
The Condensed Lam Rim

༄༅། །བྱང་ཆུབ་ལམ་གྱི་རིམ་པ་བཞུགས་སོ། །

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

15 February 2012

As usual it might be good to spend some time in meditation. It is definitely worthwhile to understand and learn about meditation because it is useful in one's life. It might also be useful to understand the meaning of Tibetan word for "meditation", which is "gom". The literal meaning of "gom" is "familiarise" which in relation to ourselves having a better life means to "familiarise one's mind, particularly with a virtuous object". Meditation is therefore choosing a virtuous object and familiarising the mind with it again and again. It is the basis for us to engage in virtue.

The next point in understanding the technique of meditation is in regards to your sitting posture. The position to adopt in a formal meditation is the seven-point sitting posture of Buddha Vairochana. However, you can also adopt a posture that is most suitable and comfortable for you. The Buddha presented these two options for meditative posture so that those who are not able to sit in the formal seven-point posture can sit in a comfortable position instead. This shows how skilful and kind the Buddha's presentation is. The Buddha does not say that you can only meditate in a seven-point sitting posture and his instruction does not force you to sit in a posture that is uncomfortable. This is something we need to understand. If we are mindful of the way the Buddha taught meditative sitting posture we can see how kind and considerate his advice is.

I have presented the seven-point posture of Buddha Vairochana in the past, but will just go over the points again now.

The first point is in relation to how to place your legs. The instruction is to have the legs in either a full-lotus or a half-lotus sitting posture. Placing the legs in either full lotus or half lotus (particularly full lotus) is the posture that the Buddha himself adopted when he practised meditation prior to becoming enlightened. If you were to adopt that posture then there is a certain blessing that one can achieve. Primarily though, the significance of the lotus posture is that it is a locked position and so suitable for long meditations. Of course in our case we are not capable yet of doing long meditation sessions! [*Geshe-la laughs.*] But for those who wish to do long meditation sessions and are comfortable in that posture, the position enables them to have a stable and long meditation without disturbance. Furthermore it helps the body be free from stress and difficulty, and helps the mind to remove the obstacles of excitement and laxity.

The second point is to have a straight back, which means that you sit with a straight posture. The benefit of this is to straighten out the channels within your body. The

channels within your body relate to energy channels and when they are straightened out they enable the wind element to flow freely and well. The result is that the mind can more easily focus on the object of meditation. Another practical benefit of having a straight back in your meditation posture is that it will prevent drowsiness, which is also significant.

The third point is an instruction for the hands. The Buddha advises that your right palm is placed upon your left palm and your thumb tips touch to form a triangle. The tips of your thumbs are then placed just below your navel, barely touching it, and your palms are placed about the width of four fingers below where your thumbs touch. The navel centre is said to be the centre of heat within the body and the thumbs are said to be the end of the bodhicitta channel. Therefore, this hand placement is significant because the combination of the channel endings of the bodhicitta vein touch the centre of heat in the body, which helps the mind develop strong altruistic intention, such as great love and compassion. This means that this hand position is the most conducive way to form the bodhicitta energy channel so that an altruistic attitude is developed within oneself. There is definitely significance in all of these postures.

The fourth point is in relation to the head. The instruction advises that your head is slightly bent forward so that you are not looking upwards. If your head was held up too high it could cause an obstruction in certain channels in your body, such as excitement to arise in your meditation, which is an obstacle.

The fifth point is in relation to the eyes. The instruction is that your eyes should be balanced so that they are not completely open or completely shut. The measure of this balance is that if you were to look at your nose, you would just be able to see the tip of it. This does not mean that we should be focusing on the tip of the nose, but that it is the amount of distance our eyesight should have. If you were to look down, you would barely see what is in front of you. For beginners it may seem suitable for your eyes to be closed so that there are not distractions, but although we may have good concentration initially, in long periods of meditation drowsiness can occur. It is said that this darkness is the onset of laxity. Therefore, having the eyes closed can be an obstacle because it can cause laxity to arise in the mind. Conversely having the eyes wide open can cause excitement to arise in the mind. This is why it is important to have the eyesight at a specific level so that your eyes are not completely open and not completely shut.

