
The Condensed Lam Rim

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As usual it would be good to spend some time for meditation.

First, generate a positive mental attitude from your side; from my own side, I'll also generate a positive motivation. It seems that whatever action we do, if it's preceded by a good motivation that action will turn out well. Whereas if one's preceding motivation is not good, the action that follows will also not be good. Thus, as the outcome of our actions depends on the preceding motivation, we need to train ourselves in developing a positive motivation.

The great Indian master Shantideva mentioned that one must first check up on the attitude in one's mind. If it's positive, then one may utter speech or engage in physical action. However, if one finds that one's has a hostile attitude, then it is best for the moment not to engage in any speech or physical action. Just remain still until you are capable of generating a positive state of mind.

What is being pointed out here is the importance of having a good motivation before engaging in action, to ensure that the ensuing actions – whether speech or physical actions – will be useful and beneficial for others. If one has a positive motivation, even if the action doesn't seem to accord with others' wishes – even if it seems unpleasant – because of the underlying positive motivation, the action can still benefit the other. That is the power of a positive motivation.

Going back to the quote from Shantideva, it is really important that prior to uttering any speech or engaging in any physical action, to first check one's motive as to why one is saying something and why one is doing something. If one finds that one's motive is pure – that which benefits oneself and others – then one can engage in the action. This is the point that Shantideva is making.

While there are various types and degrees of positive motivation, the ultimate positive motivation is said to be the altruistic wish to benefit others. As the great Indian master Atisha said, the most supreme quality is the altruistic intention to benefit others.

If we were to really contemplate and try to develop that altruistic wish, we would begin to see the great benefits of such a mind. In fact, when one generates the altruistic intention to benefit others, the real beneficiary is oneself. One would notice that the more one developed a genuinely kind, concerned attitude towards others, the more joyous and at ease one would feel oneself. Within a group of people, such as family or other relationships, one would notice that as one developed that altruistic intention to benefit others and engage in actions to

benefit others, one would naturally feel calm and relaxed. The benefit is twofold: making others feel at ease and making oneself feeling at ease as well. Thus it is one of the most essential qualities we can develop.

We can see that what we call the Dharma, the Buddha's advice or teachings, has a real practical benefit for ourselves and others. It is a way of life that improves one's own life and the lives of others.

Actually the altruistic wish to benefit others is not alien to us. Each of us, to a certain degree, has the wish to benefit others. It is an inborn natural quality that we all have. However, some people may have it to a stronger degree than others. Nevertheless, it is on the basis that we all have that natural and spontaneous wish to benefit others that we are able to develop it further. We don't have to develop it anew; we already have it within us. Thus our Dharma practice is a means to protect that noble attitude to whatever level we have developed it; not letting it decline. That is what the practice of Dharma actually means.

So we already have the inner resource of kindness – which is basically concern for others and the wish to help them. It is a matter of tapping into our own resource and extending it, slowly increasing the altruism we already have within us by developing it further and protecting whatever is there already.

When we lead our life based on these values of altruism and kindness, we will definitely experience the benefit. Within one's own family, that attitude of genuine kindness and concern for other members of your family – whether it's your children or your partner – will definitely contribute to the family's sense of well-being, ease and harmony. For example, when a parent expresses genuine concern and kindness to their children, the children will definitely feel that. Although they may not show their appreciation immediately, they will definitely take that to heart. When kindness is expressed affectionately, one can see the immediate response from the children. They will respond to and appreciate kindness and good mannerisms from the parents.

If we can relate to the benefits of this basic, positive attitude in one's immediate family, then we can extend that altruistic wish to benefit our wider society, friendships, and so forth. We can see that the more we cultivate that altruistic positive intention, the more ease and happiness it brings us. We can also see its benefit on a larger scale.

By relating to the earlier quotes from the great masters – that this positive attitude is the supreme quality – we will also be able to identify it, from our own experience, as a most valuable quality, to be cultivated and cherished. This positive state of mind is thus our inner best friend and protector.

