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using Tibetan and/or English, what's the experience of long retreat? using emotions, working with breath and the gap of bodhicitta, confidence is important, practicing shamatha w/o a still mind

LMC [00:01:56] So this is a period that we set aside to... I think the accurate word is entertain. [laughter] Entertain ourselves and also address questions and issues, suggestions that you might have regarding the practice. So, the ball's in your court, if you would care to play. Just raise your hand and we'll... Oh, yeah. You know, you have to wait till you have 'authorization' to speak.

Student 1 [00:03:03] It's so good to be back sitting with all of you. Thank you. I want to talk about the... maybe what seems like the transition from Tibetan to English. I remember on several occasions you saying that... Tibetan was important to use because of its sanctity. Because of so many beings having achieved a great realization by practicing in that language. And um, and I notice now there seems to be less Tibetan, more English. And even when Rinpoche was here, he was reciting along with us in English. And, you know, I'm just wondering if you could talk about, about that, somewhat. About what's happening, you know. I mean, I can imagine these high-level meetings back in India going like... all right... how are we gonna get this English thing going? What's our strategy here? Whatever. Right?

LMC [00:04:25] If that's a question, it's directed to the wrong person. [laughter] But, of course, what you, what you are witnessing is there! There is *change* happening. So that change is not new. It's just fresh. And I think that the way we used to talk about Tibetan, we still talk about Tibetan, in similar ways because there *is* something to be said there. For the language that the Dharma grew up in and that we inherited it at that level. In conversations with both Bokar Rinpoche and more recently with Khenpo Rinpoche, I suspect I'm not the only one who had conversations with him around this transition from the use of Tibetan to... kind of, let's say, somewhat passively accepting... the use of English and then maybe a little bit more enthusiastic about it. So, I think that's just a natural evolution of things.

[00:05:51] And... much could be said about the value of Tibetan, learning Tibetan. The nuances in the language that it's been in for so many centuries... are not easy to capture in English. On the other hand, the communities, including this one... who are paying more attention to their practice, whether it's in English or Tibetan, their understanding of the Dharma getting deeper and more, again, more nuanced and more clear and broad in its perspective, I think also gives people like Khenpo Rinpoche a sense of confidence that we're moving in the right direction. And so then we end up with things like we had when he was here, which was quite remarkable when we recited things in English. And even when we recited things that were transliterated into Tibetan, which used to also be, you know, quite a while ago, even that was considered like 'enh' compromise. And now it feels like it's more... okay. And even beyond the okay is that... things are actually good.

Student 1 [00:10:42] May I just note one other thing, which is the exceptional gift of It's like this magical thing that was happening and you were just listening to Rinpoche, you know. It was wonderful. And he, of course, noted as well, the questions about words. And he said, well, we're gonna have to talk about that. We're gonna have to try to work, you know. There may be better ways of... so anyway. Okay, thank you.

Student 2 [00:11:38] More on that. I'm remembering when you came to Green Tara practice two times ago. And you were commenting on... what you noticed when all of us were at the empowerment, chanting in Tibetan and not knowing what we were saying. And how we can access something... different. And... to me, the way I think of it is... if I'm saying words, it's like a sound meditation. It's like music. I don't know what they're saying, but there's an experience. It's like looking at abstract art rather than representational. It seems that... sometimes using Tibetan, when we only get a word here and there... and we were only getting part of that word, like thought... it opens something and lets us go beyond what we think that we're aware of knowing. Just like when we imagine ourself as Chenrezig. It's... I'm quoting Bill quoting Bokar Rinpoche saying, "Well, just who do you think *you* are?" You know, just as in... getting past what we think we are. And so, it seems like that *might* be one of the uses to chant... in Tibetan... and in English and then maybe in Tibetan again so we can expand our... Can you talk on that?

LMC [00:13:26] Not so much. But I think... and I have some confidence in this for a number of reasons... that the Tibetan and the English are informing each other, to some degree. And those of us who know neither English nor Tibetan, [laughter] for example, are also being informed and we're informing. So, there's a kind of growth that is happening. And I reference one event that... a number of people who were there, are here today... where Khenpo Tsultrim, who was, *is*, highly revered and, and was also known for being quite... I don't want to say strict, but he would have... at some point said, really, you really *need* to learn Tibetan in order to understand the Dharma. But at a certain event that we were having here in Portland, he actually... I guess picked the moment that was the most... earthshaking... he said... that if you do not recite the liturgies in English, English will never become sacred language.

