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## The Condensed Lam Rim

# ལྷན་སྐྱོད་ལམ་གྱི་རིམ་པ་བཞུགས་སྒྲིག་།

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30 June 2010

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We can assume that everyone here is a meditator. However it may be appropriate to give some explanation on meditation. Meditation means familiarising our mind with a virtuous object and keeping our focus single-pointedly on that object. The definition of meditation is something that we can easily understand, however the difficulty most of us will find is in keeping our focus on the object. Why is it hard to keep our focus on the object?

For most of us, the initial experience of meditation is a sense of tranquillity, and a sense of calmness in our mind as we bring our focus inwards. When we make a sincere attempt to focus inwards, even though we may not be able to keep our entire focus on the object 100 per cent initially, we will still feel a sense of relief and calmness within our mind.

This is because we have put our focus on the object with a sincere mind. Because we put our full attention and heart into it, we can maintain a good focus, even for a short time. It is this initial focus that brings about a sense of tranquillity and calmness in our mind. The ability to focus on an object is one positive effect of meditation. The reason why we seem to slowly lose that sense of tranquillity is because we become a little bit more ambitious, we try to prolong the focus on the object and we try to have a longer meditation session. But we fail to keep our attention and focus on the object for that long.

In a longer meditation session it is easy for the mind to get distracted. The length of time we spend meditating is not that important in the beginning; it is more important to keep our attention and focus on the object. The best way to meditate is to maintain the focus on the meditation object itself, for as long as it is comfortable. When we become distracted, then we can just leave the session for a while and then later make another attempt to focus single-pointedly on the object again. It is better to have a shorter but more focussed session. Being focused on the object and becoming familiar with that single-pointed focus on the object will gradually improve the quality of our meditation. Gradually we can increase the time we spend in single-pointed focus.

The proper way to improve our meditation is to maintain whatever initial focus we have and then slowly increase that, rather than jumping to another meditation technique, or assuming we should have longer sessions. For example, we may want to do an hour of meditation, but it can easily become a distracted meditation, where we seem to have some focus but mostly the mind is distracted. The danger is when that becomes a habit then there will never be a real improvement in our meditation. Furthermore, the quality of our meditation will never

improve because trying to focus with a mind which half distracted becomes a mental habit. If we fall into that habit, then it becomes very difficult to overcome it. We may seem to be in a meditative state, but in fact we are mostly distracted. In this case, our meditation will never improve. It is much more important to keep and maintain a strong focus on the object and then, rather than choosing another meditation technique, maintain our original technique and slowly improve upon that. This is the best strategy for successful lifelong meditation.

Having chosen a virtuous object to focus on, the more we become familiar with it by being able to maintain our focus on it, naturally our state of mind becomes a little more virtuous too. As our mind becomes more virtuous with the qualities of kindness, then it is less likely to be an undisciplined and unruly state of mind. This is how the mind works. When the positive state of mind is increased, then the negativity or undisciplined state of mind decreases. The Tibetan phrase for peace is *she de*, where *she* means subsiding the unruliness of the mind, the undisciplined state of mind. When that subsides, then there will be *de*, which means happiness and joy in our mind. So the combined meaning of *she de* or 'peace' is the experience of happiness as a result of the delusions having subsided in our mind. The joy and bliss we experience from reducing negativity in our mind is thus real peace.

When we have made the effort to adopt a proper meditation technique, then we will experience a positive result where the mind becomes more tranquil and calm. This is testimony to the value and benefit of meditation. At that point we don't need to ask other people about the benefits of meditation because we have had the experience ourselves, so we understand.

As we continue to meditate and experience the benefits, we will begin to gain a real sense of tranquillity and peace in our mind. This is in accordance with the benefits of meditation as explained by the great Buddhist masters of the past. A clear sign of an effective meditation is that delusions subside. Delusions subside even more when we have an effective Dharma practice as well. When we find that the delusions, i.e. the negative states of our mind, are weakened, then this is a clear sign of a meditation technique that is working, and that our Dharma practice is working too. As well as the delusions subsiding in our mind and generating a more virtuous state of mind, we also begin to have a stronger faith in karma and its affect, and we have stronger faith in the three jewels of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. When we have that virtuous state of mind, it is a clear sign of the meditation practice and the Dharma practice taking effect.

