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our practices are designed to discover nature of mind, working with shamatha w/o an object, karma and the union of wisdom and compassion

LMC [00:00:48] This is a period of time that we set aside for open discussion or conversation about our experiences and our questions, our proposals, hypotheses, whatever you have... about the practice. But primarily the meditation practices and your experiences. Whatever clarification you feel would be helpful, we try to either provide that or point you in the right direction. And it's also a nice, usually a nice mix of experiences in the conversation. So there's no wrong questions, or for that matter, almost the case, no wrong answers either. So as you wish, whatever you would like to raise as a topic.

Student 1 [00:02:26] I'd like to hear more about the instructions, or maybe just hear them again, that you gave tonight as an alternative practice. The piece that I heard was to, the piece that I *heard*... [laughter] was to relax well. Relax the mind deeply and allow what comes up in the mind to also be... pay attention to what comes up in the mind... and make that the focus.

LMC [00:03:28] I think the explanation this evening was not as clear as this morning. So that's *my* experience. Maybe it's more in the genre of... *I* wasn't so clear... in my own mind about it. But fundamentally, this is not a different practice from calm abiding where we place our awareness upon *something*... in order to anchor the awareness so that it doesn't just drift everywhere. And here, what we're concerned with is... our understanding that all experiences arise in the mind. Without any exceptions. Like dream up an exception and make that a topic of this evening's conversation. I don't think there's any such thing as an experience which does not occur in the mind. Even if you cut your finger, the experience occurs in the mind.

[00:04:43] So putting aside the dichotomy between science and Buddhism, or science would agree as long as we use the word *brain*, we can say here that the brain is one of the experiences of the mind. You know, you have a brain. So that's part of your experience. And it's okay, as a beginning point. You don't need to wrestle with that dichotomy. You have an experience and the idea is... the experience arises. You put your awareness on it. Simple.

[00:05:24] It could be the experience that you're having is continuously changing. Like watching clouds go by overhead, continuously changing. And yet it's not so hard, on a warm summer day and lie on your back in the grass and watch the clouds go by. And you don't need to ask the question of the dichotomy between the mind and the brain. Or any other dichotomies. It's more than a metaphor. It's a nice analogy, in a way, because what would be best is if we could relate to the *content* of our experience, the emotional side of it, physical experience, having a body and all, if we could relate to it as no more important than the clouds going over. That's very difficult. Because we identify with the things that go by. That's me! That's my experience. And so on. And that's okay too. Then that 'that's *my* experience' is the object to rest the awareness on. That is the only thing we need to do with a dichotomy. Is just note... that's the experience.

[00:06:59] And then we might talk to ourselves about that, unintentionally. Which is mostly what our speech is, unintentional. Even now, I would say most of what I say is *unintentional*. That is, I'm not reading a script. So mostly it's driven by the interdependence of things that occurred during the day and now and so on. ... Aside from the fact that it's very difficult to speak like this *and* put the awareness *on* that experience, I can say that it's not entirely impossible. It's just

more difficult. And it's very difficult to put aside the issue of... I'm speaking. These people are listening. 'I' am speaking. [laughs] These people listening... it's very difficult to put that aside, but not impossible... and just rest the awareness on the experience going by. It goes by. Something else takes its place.

[00:08:12] So stepping back a little bit, in a kind of global way, we can say that all of our meditation practice is about... designed for... discovering, in a stable way, the very nature of mind itself. ... So if you just think about all the things that you could explore in this world, that you would like to learn something *about*, whether it's rocks in the desert or fish swimming in the sea or diseases coming and going, you're a physician or research scientist... we do this stuff. And how do we do it? We *look* at it. We observe it. We watch it. We look at it with our hands. We feel it. We look at it with our eyes. We look at it with our own experience, recalling other things that are similar.

