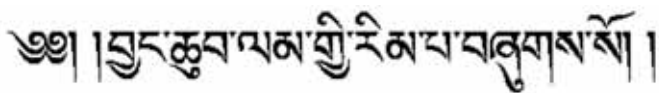

The Condensed Lam Rim



Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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As usual it would be good to spend some time in meditation. As mentioned regularly we need to adopt a relaxed and comfortable physical posture. We may be aware that along with our physical body we also have a mind and an our which we call the 'self' or 'me'.

Given that there are three aspects of oneself; the body, the mind and the self or individual 'me', it is appropriate that we contemplate their interrelationship. Inevitably there are things that the 'I' likes and dislikes. This 'I' naturally wants to experience happiness, and does not wish to experience even the slightest unpleasantness of suffering.

That being the case we can consider how we can actually go about obtaining happiness and avoid the suffering that we don't want to experience. It is the physical body and mind, which always accompany the 'I' or person, that will help one to achieve our ultimate goal of happiness and avoid suffering.

So we need to make sure that both our physical body and our mind are capable of assisting us to achieve our goals. A capable body is a healthy body, and a capable mind is a mind that is clear and bright. Having those two qualities will definitely assist us. Therefore it is essential that we try to do everything possible to maintain a healthy body, and a clear and happy state of mind.

I consider these two conditions are essential as they assist us to have a meaningful life. It may sound quite simplistic, but if you pay attention to these points they will really assist you. If we really think about it, these points will be useful and beneficial throughout our lives.

It is a fact isn't it? Whatever interests or dislikes we may have, they all relate to the individual that we call 'I'. And it is as if the 'I' demands certain things, which the physical body and mind follow like a slave; trying to accomplish all that the 'I' wants. So the individual 'I' is the real master who initiates things.

We can use our intelligence to further look into this 'I' that acts as the master and main conductor of our well-being. What is its nature? What is the real identity of the 'I' or the 'self' and what is the nature of the mind that the 'I' possesses? How does a state of mind affect the experience of the 'I'? Does a positive state of mind contribute to good experiences for the 'I'? Does a negative state of mind affect what the 'I' experiences? Is it true that having a negative state of mind means that what the 'I' or individual experiences is also unpleasant? In this way we analyse how the state of the mind and its attitudes effect us.

It's not sufficient to merely think about these points casually, as they are really deep and subtle. The way to think about and analyse them is to first withdraw from distractions, and bring the focus of the mind inward, and then investigate the nature or the identity of the 'I', the mind and so forth.

Bringing our focus inward and checking how the experiences of the 'I' or the self are dependent on our state of mind is essential. If we fail to turn our attention and focus inward and investigate our states of mind, we won't see how our attitudes and states of mind are the main source of the pleasant and unpleasant experiences that we have. If we maintain our normal way of interacting with outside world and our normal state of thinking, then we might assume that all our problems and difficulties are related to external factors.

We are so used to focusing externally and believing that problems and difficult situations in life are caused by external factors in life, that we fail to recognise that they are actually caused by internal factors—our own negative states of mind. When we bring our focus inward, it becomes evident that a lot of our problems are none other than the creations of our own mind. If we look within ourselves and check our state of mind, we will come to recognise for ourselves that most difficulties and problems and so forth are created by none other than our own mind and attitudes.

The consequence of failing to understand that the problems we experience in life are really created by our own mind and attitudes is that we might resort to trying to solve problems by looking for external solutions. If it really is the case that the answer to our problems and difficulties is having the means to alter external factors, then we would have to assume that really wealthy people, such as millionaires, would be the ones who have the fewest problems and difficulties in life.

However we have all heard of wealthy people, even millionaires, who have lots of estates and so forth, but who are not really contented and happy. That is because they have failed to understand that the unhappiness and problems they experience are related to their own state of mind. They fail to understand that they need to work with their own mind and change their attitudes. Many eventually seem to resort to taking drugs and so forth, to the point where they may take an overdose and actually commit suicide. The fact is that if one does not work to transform one's own inner state of mind, there's not much point in having good external conditions of wealth and so forth. So it is essential that we pay attention to this for ourselves.

When we see examples of people who are really rich and famous, yet who experience so many difficulties and problems, it is worthwhile to consider why that is so. In external terms they have wealth, fame and money, so why aren't they really happy? What is missing in their lives? We can use those examples to reflect upon our own situation. Would spending all our time and energy on acquiring wealth really solve our problems? Would that really be sufficient to gain a real sense of happiness and well-being?

We can really learn from this situation. In fact if we have done inner research, looking within ourselves and investigating our own state of mind, and seeing that happiness is dependent on a positive mental state, then we will reach a point where we can maintain a happy state of mind regardless of external factors. With positive states of mind, even when things are difficult on an external level such as having financial and other kinds of problems, one will definitely be able to endure that hardship. With a positive mental state, one will not add extra problems to the difficult external situation. In fact maintaining a positive state of mind, ensures that external situations will not have much effect on our happiness.