[00:14:58] And that was kind of shocking to a number of us. Not in the sense of resistance to it, but we just didn't... hear those things. So, I think many of us felt like that's true... before we ever heard it, of course. Because the Tibetan is not also the original language that the Dharma was in. So, they had to *also* come to this place of... we saw it after it happened... that they translated things into Tibetan and dealt with all of the... nuances that maybe weren't quite right and changed over time. So, I think we all had a certain feeling like... that has to happen. But who makes it happen? Who decides and who determines that a particular translation is accurate or not accurate? Those are all very kind of... interesting things. So when Khenpo Tsultrim, who had the... the ability, the confidence to say it... and also the... reputation for saying it when he said, if you don't recite it in English also, he didn't say just now we're going to switch, he just said, if you *refuse* to recite it in English, if you did that successfully, the English language would never become a sacred language. So, I think we're still in the middle of that. You should check back in a century. [laughter] I think it's true. Because it isn't *just* the language, it's the realization behind it. If we don't get the realization... all we got was what we thought was an accurate, conceptual translation, we wouldn't have gotten very far. Those things have to come together. ... So get on it.

Student 3 [00:17:17] I think my question is pretty basic, but something that I've been curious about for a while is... if there are any writings about the *human* experience of going through retreat. Like... week one, I thought I had it. And then... you know, a year in, this is the way my brain was working. And I really felt like I understood this and that. Almost like a journal or a memoir, or a telling. Because, I'm not sure that... my life... will ever have a three-year retreat in it. And I'm curious what the... human experience of a retreat is. I'm wondering if someone, you know, I'm probably not the only person who's curious. And every person who's been through a

retreat doesn't want to tell the story a million times. So, I'm curious if someone's written... or told the story in some way that... I could listen to or read?

LMC [00:18:29] Well, of course, there's things that people have written. And I would not necessarily, overly... mystify or specialize... a retreat of any particular length. So, a three-year retreat has a certain purpose and structure to it. And of course, we hope that anyone who does a long retreat, of that duration and intensity, that it's good and that it works and is helpful for them and then for others by extension. But, but it doesn't necessarily mean, and I think many people have pointed this out, that any *particular* approach cannot be said to be *the way*... to get from where we are in a confused state, let's say, to the place where we're not confused. You cannot rely upon a long retreat to dispel that confusion. There is a certain way in which we have to say... each person really does find their own way through it. And there are many things that we take into account.

[00:19:53] For example... it's helpful if you have... a qualified teacher who guides you in certain ways. And what that person's role is, is also not entirely codified. So, it depends upon the students, it depends upon the teacher, it depends upon the abilities of both of them, and it depends upon the other people who are engaged in a long retreat. So many things there... that when I say those things, I wonder who would actually be able to... write something down... which had a sense of universality about it, as opposed to just my personal experience. Which we also could say in every case... is just your personal experience. And so maybe, maybe because of that, maybe that sentiment that I'm mentioning is shared a little bit. I don't see very many books like that.

Bill [00:21:02] There's 'Cave in the Snow' [by Tenzin Palmo]. ...

Zopa [00:23:00] ...the Reverend Jiyu-Kennett, who founded Shasta Abbey, in, California, 'The Wild White Swan'. ...

Student 4 [00:24:08] This is my third week here. I've been to the evening sessions the last two weeks and I've had a question each time. First time was about the expectancy of experiencing Buddha nature. And the second question was about... whether yearning for realization is an aspect of desire. And I think these questions have been leading up to the one that's on my mind now. And it came to me last night after watching a film 'Swept Away'. Lina Wertmuller's film. And... that film deals with passion, emotions. But in the film, there are many transitions in these... experiences of feeling. And it started me thinking about Buddha's teaching about emotion. And this morning I looked at what makes you not a Buddhist. [LMC laughs] And it's very clear that emotion is something which... is a part of what we're trying to... somehow deal with... in our practice. And I have doubts about what Buddhist teaching about emotions is because emotions are hardwired, part of our essence. We speak about sentient beings... sentient means... *feeling* as well as perceiving. So I just, ah... am curious to get a little direction in how to... go about... appreciating how... Buddhism deals with emotion.