[00:09:17] We're actually pretty good at doing those things as a world community of beings. But now what we want to do is... we actually want to deal with it from the perspective of... how does all that work? What does that have to do with the nature of mind? And here again, actually, the same *looking*... is all that's required. When we talk to ourselves, we look at ourselves talking to ourselves. Mostly we judge ourselves. Nah, I supposed to be looking, not talking to myself. Then we need to develop this habit. Mostly, good Buddhist don't talk about developing habits as a positive thing, but we're not all good Buddhists. And so you want to look at the *errors* as much as everything else.

[00:10:15] There's no part of it, *really*, which is an error. You get up in the middle of your meditation session and go and have a tea break. We would call that an 'interruption to the meditation.' But *if* you watch yourself do that, maintaining that level of awareness throughout the whole thing, the meditation was not broken. Since, as we know, the meditation is *not* the act of sitting on a cushion, nor coming to the center to do the meditation, nor anything else. But what is important is... developing a *high* skill in being able to just keep the mind on all the experiences that are unfolding continually. The good ones, the bad ones, the pleasant, the unpleasant, everything.

[00:11:08] And then there's the issue of commentaries. Which we love to run on *all* aspects of our experience. And judgments, of course, on ourselves and those who caused the experience. who we either like or don't like. It's endless! And so that just becomes another place to put the awareness... without a single judgment required. We are by and large a culture of judgment. We engage in it just continuously. In this case, we want to neither encourage nor discourage, but we definitely do want to keep our awareness on it just to see it. Not so we can fix it. But so that we can kind of see its nature. Kind of really dig into it. ... Is that helpful? More than enough? It's okay to have a judgment. [laughter]

Student 2 [00:12:25] I was here this morning also. Yeah, practicing this... I think my question is, in other methods of zhinay, in my experience of that, there's an object to return to. So, I notice I'm distracted. And in that moment... I bring my awareness back to my breath or stone in front of me. And then I rest. It has those steps... in the way that I do it. And in this, that we were doing today, there's the moment of recognition... that I've been distracted. And maybe it's a commentary like you've been saying. But I recognize that. But there's nothing to come back to. It's actually just resting right there in the moment of recognition. That's how it was working right now with me. That's how it seemed to be. Is that... not that it happened all the time, but... is that correct, or... ?

LMC [00:13:57] Well, it's not *un-correct*.

Student 2 [00:14:01] Okay. That's a start.

LMC [00:14:14] You know, you can get a number of big books that contain large sections on the practice of calm abiding, zhinay, shamatha... which we normally do on Sundays. And we don't do *all* of those. Because if we did do all of those, nobody would be here. [laughs] You would draw a reasonable conclusion at some point. This is not helpful. And I think it's safe to say, as it is generally taught, actually, you don't really need more than one of those practices. But that's a kind of theoretical approach. It is helpful, for most people, to work from different angles to get an ever increasing, deeper sense of what's happening. And how it's done. And how we're doing all those things. ...

[00:15:32] But it's very different, actually, to step into... and we're talking about a kind of shamatha... it's very helpful to intentionally sit down and make an effort to just see our experience, whatever it is. Like my leg hurts. And not to look at it like, my leg hurts! But look at the experience... that might lead one to say that, or not. And develop a skillful habit of being able to just watch the experiences unfold. And one of the things that I think is a salient point is that... when we say just watch the experience, it doesn't exclude *not* watching the experience. It doesn't exclude *judging* the experience, which is another experience. So we develop this sense of it's just... *I am a river of experience*. And it's very... at some point, it was very odd to call that 'I am... that thing', because then we see that's just the next experience. The experience of 'that's me'. I am that river. No, actually, I'm the experience of 'I am that river'. And now we're at a dead end very quickly. We're meant to be at a dead end. Then you turn around and walk out and do the next step of that.

[00:17:32] This has not generally been our approach with zhinay. And I don't know that it needs to replace that approach. But, from the perspective of valuing the diversity of practices... in the tradition... sometimes a little more is helpful. It shines a light on things that it's helpful to see more clearly... what we're doing, why we're doing it. I think you could say, from an ordinary worldly perspective, even without any understanding of the Dharma at all, the ability to just put your awareness *on* your experience and follow it without judgment, without elaboration, without anything, until the experience is one of judgment. In which case you just switch to that as the next experience. And so it loses its bite. It loses its importance. Like I believe that this person is evil. Okay. You don't need to fix that. But the practice is... do you have your eye on it or not?

