

2018_08_26_pm2_QA_LMC.mp4

using our experiences as object of meditation, some re: ngöndro, life after life and karmic proclivities, gift from guru, planting seeds in our training

LMC [00:00:46] So this is a time set aside now to clarify questions and... hopelessly confused matters. So, the ball is in your court. I don't want to hear it bounce. [laughter]

Student 1 [00:01:23] I'm sure you have taught about this many times in the past. Sometimes I've heard it. But I'm interested, in particular, in focusing on experience. And why that has become part of your instruction for shamatha?

LMC [00:02:09] Well, in one way, I think it's fair to say that... experience has always been part of the instruction of shamatha. But I know what you're pointing at. I don't know about the other teachers, but... let me step back a little bit. So, for people who maybe are not completely familiar with shamatha, shamatha is the practice of placing one's awareness on some... object. So, when I use the word object, it's not quite complete, but often the instruction has been... you place your awareness upon something that is in front of you. Usually inanimate. Could be a coin, a stick, it could be a statue of the Buddha. It could be almost anything. And then you place your awareness on that and cut... the internal commentary... and relax. And then when the mind moves off of that, not by your intention, but just by virtue of our almost consistent, ever present, distracted state... as soon as we recognize that we're distracted, we come back to that object again, over and over and over. And gradually... the force of repetition... leads us to, ideally, automatically come back. Effortlessly. I shouldn't say automatically, effortlessly come back to the object that we are placing our awareness on.

[00:04:19] But our... list of things to look at has generally not included... one's experience. So, for example, like this morning we talked about... emotional states. And placing your awareness upon an emotional state, whether it's pleasant or unpleasant... and resting our awareness on that state. Resting our awareness on an emotional state is no simple... task. ... The state *itself* can vanish, unlike the statue of the Buddha or the coin or anything else. The emotional state itself comes and goes. But to develop the ability... to kind of naturally and routinely, place our awareness, without commentary, without any of the usual things that go along with any kind of emotional state... to develop the ability to place our awareness on that... and just relax and the awareness rests there is... a profoundly useful ability.

[00:05:49] Especially when we're in states of turmoil. When someone close to us has... left us by virtue of deep disagreements. Or when someone close to us has left because they are sick or they are dying or they died. We cannot escape the experiences that follow those things. And in fact, the effort to escape is anathema... to our practice anyway. Since the practice is that we engage in, all our focused on going deeper and deeper into understanding the nature of our minds. And by extension, the nature of all of our experiences. So, one of the most profound ways to have... intimate understanding of our own... sense of who we are or who we aren't... an intimate understanding of our mind... it's difficult to imagine what would be more useful than placing... our awareness on that... object, our experiences, as they unfold. And as we said this morning... the object is *not* to end experience, of course. Short of dying, we would say it's hard to end experience. But, strictly from a Buddhist perspective, even death does not end that. It continues to flow. ... So that's the short one. [laughs] Okay?

Student 2 [00:08:04] I have a question about what the preliminary practices, ngöndro are supposed to evoke or... cultivate versus shamatha and other practices. What in particular do the preliminary practices cultivate?

LMC [00:08:24] In particular, you're talking about ngöndro. ... The practice of ngöndro, which we often call foundation practices, right. You're familiar with them to some degree, I think? So, we refer to those practices as foundation practices, which really means that in a certain way they're a prerequisite to something further. But they also are themselves a practice which is worthy of doing just in itself. Without even putting much weight on what might come later. In fact, some of our illustrious teachers have said that the practice of ngöndro itself can lead to complete enlightenment.

[00:09:59] So, that kind of statement is worthy of at least pondering... because it's made regularly with many practices. If you just do this practice, it can lead to enlightenment. And Kalu Rinpoche, back in the early 70s was... on a number of occasions, saying... that the entire Dharma was contained in any piece of it. Any piece of it. So it was almost like a holographic thing. Like, if you had one piece of it, you had all of it. Which really didn't mean... that if you could sit for one minute still... there wasn't anything to be gained by doing anything else. It didn't mean that! But it meant that... the richness was not immediately apparent... from what you had in your hand. It's often the case that we have something and we don't recognize its full value or... its preciousness. ... So, one story which kind of exemplifies this, that if we are used to... bringing our awareness to our experience... more than just a *passing* awareness, but really... really being aware of our experience as it unfolds... our overall experience in life... would proceed in a different way.

