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## The Condensed Lam Rim

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As usual, it would be good to spend some time in meditation, adopting an upright and relaxed posture. As explained regularly, meditation literally means to familiarise the mind. In this context it means to familiarise the mind with a virtuous object. Meditation also protects the mind from adversity.

There is a difference between protecting the mind and withdrawing our mind from distractions. Protecting the mind refers to protecting the mind from the influence of negative emotions, so that the mind doesn't become dominated by negative emotions. To withdraw our mind relates to withdrawing our mind from distractions and focussing on an internal object.

When we develop the techniques to protect the mind, then we will also be able to maintain whatever joy and happiness we may have. Our happiness and joy comes from protecting the mind from negative emotions, because once we develop the technique of protecting the mind, it naturally brings a quiet calming effect on the mind.

One may ask what is the method then? What is the technique for protecting the mind? To quote from one of the great Indian masters, Shantideva: 'the ultimate protection of the mind comes from developing the mental states of mindfulness and introspection'. These are two specific mental states that are used as tools for protecting the mind. He further mentions 'those who wish to have this protection in bringing about a balanced state of mind, you must cultivate these mental states'. What he is particularly pointing out is that these two mental states enable us to distinguish between what is beneficial and what is harmful for us.

Mindfulness is the mental tool that allows our mind to focus on a virtuous object, by recalling the virtuous object and keeping our focus on it. Introspection, on the other hand, is a state of mind that checks whether our mind is distracted or not, the distractions which are related to actions of our body, speech and mind. The state of mind that checks whether our body, speech and mind are being influenced by delusions or not, is called introspection.

Summarising the main point of Shantideva's advice - we all have the potential for a virtuous state of mind, so we need to recognise it and try to maintain it. While we are working towards maintaining a virtuous state of mind, it is also necessary to check what we are doing with our physical actions, as well as what we are saying and what we are thinking. We must really check if our mind is being influenced negatively or not, and try to reverse the situation when it is influenced by a negative thought.

Shantideva is indeed giving us a profound and practical advice.

We all have positive states of mind within us, and we have positive intentions to act in a way that will be useful and beneficial to others. The only way to gauge whether we are being considerate and beneficial or not, is by our mannerisms and gestures. It is through our gestures that we convey the intent of our body, speech and mind. There are many physical gestures that are beneficial to others. There are also many verbal gestures that are seen as kind and considerate to others. Likewise, with thoughts - if we sincerely check, we can detect certain thoughts that are beneficial to others.

As we become more familiar in scrutinising and checking our mannerisms and gestures - physically, verbally and mentally - on all three levels, then we can develop the intelligence to detect which gestures and actions are harmful and which are beneficial. As we start to recognise the harmful ones, we can refrain from engaging in them. And we can cultivate and develop the positive actions. This advice helps us to develop the intelligence to work within ourselves; and that becomes the real protection. The real protection comes from within oneself rather than from external means.

We can all detect to some degree whether certain physical, verbal and mental mannerisms and gestures are harmful. If they are harmful, then we put some effort to try to withdraw ourselves from those harmful actions. The practice of how to protect ourselves from negativities is to adopt whatever actions are beneficial for ourselves and others, and to discard what is harmful. The way to do this is by adopting the meditation technique where we become more aware, and we develop increased mindfulness and introspection within ourselves. This is referred to as meditation or the practise of Dharma. This is a practical way to make ourselves a better person to benefit others. So this is how we can relate to the spiritual practice in a practical way.

Dharma practice involves periodically scrutinising and checking the states of our body, speech and mind to develop the awareness of how we are behaving and interacting with others. As soon as we notice our body or speech being influenced in a negative way, then we need to withdraw from our negative behaviour and try to adopt positive mannerisms.

The mannerisms and gestures of our body and speech are related to our mind. This is something we need to really understand. When the mind is in a positive state, then naturally our physical gestures and our speech will be considerate and kind. However, if we have a negative attitude or a negative state of mind, then naturally our physical gestures and our speech will have a negative influence, resulting in harming others. The main point here is that the state of our mind is most crucial, and we can protect and control the mind through meditation.

