
The Condensed Lam Rim

༄༅། །བྱུང་རྒྱུ་ལམ་གྱི་རིམ་པ་བཞུགས་སོ། །

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

21 April 2010

As usual it is good to spend some time in meditation, and for that purpose, we should sit in a comfortable and upright position.

Prior to engaging in meditation practice, it is good have a clear understanding of what the practice entails. As it is a practice for developing one's concentration it is very important to be clear about the object of meditation, and after having chosen an appropriate object, the practice involves maintaining a steady focus on that object.

Developing the concentration or mental stabilisation requires two main attributes:

1. Maintaining continual focus on the chosen object;
2. Establishing a clear, bright and energetic state of mind.

As there are the two attributes required for developing concentration or mental stabilisation, likewise there are two obstacles that will hinder the development of one's concentration. The first is called 'excitement' which hinders one's continual focus on the object of meditation. The second is 'laxity' which hinders a clear and bright state of mind.

Having identified the two attributes and the two obstacles for mental stabilisation, we will now discuss the methods for developing concentration. One of the tools is called mindfulness. Mindfulness is an aid that allows the mind to maintain a continual focus on the object. The aid of mindfulness is described particularly for developing concentration and is needed if one wishes to achieve mental stabilisation.

Concentration is obtained when one is able to maintain a continual and uninterrupted focus on an object. In order to develop unmistakable concentration, one will have to successfully overcome the obstacles of excitement and laxity. By applying the meditation practice of maintaining a single-pointed focus and by overcoming the obstacles of excitement and laxity, at a certain point, one reaches a state called 'mental pliancy', which is a mental state where one has the freedom to meditate for as long as one wishes. The state of mental pliancy is said to be a very relaxed state of mind.

After obtaining mental pliancy, we reach a state called 'physical pliancy', which is a state where, physically, there is no difficulty in meditating for as long as we wish. So with the combined states of mental pliancy and physical pliancy, a focus on the object can be maintained for as long as one wishes, without any difficulty. At times we might have a wish to meditate, but mentally, we feel very down and lack a strong inclination to engage in the practice. That is because the mental pliancy is lacking.

The state of mental pliancy followed by the state of physical pliancy establishes the 'serviceability' of the mind in order to engage in meditation. After having obtained those states, one then reaches a state called the 'blissful state'. Initially, a state of bliss on a physical level is induced by the meditation practice of developing concentration. Physical bliss is experienced throughout the body via means called the channels, which pervade the entire body. As the subtle wind element flows freely through the channels of the body, physical bliss is induced (after having obtained the state of physical pliancy); one then experiences bliss on a mental level. It is the combination of the mental and physical pliancy with mental and physical bliss that enables one to meditate for as long as one wishes without any reservation and difficulty. At that point, one achieves an acute concentration, an unwavering and very stable form of concentration on the object, and at this stage of the meditation one achieves what is called 'calm abiding'. When we understand calm abiding as the result of having developed concentration, we will be inspired to practise meditation. So it is good to understand and relate the practices to their beneficial results.

As a result of having obtained mental and physical pliancy, it is said that profound effects on one's physical and mental well-being will follow. Thus the benefits gained from developing concentration have a profound and positive effect on our overall and general well being. Ultimately the goal of meditation is to obtain peace and calmness in one's mind, with a perpetual clear and bright state of mind. The benefits are quite obvious when we look at people who are calm and peaceful, and as a result they also maintain good physical health. There is definitely a relationship between a calm and peaceful mental state and a state of physical well being. Whilst the state of mind becomes more joyful and peaceful, the physical state also becomes very calm, resulting in good and sound health, so therefore the overall benefit is definitely apparent.

Now when we look into why, or what, causes disturbances in our mind, such as the mind becoming very excited or distracted and consequently overwhelmed, the mind becomes confused and dull, rather than clear and bright. This relates to external distractions that preoccupy us; we allow our mind to become obsessed with distractions, which then cause the mind itself to lose the sense of calmness. When we are able to recognise a distracted mind or a mind lacking a state of calmness, we will then be able to apply the technique of bringing our focus inward and maintaining that inward focus. This is an appropriate technique for limiting and overcoming the disturbances in our mind.

