
The Condensed Lam Rim

ལྷན་སྐྱེས་ལམ་གྱི་རིམ་པ་བཞུགས་སྒོ།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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It is a great joy to come together again after a few weeks of separation. I feel very happy about that. The last Wednesday evening session we had together was towards the end of December, so it has been a few weeks since that time.

The particular reason that I am happy to see you again after our short break is that even if things may have not improved a lot during that time, they certainly don't seem to have become worse for you, (*laughter*). I can assume this to be the case from your physical appearance and demeanour. This is something that I observe and feel that it is worthwhile to mention.

As I stress regularly in my teachings, the most essential things in life are good health and a happy mind. Having good, sound health and a happy mind are really the most essential things in life. When I mention that you don't seem to have become worse, I am relating to your physical well-being and a happy state of mind. Through your appearance I can see that these have been maintained well.

The real virtue that I see in our gatherings is the good feeling of companionship and friendship that we have with each other. That sort of feeling, which is induced in our gatherings, is what I feel is really valuable. As I stress regularly, whenever we have a gathering of any kind, when the feelings of joyfulness and happiness to be with each other are present then the gathering is really meaningful and worthwhile.

On the physical level, there are definite ways that we can show our joy to others. We definitely can do that. We don't have to make a particular effort in expressing ourselves physically. Just by being together, we can see that there can be a good feeling.

If we consider the actual means of showing our appreciation to others physically, we will come to understand how we consider that as being important. What we need to take note of here is that the pleasant physical gestures that we use to express our fondness and connection with others start from our mind. Likewise, even the unpleasant gestures that we express physically also begin in the mind. That is something that we really need to look into and understand.

When we can all acknowledge and agree that the physical gestures that express fondness and connectedness with others are actually something important and worthwhile, then it is also important to take into consideration that those pleasant physical gestures stem from the mind.

Now, if you were to consider what kind of state of mind induces good physical gestures and expressions, then one

comes to realise that it is a calm and clear state of mind. In the process of this analysis we come to understand that a calm and clear mind imbued with kindness is the main cause for pleasant physical gestures and so forth. Thus, we will come to understand and accept that it is really important to protect such a mind. A clear and calm mind is something that we definitely need to work to protect.

The opposite side is that when the mind is in turmoil and is not calm and peaceful, troubled with many conflicts it does not naturally give rise to pleasant physical gestures in relation to others.

In brief, all the problems that we experience stem from a disturbed mind. When the mind is disturbed to a certain degree, then there's bound to be some destructive energy in whatever activity that follows. Things don't really work out well. Our physical gestures in relation to others or even in one's normal activities, whatever one does, one finds that it doesn't work out so well.

When I refer to a disturbed mind, I mean a mind which is affected by strong anger or hatred, strong attachment or desire, or affected by jealousy, pride and so forth. When the mind is completely engulfed and influenced by any of these negativities it becomes disturbed. Any activity that one is engaged in while the mind is in such a disturbed state can be quite disastrous. Therefore I normally caution people that if you find your mind is in a disturbed state, try not to make any major decisions at that time. Just keep calm and wait for a while. (*Geshe-la laughs.*) Any major decisions taken under those conditions can be quite disastrous. When you look back into your life, I suppose many of you would have experienced that.

If we don't do something about a disturbed, agitated mind then as a result the mind will be in a constantly disturbed state, and it would be very, very difficult to experience a real sense of joy, happiness and calmness in one's mind.

The conclusion should be; 'if the disturbed mind is the cause of all my problems and there is a method to free it from disturbances, then I should definitely adopt and apply the method'.

This conclusion arises regardless of whether one believes in any particular religion or not. Whether one considers oneself a believer or not, one's own calm and peaceful state of mind is a concern, a personal responsibility.

In order to apply methods for calming the mind and to free it from disturbances, one needs to first look into what causes disturbances in the mind. As we look into what causes disturbances in the mind the texts explain that it is actually a constantly distracted mind that is the main cause of disturbances. The distractions referred to here are mainly external distractions. The mind becomes completely immersed in external sensual pleasures. A judgemental mind that constantly goes between thinking 'this is good' or 'this is bad', making the comparison between what is good and bad is also a cause for the disturbances in the mind.

If we look into our state of mind and come to agree and accept that the distracted mind is a cause of our problems, and then look into why one has a distracted mind, one finds that it is because we don't pay any

attention to keeping our mind focused inwardly. Instead we allow it to follow any distractions that arise. We just let it to become distracted in that way. That lack of inner focus is really what causes the disturbances to arise in our mind.

Now the question is whether there is a method that allows one to keep our mind or attention focused inward. If there is a method, then one must definitely apply that method so that one does not fall victim to a distracted and disturbed mind. That is the conclusion that one can definitely come to.