[00:11:45] So, a rather crude but nonetheless... a helpful story... goes back into ancient India when... people walked a lot on dusty roads. And poverty was intense in many areas and many times. And so, the story is one... person who is very poor, and so ate only what small amounts he could get from whoever might give him something to eat. Walking on the road... he became angry at a rock that was in his way, just kind of irritated generally. And so, he kicked the rock out of the way. The rock, as it turned out later, was actually... a dirty, but very precious jewel. And... so as a result... if rather than... to say it rather humorously, taking refuge in his anger at the rock... and rather than that, have brought his awareness to a higher state, it might very well have taken the time to pick that up with some curiosity and see what it was and thereby become wealthy. So, I think there's lots of examples of that sort of thing in our own culture also that follow. But in the context of our... meditation practice, in our practice of Buddhism in general, with all of the stages and things, the point of ngöndro can be, I think, stated in many, many different ways. And so, what I'd like to do is pass it to Bill. If you don't mind, Bill, saying a few things about what the point of ngöndro is? Is that fair? [laughter]

Bill [00:14:05] Life's not fair.

LMC [00:14:07] Life's not fair. Yes. [omitted the remaining comments]

Student 3 [00:25:28] Lama Michael, you said something other day about the time that Kalu Rinpoche spent some number of years sitting on a rather small ledge, meditating. And this morning... when I was pondering that, the thing I mostly was curious about was... who supported him in that endeavor? And do we know anything about those people. Because you can't just sit on a ledge for years without... the food appearing or...

LMC [00:26:06] Yeah, I know I can't do that. [laughter] I'm not sure that that proves that he can't do it, but maybe. There's... for however long, there's been a tradition in Tibet for the populace to support people who... sit in caves and meditate and sit on ledges in the wind and all. And so, my guess is that he was supported by the locals in the region... since he was already renowned... as an extraordinary meditator. So, that would seem to explain it, but... I don't know whether we have any precise story to explain that. But it would be totally out of character if he had just, uh, you know, sat there and worked and starved to death. That would be really unlikely... since so many people knew about him.

Bill [00:27:33] He did have to move, apparently, because... people did know about him. And he was also a doctor. But, he had to set that aside because... the line of people... to have something taken care of was endless. And then he would, he would occasionally have to move because... he'd become too much of a local institution.

Student 1 [00:28:21] Did he move from that ledge to another ledge?

Bill [00:28:23] Since I wasn't there, I don't know, but my sense is to change location.

LMC [00:28:41] Is that okay?

Student 3 [00:28:43] Yeah, it's, it's good. But it's a reminder that... when I... revere some part of the lineage, that person also wasn't separate from the whole rest of... the universe, people and beings.

LMC [00:29:04] Absolutely, absolutely. And this always is a great thing to contemplate... in terms of the teaching on unbounded interdependence. So, Kalu Rinpoche also had a mother and father who, as it turns out, he deeply revered. And they were also... fairly renowned meditators on top of it. So, no big surprise that he got into that also. Interdependence is an interesting and helpful... tool to look at whenever we have some kind of an issue or a question. It's often really useful to look and see... like, what is it that led to this? Where is it going? Where is it right now? Does it apparently have a beginning? Or is there no beginning that we can see?

[00:30:07] Mostly, I think when we look, we can't find a beginning to *profound* things. Because profound things often have... a history. And so, where do you mark the beginning? And if it happened a very long time ago, like numerous centuries, and you can't find anybody who does that practice anymore, did that practice come to an end? Or... is it just that we don't know who's practicing it? Or we don't know where it went and who embodies it or whatever. But the teachings on interdependence, which are so easy to... buy into... to comprehend, like that... things do not arise without causes and conditions. And they do not necessarily end in predictable ways. And in many cases, we can say they actually don't end.

