
The Condensed Lam Rim

༄༅། །བྱུང་ཚུབ་ལམ་གྱི་རིམ་པ་བཞུགས་སོ། །

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

18 April 2012

As usual we can spend some time in meditation because when we gather as meditators, naturally, we need to meditate! [*Everyone laughs.*] Seriously though, when we come together in this way, we need to allocate some time to practise meditation because the conditions of coming together like this are rare. We also need to have the right attitude and intention.

Meditating requires a disciplined mind for the duration of the practice to achieve its positive effect. Disciplining our mind and becoming familiar with doing so will enable our meditation practice to be effective because a positive effect will be achieved by focusing on whatever we are doing in the moment.

As I regularly share, meditation is a technique to develop a calm, relaxed and clear state of mind. If our minds are calm, relaxed and clear then we can develop kindness, which is the essential purpose of our meditation practice. The way to develop kindness is to think about and have concern for others. If we make our consideration for others our primary motivation then our minds can cultivate kindness more easily. To develop kindness in our everyday life we need to first train our mind to be relaxed and clear. A relaxed and clear state of mind will assist our effectiveness in whatever activity we engage in because when we act from this state of mind we are more focused.

One of the most important internal qualities to develop is the wish to benefit others. To have an attitude of assisting others in whatever way possible is vital because we live in a society where dealing with others is necessary. We need to associate with others at work, at home and, in fact, wherever we go because we depend on them. If we maintain a genuine attitude of kindness in our interactions with others it will be appreciated by them because we will be helping in whatever way we can and, at the very least, we will not be harmful or bothersome. Additionally our kind attitude will fulfil our own needs and goals because others will naturally assist us in return.

I often emphasise that our wellbeing depends on two essential aspects of oneself: the state of our mind and the condition of our physical body. In order to have a healthy mind we need to work on developing positive attitudes and overcoming negative attitudes because a positive outlook on life contributes to our mental wellbeing. In order to have a healthy body we need to ensure that we promote our physical health by eating nutritious food that contributes positively to our physical condition and by avoiding substances that harm it. Paying attention to what is detrimental to our health is crucial; drinking alcohol, smoking or taking drugs are behaviours that

evidently damage our mental and physical health. I usually share this advice with the younger generation because they may be more easily influenced by the outside environment, but I also share it with them because smoking or drinking can become a very difficult habit to break. Why start a habit that is a struggle to discontinue later on in life? It is far better to be careful and mindful when you are young so that these kinds of habits aren't formed. So again, our wellbeing depends on the health of our minds and bodies. Thus, we need to be mindful in order to secure our own physical and mental health.

Each of us has a responsibility to cultivate our own happiness and to avoid our own suffering. We cannot help others if we do not help ourselves first, so we must take the initiative to develop personal happiness and to avoid extreme levels of pain. I regularly share, based on my own experience, that the prime time to develop ourselves personally is from around the age of fourteen to thirty. The physical and mental conditions are ideal during that time because physically you are fitter and mentally you have matured. The mind is also fresh and receptive to learning. A natural curiosity combined with a relatively clear state of mind can contribute towards gaining some genuine knowledge and wisdom, which is of immense benefit. We can, of course, learn after the age of thirty but the period beforehand is best because that is when the mind is most open to new ideas.

This is why I often remind youngsters to seize the opportunity they have now and not to waste time. At fourteen or fifteen the mind is able to focus better and is less easily influenced by the inner turmoil of the earlier teenage years. The mind from age fourteen or fifteen seems to have developed to a state where initiative can be taken to achieve something personally significant and meaningful.

This fresh and clear state of mind can be used for studying and gaining worldly knowledge in order to get a good job, but also to cultivate positive qualities in the mind. The best way to personally grow is to use our time and energy in developing external and internal knowledge. I emphasise this point again and again in our sessions because I think it is important. I have the best intentions and no other motive when I share this advice other than to remind you to seize the opportunity that you have while you have it.

As mentioned earlier we all share the responsibility of cultivating what is personally beneficial and trying to avoid what is personally harmful. We need to take the initiative to determine what is conducive and what is detrimental to our personal development. We may be in the habit of blaming others when things do not go the way we want, but ultimately it is our decisions about our internal and external environments that determines the level of our happiness. If we make a choice about what to cultivate and what to avoid then we will not be easily influenced by how others treat us or what they say. Instead we will be able to make good decisions based on sound judgements about what helps and what hinders us. Again this is most significant during our formative years.

