a similar sense of joy and happiness throughout their married life. That joy and happiness that was experienced earlier was because there was that mutual concern for each other. A similar joy and happiness can be maintained throughout everyone's life. This is an important point to consider.

When I witness married couples in their seventies and they are still married and helping each other, they have really achieved something worthwhile. Reaching a mature age such as in the late seventies is when people really need friends. When we are young it is usually easy to make friends. Reaching your seventies and having a companion to hold your hand is a real sign of a good companion who can really support you in your later years. When you are young, in your teens or mid-twenties, there may be many people who are willing to hold your hand. Holding hands at that early age is not something that remarkable, as there is always the question if whether it comes from a genuine concern and good heart.

The main point is that meditation serves as a means to lessen distractions in our mind, and becomes the ultimate technique for bringing about a more peaceful and calmer mind, a joyous and happy mind. The meditation technique involves withdrawing our mind from all distractions. To really make the decision to meditate, be determined not to allow your mind to be influenced by distractions during the session. Make every attempt to keep your mind focussed on the object. Be mindful and diligent during the meditation session, and make every attempt to keep your focus and attention on the object.

If we follow those distractions, then all the faults that arise from that are what cause us distress and unhappiness. Recalling the faults of a distracted mind, we need to make every attempt to withdraw our mind from all distractions, both external and internal distractions, including thoughts or ideas. Completely withdraw from all the distractions and do not allow your mind to be influenced by them. Thus bring your focus on the object, which is the breath. Intentionally put your full attention on the breath and try to merge your mind with your breath as if they are becoming one. Be completely in tune

with the breath itself and maintain that focus. (*Pause for meditation*)

## Questions

*Question:* How should I prostrate to the five buddhas? The directions of the five buddhas confuse me.

*Response:* If you are too concerned about their directions, then some buddhas might be behind you, so you wouldn't be prostrating to them. Thus, it is more appropriate to visualise them in front of you, rather than thinking about the different directions of where the buddhas are. Then you are prostrating to the five buddhas all in front of you, which is much more appropriate as a practice.

*Question:* Were the vast majority of the Tibetan Sangha who did not flee Tibet at the time of the Chinese invasion able to overcome the distractions of the Chinese invasion in employing their spiritual practice? Did they accept it as a challenge?

*Response:* Of course the circumstances were such that it affected different people in different ways. Some people who had developed themselves to a certain level in the practice of meditation took the opportunity to go off in solitude and live by themselves to practise. People helped to support them, and they were able to remain meditating anonymously and maintain their practice. There were others who endured the hardships and engaged in their practice quietly, not publicly at all. It was later when the danger lessened that they were able to teach and help others. There was one particular nun who would just practise, meditate and do prostrations during the day. In the evening she would quietly teach others. These are particular examples from my hometown in Tibet. There were some people who were able to not only maintain their own practise but were able to further help others as well. Of course people who had some status were prosecuted and imprisoned. So they didn't have the good physical conditions to practise, even though maybe internally they may have done so. Others were supported by families who hid and fed them. When the officials came, they couldn't be seen because they were in hiding and they were able to maintain their practice with this support.

Another story I heard, not too far from our village, ten nuns were able to engage in meditation together by claiming that they had contracted leprosy. Within Tibetan, as well the Chinese society, any mention of leprosy meant they would not go near the affected people. The Chinese officials apparently never came to check on them. They were thought to have leprosy and that was the reason they were living in an isolated colony by themselves. But in fact they were engaged in the practice of meditation together. This is another example of how people can endure hardships and maintain their practice.

Some monks and teachers who had many students and disciples who were known to be teachers and have followers were the first ones to be prosecuted and detained and put in concentration camps. Of course they did not get good physical conditions to be able to practise. However there are many examples of people

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who were able to practise in spite of harsh conditions. Another monk from my province had spent a significant amount of time in retreat during the Cultural Revolution in a dark cave, where he entered into a prolonged meditation practice. Later, he slowly encouraged others to also come and do retreat in the same area. After the Cultural Revolution some freedom was restored, and so after a few years he was able to come out and teach in the monastery. He taught meditation to the younger generation of monks in the monastery. So there were good circumstances as well.

Another example of being able to practise meditation during that time is the lama, known as Choden Rinpoche, who escaped from Tibet a few years ago and is now living in India and teaching in different parts of the world. In Tibet he was kept by a family who took care of all his needs; he stayed inside the house all the time without being seen or noticed by the outside world, or by the Chinese. For about twelve years he was in retreat while the family supported him. This family was not of Tibetan origin. They were from a border area of Nepal and they had some Nepali blood. They are known as *khatsari* by Tibetans, as they are not completely Tibetan. However, this family supported Choden Rinpoche. After having escaped from Tibet Choden Rinpoche has been able to teach in many different countries, including Sydney and I think he went to Adelaide as well. He has been to New Zealand, and he teaches often in America. So he is able to share a lot of his experiences with many people.

That question was really good, because it reminded me of those hard times and practice. Thank you.

*Question:* Geshe-la, could you help me understand my painful or troubling thoughts? When I'm trying to meditate, my mind seems to want to hold on to pain or trouble, more heavily than it wants to hold to pleasant or happy thoughts. Why do I feel pain before I feel warmth? Why do I feel trouble before I feel pleasant? Why do our minds seem to want to go towards those difficulties? The mind seems to hold harder to the pain than to the comfort.

*Response:* It may not be such a bad thing to consider the pain and the difficulties. We can contemplate on that. It seems ironic that without actually experiencing some pain and difficulty we don't really recognise the happiness and joy in our lives. Sometimes those difficult situations can be an impetus for us to experience good circumstances. I often remind people that we are in a very good country. We are in a country that has plenty of good resources and it is a very conducive country for practising meditation. But some people still have complaints; I recommend people to go and visit India. When they go to India and face a lot of hardships there, even in practical sense, they come back and seem to appreciate Australia as a country. In my own circumstance, when I was escaping Tibet, when I was on the move, it was difficult walking all day long. So even if I was lying down on snow, it seemed very pleasurable because of the earlier hardship. It all seems to be relative.

If your question was about feeling pain or feeling weighed down in your physical body, then it is good

sometimes to engage in rigorous or physical activities such as running. That could help to move your energy, rather than sitting down, crouching up and feeling tense. It is good to move about a bit before meditating.

Some parents seem to adopt the method of taking their children on a vacation, sometimes within the same country, and take them to an area that is not so pleasant. When the children experience the difficulties and hardships there, then the parents take them to a better place, and then the children seem to appreciate that better. If you can afford take children to a third world country where they can see and experience difficulty and hardship, then they can of course definitely appreciate their own country. When children see places where people are going through hardships and difficulties, they may want to avoid such situations by putting a bit more time and energy into studying so that they can make good money to live an easier life. This can be a learning experience. The main point is that it is not too bad to think about hardships and difficulties if it can be an impetus to appreciate the good things in life.

Before we finish for the evening, we can spend another few minutes in meditation. This time we focus on the sound of the Buddha Shakyamuni mantra.

*TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA*

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