[00:18:54] Because if you don't have your eye on it, it probably has its eye on you. [laughter] Or the other way we might say... it actually doesn't have its teeth in me. I have my teeth in *it*. That's why I can't get rid of it. ... I'd like to be free of it, to be free of it is to see it. The teeth holding is not to be free of it. ... So there's a certain kind of freedom and openness that comes, I think, from just settling on the experience, whatever it is. And discovering the enormous diversity of experience that just unfolds effortlessly all the time.

[00:19:40] And we *do*... run on all of those things. Hot and cold. Fast and slow. Everything. It all affects us. That's just the truth of interdependence unfolding continually. It has no inherent reality. Though we assign it that... more or less continuously. [laughs] When we have the experience... and the mind rests like that on one experience after another arising... it's kind of like water flowing into water, at some point. And it loses this... irrelevant distinction and we come to just experience the nature of it. That's a kind of clarity. ... Okay?

Student 3 [00:22:41] Bill started moving in the direction of the question that I was going to ask. Which is, how is this different, other than a more elaborate explanation, or instruction, how is this different than shamatha without an object? ... It seems as though that's what we're doing.

LMC [00:23:53] Shamatha without an object is different. And not just because I say so, although I'd like to be able to have that power. [laughs] It's different, because here we have... mostly, usually, an unending flow of objects. Right. We're not picking them. They're being delivered one after the other. And the trick, if you loosely state it like that, the trick is... to not identify the objects as they come.

Student 3 [00:24:37] To not fixate on anything.

LMC [00:24:39] Yeah, yeah. That's the trick to it. Well, one of many that one might use. But shamatha without an object really can be that you only put your awareness *on*... the function of the mind itself. So you can see the mind itself is the object. But we don't normally say that. But I think in some practices, actually, we get to the place where there's no object at all. The mind just rests in its own nature. So that doesn't mean, in my understanding, that the flow of experiences has stopped. Since we say that doesn't even happen at the time of death, it would be odd to assume that it happens at the time in any meditation practice. But definitely, when you're not *grabbing*... things all the time, the experience changes.

[00:25:42] And in one way it would be fair to say... so, maybe I'm not the right person to make this proposal, but... I think it's possible you could say that the approach that we're talking about *is* shamatha with no object. But there's more than one approach to shamatha with no object. So, again, in the big tomes, you are describing shamatha.

Student 3 [00:26:17] So relating then to another vehicle, so it seems as though it's like mindfulness of mind, in four foundations of mindfulness.

LMC [00:26:36] Yeah, I think so. Except the four foundations of mindfulness definitely have... there's a defined object in each stage of it.

Student 3 [00:26:49] When you're watching what arises just as mind. Because that's how I thought you were distinguishing this from shamatha without an object.

LMC [00:27:08] I can see both sides of that. I think that you could say similar or different things about both of those approaches. But... I also think that in the moment of the actual practice, and actually successfully doing that practice, that distinction becomes irrelevant. So... even that much feels like it's too much... to say the distinction becomes irrelevant. It doesn't mean the distinction is not important. Because again, it's due to the truth of interdependence. All of these things... mix together... and the outcome is maybe impossible to predict. But personally, that's what I find appealing about the practice of bringing one's attention, awareness... even that's a little bit funny, slightly fishy. *Who* brings the attention to the object? And if the object isn't there, as some substantive thing, then what is it that rests on that and what does it rest on? These are all kind of philosophical things which are intriguing. But what happens when you actually sit down and put your awareness on the flow of experiences may not match up with all of the cognitive distinctions and things that we so easily make. So I'm not quite sure what to say to your question.

Student 3 [00:29:06] So, can I elaborate or...