We can now spend a few minutes in meditation. First of all it is good to reassess our physical posture, making sure that we are sitting upright, in a relaxed way. Next, we check the state of our mind, making sure that our mind is in a positive state. This is important to do before we meditate. With that positive frame of mind, we can

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begin to withdraw our focus and attention on external distractions as well as internal distracting thoughts. We completely withdraw our mind from all of those distractions. We bring our full attention and focus inward and do not allow ourselves to be influenced by any distractions. Then we bring our focus and attention upon our breath. It is the breath that we are focusing on in our meditation. We imagine seeing the breath coming in naturally, and follow the breath as we breathe out. In this way we maintain our full attention and focus upon our breath for the next few minutes. (*Pause for meditation*).

#### **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**

##### **4.2.2.1.2.2.4. Resolving the nature of the path that leads to liberation**

##### **4.2.2.1.2.2.4.2. The actual resolution of the nature of the path**

Suffering does not come about spontaneously without any causes and conditions. Each and every type of suffering that we experience, whether pleasant or unpleasant, is based upon specific causes.

All our unpleasant experiences and sufferings are dependent on what is called origination, which is two fold, the origination called delusions or negative states of mind, and the actions we call karma. These two fold originations are the cause of all our sufferings. Is it possible to overcome these causes or not? Is it possible to overcome our negative states of mind and our karma? It is definitely possible to achieve a state of cessation where we can be free from all of these causes of sufferings. When we develop a state of mind where we want to be free of not only suffering but the causes of suffering as well, only then will we develop a strong wish to strive towards achieving liberation. Liberation is possible, so we need to develop a state of mind that wants to achieve it.

What kinds of conditions do we need to achieve liberation? Again the answer is twofold: the type of life that we need to follow, as well as the technique or the path to achieve liberation. In terms of the life, we need to have all the conditions as a human being, the perfect human rebirth that has the eight liberties and the ten endowments. When we have that, then we have the perfect conditions to strive towards achieving liberation.

The next thing to ponder is when would the appropriate time be, to use our human life towards achieving liberation and creating the causes to achieve liberation? The answer is - right now!!

As a human being we have excellent conditions right now to create the causes to achieve liberation. If we do not take advantage of these conditions right now, then it is doubtful whether we will be able to get such perfect conditions again in the future. If we keep procrastinating and thinking that there will be a better time in the future, then that time may never come about. In fact, it is very hard to be certain about having these perfect human conditions again.

Right now we do have these perfect human conditions to develop the spiritual path leading towards liberation. This is the right time to take advantage of that, because

right now we have the perfect conditions. Even in the worldly sense we talk about taking the opportunity when it is there. We have that expression, taking advantage of a good opportunity. Experiencing a human life right now for us is like having a great opportunity. If we don't take advantage of this opportunity, it is doubtful that we will have another opportunity like this arising again in the future.

Furthermore, it is good to understand the full context of these teachings in relation to the Four Noble Truths. Using the analogy of a person who is sick, the first thing that the patient needs to do is to find out the cause of the sickness. This is where they would rely on a skilled doctor, one who is able to do the diagnosis properly. So having relied on a skilled doctor, the patient attempts to find out the cause of the illness. It is only when finding out the cause of the illness that the illness itself can be dealt with. Having diagnosed the illness, then the next step is to actually apply the treatment in order to be free from sickness. The goal of this process is to eliminate the sickness. The process of doing this is to first recognise it and diagnose what the cause is, and then to remove the cause. We try to tackle and apply the remedy to overcome the causes of the sickness, so we can be free from the illness.

Similarly, we use this analogy in the context of the Four Noble Truths. The first Noble Truth is the Truth of Suffering. Using the earlier analogy, we need to first recognise what the suffering is. The Buddha said suffering is to be recognised. The next noble truth is the Truth of origination. The Truth of Origination is like detecting the cause of the illness, as it is what causes our suffering. By understanding the cause, we must abandon the cause. The Buddha said the origination or the cause of suffering is to be abandoned. The next noble truth is the Truth of the Path. The Truth of the path is to be cultivated and this is like taking the remedy or the medication. With that one achieves the Fourth Noble Truth, which is the Cessation of all Suffering. The cessation of suffering, as the Buddha mentioned, is what is to be achieved.

Both these analogies illustrate that it is crucial to recognise or identify the causes of our suffering. It is only by identifying and overcoming the causes that suffering can be abandoned.