In our tradition the method for maintaining inner focus is called 'meditation'. Meditation is a technique that, by choosing an internal object to focus on, trains one's mind to maintain focus on that particular object. Then, with that familiarity, one will naturally become more and more habituated in keeping one's attention and focus inward. So, the technique of applying our focus and attention to a particular object is what is called meditation.

The referent object to be focused on in meditation is specified as an internal object. When we focus on an internal object the mere act of focussing or bringing our full attention to that internal object naturally distances our mind from other thoughts, other pre-occupations, other distractions. Then by distancing our mind from thoughts and external and internal distractions the mind naturally becomes more subdued and calm. That is definitely the positive effect.

At this point one needs to get an understanding of what 'internal object' refers to. If one doesn't have a good understanding of what the object that one is meant to be focusing on is, then it can cause some complications.

We can give an example of how one can misunderstand or miss the point about focusing on an internal object. Meditation techniques allow any object to be used as a focus to develop concentration. For example, one may use the watch as an object to focus on. If, however, one were to focus just on the external aspect of the watch then it wouldn't be an internal object because you are focusing on the physical watch. One needs to have a more profound understanding in order to use the watch as an internal object. This means, in relation to the watch, one initially familiarises oneself with the aspects of the physical watch visually first, but then one brings up a mental image of the watch in one's mind and it is that mental image of the watch that one focuses on in meditation.

The mental image is a vivid image that we bring to mind of any particular object, and this is referred to as an internal object. As we gain more and more acquaintance with focusing on an internal object we begin to achieve profound concentration.

We can now proceed further with the presentation of the technique of meditation. Having chosen the appropriate object to focus on, the mental tools that we need in order to develop concentration are said to be the two particular mental states called 'mindfulness' and 'introspection'. Mindfulness is a state of mind that constantly remembers to keep one's focus on the chosen object. It is a constant

remembering of the need to keep one's attention and focus on the object. If one doesn't develop that mental state then it's very easy to get distracted. Thus the particular function of mindfulness is to constantly remind oneself to maintain one's focus on the object.

As we try to maintain our focus on the chosen object we need to be very wary of falling into a state of being distracted but not being fully aware of it. Thus, 'Introspection' is a mental state which serves to vigilantly watch over the state of our mind. Introspection is particularly important at a beginner's level, where we need this tool to constantly check whether the mind has become distracted or not. As soon as one notices that the mind has become distracted, we bring our focus and attention back onto the object again. So, the particular state of mind that constantly guards our focus on the object is called introspection. When one reaches higher levels of meditation and develops stable concentration, then we don't need to use these tools. But initially at the beginners level they are essential.

We can now discuss the physical posture. For formal meditation it is advised that we sit in an upright but relaxed and comfortable posture. We can discuss more details of the posture in later sessions. There are particular descriptions however the main thing is to have a relaxed and comfortable posture.

Next we come to the intention for our meditation, what we call the motivation, which needs to be very clear and positive right from the start. From the Buddhist perspective, the noblest intention that we can develop for any spiritual activity such as meditation is this, 'the purpose for doing this meditation is so that I can bring about well-being and goodness for all living beings. I am learning techniques now to develop myself so that I can assist and bring benefit to all living beings'. That is one of the noblest motivations that we can develop. By adopting such a motivation one is naturally training oneself in cultivating love and compassion as well.

If one does a practice such as meditation imbued with the qualities of love and compassion, with a sense of responsibility to benefit others then, by the very virtue of that motivation, whatever we do during that time, even if it is just focusing on a particular object, becomes a cause for further developing one's love and compassion. In this way the practice becomes a worthwhile, meaningful and powerful practice.

A positive motivation can also serve as an antidote to overcome the evil attitude of a self-cherishing mind, which is a self-centred attitude.

As mentioned earlier, the main negative attitude or cause of our problems is said to be that self-obsessed mind called self-cherishing. Indeed there are people who have related to me that they have found from their own experience how true it is, that when one is focused only on oneself, one's own self centeredness actually prevents one from doing many good things. That self-centred mind actually prevents other positive things that could unfold in one's life.

If we actually think about it, when we have a self-cherishing or self-obsessed attitude our entire focus is just

on oneself. Even when we refer to 'me' or 'I' that points to only one individual, just oneself. If it's only one's own interests that one is concerned with, then that completely shuts out others. There is no real concern for the others around one, their feelings, their needs and so forth. Whereas as soon as we open our mind with a sense of love and compassion and go outwards from our own self-centredness and take a concern about 'you' and 'yours' and 'others', it releases one from that self-centredness. The door opens to many opportunities in engaging and being positive for others as well as for oneself. Even when we think about it logically, we can see how true this is. Self-centredness and the self-cherishing mind actually closes one up and prevents many good opportunities in life.

Now the particular object that we choose to focus on in our meditation sessions here is our own breath. Remembering to bring up the mental image of one's breath by first of all being in tune with the natural rhythm of one's breathing, the in-flow and out-flow of one's breath, one places one's focus upon that and maintains attention and focus on that. It is said that the technique of focusing on the breath is a particularly effective meditation technique to overcome distractions in one's mind. It is one of the best remedies.