LMC [00:26:09] [someone off-mic added, 'In 30 seconds' - laughter] That would be easier actually. [more laughter] Yeah. ... I was thinking while you were speaking that you were going to... come to some kind of a conclusion, which you didn't, about... perhaps that Buddhism had as a goal to be free of emotion. So, I'm hoping that you don't... have that understanding, as it would be considered a misunderstanding. The emotion actually is... we could say just generally, we might first say... that... it's a certain kind of feeling experience. And... I don't think that we can... effectively meditate without experience. And almost by definition, we could say that *all*

experience is in that same category. We could call it all emotion if we wanted to. But we don't call everything anger or everything happy and pleasurable. We make those distinctions. But... emotion is powerful. And without a *strong* emotion of some kind, it's very difficult to see... what we need to see... in our meditation. So, the emotion is powerful... and helpful if one knows how to use it. Kind of like... you have a can of gasoline to put in your car, you need to know where to *put* it in the car in order for it to accomplish what you want it to do.

[00:28:18] So we have... many situations in our lives when we have emotional experiences. And we could divide these things into two categories, though I've never seen it done, but... in my own sense of it... in a very broad, kind of coarse way, I would say that... emotion... *strong* emotion especially, can be extremely helpful. Extremely helpful. *If* you can see that experience... in the moment without attachment. Where you just see the experience very clearly. That is not so easy to do. And the conundrum, and it is that... if the emotion is weak, then it's kind of like you need to go across town, but you've only got one tablespoon of gasoline, so it won't get you there. You need to have enough so that you can actually make the journey. And I think that's a piece of why we do strong practices sometimes because... it naturally raises strong experiences. If everything is kind of flat... there isn't much to see. So you want to accomplish this thing of recognizing the nature of mind itself, but... the experience of seeing that, according to all of the texts and the teachings, is actually... an extraordinarily powerful experience. So, if everything is kind of flat, the likelihood that you'll see that thing is not very high. So, we tend to... *suffer* as meditators, by wanting to... be rid of...difficult emotions. And in the process, if we're successful, unfortunately, we're actually putting aside... in many cases, the very thing that could have been very useful.

[00:30:31] So, you have to add one caveat to that. That is that... if within our practice, we're still quite young... kind of like, you wouldn't give a can of gasoline to a 12-year-old with matches. Even though they might enjoy the result. So, we also need to... take into account as we mature in our meditation and our practice and our understanding, that there are certain things that happen in a certain order. And if the prerequisites are not in place, then the thing that you're looking for, or the thing that you've read about should happen, is not likely to happen. And that, of course, is where we get into... the value of personal relationships with teachers and with sangha members, community members, sharing their experiences and their understanding, so that there can be a gradual increase in our understanding and our experience. It's helpful. Let's see, I think I did that in twenty-seven seconds, didn't I? [laughter]

Student 4 [00:31:50] That's very helpful because I think the problem is that I was having with the concept is... that on the one hand we have emotion, which we are counseled to be aware of. And I think in the way that you describe it as experience, it helps bring together the... feeling... along with the awareness. Thank you.

Student 5 [00:32:30] Lama Michael, I noticed during Shamatha practice... today that... I focus on the in-breath. And I focus on the out-breath. I pay attention there. Then, after the out-breath, there's this space... a second, second and a half, two seconds before the next in-breath. And I just, I started to feel like that's really kind of a precious little opportunity there. A little free-fall space there... where I'm not focused any more, but nothing else is come in either. I just wonder, is that something to work with? [laughter]

LMC [00:33:29] Well, of course. [more laughter] Next! ... There is... in the shamatha practice of following the breath...this is always there! In other words, there is an end to an inhale and there is an end to an exhale. And at both of those ends, there's... a kind of a moment there... where if

one intends to, and pays attention, there is a moment where... you have the opportunity for a little insight. So, the insight... might be not very big, and so we miss it. In other words, we might just write it off as... well, that's just what breathing looks like. You breathe in and you breathe out. You breathe in and you breathe out. But there is some benefit... in recognizing the subtlety of... when you put your awareness on the breath and you follow it, you follow it out and you follow it in. And there's like some practices where you *count* those breaths in a certain way and *relate* to them at the point where... you've exhaled and you're about to begin the inhalation. So, you're paying kind of attention to that also. So, I'm not sure what else you're looking for there, but I think that one of the things that many of us... appreciate about our Buddhist practice is that... it's meant to embrace virtually every experience that you could possibly have... in some way, kind of like food that's digested. You're meant to digest all the food. And this is in a way... like food for the meditation.

