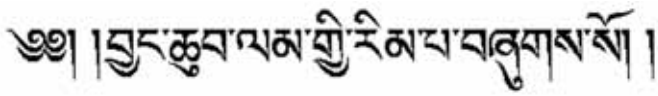

The Condensed Lam Rim



Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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As usual we will spend some time doing meditation. For that purpose, we will adopt a relaxed and comfortable posture. At the same time, it is important to adopt an appropriate state of mind by recollecting the main purpose of meditation, which is to acquaint ourselves with positive behaviours and attitudes.

The mind can definitely be trained. When we acquaint it with a positive attitude, that attitude will become the natural state of the mind. We need to remind ourselves again and again that it is definitely possible to transform one's state of mind, which is, by nature, tangible.

So first, we need to recognise that we can change our state of mind or attitude. We can then adopt a technique that allows our attitudes and mindsets to change. For some individuals, while external conditions may change, internally their minds do not change and that can cause them a lot of turmoil and difficulties. If, along with the external changes, we can change internally, we will be able to abide more harmoniously with those changes.

Those who are not able to change their mindset in accordance with external changes can experience agony and difficulties. But such external changes will definitely occur. To equip ourselves to deal with them, we need to use our wisdom to change our state of mind or attitude. We cultivate wisdom through the practice of meditation. As we gain wisdom, we can use it to change our attitude in accordance with external changes.

If we are not able to adapt to and accept external change, our state of mind and attitude can become narrow. We can experience real mental anguish – you could call it mental illness – because of not being able to adapt to the situation. If we don't pay attention and let the anguish in our mind escalate, it will reach a point where it will become difficult for us to cope with and manage our situation. So from the outset it is important to accept the situation, whatever it is; whatever we do we must assess the situation well, have a good strategy and prepare mentally. If we are mentally prepared, we can definitely cope with whatever occurs when things go wrong or don't work according to our plans.

From my own observation, I feel that a lot of problems and difficulties arise in people's lives when something changes suddenly, but they are unable to accept or adapt to the change. Through practice and training, however, it is definitely possible to gain a clearer state of mind. When we have a clear state of mind, our intelligence or wisdom can also function better to accept the situation so that we make concrete plans and so forth. We are much more flexible and open-minded.

I am not saying that I myself have experienced all of what I am relating now, but it is what I notice when I see others. Sometimes the anguish, difficulties and pain seem quite obvious: you can even see it in people's faces. That is my observation.

I can share with you my experience from when I was young, studying in the monastery. As I have related in the past, there were times when my mum would visit me and, after she left, I would feel some anguish and pain and begin missing her. But I began to see that, for as long as I allowed my mind to carry on missing my mum, I would not be able to focus on my studies and I would not be able to do whatever task was at hand. When I was able to change my attitude and not allow my mind to dwell on my mum's visit, I was able to again get back to my studies.

Similarly, when others, regardless of the situation, don't change their attitude and focus on some difficulty or problem, the problem may escalate and one's life becomes difficult. We need to be mindful of this from the start of whatever we are undertaking. As we are all responsible for our own well-being, the first person we need to manage well is oneself; only then will it be possible for us to help others.

The way we take responsibility for ourselves is to ensure we maintain our overall well-being and have what we would call a contented life. We all seek a sense of genuine satisfaction, a happy mind and physical well-being. When we have secured our physical and mental well-being, we are definitely assured of having a happy and joyous life.

While we may agree that we are seeking a happy, enjoyable and good life, there might be some disagreement about how to achieve it. For some, a happy, enjoyable life might mean getting sufficient money to go out and have parties and so forth. That may bring them some sort of satisfaction, but I feel that spending one's entire time and energy in pursuing external means of happiness does not really contribute to genuine happiness and well-being. The main cause of well-being is the development of one's inner qualities: acquainting one's mind with a positive attitude, which in essence is a feeling of love and compassion within one's heart which comes with genuine concern and consideration for others. Developing these positive qualities are the main condition for experiencing inner satisfaction and well-being.

I am not in any way advocating that we do not pay attention to external conditions. Of course external conditions contribute to a degree of physical comfort and well-being. However, if we are talking about the main causes of inner well-being and a real sense of joy and happiness in the mind, I definitely feel that developing the qualities I have mentioned – consideration and concern for others based on genuine love and compassion – will contribute to this. This is what I stress regularly. It is good for us to invest some time and energy in developing these good qualities.

