
The Condensed Lam Rim

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When we meditate, it is good to settle into an upright and comfortable position. Adopting a meditation technique in our lives is something that is useful and meaningful.

Meditation is meaningful and useful for us because it allows our mind to settle down and become calm. From our own experience we notice that if we are in a disturbed and agitated state of mind, we are not settled, and we don't feel comfortable. But when the mind calms down and becomes more tranquil and calm, then we feel the positive effects.

This becomes clear if we start to reflect upon how we feel when our mind is disturbed. When our mind is in a disturbed state, what consequences do we experience? Conversely, when the mind is in a tranquil and calm state, is our experience different? It is worthwhile to reflect upon that.

When we reflect upon our situation or the conditions around us when our mind is in an agitated and disturbed state, then it is evident that for as long as the mind is in a disturbed, agitated state, we don't feel settled, and that we feel uneasy and disturbed. We need to see the connection between our disturbed state of mind and when we feel agitated and uncomfortable. We can then recognise how necessary and important it is to calm the mind. There is no choice but to work on calming down the mind in order to experience tranquillity and peace within ourselves.

When we look at our actions in these two different situations - one where our mind is agitated and excited, and the other with a mind that is calm and peaceful, we find that there is big difference in the outcome.

There is even a difference in our appearance. The difference in the physical appearance of someone who is in a disturbed and agitated state of mind is noticeable; they appear restless. Whereas when the mind is calm and peaceful, even our physical appearance and gestures are calm and soothing.

Just as it is obvious that other people look different when they are in these two different states of mind, it is exactly the same for us. We appear the same as others do in a disturbed state of mind.

When we can relate others' actions, demeanour and states of mind to our own actions and state of mind, then we can learn something significant just from that observation.

Another point to take note of is that when we are feeling distressed or feeling down, this is the time that we would appreciate some help and care from others. As we reflect

upon that fact, then we can relate to how others feel when they are in a disturbed and agitated state of mind. Even though their facial expressions and gestures may not be pleasing, we can understand that is because they are feeling disturbed and agitated. We should be able to relate to their situation where they need care, understanding, and help. It is not an appropriate time to scorn their behaviour. Instead, we should show some understanding and extend a helping hand. When we see others, friends, associates or relatives, get into a disturbed or agitated state, then that is the time to extend our help. Similarly, if we are agitated and disturbed, then others will understand that this is a time that we need help. This kind of mutual understanding is beneficial.

In a relationship, both people can nurture their understanding of the others' needs when the partner is in distress and disturbed. This is the time when it is essential to provide a helping hand. This understanding on both sides is the key factor for good communication, and having a good relationship based upon mutual trust. Mutual trust withstands any difficulties and hardships at any time between people in relationships. When there is strong trust in each other, then there is trust that even when one person is disturbed and agitated, the other will understand. This mutual trust strengthens the relationship. When we extend this trust from people in our immediate relationships to others in general, we can see how understanding based on trust is what helps us to have healthy relationships with them.

This understanding and trust can come only with a tranquil state of mind that has some clarity and understanding. If we are completely agitated, then it is hard to achieve that understanding and concern for others.

The main point is that meditation will help us gain a tranquil and clear state of mind. When our relationships with others are based on trust, understanding and concern, then we can develop a genuine sense of love and compassion towards them.

It is possible to develop genuine love and compassion within ourselves and extend to others. A pure and genuine sense of love and compassion is based not on self-interest but is instead based on keeping other's interests at heart. When we feel love and compassion because we take another person's interest into account, then that is a sign of genuine love and compassion towards others.

When we are able to extend a genuine sense of love and compassion to another person, then they appreciate this. But how do we gauge whether our love and compassion is genuine or not? It is tested when we see others going through difficulties. If we can extend help when they are distressed and having a difficult time, then that is the real measure of our genuine love and compassion for them. However, if our alleged love and compassion for other people starts to fade away when they are going through difficulties, then this is a sign that what we thought was love and compassion towards others was nothing more than a fleeting attachment or infatuation with them, and not real genuine love and compassion.

