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## The Condensed Lam Rim

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As usual, it will be good for us to spend some time in meditation. For that purpose we adopt a relaxed, comfortable posture. We also ensure that we have a relaxed state of mind that is clear and bright, because a relaxed state of mind is of utmost importance for our well-being.

As I regularly emphasise in my talks, a relaxed state of mind really contributes to our overall well-being. With a relaxed state of mind we find that we naturally have a clear mind and everything in life falls into place. When in a relaxed state of mind we will be joyful and happy, which also has a good effect on our physical health. So having a relaxed, and happy, positive state of mind is essential for our well-being. When we think about this, we will see that regardless of our status, whether we are rich or poor have a high status or low status, we all need to have that quality.

However, while we may agree that a relaxed, calm and happy mind is essential for our well-being, that state does not come about naturally or spontaneously. Rather we have to put some effort into achieving that state. It is a fact that if we put some effort into training our mind, then we can definitely achieve that ideal state of mind.

When we investigate why we might be lacking a naturally relaxed and peaceful mind, we will come to find that the obstacle is an opposing state of mind. In other words, there is something within our own mind that opposes a relaxed and calm state of mind. When we investigate further, we find that the mind that is completely distracted by worldly affairs prevents us from having a relaxed state of mind. When we look further into why our mind might be so distracted by worldly affairs, and influenced by delusions, we come to understand that it is because of our habit of just completely letting our mind loose, allowing it to follow every worldly distraction that comes by. Our habituation has got to the point where it seems very natural and spontaneous for the mind to behave in that way, and so it is hard to overcome the distractions.

However, when we recognise that the distracted mind has been the main cause of our troubles and worries, we can make an attempt to practise the opposite. By not allowing the mind to be distracted, in particular by the delusions, and then making an attempt to divert our attention and focus, we can slowly familiarise our mind with positive patterns, which then become the cause for our mind to become more relaxed.

This is not obscure or difficult to understand. When we think about our own state of mind it is quite clear that the mind is influenced by distractions, which cause so many

doubts and worries that we are not able to make decisions, and so we don't have a clear direction in life. That is a fact! If we really check on how our mind actually functions on a regular basis, it will dawn upon us that our mind is mostly preoccupied with unrealistic plans and ideas about what we need to accomplish, how to achieve them, and how to control things.

Of course if these plans could actually be achieved through our physical or mental effort then it might be reasonable to allow our mind to focus on all these speculations. However, most of the things that we think we need to accomplish are unrealistic, which then causes anxiety, worry, frustration and so forth. When we come to see that a lot of our goals in life are actually not very realistic, and how our mind actually is constantly preoccupied with these sort of thoughts and speculations, then we have seen the cause of our anxiety. It will dawn upon us that if there was a method to divert our attention to focus on something that is more realistic, more positive, then that would be of benefit to us.

As we gain such an understanding through personal investigation, we begin to really see how our troubles and so forth are related to a distracted mind, particularly a mind that is influenced by delusion. Then it should become clear to us that if we were to change our patterns of thinking and adopt a state of mind that focuses inwards, rather than allowing our mind to be distracted with external objects of desire and so forth, then that inner focus would naturally produce more tranquil and calming effect.

That technique of bringing our focus inwards and focusing on an internal object is called meditation. Meditation is basically a technique of internalising our focus; if we are able to do that then we will naturally experience the positive effect of a tranquil, calm and relaxed mind. As I regularly emphasise, one does not need to feel that one has to be religious or follow a spiritual path in order to benefit from this technique—it is a technique that is accessible to anyone who wants to adopt it. If we want to take real personal responsibility for our own life, and have a really calm and relaxed mind, then it is our right to be able to utilise this technique.

If we actually adopt the meditation technique, our mind naturally becomes calmer, more tranquil, and happier, which will naturally have a positive effect upon others. Because we are not in chaotic and troubled state we won't be causing trouble for others, which in itself is actually a religious practice. Regardless of whether it is a part of a particular religious tradition, I consider that the positive effect that we have on others is an authentic form of spirituality. That is why I emphasise again and again that we can all benefit from this practice.

What I also emphasise regularly, is that regardless of whether we consider ourselves to be religious, a kind and positive mind is essential for our well-being. When one secures a kind and happy positive mind, that will naturally have positive effect upon others. I have seen shows on TV where people are really extremely kind to others, yet they don't seem to be operating from any religious base as such. Rather they seem to have a natural

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inclination of wanting to help and benefit others. It is really amazing to see these remarkable acts that come from a genuine concern for others. So regardless of whether one is religious or not, if we can secure a kind mind, and a genuine concern for others, then as well as benefitting others there will, in fact, be personal benefit, as we will feel very relaxed.