I can modestly say that I have had some experience of this myself. If I were to relay the details of the hardships that I have experienced in terms of lacking sufficient clothing, food, shelter and so forth, it might sound quite severe. However I can confidently say that I never felt that I was affected in a negative way. I can safely say that I was able to maintain a positive frame of mind throughout the ordeals in my life. I definitely feel that the positive attitudes had enabled me to endure all hardships. If I was to tell you all the difficulties I have gone through you might not be able to comprehend the enormity of them. Some may even dismissively think, 'Well, if it was hard for you, that's too bad!' (*laughter*).

The main point here is that I voluntarily made sacrifices and endured those hardships and difficulties in my younger years in order to pursue my studies and my practice. I left the comfort of home and so forth, and later went on to escape from Tibet, in pursuit of my studies. So I attribute my seemingly comfortable situation now to sacrificing comforts and willingly enduring hardships in the early part of my life. Now, without much effort from my part the conditions around me are quite good; I am not deprived of food or shelter at the least. Even though it is not in my constitution to strive to achieve a more comfortable life style, the comforts and affection from others come about naturally.

The point I emphasise to youngsters is that it is important to pay attention to life goals while you are young. You need to really take to heart the importance of studying and investing in the future now. Of course it is not going to be easy, and there will be many difficulties, as it will involve studying instead of enjoying leisure time, having fun and good times with friends. You will sometimes need to sacrifice leisure times in order to spend more time in study. At other times there will be anxiety and some indecision about making the right decision about what studies to pursue and so forth. However if you remain determined, and keep your mind focussed on how that sacrifice is essential to secure your future life, then you will definitely reap the good results of that effort in the future. Without any doubt, there will be a positive outcome. The main point of this message is that it is essential to really pay heed to your studies now and to also do some practice.

The points I am making here relate particularly to those who range in age between seventeen up and thirty. These are the prime years of life, where one's state of mind has a natural clarity, and one's intelligence is most alert. I use the analogy that the time for study is like a bud that is about to flower. With the prospect of living beyond the age of eighty, what is there to lose in spending four or five years putting all one's energy and effort into study. That effort will enable one to have a really secure and stable life in the future, and so one's efforts will not be in vain. If that investment in study allows one to have a good state of mind later on then isn't it worthwhile?

As I said earlier, the years from seventeen up to twenty-five are the prime time to really focus on study. Because of that naturally clear state of mind and heightened state of intelligence, what one learns is directly proportional to the effort made. After the age of thirty, memory and intelligence become little bit duller and slower.

Those who are already past thirty will recall that when you were between seventeen and twenty-five your mind was really open to learning. Whatever you wanted to learn you could learn easily, and it was as if you couldn't get enough knowledge. The more you learnt, the more you wanted to

learn. Whereas once you reach thirty, then even you have the interest you might find that things come more slowly, and that it is a bit more difficult to try to retain what one has learnt. And then from then on, it is all downhill!

The main point here is that we will gain most from our time and energy when our intelligence is in a naturally heightened state. As I mentioned earlier those are the years from sixteen or seventeen up to twenty-five or even thirty. Then, after thirty, the ability to learn starts to decrease. I am not saying that it is not worthwhile studying after thirty, rather that one would get better results from studying in the earlier years of life, where there is more time and energy.

So to summarise, I started off this evening by explaining that we all have undeniable identity, which we call the self or 'I' or 'me'. This identity is at the core of our existence, and is accompanied by a physical body and a mind. What does that 'I' wish for? It undeniably and naturally wishes for well-being and happiness. No-one would dispute that. Conversely no-one wishes for unhappiness, ill-will, or illness. So how do we go about in obtaining happiness and well-being?

The answer to this lies in our two closest companions, i.e. our body and our mind. There is certain amount of happiness to be had in our physical well-being, but the main source of happiness comes from our state of mind. So both aspects of our existence, our physical body and our state of mind, are equally important for our well-being.

Therefore, on a physical level we try to follow a healthy lifestyle, good diet and so forth, which will contribute to our good health. We also need to avoid things that are harmful to our health, such as the wrong types of food. In the teenage years, we need to be mindful about avoiding harmful substances such as alcohol, tobacco and other kinds of drugs, which harm not only the physical body, but also the state of mind. So we really need be mindful about not consuming substances that are harmful and detrimental to our health.

On the mental level we need to try to secure a positive mind, by cultivating positive states of mind, and try to lessen and eventually eliminate negative states of mind. I cannot emphasise enough how important it is to maintain good health. If we are physically unwell, there is no way that we can utilise our body for any other activity, such as study or practice. And whatever we wish to acquire on a mental level is also dependent on physical health.