Furthermore there are said to be special features and uniqueness in taking the breath as an object to focus on. It's said that because it is devoid of colour and shape it is less distracting. It is a particularly good object to settle the mind because it doesn't have any aspect that would distract us in any way. The breath itself is a very soothing and stable object to focus on. Thus the breath has particular features or characteristics that make it a good object to settle the mind.

The actual technique involves adopting a relaxed, comfortable, upright position of meditation and a good positive motivation. We make a strong determination in our mind that 'for the next few minutes I will keep my entire 100% focus on my breath, and nothing else but my own breath'. In that way one intentionally distances one's mind, attention or focus from any other thoughts. By mentally observing the in-flow and out-flow of our breath, we try to be completely devoted to focusing on the breath itself. We will adopt this technique for the next few minutes. (*Pause for meditation.*)

That should be sufficient for now. It is quite warm and humid this evening. (*Geshe-la chuckles*)

The power or ability of the mind to understand the great potential or power of the mind is noteworthy. If we were to consider our bodies to be without the mind, if there was no consciousness or mind present in our body, very soon this body would not be able to maintain its freshness and, because it is made of flesh, it would actually start to decompose and rot. What keeps this body functioning in a natural way without being spoiled is the mind within the body.

As we attempted to meditate in the last few minutes we would have noticed that the mind naturally becomes calmer and more settled. The reason why the mind becomes calmer and one feels more settled is because the mind is not distracted during that time, thus the

disturbances in the mind subside. You don't feel the disturbances. This shows that a distracted mind is, in fact, the cause of one's problems and difficulties.

As mentioned previously, the disturbances particularly arise in relation to the five sense objects: seeing beautiful objects and developing attachment towards them or developing jealousy when you see other's beautiful objects and the beautiful features of others, or engaging with certain visual objects and becoming angry with them. Strong attachment or anger equally bring disturbance to the mind. It is the same with sounds, smells, tactile feelings and taste. When we overreact to these five sense objects, either with strong attachment or anger, or jealousy, or other negative states of mind, it causes disturbances in the mind.

When we are settled, when we have chosen to focus on a particular object and we bring our full attention and focus upon that object, then because we are distancing ourselves and not allowing our mind to be pre-occupied with the five sense objects and thus negative states of mind in relation to the five sense objects, attachment, anger and so forth do not arise and the mind becomes settled and calm. One experiences that result.

When one comes out of meditation one may experience that one actually goes back again to the same distractions. That is because we are not really familiar with the meditation technique yet. To put it simply, we haven't done enough meditation to protect our minds from being influenced by the distractions. But if we take meditation seriously and apply it in our daily life we would begin to notice that the distractions we encounter have less effect on our mind. For example, if we have a habit or tendency to immediately develop strong desire or attachment when we see a beautiful object, after having done some meditation we would begin to notice that the attachment, even if it does arise, does not last as long. One is not as infatuated with that attachment for as long a duration as previously. Thus the duration and intensity of attachment begins to lessen. It is the same with anger.

Better than that, if one notices attachment arise one will be able to immediately try to appease that attachment. One will recognise it as a negative state of mind and immediately protect oneself from being influenced by it. As we gradually progress with meditation that is the effect we would experience.

Of course the ultimate, positive goal of meditation is to completely overcome attachment and anger, and all other negative states of mind. It is definitely possible to completely overcome them. The whole point of the meditation technique is to eventually completely overcome the negative states of mind. In the mean time, even if we are not able to completely overcome those negative states of mind one would begin to notice that meditation slowly lessens the intensity and the duration of the negative states of mind. As it lessens and if one does not react to those negative states of mind it will give us a certain amount of protection. It is in this way that we can see the positive effects of meditation in our daily lives.

For this evening, I will conclude here with that brief introduction to the purpose of meditation, the technique

in brief and the positive effects of meditation. In the following sessions we can go into more details of these techniques and how to apply them in our daily lives. Even if we have maybe only one session a week on meditation, if we come with a positive motivation, that hour can be a factor to bring about some transformation, some change, in one' s life. One becomes a little bit more settled, a little bit calmer.

So the time we have together here, just over an hour, can be very effective in one' s life due to the positive motivation. I constantly remind myself to have a positive motivation. So, from my side, I can assure you that there' s no neglect or lack of that positive motivation for doing these evening sessions. So if you, likewise, come with a positive motivation, there can definitely be a positive effect from the combination of a positive motivation from my side presenting to you, and you as the receivers or the listeners. I encourage that you take it easy. If you come along to the sessions we can go into more details slowly.

Before we conclude for the evening let us again spend a few minutes in contemplation. This time the object to focus on in our meditation is the sound of Buddha Shakyamuni' s mantra being recited. We focus on the sound of the mantra and try to maintain that focus.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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