The other positive benefit of meditation is that the mind starts to become clear and our intelligence or wisdom starts to increase. This is the positive, beneficial mental state we want to have, rather than a state of mind where we are weighed down with the darkness of ignorance; where the mind becomes all muddled up and whatever we do is not very fruitful because of an unclear mind. This darkness and confusion is an unfortunate state to be in. It is a state that is detrimental to our wellbeing,

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whereas to be in a state where our mind is clear, bright and intelligent is beneficial in our life.

I also regularly emphasise that it is essential to take notice of how our mind works. We always have two choices - if we give in to our negative attitude, the attitude that is tainted with delusions, then we follow a direction where we become more confused, more agitated and more troubled. Our mind is constantly in a troubled state because we follow a certain attitude that we hold onto.

But if we realise that we have a choice, then we can come out of this negative pattern and we can develop a positive state of mind. We have that choice and when we take the initiative to adopt a positive attitude in our mind, things become clearer. Our mind becomes uplifted and it is more calm and positive. Meditation helps our mind to be in a more positive state.

We need to take notice of this, rather than finding faults elsewhere and constantly blaming external situations for our troubles and problems. Instead, if we actually take the initiative to look within ourselves and recognise the internal causes of the problems within ourselves, then we can act to overcome our deeply entrenched pattern of negative attitudes. Only then will we have a more manageable and positive state of mind.

This advice gives us a direction in life—it presents us with choices of behaviour. Of course, we are ignorant if we feel we have no choice and as a result don't engage in any meditation practice, even when we see there is a choice. If we don't engage in a meditation practice, then we haven't taken this advice to heart yet. Clearly seeing the options and then trying to follow the positive ones is the way to help ourselves.

Another point that I regularly emphasise is that it is essential for our well-being to identify the positives in our frame of mind, and to try to bring about these positive frames of mind. This will ensure a more calm and peaceful state of mind. Rather than external friends and companions, our real companion is the unfailing positive mind. It is hard enough to find external friends and companions to begin with, and finding someone that we can trust and rely on is even harder. Even if we were to find a companion, it is very hard to know for how long we can rely on them. It's never sure when they will betray us or fail us, especially in times of difficulty. However when we take the initiative to recognise our inner friend—a positive and calm state of mind—and cultivate it, then our strong positive mind becomes our unfailing friend which is with us all the time. In any kind of circumstances, it will always be there for us to rely upon; that is why it is our best companion.

Identifying our inner friend will also help us to find reliable external friends too, as this is what most people seem to want.

Summarising the main point, there is definitely benefit in the authentic practice of meditation. If we wish to be considered a good person, a person with good character, then we need the conditions to become a good person. To become a person of good character that is appealing to others, we need to develop those qualities within ourselves; they cannot be found externally. When we

have cultivated a positive attitude, then we will become a person of a good manners and good behaviour, which will be appealing to others. For example, when we are in a happy state of mind, a happy mood, then we can smile and be joyful with whoever is around us. But if we are in a bad mood and not feeling happy in our own mind, then it is hard to maintain a happy disposition. On the contrary, we will have a dull face, which is not appreciated by others.

The important thing to recognise is that when we are in an unhappy state of mind, that is when we don't have a pleasant appearance. So we can understand that when our friends display an unpleasing appearance, rather than getting upset and angry with them, we need to understand that they must not be happy, and their mind must be a little troubled for them to show that appearance. Understanding this helps us to develop a sense of compassion; strengthening our sense of compassion for them. If we already practise compassion, then it will be enhanced when we know that they are troubled.