The sixth point is in relation to your shoulders and arms. The advice is to have your shoulders level so that you are not crouching or tense, but in a relaxed and natural state. Your arms do not touch your body, but are slightly away from it. The measure of this is said to be like an eagle holding its wings down and is an instruction to again prevent drowsiness from occurring by helping your body be a little more fresh.

The seventh point is in relation to your mouth, jaw, lips and tongue. The instruction is to leave these in their natural state by keeping the area balanced. If your mouth is too open it can get dry, which is a distraction to your

meditation. Whereas if your mouth is completely closed, or your teeth are clenched, it prevents air flow, which is also an obstruction to your meditation. The instruction for the tongue is to have it on your palate so that it touches the upper gums on the roof of your mouth. The practical significance of having the tip of your tongue touching the gums behind the upper row of teeth is so your mouth is moisturised from saliva and prevented from becoming dry. This placement also prevents excess saliva from forming. If your mouth is open and the tongue is stretched out then saliva could form easily and we might start drooling when we're meditating! [*Everyone laughs.*]

Placing the tongue in the advised position brings the two-fold benefit of preventing too much saliva from forming and the mouth drying out. Therefore, the tongue placement prevents thirst from arising during meditation. This is significant for an earnest meditator, who wants to do prolonged meditations without getting thirsty and interrupting the practice to drink, which in itself would become an obstacle.

These meticulous instructions about how to place your physical body during meditation are all significant, particularly for someone who wishes to engage in prolonged meditation. There are definitely benefits in adopting the seven-point sitting posture of Buddha Vairochana.

Buddha Vairochana is one of the five Buddha families. He is said to have the perfection of concentration in particular, so the posture of Buddha Vairochana is said to be very conducive for developing concentration. Adopting his posture is also significant because it leaves a very positive imprint to purify the negativities that we have created through our body. Ultimately this purification and meditation will enable us to achieve the enlightened state of Buddha Vairochana.

Having gone through the instructions of the meditative posture, I can now explain what we are attempting to do when we meditate. As explained previously, meditation is defined as familiarising the mind with a virtuous object. This is what we're attempting to do when we meditate. Ultimately the main purpose of meditation is to develop sound concentration by focusing on a virtuous object. As I've explained many times, it is necessary to understand how Buddhist teachings define concentration.

Concentration, as defined from the Buddhist teachings, is a state of mind that is clear and bright, and has a single-pointed focus on an object. It is achieved when the mind has the intensity or strength of clarity and brightness, while focusing single-pointedly on the meditation object.

Having defined what concentration is – a goal of meditation and the state of mind we want to achieve – we need to understand what the obstacles are for achieving it. Specifically what are the main opposing factors for having a concentrated mind? The main obstacle to having a single-pointed mind is excitement. Even when we are not meditating, but keeping our mind focused, the excited mind becomes distracted from the object that is being focused on. Excitement is said to be an element of attachment, but the main point here is that excitement itself is a distraction and the main obstacle or opposing

factor for the mind to be single-pointed. The main obstacle to having an intensely clear and bright state of mind is laxity. That is to say, even when we are able to keep our mind focused on an object for a while, which is hard in itself, the object may not appear to us in a clear and bright form, or it may lack intensity; laxity is what prevents our mind being in a clear and bright state while focusing on the object. So the main obstacles to developing concentration are excitement and laxity.

Now that the main obstacles to the development of concentration have been identified, what needs to be understood next is what the methods are for developing concentration. The two methods for developing concentration are the mental states called mindfulness and introspection.

Mindfulness is a particular state of mind that has the function of not forgetting the virtuous object. This means the virtuous object that the meditator has chosen to focus on is not forgotten; this is done with a constant memory or recollection of the object. For mindfulness to work the meditator needs to be familiar with the object chosen for meditation; the meditator cannot recall an object that isn't familiar to him or her.