[00:35:42] Everything that we do, everything that we experience... I'm having an experience right now... I'm speaking. So, I hear that and I have a *reaction* to it... which may be positive or negative. If I notice that... reaction... everything changes in the moment. My speech changes. What I'm about to say, changes. Everything changes. If I notice that *change*, something more happens in terms of... just the awareness... of what's happening, changes along. And in the short term *and* the long term. I would say... what's really helpful *is the awareness*. You recognize the experience as it unfolds.

Student 5 [00:36:35] And we say, "I will now practice calm abiding in order to release all beings from their particular suffering and establish them in lasting peace and happiness." I wonder if that space could be a space of bodhicitta. You know where...

LMC [00:36:51] Well, what you just said is that, isn't it?

Student 5 [00:36:54] Yeah.

LMC [00:36:54] Yeah, of course.

Student 5 [00:36:56] Yeah, but what does that... maybe a space where... we're all there... doing shamatha.

LMC [00:37:12] I'm not sure what you mean by...

Student 5 [00:37:14] Nor am I. [laughter]

LMC [00:37:14] Now wait a minute, that's not...

Student 5 [00:37:18] We'll work on it.

LMC [00:37:24] I think there's an interesting... point to be made here, regarding bodhicitta. So, for those who are not clear about the bodhicitta... the bodhicitta is fundamentally the *aspiration*, which is really critical... *in* this practice, to direct our energies... towards the benefit of all sentient beings. Now, I can say from my own experience that that has from time to time... been so dry that it's like powder in the desert. You know, you wonder like, why would I be doing this? I don't get it. And I think it's dry when... we are not... doing it properly. When it isn't quite right. So, it really should be, and sometimes is characterized by this technically, should be warm and moist... *like life itself*. Should be warm and moist.

[00:38:38] So when it gets dry, it's because maybe we're just following the schedule. In other words, you do this and then you do that. You follow the breath when it comes in. When it comes to the end of the inhale, then you just let go of it and relax in that place. And then you do this and that. Put all the pieces together, it can be really wonderful at *some* point. And then because you repeat it verbatim, like you read the same instruction out of the text over and over... it ends up being dry. ... So my antidote to that... for myself is this... *it is not possible to accomplish your own benefit*. Full stop. ... And then, the first time that came to mind, I thought, hmm, is that the case? And I'm not sure that it's 100% the case, but let's admit what is clear. Almost everybody, I think we could say everybody, but I'd like to be slightly generous... almost everybody, when we sit down to meditate, is *hoping* that... I benefit from my meditation. I should at *least* be less attached. I should be... less angry with my friends. I should... be less cynical about the world. You know, it's like this... I'm trying to do something good here. But, behind that is also the thing of... wait a minute here, I'm not feeling any better... at the end of the session. So what's wrong with my meditation? And I think that the answer to that is, is that the bodhicitta is meant to... be the practice that... undermines our attachment, gives rise to great equanimity, loving kindness and compassion. All this stuff. And meanwhile, *we're* undermining it by trying to engage in this practice so that *I can be* somehow improved.

[00:41:05] Now that's a laudable goal to improve one's self. But the problem is... the self always gets in the way. And it's not even helpful when you read a compelling text that convinces you... there actually isn't anything... we call a self. That's just an illusion. That doesn't help either. That's just disappointing. [laughter].