Developing this understanding comes only with the practice of compassion. This is why I emphasise regularly that it is essential that we practise compassion with our companions. Of course the relationship with our companion may not be completely free from attachment. For an ordinary relationship to be completely free from attachment might not be entirely possible, however, along with the attachment that attracts you to your companion, try to also cultivate some compassion. If you regularly put some effort in developing real genuine compassion for your partner, then it will be easier and come about more naturally.

On television last week, there was someone on who was 93 years old and his wife was around 88 years old. They had been together for 64 years. In observing them on the show, it was quite clear that they had a strong affinity towards each other. Even after having lived together for over 64 years it seems they are still enjoying each others' company, and are still on very good terms with each other. What are the main causes for them to have such a sustainable, long relationship together, considering the likelihood of so many conflicts and problems? What maintained their relationship?

My conclusion was that they must have true love and compassion for each other; this is what has sustained their relationship, even after all these years together. These sort of examples are worthwhile for us to consider and try to understand. What keeps people together? What is the factor that enables people to still be friends and live happily together even after long time. The couple on television didn't change partners for 64 years; they kept each other as their partner and are still happy together.

In the early days, when I was teaching up in Queensland at Chenrezig Institute, during lunch a lady sat next to me and she confided to me that she was not very happy and that she was lonely. Since this was an informal conversation, I casually asked her if she had considered living with a partner, or getting married. She told me that

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she had been married four times! This shows that even with four marriages she was still feeling lonely.

We will now get back to meditation. To engage in a meditation practice, let us again adopt an upright but comfortable position. The object to focus on in our meditation will be our breath. As far as the object goes, it is not very complex; it is a simple object to focus on. However the breath has many attributes. It is a good object for beginners to focus on as it helps the mind to settle down. To meditate well, we need to be determined to withdraw our mind from all distractions. We need to intentionally withdraw our mind from all forms of distractions and bring our focus inwards and focus on the breath. Try to focus 100% on the breath. *[meditation]*

*Question:* I just wanted to make a comment. I read in a local newspaper recently that when they did a survey on what were the factors that maintained long-lasting relationships, one of the key factors that many successful partners had expressed, was that they never went to bed angry. If they had any conflicts, they would try to resolve it before going to bed.

*Answer:* That might be a contributing factor, definitely. However practically speaking, if anger was present before going to bed, then that would obstruct attachment from arising! The point is, when anger is prevalent, then it's hard for attachment to rise because that anger pervades the mind; when anger is present, attachment doesn't have a chance to arise. And if attachment isn't present, then of course they won't enjoy themselves in bed!

Of course, joking aside, it is definitely a case where if someone is in an angry state of mind, then they would want to keep a distance from whoever they are angry towards. Naturally, if you are angry with someone, then you would not be too comfortable with them close to you. So you won't enjoy your time together with a person you are angry with. If you want to be with someone and enjoy your time together, then you should be free from an angry state of mind.

Recognising the faults of anger is easier than recognising the faults of attachment. It is easy to recognise the faults of anger because we can easily see the unpleasant situations that come about as a result of anger. In contrast to anger, attachment is harder to recognise as being a faulty state of mind, because attachment seems to have a natural attribute of bringing you close to someone, and there is also some enjoyment that we initially experience being with someone out of attachment. This makes it hard to recognise attachment as a faulty state of mind. In any case, it is better to go to bed without anger because you will sleep sounder. If we go to bed with an angry mind, then we would not enjoy a good night's sleep.

*Question:* Why is it that we don't remember our past lives?

*Answer:* The simple answer to that is we don't have the clairvoyant mind to see beyond this lifetime. Within the different kinds of clairvoyance that can be developed in our mind, there is one particular type of clairvoyant mind which can see past lives. Our normal state of mind can't recall events of past lifetimes because of the length of

time between the past life and our present life. Even when we think far back in our present life, there are certain events we will not be able to recall. For example, we may not recall what we did when we were about two or three years old. Even though things did happen then, we don't have the capacity to recall them. If we could recall all things and events from the time that we were born, it might be useful. At the very least, if we could remember how much pain our mother endured during labour, it might give us a stronger appreciation of the kindness of our mother.

