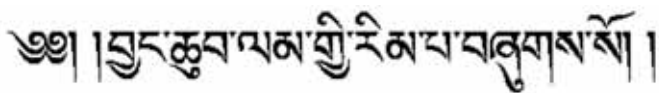

The Condensed Lam Rim



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As usual we will spend some time in meditation. To do this we adopt a relaxed and comfortable physical posture as well as a relaxed and comfortable state of mind. A combination of physical and mental relaxation and comfort ensures our meditation practice has a meaningful result. In fact, physical and mental relaxation and comfort ensures a meaningful result in whatever virtuous activity we pursue. Indeed, the combination is also a main contributor to our wellbeing. We may be able to acknowledge this as being true, but relaxing our body and state of mind is not easy. This is particularly so when our minds are very busy because when our minds are in this state we tend to be physically busy too. Meditating reverses this situation so we need to intentionally adopt a relaxed and comfortable physical and mental state to ensure that we benefit from our meditation practice tonight.

The Tibetan word *gom* is translated into English as "meditation", but the literal meaning is to *familiarise the mind again and again*. In the context of meditation, this means to familiarise the mind to be in a positive state, which is done through focusing on a virtuous object. Meditation is therefore the act of *familiarising the mind to be in a positive state through concentrating on a virtuous object*. The more we acquaint our minds with virtuous objects, the more likely it is that our minds will be in a virtuous state. A virtuous state of mind leads to a general way of thinking that is more positive, and this attitude naturally promotes good behaviour.

We all appreciate good behaviour and are familiar with it as a concept from early childhood. For example, people often describe a well-behaved child as "good". In a worldly context children are taught to be good so that they grow up to be well-behaved people – good behaviour is appreciated in society, but bad behaviour is not. In a spiritual context what we need to understand is that good behaviour likewise depends on what influences we have been exposed to. This means that our behaviour is usually determined by the state of our minds. If we have a positive attitude our behaviour naturally tends to be positive, but if we have a negative attitude our behaviour tends to be negative. Therefore, we need to understand the relationship between our mind and our behaviour, and see how our state of mind affects our actions.

We seem to have a natural inclination to find fault in others while completely ignoring our own behaviour. However, the real fault is being judgemental about other people's conduct and failing to change our own. We need to look within ourselves and acknowledge what causes our own good or bad behaviour rather than looking externally to other people's behaviour. Honestly looking within ourselves is much more worthwhile because other people's actions do not really have much to do with us. Of course another person's misbehaviour may make us feel uncomfortable, but

ultimately other people's conduct does not really affect us. Our own behaviour, on the other hand, definitely affects us.

We are responsible for our own behaviour so if we need to correct anyone's behaviour it is our own. To do this we need to look within and sincerely analyse what we see. As mentioned earlier, our behaviour is related to our attitude, which means that the best way to check our behaviour is to check our thoughts through self-analysis. This self-analysis is an honest investigation into the state of our own mind and way of thinking. By asking ourselves if we have a positive attitude in the moment, we are using our wisdom to detect what our state of our mind is and what our thinking patterns are. Gradually our self-analysis will enable us to see clearly what kinds of mistakes there may be in our way of thinking and how to transform our negative thinking patterns into those that cultivate positive attitudes. What I am sharing with you is not obscure, mystical, beyond your ability, or even particularly spiritual, but something very practical, which can transform your life.

I have come to understand through my own experiences that the way to change my attitude is by looking within so that I can deal with my emotions and states of mind. If I notice that anger is arising in me, I know that I need to deal with it and transform it myself because I can't expect other people to overcome my anger for me. Likewise with other negative states of mind that may arise, my experience has been that no one but me can overcome these negative feelings. This is something that I have learnt.

The great master Shantideva mentioned that we cannot subdue or overcome anyone else's anger, but we can definitely overcome our own. Specifically, Shantideva taught that it is impossible to overcome all the external objects that may cause anger, but if we overcome our own anger it is equivalent to overcoming all external conditions that cause anger. This is how we need to understand our own situation and deal with our own emotions.

Many people in relationships often complain about their partner's anger. Sometimes they say to me, "Oh my partner is very short-tempered and is always on edge." When they complain like this, I often confront them by asking, "Well, what about you? Do you ever get angry?" They usually become quiet after I ask this! [*Geshe-la chuckles.*] When people repeatedly complain about other people's anger, they may be overlooking their need to investigate their own state of mind. To first look into our own mind to see if we are angry is far better than accusing others of always getting angry, particularly when we live with them. This is how we need to deal with these situations on a practical level.

So, to relate this back to the main point emphasised earlier, the Buddhist teachings present meditation as the most effective technique to acknowledge our need to overcome and transform our negative states of minds. Meditation was defined before as the practice of intentionally focusing on a virtuous object so that our minds become familiar with it and naturally inclined to be more virtuous. This is important because a virtuous attitude enables us to maintain a stable mind that is not influenced by negative emotions. This is because when our mind is virtuous there is no opportunity for negativities to arise.