[00:41:28] And so, I come to the conclusion you *cannot* benefit yourself. It's kind of like, if you want to... climb up something, you have to have a rope. You can't just like... [mimes shimmying up a rope] grasp at the air. You don't go anywhere. So you have to get a rope or a pole or something! And the analogy that I come to is... the bodhicitta *is that* thing! Give up... the benefit for yourself. Just abandon it 100% and do not think that this makes it a martyr program. Because that's just going to undermine everything. So... you need to really be interested in doing it and you need to understand... that you cannot yourself... bring about your own happiness. Though you may feel happy for a moment. It's most likely because you were focusing on the benefit of others. That's the key! You put your focus on the benefit of others. Abandon your own sense of, whether you say it to yourself or not, like what I'm really looking for is the benefit that *I* can experience, that *I* can measure, that *I* can know that I'm doing it right, all these things. And those things are not necessarily bad... but the reliance on that undermines... where the real power is. That your *effort* goes to the benefit of others. Your wish, your effort, your... practice in its totality, is for the benefit of others. So, you rely upon the *others'* happiness and *your* happiness rides on that. ... I can't think of a better way to say it, but I'm sure that there is someone could do that.

Student 6 [00:43:39] I'm not sure my question... I guess I'll ask it anyway. I like that last answer. So... I, was just going to absorb that.

LMC [00:43:48] We have to be kind so you can ask anything.

Student 6 [00:43:50] Well, now I have sort of two questions. Or maybe one initial comment is, I find it helpful, and I don't know if this makes sense, when you... think about bodhicitta and doing things for others, it can add some juice, for me... to include myself, right. Like in the Four

Immeasurables, to start with yourself. The Tonglen, start with yourself. So, it's not so much about my benefit, but... that identification with others... is helpful.

[00:44:19] My question, though, was I've been reading 'Buddhism with an Attitude' again. Alan Wallace. And every time I read Alan Wallace, it reminds me of a lot of instructions that I've gotten over time... about sort of achieving quiescence, achieving shamatha and a lot of discussion of insight practice in the context of... you're not really going to make a lot of progress on this unless you've got some pretty deep... quiescence, shamatha, calm. And for somebody who is still a long way from accomplishing shamatha and doesn't have a lot of time to get there... my question was how do I... read those kinds of instructions... in some kind of positive way and not in a discouraging way?

LMC [00:45:17] Great question. That is really... important. ... I am not sure that I know... anybody... who hasn't lived in that space that you're talking about. How do I even just take the next breath in this thing that, that will work? ... And to some degree... the issue arises... because we would like to *not* encourage ourselves and others to have unrealistic expectations. And since we all have had unrealistic expectations, we know the outcome of that one really well. But that isn't good enough. And what you just said is a great example of that. Like we can put our expectations aside and do all sorts of things, but at *some* point along the way, we *have* to have confidence. So, where does that confidence come from? Normally, it comes from... some level of success, right? If we just keep going at it and we keep hearing... and I don't mean this as a cut on Alan at all. I mean, but his specialty is... shamatha... above all else, at least that has been my experience and, and I wouldn't necessarily rely strictly also upon just his comments. Like you also might find some help in other texts that take a slightly different approach. Sometimes, you know, the batteries in one flashlight go out. You need to get another one and look at it in a slightly different way.

[00:47:36] For example... when we practice shamatha, I can say that probably in the last 30 years, at least twenty-nine of them, the success was measured by how *still*... your mind was in the practice of shamatha. And whether or not... you could remain in that state for a certain period of time. And along the way, about maybe 10 years ago... without going into this too far, I just want to say, maybe about 10 years ago, I was talking with a teacher who many of us know, but I don't want to go into that right now... and the instruction... because I was basically saying the same thing... the problem we have here, not only with myself sitting in front of this person, but also the people who we're supposed to be helping to learn these things, we're somehow... inadvertently undermining the very thing we're trying to deliver, sometimes. And there's lots of examples of that. But... it's not intentional. What we need in order for this to work is, we have to have confidence.

[00:49:07] Confidence, many teachers will say, is the *absolute* requirement. Like, you have no confidence? You got nothing! It isn't going to go anywhere. So anyone who's consistently practicing has certainly got some level of confidence at some level. But if it doesn't grow a bit, we lose that thing. It's not some permanent thing like you get it and now you have that thing. It has to keep renewing itself somehow. So, the instruction that I got was very interesting, and I don't necessarily recommend it for everybody, but I'll just give it to you anyway and you can do with it what you want. And that is... shamatha is not necessarily, in all contexts... just to be defined as... the *stillness*... of the mind, the stillness of it.