Our human life gives us the appropriate conditions so we can wholeheartedly follow the spiritual path. Furthermore, one of the best conditions to practice the Dharma path is to become ordained and live in the vows. Being ordained is of course a different lifestyle. An ordained person supposedly has fewer distractions than a layperson, which makes it easier and a little bit more conducive to following the spiritual path. However, it does not imply in any way that the path leading towards liberation is only possible for an ordained person. A layperson can strive to achieve liberation too. The Buddha has mentioned specifically in one of his teachings that liberation is possible even among the laity. He was confirming that even lay people, especially sincere adherents, can definitely obtain liberation.

However, generally speaking an ordained life is a more appropriate life than a lay life, as it has better conditions to practise. A lay life has more obstacles to practising the Dharma wholeheartedly. Generally speaking, in comparison to an ordained person, a lay person has more issues that have to be dealt with, such as relationships, engaging in a working life which involves competitiveness and maybe jealousy among others, and then trying to always work towards matching up with the expectations of others and never being really content, and then striving for more and more. That sort of preoccupation takes so much time and energy. And then for those who have children, there is lots of time and energy that has to be invested in nurturing and caring for the children as well. It seems that a lot of time is spent in these activities. Under these conditions, it is hard to find the time for spiritual practice. The main point is that because of so many distractions that are presented in a lay life, the mind is easily influenced by all of these distractions, so it is very difficult for the mind to focus on the spiritual practice.

Contrary to a layperson's lifestyle, an ordained life in its true sense should be a life with fewer desires, and which has contentment. This allows the mind to be free from distractions, and the body to physically withdraw from frivolous activities. These are the criteria for a renunciate or ordained person. If these qualities are intact, then it is very clear they become the most suitable conditions to practise the Dharma. If there is less desire, it means that we will not have to spend so much time and energy in satiating our desires. If we have a mind of contentment, then similarly we don't need to put energy in trying to accumulate more. Withdrawing the mind from all distractions and physically withdrawing from all frivolous activities becomes the means for us to be able to focus and to devote our time and energy on the dharma practise.

These are the most conducive conditions. However, as Lama Tsong Khapa says, if ordained people don't have the conducive conditions of contentment and less desire, and they engage in activities to accumulate material things and are distracted with frivolous activities, then there is no real difference between an ordained life and a lay life. Even if ordained people don't have these conditions, then they will be distracted with worldly affairs, and then of course there is not much difference between an ordained person and a layperson. Even for an ordained person to have all of these conditions intact is not easy. When the mind becomes naturally withdrawn from distractions and the physical body becomes withdrawn from frivolous activities, when these conditions are met, then definitely it is much more suitable in developing a Dharma practice, particularly when the mind is content and has less desire. It is said in the text that an ordained sincere seeker would not be distracted if they were presented with the treasures of the kings, or were led into the king's treasure house to see all of his jewels and gems. They would see that all of this wealth is a cause for more suffering rather than a means for real happiness. By understanding and seeing that, there will be no sense of wishing to possess or own that wealth. With such a state of mind, the time and energy

can be devoted to practising Dharma. The mind will have no other thoughts and no other intention but to engage in the practice, leading towards liberation. Again, developing these mental attitudes or mental states of mind is also possible for a layperson.

Because of these reasons, an intelligent person or a true scholar would favour an ordained life. To back up this, the text quotes from one of Buddha's own sayings which mentions that a lay bodhisattva or noble being who is living as a lay person will admire the state of an ordained bodhisattva and be inspired to be ordained themselves. So, even a lay bodhisattva would admire and be inspired to become ordained.

This also indicates that even a layperson can become a noble being, what we call a bodhisattva. This is something noteworthy. The Buddha's teachings are always presented in the context of the followers of the Buddha, which consists of fully ordained monks and nuns as well as men and women who live in the lay vows. In the tantric teachings there is always reference to practitioners as dakas and dakinis, which are men and women who have reached specific high levels. These are all indications that the followers of the Buddha are all in different aspects and in different forms. It is good to take note of this. Furthermore, in relation to one of the most important texts that we often recite called the *Heart Sutra*, there is a particular part that refers to the sons and daughters of the lineage. This indicates that both males and females are suitable vessels to obtain whatever realisations.

Before we conclude for the evening, we take a few more minutes to engage in a focussed meditation. We particularly focus on the sound of the Buddha's Shakyamuni's mantra.

*TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA*

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