Avoiding non-virtue and adopting virtue is not unique to Buddhist teachings. In fact the essence of every religion is to provide ways to cultivate virtue and overcome non-virtue. We can see that the central presentation in every religion is to demarcate virtue from non-virtue in order to achieve a

higher consciousness. We can also see that every religious tradition clearly advises their followers to adopt virtuous values and to avoid non-virtuous values; this is the basis to become a genuinely good person. Indeed this is the ultimate way to benefit ourselves because our state of mind is with us wherever we go. If we attempt to have a virtuous mind in whatever situation we find ourselves in, then our positive attitude will prevail. From a practical point of view, we can see how adopting a technique that further cultivates and encourages virtue within our minds is essential. Of course, if religious followers don't put their religion's techniques into practice, then irrespective of their religion's merits, the effect on the practitioner will be slight. However, every religious tradition has wondrous people, who sincerely practise the values of their tradition, and so are modest and ethical people. We can develop a genuine respect for every religious tradition because of these practitioners.

Returning to the Buddhist tradition, the way to transform and develop oneself is said to be through meditating. Meditation can also be understood as a technique that develops and cultivates positive inner qualities, and enables us to distinguish and overcome inner negativities. Therefore, it is a worthwhile technique to learn and adopt in one's life.

I regularly share that adopting a meditation practice and applying the positive effects we experience from it to our daily life, develops and promotes our natural and innate wisdom. This unique inner wisdom is able to distinguish which states of mind are positive and need to be cultivated, and which states of mind are destructive and need to be avoided. When our innate wisdom can clearly distinguish and recognise these different states of mind, then we are naturally able to further establish the positive and overcome the negative states of mind.

Let us now readjust our physical posture and our mindset so that we are comfortable and relaxed in order to apply the meditation technique. First we make a commitment to ourselves that for the next few minutes we will not allow our minds to be distracted. Instead we will withdraw our attention from all thoughts and objects that may come to our minds, and bring our minds to focus within by completely withdrawing from all distractions. We will harness our attention and use it to focus on a particular object, which for our purpose tonight will be the natural rhythm of our breath. For our meditation to be effective, we need to be completely dedicated in maintaining our focus on the breath. This is how we will develop concentration.

In other sessions I have mentioned that concentration is where one has a clear and stable image of the object of focus. In fact the two attributes of concentration are clarity and stability. In order to train our mind to develop concentration, we need to use the two tools I mentioned last week, which are mindfulness and introspection.

Mindfulness is to constantly remind yourself of the object you are focusing on. In the meditation we are about to do the object is our own breath. Introspection works as a tool to periodically and vigilantly check whether our mind is really focused and clear. When we concentrate on the breath our mind needs to be in a clear and bright state. If the mind is dull, it needs to be freshened up and if it is unfocused and starts to drift away it needs to be returned to the object of focus. So mindfulness and introspection will help us to keep our minds' attention on the object and to maintain our minds' focus. Thus for the next few minutes we will adopt this technique. [*Pause for meditation.*]

If you have a question you are welcome to raise your hand. Otherwise we will continue with the text.

Question: I have been thinking about the answer you gave a couple of weeks ago regarding animals that are suffering. At that time you mentioned their suffering related to the exhaustion of their bad karma, but ensuring their quality of life through medication until the time of their natural death could be appropriate. I was wondering what your answer would be in relation to humans. Is it appropriate for humans to have pain killers when they are suffering?

Answer: Ultimately your question is dependent on personal choice. Amongst the Tibetan community there are definitely individuals who refuse to take medication because they would prefer to accept what is happening and not take mind-altering drugs. I've found that in the West there are people who also make a choice not to take certain medications. So it really comes down to a personal choice. If someone chooses not to take medication, I don't think that it can be forced upon them, and I don't think it would be ethical to force it upon them either. There is no fixed rule in Buddhist texts that says, "Thou shalt take medication" or, "Thou shalt not take medication." [*Everyone laughs.*]

Some Buddhist practitioners totally embrace the discomfort that occurs in illness and willingly take the suffering upon themselves as the ripening of karma. Since their karma is ripening, they feel enthusiastic and encouraged to experience more suffering because, by experiencing the suffering, the negative karmic imprints are being exhausted. When the negative karmic imprints are exhausted, what will be left is the good karmic imprints to be experienced in the future. Having this intention, and willingly accepting and embracing suffering by refusing to take medication, is courageous.

There is a particular teaching in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition called *tong len*, which means "giving and taking". Practitioners in this practice take upon themselves the suffering of others and give their own virtue and happiness to other beings. So when a practitioner is experiencing a kind of suffering, he and she can acknowledge that it is his or her negative karma ripening, while utilising that suffering and discomfort to take upon other people's suffering as well. These practitioners experience the consequences of their own negative karma and allow others' negative karma and suffering to ripen upon themselves too. *Tong len* is a powerful practice that makes use of personal suffering to develop compassion for others and to give them whatever personal virtues and happiness the practitioner possesses. This is a practice for earnest practitioners, who are able to train their mind in this way. However, other traditions, such as those that believe in God, may develop encouragement by believing that the suffering they are experiencing is God's will or that God is giving them a test. They may willingly experience their suffering as a demonstration of their faith. In that way the situation develops a stronger faith in God and is a way for earnest practitioners to develop their spiritual practice because they know that when they pass the test, God will grant them a boon. So in this way religious-minded people can take upon hardship.