Having briefly explained the benefit and advantages of the practice of meditation, we can now make an attempt to adopt the meditation technique. Bring to mind that meditation entails choosing an internal object to focus on, and being really committed to just focusing on that chosen object. By doing that wholeheartedly, with full focus and attention, we will naturally distance ourselves from external distractions. The reason we choose an internal object is so that we are not influenced by external worldly concerns and objects.

Thus the practice is to distance ourselves from all forms of external distraction by placing the complete focus of our mind within ourselves, by choosing an appropriate object on which to focus. For the meditation practice to be authentic and effective we need to be really clear about the technique, and fully committed to focusing on the chosen object. Here we use an internalised image of the breath as our object.

We completely withdraw from all other forms of worldly distractions, and thoughts, and just place a one-hundred-percent focus on the breath itself. Even if it is for few minutes, the main thing is to really pay full attention to our breath, focusing on it and constantly reminding ourselves to keep focusing on the breath itself, and not be distracted by any other thoughts, ideas and so forth for the duration of our practice.

Through the positive habit of focusing on our internalised image of the breath, even for just a short duration, we slowly become more and more familiar with focusing on internal object, and to that degree we will be less concerned with external distractions. Of course we should not beat ourselves up for being easily distracted, because up to now it has been natural for us to be distracted.

While focusing inwards in our meditation we experience a temporary relief from our anxious and distracted mind, but then as soon as we come out of meditation we find that our mind immediately runs back to the objects of distraction. That is because we are still beginners; we have not spent that much time in familiarising ourselves with the internal object. However over time, as we become more and more familiar with focusing on an internal object through our practice, we will come to a point where our mind becomes naturally more balanced. Then even when we interact with outside world and come across external distractions, our mind will not be so influenced by those external distractions. This is the long-term positive effect of the practice of meditation. For the next few minutes we will sit in a relaxed and comfortable posture and just focus on the breath. *[pause for meditation]*

That will be sufficient for now.

It will be really beneficial if you try to adopt a regular practice of meditation in daily life. Another practical way to understand the purpose of meditation is that it is a

means to gain control over one's own mind. When our mind is not controlled, then it is in a chaotic state of confusion, distraction and doubt, anxiety and so forth. Practising meditation is a way of really gaining genuine control of our own mind, which means being able to withdraw our mind from certain objects or from negativity when necessary, and engaging in things like virtue when that is appropriate.

Right now we might find that it is very hard for us to engage in virtue, and that negative influences such as distractions seem to arise very spontaneously and easily. The reason for that is none other than the familiarity that we have with distractions, and our lack of familiarity with focusing our mind. However, if we really put in some effort with regular practice over time, we will come to notice that our mind is able to focus for even a few minutes on an object. We will have gained a positive result, just by the virtue of familiarising our mind with, and maintaining that practice. Then over time we will find that it becomes much more natural to withhold our mind from negativity and engage in virtue.

I am happy to address any questions you might have before going into the text.

*Question:* If the ego doesn't exist, who is the one that engages in positive or negative deeds?

*Answer:* First of all to get one thing right, in saying that the ego does not exist ultimately, one must understand that it is not denying the existence of the ego altogether. It is a misinterpretation to believe that the ego does not exist. That has to be understood.

This misunderstanding may arise from the semantics of the language. To assume that the 'I' does not exist would be a wrong conclusion, because even conventionally we all agree that there is an entity or individual called 'I'. Just as there is you, and we say 'You are coming, you are going' so there is 'I', when we say 'I am going, I am coming, I am sleeping, I am eating' and so forth. The unique explanation of the highest school of Buddhism is that the Buddha's teaching accords with worldly convention. Therefore when it is said that the 'I' does not exist ultimately, it means that that the 'I' does not exist inherently or independently; the 'I' does exist conventionally but it doesn't exist independently or inherently.

Of course when we say that 'I' does not exist', it is the 'I' that is perceived by the wrong conception of grasping at an inherently existent 'I' that does not exist. However, our conventional 'I', which thinks, functions and works, does exist. If one comes to the conclusion that 'I' does not exist at all then that will be nihilism.

The 'I' that is perceived by the wrong conception of grasping at an inherently existent self does not, of course, exist. For example, when we say, 'I disagree with this' or 'I agree with that' or 'I accept that', or when someone criticises you, or when you feel 'I didn't do that' when wrongly accused, there is a very strongly opinionated 'I'. Even though we may not be consciously aware of it, the 'I' that appears at that time appears as being an independently, self-sufficiently existent 'I', which does not relate to anything else. We have a sense of a very solid 'I' that we feel that we have to defend. When we

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have a very strong feeling of, 'I didn't do that' or 'this doesn't agree with me' or 'I cannot accept that', the 'I' that appears to us at that moment is an 'I' that does not exist. That is because, even though we are not aware of it, the 'I' that we are referring to at that moment, appears as being inherently or independently existent. Do you follow that?