We can also see that the opposite of this attitude – an attitude of wishing to harm others, to hurt them, a negative attitude – is harmful and not useful to oneself or others. While one attitude benefits others, its opposite will naturally harm ourselves and others. The altruistic attitude is our inner friend and solace, our inner protector, whereas its opposite – harmful, negative

attitudes – can be regarded as an enemy. Just as we would consider people who help and benefit us as friends and those who criticise and intentionally harm us as enemies, in relation to our inner state of mind, there are certain attitudes that are useful and beneficial to us, which we can consider as friends, and certain attitudes that are harmful and detrimental to our well-being, which we can consider as enemies. The first Dalai Lama, Gendun Drup, says that when one honestly and sincerely scrutinises and checks within oneself, one will notice that the real enemy is within. When one recognises that the real enemy is within, rather than external, one can then attempt to get rid of that inner enemy.

While we may all agree that the altruistic intention, the wish to benefit others, is a positive state of mind that we need to cultivate further, we may find that it is not easy. That altruistic intention doesn't arise readily. So, first we should try to subdue the mind and reduce mental distractions. This is where the technique of meditation can help, by calming down the mind.

When we engage in the practice of contemplative meditation focusing on a particular object, we are withdrawing our attention and focus from the negativities, what we call distractions, which are the opposite to the positive states of mind – the ultimate positive state of mind being that altruistic intention. This will naturally be conducive to further developing the positive intention within oneself.

Prior to engaging in meditation practice, first, it is important that we sit in an appropriate posture – relaxed but upright. Even our physical posture contributes to our having a good meditation.

Having assumed an appropriate physical posture, it is important that we set a strong, positive state of mind. Based upon this, we engage in the actual technique of meditation.

Before we engage in focusing on the meditation object, it is important that we first determine to keep our mind focused on the object. This requires us to intentionally withdraw our mind from distractions. If we just let our mind be as it is, because of its habituation, it will naturally follow distractions. Thus in order to discipline ourselves, we need to think: "I will not allow my mind to be influenced by the distractions". One can remind oneself that the many shortcomings and difficulties one has already experienced are due to the mind being influenced by the distractions. In all of our lives, from beginningless time, the distractions have kept us trapped in the cycle of existence. So the distractions have no redeeming qualities or virtues. They always lead to one's downfall.

By reminding oneself of this fact, we will understand why, for the next few minutes – even though it's just a few minutes – it is crucial that we try to make a whole-hearted, dedicated attempt to practise meditation, so that we can familiarise ourselves with the correct approach. We need to say to ourselves: "I will not allow my mind be influenced by the distractions. Rather, I will completely withdraw it from distractions." As soon as one notices that one is being distracted, one brings the attention back and keeps it 100 per cent focused on the object itself.

So the actual process of engaging in the technique is to first withdraw the mind. As we withdraw the mind, it will naturally abide inward. When our focus becomes more centred, we then direct our focus to the actual meditation object, which in this case is the breath. The breath as an object is relevant to all of us, even as beginners, because it comes naturally to us, and we also don't have to analyse it. The object is just the natural inflow and outflow of our breath: that is what we focus on. It is a relatively easy object to focus on. We just keep our attention 100 per cent focused on the breath itself. So for the next few minutes we will adopt this technique. *[Pause for meditation]* That should be sufficient for now.

As mentioned in the instructions, for those who have difficulty in focusing, who have a lot of distractions, bringing the attention to just focusing on the breath will help to calm the mind. The mind is strongly influenced by conceptual thoughts. Many people have confided in me that the biggest challenge they face is trying to keep the mind quiet, which is due to their minds being overwhelmed by too many thoughts. Indeed if we were to utter everything that went on in our mind, people would definitely think we were crazy! *[laughter]* In fact, we call someone who says whatever comes into their mind an insane or crazy person. There is even an expression amongst the Tibetans that when someone says whatever comes to their mind, that they are a bit crazy.

As a technique, meditation is not really that complicated. It's basically committing ourselves to keeping our attention and focus on the breath for the next few minutes. That's it. The technique is as simple as that. But as we will notice if we sincerely follow this technique, its benefits and effectiveness are great: it will help to calm a very busy mind, and distracted thoughts will subside.