I am greatly concerned when I see older teenagers, who feel lost and depressed, (usually because they have been drinking alcohol or taking drugs—perhaps initially due to peer pressure), completely succumb to drugs and alcohol because of their negative feelings. I feel really sad when these situations occur because they can deal with their feelings of depression and hopelessness in better ways without resorting to drugs and alcohol. Of course I cannot do anything for those who are not directly related to me, but I am greatly concerned about what they are feeling and the great waste of their time and energy. I do notice, however, many teenagers' self-respect enables them to limit themselves or say no to alcohol and drugs even when they are at parties. I think it is wonderful that they do this because their behaviour shows that they clearly understand what is harmful to them, and they have the courage and integrity to say no even when there is pressure to say yes. This is the way to develop personally.

So we must take responsibility for our personal happiness. We can do this by investigating what is beneficial and what is harmful to us. We can also periodically check our state of mind to see if we have a harmful or beneficial attitude at that moment. The great masters have mentioned that analysing the mind at regular intervals is the best and most essential tool to use in our lives. As we become familiar with and develop a natural ability to periodically check our attitudes, we also become better at making good decisions. This is because we are able to quickly assess whatever is presented before us based on what is useful and what is not. Therefore, making good choices, or even deciding, which is difficult for most people to do, becomes easier when this wisdom is cultivated.

Meditation is the ultimate means for cultivating the wisdom of self-analysis. It is also the way to develop and strengthen an awareness of the present moment. As we all need to use awareness as a tool to assist us in our lives, we need to engage in a practice of meditation. We could say that we have no choice but to meditate if we want to develop good qualities. In fact, the two most indispensable tools for developing a successful meditation technique, and for a happy life, is said to be mindfulness and introspection. Mindfulness is a constant and specific remembrance of the positive activity of our three doors, which are our body, speech and mind. Introspection is a self-investigative state of mind that vigilantly checks whether our body, speech and mind are virtuous.

So let's now adopt a physical posture that is relaxed but upright for our meditation practice. The object that we will focus on in our meditation will be our breath. We will place our full attention on the natural inhalation and exhalation of our breath, which means that we need to intentionally remove our minds from all distractions. Since the mind follows every whimsical thought and goes in various directions we are often completely distracted by whatever objects and memories arise. This scattered state of mind is disturbed and, unsurprisingly, means that whatever we engage in isn't fruitful because the mind is not steadfast.

The contrast to this disturbed mind is a focused mind. When the mind is focused it becomes firmer and more stable. The great Indian master Shantideva mentioned that a scattered mind is unable to put any positive energy into an action because the mental energy is weakened. He compared the loss of positive energy of the mind to the loss of physical strength and energy we experience when the body is unwell. So what Shantideva is recommending is to transform a situation we need to develop a focused mind through training and discipline. For the next few minutes we will focus entirely on our breath. [*Pause for meditation.*]

That will be sufficient for now. You were all engaged in good meditation so I felt uncomfortable bringing you out of it! Are there any questions?

Question: What importance does humour have in your teachings?

Answer: A true sense of humour is synonymous with a true sense of joy, which is a natural result of a conscientious meditation practice. If we misunderstand how to meditate and do so with an agitated mind then we will find that outside stresses are brought into our meditation, which will not make us very joyful at the end of it. However, if we meditate properly we will unintentionally develop a sense of humour and a feeling of joy because they are the natural consequences of meditating.

So what is felt depends on the meditator: some meditators appear gloomy because they are not meditating properly, which means that their practice increases their despondency and prevents them from appearing joyful to others; other meditators feel joyous and happy because they are meditating properly, which makes them appear jovial to others. Sometimes, if we are not joyful ourselves, our jokes can annoy others instead of making them laugh – jokes going wrong and people getting upset happens often. So for jokes to be truly funny, we need to be joyful ourselves. A true sense of humour comes about naturally as a positive effect from meditation so we need to cultivate a happy mind rather than finding ways to be funny.

I often mention that there are many ways we can help someone who is experiencing a difficult or tense situation. Sometimes spending time talking things over can diffuse whatever problems the person is having. Other times having a good laugh and sharing a joke reduces their dejected feelings. We do not need to restrict ourselves to one particular way of assisting others because, depending on the situation and circumstances, sometimes talking will help and sometimes laughing will. So to answer your question, genuine humour is important because it spreads joy to others. Humour comes from a joyous state of mind, but it does not need to be developed separately to a meditation practice because it is naturally produced through meditation. Of course a person who is genuinely joyous has no maliciousness in their mind so will never do a negative deed. So irrespective of whether you believe in future lives or have big goals, if you always have an unwavering joyous mind, it's fine – you can do without meditation! [*Everyone laughs.*].