Although it appears to us in that way, the 'I' is not an independent, inherently existent entity. But even though the 'I' that is perceived by conception that misapprehends the 'I' does not exist, an 'I' as an individual does exist. That distinction needs to be understood.

As you may be aware, the most concise teaching of the Buddha is the *Heart Sutra*, which contains the words 'no form, no eyes, no nose and so forth'. That is not to be taken literally as meaning that there is no form. At the beginning of the *Heart Sutra* there is reference to a particular phenomenon not being inherently existent. As the sutra was given to intelligent disciples, it is to be understood that the characteristic of 'non-inherent existence' applies to all of the phenomena that are mentioned further in the teaching. So even though the sutra says no form, no eyes, no ears and so forth, it means no inherently existent form, no inherently existent eyes, ears, nose and so forth.

Ultimately it depends on how one perceives it. More specifically it relies on valid cognition. What is perceived by a valid perception exists, and what appears to a wrong conception does not exist.

The essential point in the Buddha's teaching is that all our problems arise from the self-grasping mind which, in itself, is a wrong conception. Self-grasping refers to grasping at an inherently and independently existent self, which in fact does not exist. Yet one holds onto such a self. It is this self-grasping that is the fundamental cause of our problems.

As the Buddha explained, all of our likes and dislikes stem from that notion of grasping at a self. Because of a very strong grasping at a self, things appear as being agreeable or attractive to that self, and attachment develops from that. We also develop aversion to things or events that are not agreeable, which manifests as anger. So we can see how the two main vices that corrupt us, attachment and anger, arise because of that initial strong grasping at the self. That is why Buddhism explains that grasping at the self is a wrong conception. That wrongly apprehended, wrongly perceived 'I', or self that we grasp at, does not exist. Gaining the understanding of selflessness in relation to the 'I' or self will release that strong grasping at the self, and thus release attachment or aversion.

To take a particular illustration of how strong grasping arises, when something accords with the 'I' then that strong sense of 'I' is not really there. Because you agree with it, you think, 'OK, fine, that's great, good for me'. But as soon as there is an opinion, or opposing factor that is not in accord with one's own opinion, then that sense of the wrong perceived 'I' or 'me' becomes much stronger. 'How dare they not agree with me! They cannot accept my opinion!'—at that time the 'I' is very strong. That is when the 'I' becomes more evident. We still have

the self-grasping when things are agreeable, and until we overcome it we always have self-grasping, but it becomes much more prominent when someone disagrees with that 'I'. Does that make sense? If you got a general sense of what has just been explained then that is worthwhile.

On a very practical level we can see how this misconception causes us distress. When we have a strongly opinionated mind that grasps at 'I', or 'my', or 'my opinion', or 'my way of thinking', then that is what causes likes and dislikes, and thus attachment to likes, and aversion or anger towards dislikes. That is a very practical way to relate to this teaching. In fact people I have met, who have not been exposed to this kind of teaching, have confided that, "As soon as you have a strong feeling of 'me', 'mine', 'my way', or 'my way is the right way' then everything goes wrong, and things don't work out well". They are talking from their experience, even though they may not be aware of these teachings. Their own experience is that as soon as you start thinking about 'I' or 'me' then everything gets in the way. If we compare concept of 'I' as opposed to 'ours' or 'us', we can see that 'my' is very singular, whereas 'us' is much more expansive. How often do we hear, 'This is mine, not yours'? This is a very unvarnished example of how that misconception operates.

There are many ordinary people, from ordinary walks of life, who say, 'if I meditate it makes me happy and relaxed, and I feel quite good, but if I don't meditate then my life becomes chaotic and full of problems'. These are just ordinary people, not people you would call practitioners, who are explaining, from their own experience, how meditation is essential in their life. They don't spend long hours in meditation, but when they do practice, they do so sincerely and find that it actually works in settling down their minds. And because of that experience they feel confident that meditation practice works for them

There are people who take every opportunity to be quiet and sit in a contemplative or meditative state. In a sitting room or even sauna or steam room, you find people want to just sit quietly, and contemplatively. They are taking that opportunity to meditate and focus inwards whenever possible, which is a good practice.

Before we conclude for the evening we can again spend a few minutes in meditation. This time the focus of the meditation will be the sound of the mantra to be recited, which is Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra. As we hear the sound we try to distance ourselves from all other forms of distraction, and place our full attention and focus on the sound itself. Then when the recitation stops, we will try to maintain that awareness or focus on the residue of that sound, and in that way practise meditation.

*TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA*

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