Another relevant point about using the breath as an object is that, because it is colourless and shapeless, it causes less distraction when the mind focuses on it. If we were to focus on an object that was colourful or had a nice shape, then because we are used to being distracted by colours and shapes, that object could be a cause for some level of distraction. It would be harder for us to keep our mind focused and reduce the distractions; whereas the breath, being colourless and shapeless, is more effective for calming the mind.

Prior to engaging in meditation practice, we should bring to mind the purpose of doing it, which is to reduce the distractions. When we talk about the distractions, it is a general term we use for all the different conceptual, superstitious or negative states of mind, such as anger, jealousy and greed. It is good for us to make the commitment and resolve that: "I will not allow my mind to be influenced by this distraction, such as anger." If we acquaint ourselves with making such a commitment, even for just the duration of the meditation, it will definitely have a positive effect upon our mind.

In relation to anger, for example, we can remind ourselves that: "It is this state of mind, anger, which causes me distress, anxiety and disturbance. From beginningless time until now, it has never helped me. It has only contributed to my distress. Therefore, I recognise you, anger, as a disruptive state mind, and I

will not allow my mind to be influenced by you." Think as if you are challenging the anger itself, saying: "Even for a second or a minute, I will not allow my mind to be influenced by you." By making this dedicated commitment and then engaging in the practice of focusing on the breath, because of that resolve you have made the practice will definitely have a long-term, real benefit in helping you to overcome the disruptive state of mind of anger; in this way the practice becomes much more relevant while focusing on the breath. This is just one example; it can be applied to all the other negative, destructive states of mind known as the distractions.

In dealing with the deeper levels of our disturbing states of mind, we can go a little bit further with the practice of meditation. For those who have an affinity with a Buddhist deity such as Tara, or Avalokiteshvara, (Chenrezig in Tibetan) - the Buddha of Compassion. For those who feel an affinity or connection with any enlightened being in the form of a deity, you can visualise or imagine that deity to be in front of you. While one does one's practice, one makes the same resolution: having recognised that the negative states of mind, such as anger, are destructive for oneself, request the deity to please send forth their blessings to purify one's mind and to be able to rid oneself of this negative state of mind. Make a whole-hearted supplication to the deity and request the deity to bestow the blessing in the form of strength and energy for you not to be influenced by the negative states of mind such as anger. In this way, as one makes this supplication, one can visualise light and nectar flowing down and entering one, purifying this negative state of mind.

The negative state of mind of anger is, of course, just one example. But one can do the visualisation to get rid of all negative states of mind. But it's particularly relevant whenever one feels dominated by a particular negative state of mind that is troubling one, be it anger or jealousy or strong attachment. Whatever negative state of mind it may be, by focusing particularly on that negative state of mind, you try to overcome that negative state of mind. So in this way make the supplication and do the practice. Then it becomes really effective for one's mind.

As we seem to be nearing the end of our session, I will not refer to the text, but we have some time for questions.

Question: At what point does one depart from conventional truth and engage in the ultimate? Such as when we refer to a table, at what point do we transcend the conventional table and reach the ultimate table?

Answer: First, we should be clear that conventional truth and ultimate truth are not to be understood as two distinct and separate modes of existence. When one relates to the conventional truth of something, the ultimate truth is within that conventionality. The ultimate exists right there. When you say a table doesn't exist conventionally, it doesn't imply that it doesn't exist at all, ultimately. What *does not* exist ultimately is an *inherently existent* table – an appearance of "a table" that does not actually exist. But we are not saying that the table does not exist. Therefore, the conventional existence of the table and the ultimate existence of the table are not two

entirely separate and distinct modes of existence of this phenomenon, the table.

In terms of the conventional existence of the table, we are referring to a table that is merely labelled and imputed. When you impute the name "table", you are labelling a set of components as the basis. The basis is a collection of different components that you label "table". However, ultimately, the table does not exist on the basis – the table cannot exist independently or inherently upon the basis itself.