When we relate love and compassion to ourselves, we can understand it better. In times of difficulty and hardship, we consider anyone who helps us to be a close friend. We feel that this is the type of person that we can trust and genuinely appreciate. If someone claims that they love us, but then shies away from us when we are going through difficulties, then naturally we would not regard them with high esteem; we wouldn't regard them as a true friend. This is based on our own experiences where we can see the value of developing genuine love and compassion and how necessary and important it is to develop that within ourselves at every cost.

The way to develop and strengthen a genuine sense of love and compassion within ourselves is through meditation. The reason why meditation serves as a means to develop love and compassion within ourselves can be understood in the meaning of meditation. The literal meaning of meditation according to Sanskrit is to 'familiarise with the positive'. Meditation allows us to become more and more familiar with the positive qualities within ourselves; to further develop and strengthen them; and then to slowly begin to distance ourselves from our negative states of mind. The technique of meditation involves the process of becoming more familiar with the positive and discarding the negativities within ourselves, firstly distancing ourselves from the negative states of mind, and eventually eliminating them completely. This process means all that is positive within us, such as love and compassion, will be developed, nurtured and strengthened.

Thus, the meditation technique is effective; for example, we all know that certain situations, people or objects in our lives disturb us and cause distress in our mind as soon as we think about them. Whereas there are other objects, both internal and external objects, that can start to make us feel calm and bring us a sense of joy. Rather than being becoming all excited and agitated, our mind starts to feel tranquil, and we start to feel calm. This is something that we can experience. The meditation technique provides us with a specific technique to engage with our positive side, and be in the moment with it. At the same time, we also naturally distance ourselves from our negative side, and from whatever negative objects that cause us distress.

When we focus in meditation, we train our mind to focus on the positive side. This engagement with our full attention on the positive side naturally distances us from the negative side, and we feel immediate relief. Meditation gives us the techniques to fully engage in the positive. First of all, we identify what is positive and what is negative, then we fully engage and develop the positive qualities within ourselves and discard the negative.

To summarise the points, we can quote from an early prominent meditation master called Geshe Karapa; he said 'for as long as we don't know how to withdraw our mind from negativities, then whatever we do, we will not feel settled'. In whatever we might be doing, somehow there will always be an unsettling feeling. He was giving some profound advice; in effect what he was saying is that if we feel unsettled in our life no matter what we do,

then it is because we have not yet been able to identify what we need to withdraw our mind from.

I have explained a bit about the practical benefits of meditation, so now we can take the time to actually engage in some meditation. Let us re-adjust our physical posture to adopt a comfortable and appropriate posture. The next step is to set our mind and remind ourselves that in order to engage in the practise of meditation, we need to make a commitment and do it wholeheartedly so we can actually benefit from it. Our commitment is to intentionally withdraw our busy and distracted mind; the state of mind where we just allow it to be constantly bombarded and influenced by whatever thoughts and whims may come up in our mind. This is the state of mind that we are normally used to. For the purpose of meditation, we need to first of all identify that distracted and busy mind, and intentionally make a commitment to withdraw our focus from all these distractions, and bring our mind inward. This means that we bring our focus inward, rather than letting it go out in all directions, following all our different thoughts and ideas. As we bring and settle our focus inward, we can then focus on our chosen object, which in this case is our own breath. We bring our full attention and focus upon our breath, and for the next few minutes we commit ourselves to focusing on the breath; nothing else but the breath itself - a hundred percent focus on our natural breathing. (*Pause for meditation*)

Just as we have attempted to do so now, if we can spend some time meditating regularly in our daily life, it would definitely benefit us. It is important to be very clear about the proper technique of meditation from the very beginning of our practice, so that we do not waste time or miss the point of the practice. Our intention and commitment to focus on the object means that we are likely to have more success in keeping our mind and attention on the object. Focusing and maintaining our attention on the object, is how we develop concentration. If we allow the distractions to slowly slip in and let our mind to be influenced by them, then we are missing the point again, we are completely side-tracked from our main task.