Many people consider me to be a happy person and I have nothing much to boast about, but I can say that I have a happy mind. However, I do need to be wary of the source of my joy and periodically check what is contributing to my happiness. If my mind is distracted by sensual pleasures because I am attracted to my external conditions then my joy is not genuine. But my investigations into the source of my happy mind, during past experiences of hardship as well as now, find that I am not distracted by sensual pleasures and that I have been able to maintain a level of joy irrespective of my external conditions. The point I am making is that a joyous mind which results from sensual pleasures is fleeting and temporary, but the joy I am referring to is more stable and firm. Nevertheless, when I feel a sense of great elation, I say to myself, "Geshe Doga, this may not be a good sign, be careful." [*Laughter.*] I need to be wary because feeling elated might give rise to a sense of pride about that feeling. So I constantly check my happy state of mind and whether its source comes from sensual pleasure or is a result of my own pride. Being cautious and mindful is necessary.

Question: Is it better to put an animal to sleep when it is in a happy state of mind rather than let it suffer?

Answer: This kind of decision is difficult to make. I once heard someone give a very simple response to this question that people who may not even know about the Dharma could accept. Basically the response is that it is never appropriate to put humans down no matter what conditions they have or how sick they are so why is it OK to put animals down? This reply emphasises the value of life.

My usual response, however, which is based on a practical view, is that when you have associated with an animal that has been your companion, and that you have cared for and looked after, it is hard to imagine that you will be able to end that companion's life suddenly. I find it hard to imagine the state of mind that intends to end the life of a very close friend and I find it hard to imagine how to cope with having that state of mind.

From a Buddhist point of view the suffering the animal is experiencing is an exhaustion of its negative karma. All suffering and experiences of hardship come from causes and conditions, which are explained in Buddhist teachings as the result of previous karma. Experiencing negative karma is not such a bad thing because it is being used up – if it wasn't, the negative karma could be experienced in a more intense way in the future. We can't possibly know what future lives our friend will have and we cannot know what future conditions will result from ending his or her suffering immediately.

So I advise to continually be kind and nurture the animal—say mantras if you are inclined—and take measures to lessen its pain by administering medicine. There are many stories of people who have followed this advice that I can relate to you. People who have cared for their animals until they die a natural death have developed stronger bonds that have enabled those animals to be calmer and more peaceful until their natural deaths. The animals seem to bear their suffering when their care is

continual. I regularly share this as being the most effective way of helping a suffering animal.

I also think that the sensation of pain lessens when the body reaches a significant older age. The experience of pain seems to be much less than what it would be for younger able-bodies, where sensations are acute. In old age the body's energy quiets and appears to be less sensitive to pain. Some medical practitioners have mentioned to me that older people seem to experience less pain when they die than when younger people pass away. They have also observed that the remaining body of a young person stays fresher, and does not wither away or become stiff as quickly as the bodies of older people.

This question reminds me of a time when I taught a course at Chenrezig Institute in Queensland to about forty-five people. One of the attendees was a sixty-two-year-old man, who mentioned that before he came to the course he'd dreamt of a Buddhist monk so when he saw me he became excited because he said the Buddhist monk in his dream was similar to me!

Later he told me about two significant things he had done in life, which defined virtuous and non-virtuous actions to him. The non-virtuous action he related was shooting to put down his friend's dog, which had a broken leg. Whereas the virtuous deed that he had performed all his life was paying his taxes! [*Laughter.*] Indeed, his thinking was good because paying taxes is a great service that indirectly helps people who are in need. The taxes that people pay are distributed to those who are not able to work because of their circumstances, those who are impoverished because they are sick or have been affected by a natural disaster, and those who require aid. Paying taxes can be considered as similar to donating money to those in need so the action is virtuous when we think of it in this way.

I will conclude for the evening, but before we end the session let us again spend a few more minutes in meditation. This time the object of our focus will be the sound of Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra. As we hear the sound of the mantra we can give our full attention to it and when the recitation subsides, we can maintain our focus with a joyful and happy mind.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

*Transcribed by Ai Chin Khor
Edit 1 by Tanya Simmons
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
Edited Version
© Tara Institute*