I have heard of clairvoyants who have written accounts of their past lives. I heard that a couple of people in America wrote a book together about the stories of people who remembered their past lives. One of the authors is famous and well known, as well as being an honest and good person. One woman they interviewed gave very detailed descriptions of her past lives. The accounts that she remembered were mostly to do with tragedy. It's good that some people have some ability to check and to investigate and find out about past lives.

*Question:* When I check whether my mind is focused or not during meditation, it seems that I get more distracted as I get caught up in a mental analyses.

*Answer:* There is a mental state called introspection that can be used as a tool to check whether our mind is focused or not. When we bring our mind inwards and focus on the object, there is a state of mind that checks whether we are doing that properly. But once we keep our focus on the object, then we don't need to use that checking mind any more. Just remain focused on the object, and think of nothing else. This of course comes with practice, but that is the technique. So once we place our attention or focus on the object then we don't need to investigate further as to whether our mind is focused or not or how it is focusing. This becomes a mental tether and becomes, as you said, a distraction itself. Having chosen the object, whatever that object may be, just keep the focus on it.

Initially when we bring our mind inwards and focused on the object, of course, we will have that state of mind. When you initially bring your mind on the object the mind will settle on the object. Spend a little time checking whether the mind is focused or not. If it is focused, then just keep it there, don't do any further investigation. Attempts at further investigation will distract the mind. If you investigate too much, then that will cause the mind to scatter and become distracted.

*Question:* Going back to the earlier question, when some one has developed the clairvoyance to see past lives, is it the case where they will actually see a physical image of their past lives?

*Answer:* People do have visions in seeing their past lives. For example, there is was apparently a young child in Turkey who recalled his past life. This is a boy who, even before seeing any of the places he spoke about, remembered a particular school and he remembered how he was killed by a bus at a particular area and remembered even the parents. Before seeing these places he had images of them in his mind. When the boy was taken to the school, his stories were confirmed, and he

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also recognised his previous parents as well. Apparently this child was having a vision of the school and other areas and this led people to identify the places.

Someone else told me about an account of a seven year old boy who started recalling his past life when he was about two years old. This boy was relating very clear incidents about his past life. This boy, who could barely speak, was talking a lot about aeroplanes and the mechanism of aeroplanes. When he was older, when he was able to speak more clearly, he related clearly that he was killed in an aeroplane crash and later started to give the names of the area where he crashed and a name of a friend. The friend was still alive and was able to confirm the story. The boy was relating every detail, his own name when he was with the fighter plane, his friend's name and the aircraft that he was flying. This account is apparently on the internet so that is something you can watch for yourself; it is quite intriguing. Apparently the parents of that boy did not particularly believe in reincarnation, but the father said that after hearing his son tell the stories and meeting his previous friend and having everything verified, that he had no choice but to believe in reincarnation and past lives.

[This story can be read from these links:

<http://www.facts-are-facts.com/news/sne-26705-pastlife.ihtml>

and

<http://hubpages.com/hub/PastLifeEvidence>]

*Question:* If one were to remember or relate to accounts of our own past lives, will that understanding be useful for our practice now?

*Answer:* At the very least we can definitely confirm the validity of a past and future life, and in particular the karma aspect. We don't really have a choice to be reborn—it is karma that determines where we are reborn. If that understanding can dawn within ourselves, then our conviction in karma becomes stronger. In relation to the earlier account of the lady who apparently remembered seven of her past lives, she described her memories as if she made choices to take those bodies. However, I doubt she would have chosen those kind of lives, particularly the life where she had faced some tragedy, particularly the life where she had contracted leprosy. If you had a choice, why would you want to choose an uncomfortable life? Maybe because of not being able to understand the idiosyncrasies of karma might have been why she thought she made those choices, but in reality when we are under the influence of karma there is no choice at the time of rebirth.

Before we conclude for the evening we can spend just a few more minutes in meditation, this time focusing on the sound of the Buddha Shakyamuni mantra. Focus and maintain this focus on the sound. When the recitation stops we can maintain our focus for awhile.

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