[00:50:12] So the instruction that I got was... under what circumstances... would it be helpful to merely be *aware* of what is going *on* with your mind as opposed to... what you already know,

what's it like to... still the mind? Which is kind of, one is sort of putting the brake on and the other one is just taking your foot off the gas. What if you just... took the content of your busy mind as the object of your awareness. So now... the judgment, which is implied... [laughs] about the busy mind and meditation are two separate things. They just don't relate somehow. If your mind is busy, then you're not doing shamatha. Well, it's still true, even if you take the busy mind because you've got to be still at somewhere... seeing the busy mind. Otherwise, you're probably just being swept away by the current again. But the busy mind is easy to find. [laughter] It's like we have that almost all the time.

[00:51:36] And I have personally found it in the long run, not particularly helpful to think of it as the enemy. For one thing, it always seems to me like... just in the common vernacular, I feel *outgunned* every time. [laughter] Every time. Like, I just don't have... the tools for it. And it seems to always have the tools to deal with me. [more laughing] It's unfair. Yeah. So, to actually take what is really an authentic approach, this is not like something that somebody made up... if you look for it, you can find it... that you can take the content of... your regular ordinary experience and just put your awareness on that experience.

[00:52:35] So, just to kind of, say a couple of things about this quickly. It won't work if... you try to manage... everything... that your mind can be experiencing at any given moment. You know, it's like, you're playing catch with somebody throwing a ball back and forth. It works! Unless somebody throws a hundred balls at once. In which case... you don't have a chance. And we throw 100 balls at once at ourselves on a regular basis. So, what we have to do is... we have to step back from it and decide exactly what am I going to pay attention to as the practice? So, it might be... your utter disappointment... in being able to just settle the mind in the ordinary way that we ordinarily practice shamatha. So, we feel disappointed. Like I've been doing this for how long? And it's still like this!

[00:53:47] You can get one thing out of there that you can put your awareness on... and it's likely to be... an emotion. I hate this! When am I *ever* going to get something out of this? And... you might at some point... actually find that you can look at that disappointment. The more you look at the disappointment... clearly, look at it... you could find that the disappointment gets less. But then... the mind gets busy again. So, you're into... a game here where... the disappointment *itself* needs to be increased. In other words, we're trying to *avoid* the disappointment when actually when you've *isolated* it... it's the fuel.

[00:54:45] That's the experience that you need. It's easy to, it's easy to flatten our experiences. We do that all the time. It's just not helpful... in what we're trying to do. We're trying to become intimate with ourselves. And we mix that *up* with trying to change ourselves before we've been intimate enough with ourselves to know what a positive change would even look like.

[00:55:11] So when we sit down and you do the meditation, *embrace* the disappointment... first. Because you got to make friends with it. You have to make friends with it. And if the game is all about just having a still mind, you're never going to make friends with it. And the mind is not going to get still. So... pick something, like... an emotion is a great thing. Like, let's say you've had an argument with somebody. And let's, for the sake of courtesy to ourselves, it wasn't a big argument. But I'm still feeling a little disappointed. Sit down and look at that disappointment. Don't try to fix it. It's kind of like, honor it. You know, I'm alive! I'm alive and I have relationships with people. And so here I am, just looking at a piece of a relationship. And you're also practicing the meditation.

[00:56:18] I think I can say from my own self, just honestly, I've found that to be a helpful approach. Just put my awareness on the mental state rather than the content of the mind. And then sometimes I also feel like... it's still like swirling back there, like a hurricane, [making hand motions behind his head] but it's okay because... it's back *there*. And I can feel the wind on my back, but it actually doesn't have any authority. It's just there.

[00:56:52] So, in that way, I think it's worth running the experiment... to see if you can... take something out of your experience and use that as your, your *focus* of attention for shamatha. And... I know for sure you'll find it most helpful if what you focus on has some power. Like, an emotion is a great example because that's what we mean by an emotion. It's an experience that has some power. It doesn't have to be negative. It could be totally joyful. ... Okay? I think we've burned ourselves out here. [laughter]

sangha [00:57:47] *dedicating the merit*

LMC [00:58:20] Thank you all for coming. That was delightful, delightful experience. [laughs]