Now the question is, do we have the ability to cultivate and develop those qualities? The answer is, definitely, we all have the potential. Each and every one of us already

carries the seed within ourselves of love and compassion and concern for others – it is a matter of recognising that and further developing those qualities. We can definitely do this. When we develop those good qualities, of course the main beneficiary is oneself. But this good effect can also rub off on others.

For example, if a parent has developed genuine love and compassion for others, naturally the good effects seem to be carried on to the children. When one's children are nourished with the good qualities one has within oneself, it definitely has a positive effect on them. It is a well-known fact that a child who grows up in a kind and loving family with good parents definitely grows up to be a naturally caring and good person. The positive effect they have experienced and witnessed from their own parents inspires them to develop good qualities within themselves. When we think about it in this way, developing good qualities will have a positive effect not only upon one's children, but even their children and future generations. Therefore, one can have a positive effect over many generations from developing those good qualities oneself.

Just as a parent's positive qualities can have a good effect on their children, likewise the negative behaviours and attributes of the parents can rub off on the children too. So on the positive side, we have children who are inspired by the parents and say, 'My parents were so keen on doing good actions so I will follow in the footsteps of my parents'. Then on the negative side, we have those children who say, 'My parents were abusive and so forth, they never maintained a good relationship, so how can I expect to have a good relationship myself?' There are some who even say, 'My parents never had a good relationship and are always having conflicts, disputes and fights, so I am scared to have a relationship myself'. There was one instance where an individual said, 'I think I will become a nun instead!' (*laughter*) Having decided to become a nun, this particular individual actually became quite a good nun because she had a good example of how a relationship could turn out to be quite bitter. When she thought about that, it inspired her to be a nun.

The point I am making here is that meditation is a technique for acquainting ourselves with positive qualities. The most important of these qualities is a genuine sense of love and compassion towards other beings; this is our most valuable asset. If we adopt the practice of meditation with the understanding that the main purpose of doing this is to acquaint ourselves with a genuine sense of love and compassion and then further develop this, our practice becomes worthwhile.

I also emphasised earlier that another positive result of practising meditation is to acquaint the mind with adaptability. When external conditions change, we need to be able to also change our outlook and attitudes and adapt to the situation so that it doesn't cause us so much worry, difficulties and anxiety. The practice of meditation can help us to have a mind that is more easily adaptable to the situation.

Meditation practice serves as a means for the mind not to be carried away by negative influences. The actual

technique involves choosing an object and maintaining our focus on the object, not allowing the mind to be influenced by other distractions. Once we have chosen an appropriate object on which to focus, we make the determination and commitment to keep our attention on that object. During that time, our mind is definitely settled and calm because it is not influenced by any other objects that might cause us distress. As we slowly make meditation practice part of our life, due to familiarity, we will not allow our mind to be overcome by distractions when situations in the outside world become difficult. Our mind will have developed through the practice of meditation; even in the event of distractions and negative influences, we will not allow our mind to be completely swayed by them. Because of our familiarity with the practice of meditation we will be able to bring our mind back to a positive state. This is how the practice of meditation protects us against negativity in our everyday lives.

If we think about it, it is a very logical and systematic technique that is also quite simple and reasonable. However there are some who lament, 'It is all very true, yet I don't seem to be able to protect myself from the influence of the distractions'.

I have a small anecdote to relate about this point. In the past when I was invited to teach in Adelaide, I was presenting a particular meditation technique on how to focus on the unattractive attributes of the object of attachment. After my talk, one individual came up and confided to me that the technique on how to see the faults of an object of attachment did seem to work, that he did start to lose attachment to the object by seeing the natural faults and the natural unattractive attributes of the object. However, this person went on to confide that he was unable to do this practice. In fact he seemed to not want to see the unattractive attributes of the object because the object might have been very attractive to him; he did not want to purposely try to focus on the unattractive attributes of the object. In a way it seems like he did not want to lose attachment to the object. He said, 'It seems to work but I really find it uncomfortable to do'.