Now these practices are for practitioners who have reached a point in training their mind where the practice does not disturb them, but actually enhances their state of mind. So even though they may have physical discomfort, mentally they are experiencing joy and happiness.

Having said this some individuals may be experiencing extreme pain that may cause negativity to arise in their minds so administering medication to ease the pain in those cases is advisable and worthwhile. If negativity arises in the mind, there is no opportunity to create virtue so it is far better to ease the pain through medication than allow mental unrest to occur. When the pain has eased and they have a clear state of mind, they might be able to use the situation as a way to create more virtue. Easing the pain and alleviating the anxiety in the patient's mind will also help the carers to assist and look after the patient better! [*Geshe-la chuckles.*]

Of course, having given these examples we generally would have to say that there is definitely a place for medicine. The Buddhist tradition has scriptures of Buddha's own words about how to administer medication. Buddha knew that individuals could not deal with extreme situations of pain and suffering so out of great compassion he presented teachings on medicine and the way for it to be administered. So we need to acknowledge the general view that medication definitely has an important role to play in society. On a practical note there is no need to unnecessarily endure great hardship and pain. If our suffering cannot serve a useful purpose, then it would be pointless to not ease our pain.

It is also important to understand yourself and how medicine affects you so that you can verbalise your experience to your carers. Doctors appreciate that kind of feedback. If the patient just says, "Oh, I'm in pain," and doesn't explain how and what medicine works for them, then it is natural for doctors to administer the normal prescription and dosage based on what they think the illness is. However, if patients are specific about their discomfort and explain what medicines they've had in the past that have worked well and so on, then the carers can treat the patients in the most effective manner for them.

When I first came to Australia I had to visit the dentist a lot. Pauline, the young dentist I saw, initially said when she checked my gums and teeth, "Your teeth are in such a state they might actually fall out!" [*Geshe-la laughs.*] However, Pauline really took care of my teeth and gums by working on them herself, ordering others to help her clean and maintain their health, and administering medication so that they gradually became healthier.

I regularly advise others, when they are first diagnosed by carers, not to take immediate action because sometimes mistakes can be made when decisions are made quickly. My experience has been to sort a problem out over time. For example, several years after I had arrived in Australia and when my teeth and gums were in better health, I visited Pauline for a check-up. However, she had relocated to Sydney so I saw her replacement instead. When he checked my mouth he said, "Your gums are not so good and I think you need to have surgery as soon as possible." My response to him was, "I don't think I need to have surgery and I'm not going to have surgery right away on my gums." Shortly after, I visited another dentist who said, "Your gums are quite good. They just need a bit more care and then you don't have to worry about them for another ten years." And so when a decision wasn't made quickly and further measures were taken, my gum health was restored.

After ten years my dentist thought it would be best for me to see a specialist so I saw an expert, who was from Hong Kong. The specialist advised me to take out my upper and lower wisdom teeth on one side. However, my response

was, "I don't have any pain there. Why should those teeth be removed?" When I went back to my dentist, he said, "That's fine. I think you've made the right decision. I don't think you have to have those taken out." Apparently my gums have now healed and are in very good shape. So my story shows that drastic measures do not always need to be taken and sometimes care over time can be a beneficial option.

Another time I had to go to a Melbourne clinic for my back pain and, because it was severe, I had to stay there. The medical team administered pain killers, but after some ill-effects I didn't take them. The next day the head surgeon came to see me – he apparently was one of the best surgeons in all of Victoria – and when he saw that I hadn't taken the pain killers he asked me why. I told him that after I took them I developed constipation and couldn't go to the toilet. He immediately responded, "That is very true. These can cause constipation." He then gave me a different kind of pain killer to ease my discomfort.

This shows that doctors can learn from their patients' experiences as well. They can gain knowledge of what effects certain medications have and how patients might react differently to them. So if patients tell their doctors what their experiences are, the information can be beneficial for the doctors' understanding and for the patient because medicine can then be administered in more effective ways.

The main reason that I've shared these stories with you is so you do not completely let others make decisions about your own body. Rather, use your own experience and relate to your carers how you feel. This, combined with the opinions of doctors, can bring good results.

I commented once to a doctor that there is a difference between how ancient doctors administered medicines and how contemporary doctors do. I said, "These days the methods and ways to investigate an illness are by using mechanical objects, like microscopes and x-rays. But in ancient times the doctors would diagnose the disease by taking the pulse and detecting illness through the patient's symptoms." My concern was that the advancement in technology is making the ancient and natural ways of diagnosing diseases slowly fade away. The doctor acknowledged that was very true.

Before we conclude for the evening, let us remind ourselves how meditation benefits us in our daily life. We need to pay attention to this important fact.

For this last meditation we need to sit in a relaxed posture, and bring our full attention to the sound of the mantra to be recited, which is Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra. When the mantra recitation stops, we can just meditate on the residue of its sound. In that way, the practice will be a contemplative meditation.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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