[00:31:10] So when we talk about life and death also, in the Tibetan tradition, we often talk about life after life. And that life after life is driven by, you know, one life leads to another life. Not in the sense that the second life is *dependent* upon the first life, but more that... the conditions that one encounters in the next life are... essentially dependent upon the life or the lives that went before. And the things that we thought and did and said... result in more further outcomes, continuously. And the only piece of that which is a little mind-bending, if we haven't put some real time into it, is that we're talking about... life after life. If we remove that, it all seems kind of straight forward, fairly normal science. But if you go from life to life... now, then you get into the whole thing of karmic proclivities and the benefits of certain kinds of ethics and all. And keeping track of those

things with a certain sense of confidence that whether *I* benefit from it or not, *somebody* does. And on top of that, my connection with others is *cemented*, in a certain way, by virtue of the way that I relate to those people. So, if you think in terms of not just what you get today for ten cents, you know. [laughs] Really, the long-term benefit cannot be measured or reckoned. But within the context of the tradition... it's definitely a piece of the tradition... that those things will play out over time. It's not so hard to hold that view.

Student 4 [00:33:42] Lama Michael.

LMC [00:33:47] I see you.

Student 4 [00:33:49] I see you, too. So, I've been contemplating this since a question I asked last Sunday. Gradually, I'm getting a fuller understanding of anger. In the beginning, when I would hear anger being one of the kleshas it would be... yeah, I kind of know what that is. And I know when I'm angry. And people around me know when I'm angry. But then I heard it as aggression. It was like, yeah, that makes sense. And then it got deeper with like, oh, it can be aversion. And then I've heard Bill say it can be... and I might have misconstrued, but I thought I was hearing... it can be control or manipulation. That can be a form of... yeah, okay, aggression. So last week when I asked a question about trying to suggest a certain environment... Bill responded as if I had given advice. And I'm going, did I express it wrong? Or oh, is suggesting something... a form of control or manipulation and therefore a form of aversion or anger? And I go, oh, maybe I didn't express it wrong, but I didn't understand deep enough.

LMC [00:35:38] I want to ask you something before you continue. I just need to interrupt you here. So, you quoted Bill and a few things along there. And I think you need to ask the question from the perspective that's outside of that. And we can clarify that with Bill later, whether or not you correctly, you know, interpreted him and all. My own experience is it's rare to be correctly interpreted. [laughter] So I'm just trying to say, you know.

Student 4 [00:36:13] Yeah. Yeah. I always assume there's translation errors between whatever is inside me and how it comes out and then how you hear it.

LMC [00:36:23] Exactly. Yeah. So the question again just for your own side?

Student 4 [00:36:30] So, that's where I was coming from. That's what I was contemplating. But the question is... 'cause I'm always... okay, there's *obvious* kleshas, but then there's the more subtle forms. And so, I'm looking at... can you talk about the more subtle forms of anger?

LMC [00:36:54] What's the difference?

Student 4 [00:36:57] Between full blown anger and subtle anger?

LMC [00:37:02] Are we talking about... like you have a hose for the garden and sometimes you turn the water pressure up and sometimes you don't, but it's the same water coming out.

Student 4 [00:37:13] What I'm pondering is... not recognizing that little trickle *is* water.

LMC [00:37:23] Ah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay. Good. Whew. [laughter] Yes! So, I remember a couple of occasions, at least... back in the early 70s... I'm going to shorten the story. It's too long. So, but in essence, what happened is that... people are trying... they

recognize, to some degree, the cause of their own suffering, disappointments and also their joys and all. They recognize the causal conditions of those states of mind. To some degree, their understanding is accurate. And to some degree, they're just missing the boat.

[00:38:40] And so, because my primary personal emotional state is curiosity more than anything else... so, I recall Kalu Rinpoche saying, that if you develop to a certain point, then you actually genuinely take... *especially* the difficult situations that we find ourselves in... and the very difficult experiences that we have and haven't even really looked at them yet, all those things he said... like when you develop to a certain extent, you accept all of those things as a *gift* from the guru.