The length of time that we can maintain our focus is not really as important as actually maintaining our focus on the object for the length of time we have committed. Initially, we may find it is difficult to focus for too long, but we can make sure that we focus on the object and maintain that focus just for a few moments in every meditation session. After a few minutes, we can then come out of the meditation. But from the very start if we allow our mind to just wander off, this then becomes a habit and we completely lose the whole point of the practice; this is important to note.

People have confided in me from their own experience that, 'yes it is indeed the case where we initially attempt to focus on the object in meditation and our physical posture is correct, but the mind starts to drift off and wander in all directions'. This seems to be a common occurrence; so if we do not pay careful attention, then a habit will develop where the mind starts to wander off in all directions as soon as we make any attempt to

meditate. So we need to really make an attempt to keep our mind focussed.

Question: *How long do you suggest I meditate for each day? I have meditated for a number of years but I am constantly distracted. How long do you meditate for each day?*

Response: The traditional advice is for people who have a distracted mind is to have shorter but more frequent meditation sessions. The time to spend in meditation depends on the individual. Because you know yourself better than anyone else, when you try to maintain your focus on the object you will have a sense of how long you can maintain your focus without much disturbance. Just before the point where you feel that 'I'm about to get distracted here', when that is about to happen, you come out of the meditation session and relax a bit, still in a positive state of mind if possible, and then go back into the meditation session. So within whatever time frame you have, for example half an hour, you could have quite a few short sessions in that time, rather than the full length of time with a distracted mind.

Difficulty in focussing on an object is a common dilemma; many people experience hardships in maintaining focus. Nevertheless, since you claim that you have spent a number of years meditating, the fact that you are still persisting in making an attempt to meditate even while you recognise your distraction, this is really noteworthy. I admire your determination to keep going. The teachings refer to this particular endurance that you have as being within the category of patience - the patience of definitely thinking about the Dharma. When we practise Dharma or a spiritual practice such as meditation, there is no doubt that it involves some difficulty, some endurance and hardship. But to willingly take upon those hardships and maintaining our determination to keep going, is a real practice of patience. By knowing the overall benefits of the practice and still keep going is the practice of patience. Applying this patience in our Dharma practice is worthwhile. I would like to acknowledge that and admire your patience.

There are many types of meditation practice; meditation is not only done in the traditional setting of sitting with closed eyes. For example, reading a textbook is also a form of meditation. Masters in our tradition have indicated that for ordinary beings like ourselves, one of the best ways of developing concentration is by reading a text. This is something that I can vouch from my own experience; when you read a Dharma textbook for the time that you are focusing on the meaning of the text, and when you are thinking about the meaning as you read those lines, you will notice that your attention span is broadened because your mind is focussed on that. During the time you are reading the passages and you are focusing on the meaning, it is a form of concentration. The masters have said this is one of the best ways for us beginners to develop concentration.

In Tibet, the traditional way of teaching students is where the master reads from the textbook while each of the students hold a textbook in their hand. As the master reads over the lines, the students have to look at the passage themselves. As the master reads the lines and explains the meaning, the students are completely

focussed on that. In addition to the master giving the explanation of the text, he is also introducing the technique of meditation of concentration at the same time. Relating to my own experience, I can vouch that it is definitely the case when reading through a textbook; I don't even notice time go by. I could be spending quite some time and I would not have even noticed it while I am engrossed in reading the textbook. This is a practical approach to developing our concentration. By keeping our mind focussed on the meaning as we read the passages in the textbook, because we are completely engrossed and focussed on reading the text and thinking about its meaning, there is no room for disturbances such as anger, jealousy or attachments or any kind of delusions to occur in the mind.

While we prevent those negative states of mind from occurring we are already reducing the negatives in our mind. Meanwhile, as we familiarise ourselves with the meaning of the text, gaining a deeper insight into the text by reading, thinking and contemplating on it, we naturally gain more wisdom. Each time we read the text and reflect on its meaning, we find that we gain a deeper understanding. As we gain that wisdom, it eliminates ignorance from our mind and it increases the understanding and clarity within us, and removes inner doubts from our mind. This is a complete practise in itself.