LMC [00:29:09] I bet you can [laughter]

Student 3 [00:29:24] So it seems that what you're trying to describe here is actually a technique that *does* take one beyond an object based shamatha. Because when one is doing shamatha with an object, that there is, of necessity, a dualistic fixation because there's a subject focusing on an object. Whereas what you're trying to point out, I think, with this instruction, is to let go of that subject object distinction and just be in the flow of experience.

LMC [00:30:07] Yeah. That's the ideal. Does everybody here understand the difference between shamatha with an object or not an object? ... We can sometimes get off in a direction where... not everyone is tracking.

Student 4 [00:30:44] Seems like this is not your usual approach either. If people have been coming here for a while, and when you're giving this type of instruction, it may not be as familiar to a lot of people.

LMC [00:30:55] Yeah, yeah. We're dealing with *real* people here. [laughter] And in order to know to really put that in the right context, I have to say, *you* are dealing with real people when you come here and listen to teachers. Who are not only doing their best to manifest what they're teaching and to be clear about those things, but we're also, in the exploration of the meditation, coming to places where... it feels, at times, like you know, we've been doing this a *long* time. And one thing is, is that means it's not fresh. And not fresh is the *antithesis* of what our experience in the Dharma is working with, like, *fresh!*

[00:31:59] We want to experience every last thought, feeling, everything as fresh. Because conceptually that *is* the philosophical underpinning... of all experience. Whatever you experience in this moment has never happened before and will never occur again. Well, that's hard to learn when you received very close to the same instruction every Sunday for five lifetimes. [laughter]

Bill [00:32:33] All of which occurred in *this* life time. [laughter]

LMC [00:32:43] Part of this is just kind of like waking up and thinking, you know, it's time to do something new. And, there's always a risk there. Because we received our teachings, I will say, with, I think no arrogance at all, from *great* teachers. Who understood these things in a way which we do not understand. And so we're trying to... honor that. And that's not always easy. It's not honoring it to just repeat the same thing over and over, as if it was a tape. Similar. And call that... learning, teaching and exploring, doing the Dharma. So, part of it is... when we make changes, we have an understanding that there's *risk*. It's one of those things where you come to a crossroads, and somebody said the sign will tell you which way to turn. And there's no sign. [laughs] But you also can't go back. So you're stuck. So you make a decision on what you're going to do. And then you ferret out the problems and, you know, masticate it for a while until it looks like it's digestible. I think we're a little bit in that process. You know, honestly.

[00:34:16] We all do it in our ways. And maybe one of the big challenges in the Dharma coming to the West in general, is that we will *not* leave it alone. No matter what anyone says. No matter how wise the instruction, 'don't change these things' is... the first time you sit down and meditate, whether you notice or not... you changed it. So there's a wisdom to saying don't change it. And also, there's a wisdom to changing it. And allowing it to happen, and maintaining

an awareness that I'm not yet sure that the change is actually the right change. We're just going to have to look at this for a decade or a year or something... to see what it is.

[00:35:06] So that's partly the point of having open conversations like this. People express their interest, their questions and things. And I can say to [him] what I said, because we're good friends and I appreciate, as I'm sure everybody does, the pointed questions, the analysis, all of these things, at all levels, just as valuing the diversity of people's experiences. I think the truth is, is that each one of us carries more diversity of experiences than we can possibly honor or even imagine. And it's kind of shocking at times to see the Niagara Falls of experiences on-flowing and we don't know what to do with it. So one thing is, what do you do at Niagara Falls? You stand there and your jaw drops open and you just gaze. [laughs] And that is not so different from the instruction.

Student 5 [00:36:19] Do you think that Shamatha with an object helps you to be more stable, to be able to do this other type?

LMC [00:36:25] Yes. Yeah, there's nothing wrong with using a fixed object, you know. Nothing wrong with that. But even you move to the breath and we find the breath is not fixed. It's coming and going all the time.