[00:39:36] And I remember finding that a *shocking* proclamation. Like, first of all, my little mind said, why would someone you trust give you such an awful thing? And of course, the truth is, that he didn't give it to you. That's yours. But... in order to actually use that energy, which is kind of like pouring gasoline on yourself and igniting it. And then you're sitting there thinking, I wonder how you put this out? So, well gasoline is kind of cold, [mimics pouring it over his head] so you pour some more on. It just is... remarkable how we can weave ourselves in to very difficult situations and continue to hold others responsible for it, for example.

[00:40:32] So, in this case, the *miraculous*... skillful means of his statement... take every one of these things as a gift from the guru. Miraculous! In the sense that... if you can hold that view, what you find is... that it actually *is* precious. But primarily it's precious because... you've been given the tools with which to work with it. If that hasn't happened, then it's kind of cruel. [laughs] But the interesting thing is, we get the tools and we work with them and then... we get slammed with something and we want to take it as the gift... but we can't, because it's almost like we... *refuse* to use the tools.

[00:41:29] We have the tools. They're right in front of us. We know how to use them. But we're more *attached*... in a certain kind of macabre way... we take refuge... in those... emotional experiences. Which we in the moment recognize as harmful to us. And by extension, because they, they come *into* us... then, it affects all of our relationships. I mean, this is just simple. You don't have to be a shrink to know that. That's pretty much how it gets started. So, that statement from him, which I was just immensely curious about... and over time, I thought that was maybe one of the most valuable teachings I ever heard. And it was less than ten words. Really short.

[00:42:25] But, it seemed like, one, it had to be somebody who you trusted. That teacher, this is a gift from that person. You have to be in a position of trusting that person, having a sense of what we, you know... call *devotion* to that person. So, you know, that that person would not harm you. You also have to have a sense that... that they have enough wisdom to know the difference between harming you and not harming you. And a number of other obvious pieces there when you think about them.

[00:43:03] But if you can hold that view that... whatever experience I'm feeling, it doesn't have to be some nasty thing that happened, it also doesn't have to not be something really good. But, if we can think of... fundamentally... *all* of our experiences coming from... a profoundly good teacher... that cements our connection... to that person, in a way that negative experiences can become something that helps us to thrive. Not undermine our goodwill or our discipline or our compassion or loving kindness for others, but rather we feel like we've received so much of that compassion and loving kindness that it's overflowing. It's kind of mysterious in a certain way, but in another way, it seems just obvious. ... You know that, don't you?

Student 4 [00:44:19] Lama Michael, I first remember hearing that instruction from you about seeing it all as a gift from your guru... April 5th last year. And it doesn't always come to mind, but it often does. And did ah... I get to... I don't have a word for that.

LMC [00:44:48] A word for?

Student 4 [00:44:51] The experience when that is recalled in my... inside.

LMC [00:44:57] It's the experience that's recalled. [laughs]

Student 4 [00:45:00] Yeah. And thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

LMC [00:45:10] Good enough? ... Well. How we doing? Anymore?

Student 5 [00:45:31] I feel like I've probably ventured... like put something forth like this before... maybe early on when I first started coming here. I'd like to hear a little bit about... working with... distraction that... arises from like sensory experiences or... in general, distractions that arise... from, what's the word I'm looking for, like... from experiences that don't involve the narrative. You talked earlier, earlier today about dropping the narrative and sitting with experience. Sitting with what's happening in the moment. And I'm curious to hear about working with distractions that arise from... places other than that narrative. Because I've been finding that I'm actually able to drop the narrative for... decent amounts of time. And at the very least, not carry it so close to where I am. Even if it is there, I'm not necessarily putting my primary focus on. I'm just kind of curious, you know, how to work with other distractions like... or just like talking about it. I'd like to hear a bit more about working with things that are a bit more visceral. Things like... being tired or anxious or working with things that seem to go deeper than just like the words in our heads. ... I'm not looking for any kind of like specific answer to anything. I've just been finding that I have more room to work with those distractions because they're always there. I just haven't really had a whole lot of opportunities to... notice them at this level.