As this technique involves concentrating on a particular object and withdrawing our mind from all external objects, the practice itself requires maintaining a complete inward focus on the chosen object. As we become more familiar with maintaining our focus on an internal object, and because we have withdrawn our preoccupation from external objects, the mind will naturally start to become calm and settled. Thus the more we familiarise with and focus on an internal object, the less likely our mind will become distracted by external objects, and the less likely

the mind will be in a disturbed, confused and dull state. Likewise, the greater we focus on an internal object the mind will naturally become more calm, clear and bright.

Now as we put this technique into practice and gain greater familiarity with focussing inwards, we will begin to notice that we are less likely to become distracted by external objects, because we have distanced our mind from the external focus. During the time of meditation we will definitely feel some relief and notice the immediate benefit. However when we come out of the meditation we might find that our mind still becomes distracted. But with time and familiarity, we gradually notice that we will be less inclined to become completely obsessed with the distractive object.

Even if we are not focussing internally on a particular object and we are not in a formal meditation practice session, we will definitely notice a difference in our approach when we come into contact with a distractive object. Our mind does not become as readily prone to excitement and complete obsession with the object. The point where we begin to notice a level of distance from distraction is a clear sign that the practice of meditation has rendered positive effects on our overall well-being and on the stability of our mind. We will then begin to see the real benefits of the practice of meditation.

Thus it is not only during the practice of meditation that we can maintain a calm and peaceful state of mind, but even outside of formal meditation practice we will be able to maintain some stability in our mind, which will in turn provide a sense of relief of how the practice definitely helps and benefits our overall well-being. We might find it constricting if we were to think that mental stability can only be achieved in the meditative state when we are focussed on an internal object, and that when outside of meditation, our mind will revert back to the distracted state. Such is not really the case because through familiarity, the level of distraction will gradually be reduced.

Again we may still have doubts and questions about whether we can achieve the state of maintaining an inward focus and stability on a continual basis, because of the difficulties we find with the practice of meditation. The technique itself and particularly maintaining a focus for a long period of time, might be difficult initially. We might even doubt whether it is possible. However when those sorts of doubts and questions arise we need to resort to the advice of the great masters, who have explained how it is definitely possible.

The great master Shantideva has explained in his work, *The Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, that there is nothing which cannot be achieved through the practice of familiarity. He is indicating that with familiarity, one can achieve whatever state that one wishes to achieve. He provides examples to illustrate his point, for example situation with someone whom we consider an enemy, when the very sight of that person, or even hearing the person's name evokes disturbance and agitation or anger in our mind. Through familiarity however, as we become more familiar with the qualities of that person, we will begin to develop an affinity with the person to the point where we will be unable to bear being separated from the person;

we will feel contented and happy in their company and joyless in their absence. We may have experienced such examples in our own life. I have definitely had similar experiences, and likewise you may also have had experiences in life where someone you considered an enemy, or someone that you disagreed with, turns out to be a very good friend; you enjoy their company and being with them and so forth. So these are examples of familiarising and developing affinity with people in that way.

Relating to these practical analogies imparted by the great masters serves as a means for encouragement; they inspire us to develop the positive qualities in our mind, which in turn serve as a basis for our overall well being. By referring to these analogies that relate to the practical experiences in life, we will begin to notice and understand the main points explained in these teachings, which is that our happiness or unhappiness is dependent on our own state of mind. That piece of advice is really sound instruction and rings true and clear, through one's own familiarity and experiences. So it is indeed very true that happiness is mainly dependent on the attitude in our mind; a positive attitude and a positive state of mind will contribute to the happiness of our mind. By the same token, unhappiness or suffering is a state of mind, which is also dependent on the attitudes in our mind. When that point becomes clear, one gains a genuine sense of personal responsibility as happiness is something that is developed within ourselves.

When we can identify or realise that the main causes for our own happiness or unhappiness lie within ourselves then our intelligence has developed further. Such an intelligence called 'analytical wisdom' is the intelligence or wisdom that distinguishes a positive state of mind (conducive for our happiness and well-being) from the negative state of mind (destructive attitudes which destroy our happiness and well-being). When we develop such analytical wisdom to the point where the positive and negative states of mind can be clearly distinguished then it becomes clear to us as to what needs to be adopted and further developed, and what needs to be discarded.