Introspection is a state of mind that watches over the meditator's focus on the object. This means that the mind is vigilant in checking whether it is focused or whether it has become distracted. When meditators are vigilant and watchful, they can detect when their minds become distracted and move away from the object meditated on. Introspection enables the meditator to detect distractions and bring the mind back to focus on the object. Applying the introspective state of mind when you meditate helps to strengthen your memory. Sometimes we complain that we have a bad memory, or our memory fails us, and this is because we have not been very watchful. If we, however, conscientiously employ introspection, it will help us to retain our memory. This is how the methods of mindfulness and introspection work.

We need to really think about how the Buddha presented his teachings because it is good for us to think about how significant and skilful these presentations are. In this teaching the obstacles are identified first. When the obstacles are identified, we may wonder, "Well, if there are obstacles to concentration, how do I overcome them?" So the next step in the teachings is to present the antidotes. To think about the teachings in this way helps us to see how systematically the teachings are laid for us and to appreciate how easy they are to adopt.

In relation to choosing the object to meditate on there is a description in the teachings that for someone who is interested in developing concentration, specifically calm abiding, which is sort of the excelled state of concentration, any object can be chosen. The teachings go so far as to say that any existing object may be chosen to develop calm abiding. However, I feel this advice is for people who have already achieved the calm abiding state; people who have achieved this advanced state of concentration will be able to focus on anything and maintain their concentration and focus for as long as they wish. However for beginners, it is best to have a specific appropriate object to focus on.

There are specific objects that beginners need to focus on to develop their concentration. To combat different kinds of negative emotions within yourself the teachings explain which objects need to be focused on. For someone who has a problem with strong attachment, then the object to focus on would be the unattractive features of the object they're attached to. If beginners focus on the attractive attributes of an object their attachment might increase so they need to focus on the unattractive attributes of the object, which will naturally reduce their attachment. To overcome strong pride in your mind the object to focus on would be the various categories of existence. In the Buddha's teachings all existence is explained in various categories. If you focus on these you will come to realise that there're many categories that you are not yet familiar with or that you don't even know about. This focus helps to overcome pride in your mind. For someone who has strong anger the object to focus on is compassion. Focusing on compassion overcomes anger within your mind. For someone who has strong ignorance the object to focus on is interdependent origination, or emptiness. Focusing on the interdependent origination of things and the general lack of intrinsic existence helps to reduce ignorance in your mind. Now for those who are suffering from disturbing and discursive thoughts, the best object to focus on is the breath. Focusing on the breath helps to overcome the overly discursive state of mind.

In presenting these different meditation techniques to overcome various disturbing negative states of mind or emotions, we can see that the teachings are descriptions of ways to overcome problems.

Normally problems are not welcome in our lives because we often equate them to having difficulties. In reality every problem has a solution, but when you don't know the solution you feel stuck in the problem and overwhelmed by it. If we know that any problem can be overcome then our mind becomes more courageous; it can embrace the problem and the situation does not become a big difficulty in your life. This is true in the mundane activities of life and particularly in respect to our minds.

Negative emotions, such as strong attachment, anger and so on, were mentioned earlier as problems of the mind. Why? Because when negative emotions arise within ourselves, when they manifest, they disturb us by disturbing our mind. This disturbance is a problem for us. If there is nothing we can do to counteract the negative emotions then we may feel doomed. However, the meditation techniques present a method of overcoming strong negative emotions. As explained earlier, when you are suffering from the problem of strong attachment in your mind, to overcome the problem you focus on the unattractive features of the object, which will naturally reduce your attachment to it. The mind is then released from the pang of attachment and you are able to function more normally. We need to understand that all of these meditation techniques are nothing more than simple methods to overcome mental or emotional problems. Therefore, the purpose of meditation is to overcome our mental problems.