LMC [00:48:45] So let me ask you a clarifying point, okay. Is the issue, when whatever you are talking about arises as something you're having trouble working with, for whatever reason or it's confusing... is it confusing... because the narrative that you're in is incomplete or is it something else?

Student 5 [00:49:21] It feels like the narrative isn't the, the primary obstacle. We talk about in mind-training about confront the greatest obstacle first. I'm finding that the narrative, at least at this... point in my practice, isn't the primary obstacle. It is sort of this general feeling of sort of sluggishness. The sort of general lack of motivation despite, you know, having tools like the Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind, and the Four Immeasurables and these really effective ways of generating... bodhicitta. Sort of a motivation to continue to work for others. But a lot of times I'm just sitting on my couch with, with the TV on or... just kind of like sitting with what I'm feeling and not really doing anything with it or doing anything about it. It's kind of like... hanging out with it and not really... seeing a distinction between me and whatever I'm feeling in the moment. And usually it's this general kind of like murky... vegetative kind of feel.

LMC [00:50:41] Yeah.

Student 5 [00:50:43] And, I would love to practice in those moments because I clearly have those moments available for practice, but I don't use them. [laughter]

LMC [00:50:53] Remarkable! Yeah.

Student 5 [00:50:57] Because I'd love to start a daily practice again. And I haven't had a daily sitting practice since like 2016. And I have the time for it. I just find that this... kind of... this is hard to describe other than saying a lack of motivation. But it doesn't feel like a lack of anything. It feels like this like active, like suppressing, kind of like... not paralyzing, but... weightiness or almost like I'm kind of like all of a sudden, I'm like, you know, trying to like walk through, you know, sludge or something. [somebody else spoke off mic] Been trying that. Actually, caffeine doesn't really do a whole lot for me other than like, make me jittery.

LMC [00:52:00] Well, almost anything will work at almost any time. I think we all know *exactly* what you're talking about, for starters. You are not the only one. And you're on the right track... when you say, I would like to work with that. I would like to see that better, do something with it. I'd like to transform it somehow... my relationship to it in some way, in such a way that I would be able to like... harness that somehow. And see it clearly and all. And some of those things are *clearly*... you're in the right place. You're looking for that. The majority of people who I know, will say, oh, I'm just feeling too dull. I'm going to go to sleep. So, it's actually extraordinary to say I'm feeling dull and I need to find out what that dull is, you know. And of course, the interesting thing is, the answer you already know. So, the *answer* actually is not going to be satisfying, of course. [laughter]

Student 5 [00:53:38] Is it ever?!

LMC [00:53:40] Well... yeah, maybe when we're asleep. Might be. But... this occurs. So I'm just going to say from my *own* perspective... which is definitely not special because we all have this exact thing... the issue is what do we do with it? We had it before we were born. And we'll have it after we're dead. But that's just to say... that's just what happens. You're in this world. And you're in a human body and you drink alcohol or you do too much of this or that and you feel dull. But those are not the situations that *you're* talking about. You're talking about a situation where it is actually *not* immediately explainable. And your awareness is at least somewhat clear. And you are grappling with a thing which, using your own metaphors, it feels like your clarity is bound by weights that are hanging from it. Like you just cannot move.

Student 5 [00:54:52] Yeah, I have enough wherewithal to like, sort of be like, wow, I don't feel like doing *anything* right now. Yeah. Like there is no physical drive. Usually I experience anxiety a lot. I experience anxiety a lot and that's generally my motivator through life is like I mean I feel anxious and I'd like to not. So, let's find a way to take care of that. And now, with practice, like... the anxiety is dying down. And so now there's this like this like... amazing, this like incredibly... strong like, sense of like, planted-ness like. Like you're saying we think there's weeds everywhere. It's just like, oh, and there's no... I don't really have anything to tap into because the anxiety... and I'm not really... the stores of that are down. So I'm looking for a new source of energy.