Looking at it from a practical level; it is clear we all want companions and good friends. When we examine the causes for having a good companion, we will find that they are based on certain attitudes within ourselves. Having a positive attitude will naturally attract good companions. However if we lose a good friend, the main cause for the loss will be the attitudes that we have developed within ourselves. If we have developed a negative attitude towards the person then that is what will cause us to lose the friendship. So thus in both cases, the causes for acquiring companionship and good friends are dependent on our positive attitudes and causes for the loss of good friends and companions are a result of negative attitudes within ourselves.

As mentioned previously, we can reach a state of being able to clearly distinguish and identify the causes within ourselves for our own happiness and well-being in general, particularly with respect to companions and friends. Such understanding or intelligence will engender honesty; we will become really honest about our own

situation and the situation with our friends. Even though it may be hard to admit, there is a certain level of dishonesty when we complain about others not being friendly, nice and kind, or deserting us. There is some dishonesty in the fact that one entirely blames the other person and deems it to be their fault. We normally assume that 'it is not my fault' and the other person is at fault, because they did wrong of not kind and so forth. That is not being honest if we really look at it. So when we develop the intelligence to an acute level we will be able to be more honest with ourselves, such that if we lose a friendship we will not immediately blame the other person out of habit, but rather we will examine whether or not the cause comes from within ourselves.

These points are worth considering as a means for encouraging the practice of meditation. If we try to practise meditation without being clear about the situation, then we may sometimes lose the point, thinking, 'why am I doing meditation?' So by clearly identifying the situation and admitting what the situation is, by understanding the practical level and the subtler levels, then we will have a clear basis to continually engage in the practice of meditation. It is really worthwhile to consider all these points. As we gain these tools through the practice of meditation, particularly the tool of analytical wisdom, they can be used in our daily lives. Analytical wisdom is not just reserved for the practice of meditation, although enhancing that analytical wisdom within ourselves during meditation enables us to apply the benefits of meditative practice to our daily life, and for that purpose analytical wisdom becomes a very useful tool to have.

So now we can take the opportunity to engage in some practice of meditation. We can reassess our physical position to be in calm, relaxed and upright posture. The practice of meditation that we will now adopt in this session should first of all involve the technique of withdrawing and then choosing an internal object by which to maintain our focus, which will be our breath. However, prior to reaching that point we must first of all make a resolution to distance our mind from preoccupation with different thoughts, superstitions, various external objects and so forth. In particular we can sum up our thoughts and ideas as relating to either the past, our present situation or our future. We find that a lot of our worries, our doubts and a lot of angst comes from our preoccupation with past memories. For some people uneasiness in their mind comes from recalling previous instances in their life, whilst others experience worry and unnecessary doubt and fears about the future, and there are those preoccupied with meaningless thoughts and distractions of the present moment, all of which distract us from our state of well-being. So whatever may cause the mind to become completely distracted, we need to try to withdraw from that.

When we engage in the practice of meditation we must first of all make a strong resolution that 'I will not allow my mind to be influenced by distractions but rather I bring in my focus inward'. We need to completely withdraw our mind from the preoccupation with thoughts and ideas, as well as withdraw our mind from all other external distractions and influences. This needs

to be a complete withdrawal and not just partial, where some thoughts and distractions still remain in mind. Partial withdrawal is not an appropriate means to achieve our goal, which is to eventually develop single-pointed concentration. In order to really succeed in the practice of meditation, from the very outset we need to be totally committed to bringing our full attention and focus inward. When we withdraw our mind, it becomes difficult to maintain a focus on nothing, thus at this point we choose an object of focus, which will be our breath. We then maintain complete focus on a mental image of our breath for the duration of time that we are in meditation. So in this way for the next minutes we will spend focusing on our breath.

(Pause for meditation)

That is sufficient for now. Before we conclude the session for the evening we can again resume a meditative state, this time our focus will be on the sound of Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra, which is to be recited. As we hear and chant the mantra we need to try and maintain our full attention and focus on that sound of the mantra itself. Then when the recitation comes to an end we can all remain with our focus in that meditative state. That will be a beneficial and helpful means to relieve any dark and heavy feelings that may prevail in our mind. We will be able to establish and maintain a lightened state, which will furthermore result in a clear state of mind.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

*Transcribed from tape by Ai Chin Khor
Edit 1 by Bernii Wright
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
Edited Version
© Tara Institute*