However, we need to understand that this technique is something we need to apply ourselves. We created our own problems so we have to find our own solutions. When we know the techniques of meditation we have the means to gradually overcome the mental problems we face. Those who have sincerely practised the meditation techniques over time have definitely felt the benefit firsthand. I can attest to this fact by the notes and letters I receive. Recently over Christmas, when people traditionally send thank you notes, I received quite a few notes explaining specifically how meditation has helped people's lives. Some have mentioned that they come in the morning to the healing group that we have every Wednesday; and some have mentioned that they come to the Wednesday evening class. Over time they have found meditation to be an immense benefit in their lives and that their lives have been transformed. There are some who have confided in me that they have been unhappy for eleven years and couldn't really find a solution during that time, but after having come into contact with the meditation techniques, they have overcome their misery and sorrow, and are feeling much lighter and much happier. These examples are from people who have put meditation into practice and have confided to me what their experiences were. So from this we can see that when one sincerely practices there is definitely a positive result.

Initially when I first started to teach meditation I had to convince others of the benefits, but nowadays it is the other way around! [*Geshe-la chuckles.*] I don't have to talk much about the benefits now because people tell me about the benefits of meditation!

Amongst the various objects of meditation that were identified earlier, the breath is an object we focus on in our regular practice. I can't assume that most of us here have a problem with a discursive mind. Nevertheless, focusing on the breath is one of the most effective objects to adopt in overcoming a mind that has a lot of disturbing, conceptual or superstitious thoughts. Discursive thoughts make the mind very busy so focusing on the breath becomes very useful and relevant. The breath is colourless and shapeless and when we focus on something that does not have any colour and shape it reduces excitement in the mind. If we focus on shaped and coloured objects they might cause excitement to arise in the mind, which would make it more distracted. Further, the breath is an internal object, rather than an external, visual and solid object. Thus it is an appropriate object to use to focus the mind inward rather than outward. That makes the breath relevant to focus and settle the mind. As I've mentioned before, the breath is an easy object to focus on because it is something intimate and uncomplicated.

Now that we are about to adopt this meditation technique, remind yourself of the sitting position discussed earlier. You can sit in the seven-point posture if that is manageable for you or if not, any comfortable posture, as indicated in the teachings. You need not feel that you must sit cross-legged. Whatever posture you are comfortable in is fine. Just remember that a comfortable posture is opposite to a tense posture. If you are tense or physically uncomfortable, then that in itself becomes an

obstruction to your meditation practice. It is important that we have a comfortable posture for meditation.

The particular state of mind we need to have is one where we intentionally withdraw from all forms of internal and external distractions, and bring our focus inward. Having brought our focus inward, we anchor it by placing it upon the breath. Using the natural inflow and outflow of our breath we keep our entire focus inward and, as mentioned previously, try to have a mind that is fresh, bright and clear so we are not sluggish. In this way, for the next few moments, we will maintain our focus on the breath. [*Pause for meditation.*]

That is sufficient for now. As we have just attempted, it would be good to meditate in one's everyday life. Regular meditation is meaningful and useful because it protects the mind from negativities. Regular meditation also protects the most valuable qualities of the mind, which are kindness and calmness. It would be a great loss if we were to lose our tranquillity, calmness, happiness and kindness. A person who loses these states of mind has a really great disadvantage. Therefore, the way to protect a happy and calm mind is to employ the two main tools or methods explained in meditation: mindfulness and introspection. If we were to familiarise ourselves with meditation practice and become attentive to the natural awareness of our mind, our mindfulness would increase. If we were also vigilant in making sure no opposing factors disturb the calmness, happiness, and particularly the kind states of our mind, we could more or less secure a good life for ourselves. This is how a regular meditation practice is meaningful.

Before we conclude for the evening, we can again spend a few minutes in meditation. This time the object of our meditation can be the sound of the mantra to be recited, which is Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra. As we hear the mantra being chanted we can try to keep our full attention and focus on the sound, and when the recitation stops, we can meditate for a few moments on the residue of that sound. In this way our meditation attempts become a practice for developing concentration.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

*Transcribed by Peter Boothby
Edit 1 by Tanya Simmons
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
Edited Version
© Tara Institute*