Zopa [00:40:00] Lama Michael, this morning, right at the end of what you were teaching, you said, when we are present in that way, present with the experience as it arises... that's where genuine compassion... and the bell rang and it was like cut.

LMC [00:40:30] Fortunately. [laughs]

Zopa [00:40:32] So you say a couple things about... well, it seems so key. Otherwise, it feels sort of nihilistic. Yeah, well, the water's going by. What's the meaning? Nothing. More water's going by. Nothing. So that can be a dead end.

LMC [00:40:58] There's no dead ends. You know that.

Zopa [00:41:00] Well, I know, but I'm just saying, it can get that flavor if a person is not experienced.

LMC [00:41:13] We I think I meant to reference there something that actually after I had said that... I had some mild regret.

Zopa [00:41:23] And you noticed it?

LMC [00:41:30] That's what I regretted. [laughter] Compassion... is a very tricky word. Because we all have an idea of what it is. And even within the context of our Buddhist lineages and levels of teaching and all... compassion takes on a different shape, in a way, depending upon where in there you're exploring it. And each one of us, no matter what our spiritual leaning is, we'll have some sense of compassion. We're all aware of an understanding of compassion, which is essentially, kind of, to feel sorry for suffering. You might say, like just generally, you see suffering and you feel bad for it. So you kind of *share* that suffering with others. And that understanding is accurate at one level. But at another level it changes. And at another level it's unrecognizable from what it seemed to be before.

[00:42:55] But one teaching that I recall that, we're not going to go into tonight in any detail, I'm positive of that... it's a teaching on... how karma unfolds. And it's a very kind of simple and linear approach to it. Which is in one sense not accurate, but helpful from another perspective, maybe. Karma is really just kind of the overt manifestation of interdependence. Things that are done, said, so on... carry some effect... into the near future or the distant future. And often, we might say, generally speaking, *more* often than not, when that karma ripens, we do not recognize where it came from. We have the experience! But we have no sense of where it came from. Or maybe in other cases we have no *accurate* sense. In other words, I think I you did that to me. It's not accurate. But... nonetheless, we carry some understanding of karma due to just the truth of interdependence.

[00:44:49] One description of ripening karma is that, for example... let's say, I met somebody a long time ago. And I didn't get to know them particularly, but I shook their hand and I, you know, we had a little conversation. And then we split up. They went their way, I went mine, and I didn't see them. And then a year later, approximately, that person, we run into each other again. And in that *moment*, there's a moment of recognition. In the moment that you meet again, there's a moment of recognition. It's *very* small. And sometimes that space, I don't know the Tibetan for it, but it's sometimes it's called '*contact*.' It's the moment of contact where the two pieces of karma ripening come together. And they ripen just instantaneously. If you had a bad experience before, maybe you don't feel so good about it. If it was pleasant, you would feel pleasant about it. But the point is, *in* that space of contact, in the *moment* of that space of contact, where you just meet the person and there's recognition... there is a moment... longer or shorter, depending upon who the person is, [laughs] of utter stillness. ... It may last a millisecond or it may last seconds or longer, but that would be like someone who really had kind of deep realization.

[00:46:53] In that moment of contact, there's a moment of complete stillness. The mind is completely still. And *in* that stillness, if you were to define meditation, what is meditation? ... you could say meditation is maintaining that stillness. Not disrupting it. But generally speaking, in the moment of contact, there's a [snaps fingers] second and we do something. We react... based upon old habits and old forms, right. The reaction takes the karma that was just ripened and propels it into the future. And we missed the chance for the stillness.

[00:47:48] The place of stillness... I'm trying to remember who the teacher was that explained this the first time I heard it, because it's a name that we would all recognize... but he said in the moment of that stillness, that is the moment of compassion. ... So, on inquiry in that... just to close this up... on inquiry, he didn't say that it was *just* compassion. It was also, by virtue of the *stillness* mixed with the interdependence, the compassion then had an opportunity to become wisdom. The union of wisdom and compassion.