However a misinterpretation may arise when the teaching claims that the table does not exist upon the basis. That terminology seems to lead people into thinking: "Where does the table exist then? Perhaps the table doesn't exist at all?" When the terminology states that the table does not exist upon the basis, it means that the table does not exist *inherently* or *independently* upon the basis; rather, it exists as a label and a collection of the components of the basis. Due to that combination, a table does exist.

Usually, we would just look at the components of a table, and claim, "That's a table." We don't go further than that. But if we were to scrutinise and look within each component or part of the table, we would not find an actual, solid, inherently existent table upon the parts.

Going back to your question, it is not so much as if there is a conventionally existent table and a separate ultimately existent table and that one departs from the conventional and goes into the ultimate. Rather, one gains a different understanding of the mode of existence of the same object. Does it make sense?

Your question relates also to the misunderstanding that may arise from the passage in the *Heart Sutra*: "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form." The terminology can lead to some misinterpretation that "form", taken literally, is emptiness, and emptiness itself is also form. To understand it in this way would be a misinterpretation.

What is being implied here in the words "form is emptiness" is that the mode of existence of form is that it is *empty of inherent existence*. The converse, "emptiness is form", indicates that all phenomena, all existence is a manifestation of emptiness. There is an expression in the teachings that everything is a manifestation of emptiness. Although it is quite subtle to understand, this means that non-inherent existence is a natural characteristic of all phenomena. In the expression, "emptiness is form", one needs to understand how, although form is empty of inherent existence, it still exists conventionally or nominally. Although it is empty of something, it doesn't mean that it is entirely non-existent. It still exists conventionally or nominally. Conventional reality and ultimate reality are like two sides of the same coin, so to speak. Form itself has a conventional reality and an ultimate reality within its own mode of existence.

That was a very profound question. Thank you very much. I don't know if my answer addressed your question sufficiently or not, but it seems you gained some understanding from the answer. Perhaps it's good enough for a while.

Question: There is an English expression: “revenge is sweet”, how does one understand this statement in the light of the Buddhist teachings?

Answer: There is a Tibetan expression: “revenge is a great act of bravery”. Especially amongst the nomads, those we call the Khampas or warrior-types, there is that expression. The expression implies that the person who received that revenge, who got that retaliation, deserved it; it served them right. *[laughter]* This is however the worldly view, that “revenge is sweet”, according to the English expression.

However, from the spiritual or Dharma point of view, if you take revenge, for example, if you kill someone, you definitely create negative karma, regardless of what they had done to you, your family or so forth. If one enacts revenge by, for example, taking the life of someone else, one definitely creates negative karma. The negative karma is not cancelled out just because the other person may have done some wrong. *[Translator: I think there is another English expression “Two wrongs don’t make a right”!]* Similarly, from the Dharma point of view, you do not benefit at all by an act of revenge. You just create more negativity for yourself.

The Khampas from the Tibetan province called Kham hold a grudge for many generations. If someone’s father had been killed a few generations ago, there would be a family line that “they have to get even”. If the victim themselves had not been able to take revenge, their sons will have to take revenge. If the father who killed cannot be killed in revenge, their son has to be killed. And if the family whose father was murdered started to befriend the other family, it would be considered a real sign of weakness, as if you had betrayed the family. However, as you said earlier, this is a very lowly and cruel attitude.

Tibetans also have an expression that when someone retaliates: “That’s very tasty, isn’t it?” This expression is used when revenge has been taken and everyone agrees that the person deserved it. *[laughter]* Even when children play, if one child hits another child and the other child is strong and hits back harder making the other cry, the parent would say, “You deserved it because you started it.” From a worldly viewpoint, it looks like as if the two actions are equal, because when you harm someone else, they harm you back. It seems natural. However, when we really look into how it works, it doesn’t really serve our purpose to take revenge.

We can conclude for the evening. That was another good question. Thank you. *[Geshe-la laughs]* Since I come from the province of Kham myself, I was able to talk about the mannerisms of people from our province. I actually have marks on my head from fights when I was 12 or 13 – I used to have a few fights too!

Before we conclude for the evening, we can spend a few more minutes in contemplation. This time, as we withdraw our mind from distractions, we keep our focus on the sound of the mantra to be recited, which is Buddha Shakyamuni’s mantra.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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