LMC [00:55:52] You know, it's like if you put on hip high boots and wade into water, it's not so bad. You can walk across the field and if there's no water, you can walk across it even easier. But if you walk into thick mud, you have a different situation. And so, you have to do something

that's different in that situation or you won't get to the other side of the field. Or you may never get out at all. Yeah.

[00:56:27] But the physical thing, I think it's just an analogy. But it has certain parallels, right. It's like, you actually in this case... would be happy to put boots on and wade into it, but you don't know what you would put on in order to wade into it or even whether or not that thing would be helpful to wade into it. But I will say... that there are some things that I think you can do that you would find the resolution to this on your own. Because it is *not* conceptual. It is *utterly* not conceptual. We are way too smart to not see the conceptual way out of that. But pretty much the entire Dharma...is ultimately about the non-conceptual. So, the conceptual frameworks and things that we work with are really helpful and key.

[00:57:29] But in the end, it's this experience thing... that's coming about. And one thing to avoid is... do *not* put the sluggish mind in a special category. Just to put it, in the context of...how our own sense of *self*... tends to deal with these things... you put it in a special category and the next thing you know, you won't say it maybe, but you're thinking it... this is who I am. I am this sluggish, dull person. That's who I am. And you won't really believe it, but you've planted that seed. That's not good. Because it's not who you are. And we know, to move into the conceptual for a moment... we know that actually we are *no* thing. No such thing. Not to say we're *nothing*, but *we are no thing*... for sure. But that doesn't mean... we also know... that my 'No Thing' experienced today will repeat itself tomorrow. It's almost guaranteed that it won't. And so, your curiosity, which is leading you to look into it tomorrow, you won't find it. It's like a cat that slithers off into the darkness, you know, and comes out at night and you hear it eating. But you can never actually find it.

[00:59:03] And so, I think... you have to play with the clever side of it. Not because you're going to find the *truth* from that. But because... you have to stir something up. Not just in order to stir things up... like our President. [laughter] Oh, excuse me.

Student 5 [00:59:27] Getting political now.

LMC [00:59:29] But because... it's kind of like... you stir up a non-homogenous thing... you see different things coming up all around it. So, if you take this, in a kind of... almost with a sense of bravado... that I cannot make myself feel alive and awakened and all. But I know what I need to do in order to break through things. And one of them is to... recognize where you are. I would say it's the single most important thing. You got to recognize where you are. So, when you get into that place, you stop. ... And you remind yourself, this is 'no thing'. This is actually not an impediment, inherently.

[01:00:33] Kind of like, if I leave my shoes outside and can't walk home, it's not an inherent impediment. It's just a condition that's occurring now. So, that way you don't remind yourself that you're really screwed up. Because you're actually not. So, you don't want to go there. So, I think if you remind yourself to just look into it and stop and do the meditation... you weren't here this morning where you? So, it's what we talked about all morning... was the thing of... placing your awareness on the current experience. So, your current experience, it feels debilitating. But if you put your awareness on it, without any agenda... the obvious agenda being, I'm going to overcome this... you have no hope. It's so bigger... than you are.

[01:01:27] But, it's only bigger than you are because you *believe* that it's something. So, you need to step back from it and work into it. And almost it's kind of like, bring it on. Come on. You

and me. We're gonna work this out, kind of... [laughter] kind of like that. When actually, what it is, is that you don't know what it is and it's not something. But when you put your awareness on it, you are doing something that... nobody does. When we feel like we are being *suppressed* in some way... from the inside or the outside, it doesn't really matter. In the case what you're talking about, likely, you're just surrendering. Because the immediate tool to crawl out of the swamp isn't apparent. The first thing you gotta find out is that it's not there. And you do that by putting your awareness on it. Which may be hard. But you put your awareness on it. It's the object of your shamatha, you can say. And you just let it rest there. And when it slides off, just put it back on.

Student 5 [01:02:43] It actually does tend to be the object of my shamatha.

LMC [01:02:49] It does tend to be? Well, then what are we complaining about?

Student 5 [01:02:53] All right, fine. [laughter]

LMC [01:03:00] Okay. You're going to report back. And we're going to dedicate the merit of this evening now.

sangha [01:03:12] *dedicating the merit*