When my main teacher, Geshe Ngawang Dhargay, was doing prayers, as he read a few passages of the prayers from his commitments, he would pause and think about the meaning and then read the next few lines, then pause and think about the meaning of what he had just read. He was exhibiting a profound way of practising - not just reading the words from the text, but also contemplating on the meaning. He was giving us a good example in how to engage in practice.

Question: *Geshe-la, could you please present a most effective method for developing single-pointed meditation? Also, is there a separate recommended technique for engaging the mind in analytical meditation? Or does single-pointed meditation continue?*

Response: In relation to the first question, the most supreme technique for developing single-pointed concentration is to apply a state of mind that opposes the two main obstacles for developing single-pointed concentration. First of all, we need to recognise what the two main obstacles are for developing single-pointed concentration, which are laxity and excitement.

Excitement is an obstacle that distracts us from the focus on the object. While we are trying to focus on the object, excitement doesn't allow us to focus on the object because it completely distracts our mind away from it. Laxity makes our mind become dull and you cannot gain single pointed concentration because there is no clarity of the object. Excitement and laxity are the two main obstacles.

The two states of mind that oppose laxity and excitement are called mindfulness and introspection. They are one of the two main antidotes for overcoming excitement and laxity. Mindfulness means recognising and recollecting the object we are focussing on, and being completely mindful of that. Introspection is the state of mind that

constantly checks whether our mind is becoming distracted or not. Introspection is a state of mind that periodically checks whether we have maintained our focus on the chosen object. It is a mental tool that we develop within ourselves.

Excitement is an element of attachment. When we are focusing on the object, and when we are attached to certain objects, then that causes excitement to arise in the mind. Whereas distractions may not necessarily be an element or an attribute of attachment. For example, while we attempt to focus single-pointedly on the breath as an object, we may start to think about a person in distress and start to develop some compassion for them. This is a virtuous thought, it is a positive thought, therefore it is not attachment; it is not a negative state of mind. Nevertheless, in thinking about other beings suffering and developing compassion, it has affected our single pointed focus on the breath and it has become a distraction. It is a distraction but it is not a negative distraction. Nevertheless, it has to be recognised as a distraction. It is good to understand that all distractions do not necessarily have to be negative in nature, but we must be able to recognise them.

There are also distractions that are negative, but also not attachment. For example, when we become distracted from an object due to anger. If anger arises and we become distracted because of the anger, then it is a distraction. But it is not excitement because anger is not an attribute of attachment. It is a separate negative state of mind. Excitement is specifically identified as obstacle to meditation because most forms of distractions are interconnected or attributed to attachment. This is why excitement seems to have been specifically identified.

One of the great masters, Shantideva, explained the meditation techniques in his text, *Bodhisattva's Way of Life*. In the eighth chapter, he specifically relates to that. It is good to identify the difference between excitement and distractions.

As to your second question, analytical meditation is not to be understood as a completely separate meditation. It is as you indicated earlier a continuum of the single-pointed meditation. Without developing single-pointed concentration, we are not able to do an authentic analytical meditation. Because analytical meditation means to analyse the very object that we are single-pointedly focussed on. When we develop a single-pointed focus on the object that we have chosen, then further analysing that object without the mind becoming distracted is the analytical meditation on the object. It is a follow-on or a continuum of the single-pointed focus. The advice in the teachings on how to develop single-pointed concentration and achieving a state of calm abiding is to choose an appropriate object, be clear about what object we choose and then maintain focus on that object. Do not to focus on a different object or keep changing the object, but use the same object so we can familiarise ourselves with that particular object. Based on that, we develop a single-pointed concentration, and then based on having developed single pointed concentration on that object we can then develop analytical or special insight on the object.

That is a significant question, thank you very much. Because everyone this evening is interested in meditation, these are questions that are related to the technique of meditation and it is useful and meaningful for everyone. There may be many who have a question or a doubt but maybe are a little timid or a little bit shy to ask the question. So asking questions helps many others to help clear the doubts as well.

Before we conclude for the evening we can spend a few more minutes again in contemplation. This time, as we withdraw our focus and attention from external factors and distractions, we bring our mind inward. As we bring our attention inward, we focus on the sound of Buddha's Shakyamuni's mantra.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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