We can all relate to the need to be healthy in order to pursue interests in our lives. That is very clear. And there is very clear medical evidence that many diseases in later life arise from abusing the body with harmful substances when younger. With smoking, for instance, there is very clear evidence that it causes diseases that are detected later in life, and it is the same with drinking. So it is quite clear that these substances are harmful.

Therefore it is good to try to avoid smoking and drinking when we are young, even though it may initially be difficult to overcome the habit. The positive result of resisting those temptations earlier in life will be that we will not have to fall victim to their harmfulness later on in life. On the other hand if we develop the habit of consuming these sorts of substances in the early part of life, then it will be very difficult to get break that habit. It might even become an integral part of life. So we need to be mindful about this.

There is a very practical way of seeing how the well-being of the 'I' is related to the body and mind. If we are physically unwell, if our body is aching, we say 'I am unwell'. And if

we are experiencing difficulties or hardship, and the mind is not really happy, we say 'I am unhappy'. So it is clear that we relate our well-being to our physical body and state of mind.

Conversely, we say 'I'm well' when the physical body is well and, most importantly, when we have clear, bright, and joyful state of mind, then we confidently say 'I am well, and I am happy', So our happiness is dependent on the state of our mind. Even if the physical body not so well but the mind is in a happy, joyful state we can quite confidently say (despite our physical discomfort or ailment), 'I am well and happy'. That goes to show that our state of mind is really the primary factor that contributes to our well-being. Having a positive state of mind in conjunction with a clear and bright state of mind will result in a joyful state of mind, which we hold in high esteem, because we know how important it is for our well-being.

At this point we can agree that a happy and joyful state of mind is what contributes to the happiness and well-being of an individual. So it is worthwhile to consider how we can achieve that happy state of mind. What are the causes? We can't rule out external causes completely as they do contribute to a certain level of happiness. But as the Buddha taught, the real causes lie within oneself. In other words, the causes for a happy state of mind lie within one's own mind, rather than externally.

By the same token that which disturbs our happy state of mind also lies within one's own mind, and in Buddhist terms, these are called disturbing conceptual thoughts. There are many forms of disturbing thoughts, which arise from all forms of distractions. When we are able to clearly identify these disturbing conceptions or thoughts as the main cause that disrupts our happiness, then we have taken the first step in recognising the source of our unhappiness.

What is it that contributes to mental unrest? It is the negativities in one's mind. When those negativities are absent then there will be an absence of disturbing thoughts and conceptions, which leads to a naturally calm and focused state of mind. By understanding that, we can take the initiative to reduce and eventually overcome those disturbing thoughts or attitudes, and replace them with a positive state of mind.

To see the sequence of how disturbing thoughts actually affect us, we first need to understand how we are influenced by our thoughts and our states of mind, which arise from disturbing conceptions. When we allow the 'I' as an individual to be influenced by the mind, which is in turn influenced by the disturbing thoughts, then we begin to suffer the consequence of being in a chaotic state of mind, and always seeming to have problems and difficulties and negative attitudes and so forth. So it is a matter of reversing the situation, and not allowing ourselves to follow a mind that is influenced by disturbing thoughts.

For as long as we are controlled by the mind, and for as long as the mind is controlled or influenced by disturbing conceptions, we will naturally be in a disturbed state. Whereas if we reverse that by having control over our own mind, then we will be master of ourselves.

When we have managed to subdue the negative states of mind, we will have a tranquil, calm state of mind. The process of controlling the mind and directing it away from the influence of disturbing conceptions is called meditation. So the meditation technique is none other than a technique to control one's mind, and free it from delusions or

disturbing conceptions. So we can see how effective and essential the meditation technique is for our well-being.

Now, before we completely run out of time, let us use some time for the meditation practice. As mentioned previously, we adopt an upright and comfortable physical posture, and then try to adopt a clear state of mind. Maintaining a clear state of mind is dependent on the commitment to practise meditation in an earnest manner. Thus we need to intentionally withdraw our mind from all forms of distractions, and try not to concern ourselves with any forms of thoughts or ideas. We completely withdraw from all forms of conceptual thoughts and bring our full attention and focus inwards. Then we place our focus upon the chosen object of meditation, which for our purpose now is our own breath.

The actual manner of focussing on our own breath, as advised by the instructions on meditation is to become completely immersed in the breath itself. It is as if the mind has become one with the breath. It is not that they actually become one, but we need to imagine that it is as if our mind has become one with the breath; so that all our thoughts and attention are completely focussed on the natural inflow and the natural outflow of the breath. By becoming immersed in the breath for the next few minutes, we are adopting this meditation technique to its fullest extent. (*Pause for meditation*).

Before we conclude for the evening, let us maintain our focus, our posture, and also a clear and bright state of mind. This time the meditation technique will be to focus on the sound of the mantra. So as we hear the Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra we try to bring our full attention onto the sound of the mantra and then, as the recitation stops, we try to maintain that focus for a while. That will be the concluding meditation practice.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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