My response to him was, 'If that is very difficult for you, don't worry. That's not the only way to practise overcoming attachment. You do not have to focus on the attractive object you have difficulty with. You can focus on other objects of attachment, even on the unattractiveness of one's own body. Try to overcome attachment towards one's own body'.

Again to stress the main points, the overall purpose of meditation is to ensure that the technique we adopt fulfils the purpose of bringing about a genuinely happy mind. As I have regularly stressed, the most valuable asset we have within ourselves is a happy and joyous mind; meditation practice is a means to further develop that happy state of mind and protect whatever sense of joy we already have. One of the best qualities to have is a compassionate attitude. Meditation is again a technique to further develop compassion and protect it.

The actual meditation technique we again refer to is that of developing a natural single-pointed focus. The technique involves focusing on a chosen object and not

allowing our mind to be influenced by other negativities and distractions, particularly negativities. Then the sense of joy and calmness within the mind would remain very stable. In the process of focusing on a chosen object, we acquire a genuine sense of calm and happiness. Through familiarity and practice, this will have a further impact on our everyday lives in that we will be able to protect that sense of joy and happiness by not allowing our mind to be influenced by negativities.

We will now adopt the meditation technique where the object we focus on is our own breath. Having adopted the appropriate physical posture and an appropriate state of mind, we make the commitment that, for the next few minutes, we will not allow our mind be distracted by other thoughts and memories, whether they be good or bad; temporarily we completely keep every distraction at bay. We try to intentionally prevent our mind from following thoughts or memories and constantly employ mindfulness and alertness to keep the mind on the object, which is the breath. For the next few minutes, we will put our entire energy into focusing on the natural inflow and outflow of our breath. Adopting this technique will definitely bring about, as mentioned earlier, a genuine sense of calmness and ease within the mind. We will experience the immediate result of the technique here too. Thus we will now adopt the technique for the next few minutes. *(Pause for meditation)*

Since we don't have too much time left, we could have one or two questions.

Question: Can the good relationship and connection we have with someone in this life carry on to the next life?

Answer: It seems that a good connection one has in this life can carry on to the next life. I think that definitely is possible. For example, if in this life you have a very strong affinity, a very close feeling, from merely seeing someone you haven't met, the explanation could be that it comes from a previous life's influence. It could also be a negative effect: with certain people, we may immediately have a disagreement and a clash and don't get along very well. That relationship may carry on to the next life too.

As I have also related in previous talks, there was a time when I was teaching in Queensland. After my teaching session when I was having my meal, one individual came up to me and confided that she felt very, very lonely. As a practical response, I asked, 'Haven't you considered being in a relationship?' *(laughter)* To that she replied, 'I have actually married four times already and have separated four times'. *(more laughter)*

Question: Do enlightened beings come back and have normal relationships?

Answer: From conventional appearance, even after becoming enlightened, for the purpose of serving others, he or she may seemingly adopt a normal lifestyle of being married and so forth, but the only purpose is to benefit others. It is not because of their personal need any more.

As for enlightened beings coming in a normal guise to help other sentient beings, the reason is that ordinary beings are unable to recognise and relate to enlightened beings other than when they assume a normal guise or aspect. So therefore the comment on the seemingly

ordinary human being that which involves the limitation of the human but it is in that way they can benefit and help others. For example, recently an individual came to see me and asked for advice. She said, 'I intend to offer donations for prayers to be done at the nunnery at the Kopan Monastery, which has about three hundred nuns'. She was asking whether it was a good thing to do. I said, 'Most certainly. It would be great to make an offering to such a nunnery because amongst the three hundred nuns, there will definitely be a few bodhisattvas and enlightened beings. So making offerings in that way will equate to making offerings to buddhas and bodhisattvas too'.

The teachings strongly emphasise that one cannot judge by outer appearance. Therefore one needs to be diligent and not readily criticise someone just because of their appearance. That means even if someone appears to be quite short-tempered and irritable, that may not be their real nature. *(laughter)* We have to be mindful.

I have shared with someone that when you have any difficulties or problems with your partner and they think of doing or saying inappropriate things, it is good to think, 'For all I know, they might be a buddha or bodhisattva, so I cannot criticise them'. They thought about it, and commented, 'I wonder if buddhas and bodhisattvas would appear in such a negative way!' *(laughter)*

Question: With the prospect of the world becoming overpopulated, how do we best prepare for it? How can we insure that there are sufficient resources for everyone?