[00:48:41] So I think that's part of the thing that's appealing about the approach that we just took this evening and this morning, is that it provides a space, a small space, a little interval, with every experience that we have. There's the opportunity presented once again to just rest awareness on it and just be present with the experience. And that's, when I was saying, that is the moment of *actual*, genuine compassion. So it doesn't quite match... our usual sense of compassion, which always has a subject and an object. But it also obviously has a feeling component.

Student 5 [00:49:39] For those of us that might not be making that connection between that moment and compassion, is there something you could say that would connect them a little more clearly? That that stillness... I generally have the more, you know, the understanding... is it

pointing to how we're most of the time confused? Is it having that moment of stillness and having that awareness of it, is that pointing to us, by default, that generally I'm not there? Or generally confused and so that might be the tie to compassion?

LMC [00:50:19] That's my experience.

Student 6 [00:50:22] You mentioned recognition. I think my intuition tells me that there's something about the recognizing, the act of recognition has something to do with the compassion, knowing. I don't really know how to explain it, though.

Zopa [00:50:38] Yeah, well, it sounds like one piece. It could be no self, no other... in that moment. And the other kind of compassion, there's a big self and a big other. So that could be one way to play with it.

LMC [00:50:57] There's a quick story that we could wrap this up with, because there's hopefully no end... to this discussion and this exploration. There's a story about a young monk, who was an attendant for an older lama who was a renowned teacher. And this young monk followed the teacher around and brought tea and anything that this teacher needed. This occurred in Tibet. And the young man was always asking for more instructions on meditation. Always asking. And actually, engaged in meditation a lot. But didn't feel like he had any real mastery of it. So he was always asking, will you teach me that now? Will you teach me that now? Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Well, we're going to go to this place, so sometimes there we can do it. But the time never came down, time never came. And then they went to some *big* festival somewhere. And during it the young monk got really angry at the old monk [laughs] and said, all this time you've been saying you would do something and now I demand it. So I want it now!

[00:52:20] And the old monk said, okay, okay, I'll tell you. You know how in your meditation... there are times when the object of meditation becomes a distraction. And he used a few more examples of like... the 'faults' of meditation, we might say. Like, this happens and then that happens and you miss this and then that happens and so on. And the monk kept saying, yes, I know that. Yeah, I know that. Yeah, I know that. ... And you know that space... and I don't remember that this is where the contact thing came from, because I heard that first from somebody who was alive... but he said, you know, the space... between when... the mind is settled and then something disrupts that settled mind. You know that space in there? And the young monk said, yes, I know that space. And the old monk said then... meditation is just *one thing*... you do what's necessary always to make that space bigger. That's all there is to it. That was his 'all there is to it'. [laughs]

[00:53:49] I mean, there is a way in which I think we've talked this evening about what is it that's 'all there is to it'. When we say, you have a stream of experiences that flow continuously 24/7. It never stops and even, just to be complete, when you're dead. So we could say that *is*... exactly what we're talking about. That's all there is... is that experience, flow of experience. And *if* you could actually just rest your mind on that... like a boat floating on water... there wouldn't be anything else that would be necessary to be done.

[00:54:33] And the reason why I think that that's possibly... true, is that it is so difficult. And so simple. Like you can see it so easily, exactly what it is you want to do. There's nobody who would say, I don't understand what we're talking about. I think it's mostly we'd say, I understand. I see the experiences coming and going. It would seem, there *my* experiences. I should be able to relate to them in the way that *I* want to relate to them. And *I* want to relate to it by not

manipulating or elaborating or anything, just being with it. And when you say that to yourself, you also hear some laughter. [laughs] It ain't going to work that easy. ... Okay?

[00:55:23] This was a wonderful discussion. Thank you all for coming this evening. We should dedicate the merit of this, which is a pivotal point in our own working with the truth of interdependence. That every time we do something, *especially* if we think it's positive, and this evening's conversation and meditation would definitely qualify for that, then we should think, by virtue of having done this... may it come to pass, that it becomes a cause for the benefit of all beings.

sangha [00:56:11] *dedicating the merit*