Answer: The best way to prepare ourselves would be to promote a genuine sense of harmony and good feeling between one another. When there is a genuine sense of harmony and goodwill between people, things will become naturally abundant due to the collective merit. There will be no need to worry. Generally, more individuals mean more collective merit. So due to the abundance of merit, an abundance of external conditions will naturally follow.

For example, during the recent drought, particularly in Victoria, there were quite a few concerns. People came up to me and said that the drought was so bad, they might have to move somewhere else like New Zealand. *(laughter)* At the time I said, 'Don't worry. Even though the situation seems bad now, if the merits of the general population does not decrease, then due to the positive merit, even if there are some difficulties at present, things will naturally go back to normal again. And sure enough, after a period of time, there was plenty of rain and things are again back to normal. If they had moved to New Zealand, they might be worrying about the cold there!

When there is a sense of goodwill for others, the natural tendency to share whatever one has will also be there. With goodwill comes natural sharing. As a nation I often think about the great generosity of the Australian Government towards disadvantaged people. Australia is definitely known as one of the best nations in the world in terms of helping the needy. Of course Canada also has a good reputation. Switzerland apparently has a good social security system and also France. But I am not sure

now if France still has a good reputation. New Zealand is also good in that way too.

When these governments help the disadvantaged, the needy and the poor and have good social support, it is a good way to bring about a genuine sense of well-being and calm in the country. The government's ability to help the poor is interconnected with people paying their taxes; it is the people's taxes being used – so that is the spirit of sharing. If you pay your taxes properly, and if the government utilises them in a good way to help the needy, that is the spirit of goodwill and sharing. We can rejoice about the taxes being utilised in a good way.

I often remind people here that we need to nourish and be proud of that sense of goodwill and make sure to protect it.

On the other hand, we have nations like China which seems to be a very rich country. It is a rich nation yet there is so much poverty, so many people are starving. This has been related by the Chinese themselves. People from mainland China have said their government is not looking after the people well. They are not sharing their resources or utilising them for the poor.

This is what they have related to me, but whether it is true or not, I am not too sure. Nevertheless they have related to me that people who are already well off to begin with, who have already got money, will be chosen to be a leader or manager of a company, not those who are disadvantaged or from a poor family – they will never have the opportunity. When going into hospital, a person will be assessed whether he or she has the money or not. If they have the money, they will be sent to a good hospital, but if they don't have any money or are from a poor background, they don't get any treatment.

So even if we begin with one nation, such as Australia, then promote and preserve the good conduct we already have, we need not worry about not being able to feed everyone, or not having enough resources for everyone because that good conduct will take care of itself. That is something I really encourage for everyone – all Australian citizens share responsibility for that.

So thinking of money and having a lot of money is not enough. To relate another incident – when I was at St. Kilda sea baths, I met an elderly person who might be my age or a little bit younger. He was from Hong Kong – I met him once and had a conversation with him. He told me he had been in Australia for twenty-one years. When I explained to him that I was staying in a Buddhist institute, he asked me, 'What do you teach?'. He said, 'Do you teach Kung Fu?'. (*laughter*) I said 'no'. He asked, 'Do you teach Tai Chi?'. I said, 'No, I teach meditation'. He approved of it. He said, 'Meditation is very good'. He was relating how he had a personal ailment – maybe a blockage in the nose, some illness. He said that illness was cured through the practice of meditation. He also related how Qi Gong has also helped him a lot.

After not seeing him for a while, when I was down at the St Kilda sea baths again a few weeks ago, we met again. He asked me this time, 'Have you been to China?'. I said, 'No, I haven't been to China'. He explained that he had gone there himself. He spent three months in Beijing and

he didn't like it there. He said there were too many people there and all they think about is having more money. He said he didn't like that attitude. If you listen attentively, there was a point he is making there as well.

Before we conclude for the evening, we can spend a few more minutes in meditation. This time our object of focus will be the recitation of Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra. As you hear the sound of the mantra, try to place your entire focus on the sound itself and, when the recitation subsides, try to focus on the residual sound, particularly on the sensation within yourself. Just keep your mind focused on that for a few moments. That becomes a complete meditation technique itself.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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