
The Middle Length Lamrim

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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We will do a bit of breathing meditation.

Benefits of Meditation

Lama Tsong Khapa's lamrim teachings make it very clear what meditation practice is and what it is for. We must know these points. We frequently talk about what meditation is, which is that it is a means of training our mind to abide in virtuous objects and become habituated with them.

We will find meditation very effective in reducing and overcoming suffering in our life because it counteracts mental afflictions that are the underlying source of all our problems and unhappiness. If we think about what causes these mental afflictions to arise, it is because of not subduing our unsubdued minds. Our mind is the source of all our conduct and experiences. We are led by our mind, so when our mind is led or overpowered by mental afflictions such as anger, obsessive desire, jealousy and so on, it brings us harm. If the mind that leads us is positive such as love and compassion, then it motivates us to engage in positive actions which bring positive results.

Unfortunately, in our case, most of the time we are led by mental afflictions such as anger, jealousy, attachment, pride and so forth. But as the lamrim teachings say, 'Through the force of listening we will become pacified and subdued, and through the force of meditation we will decrease mental afflictions.' Accordingly, we must target our meditation practice at counteracting mental afflictions and as we meditate, the mental afflictions within us must diminish.

The lamrim teachings also succinctly say that when we meditate, we need to think of ourselves as a meditator who is meditating on subduing the unsubdued mind driven by the force of mental afflictions. Meditation is not for eliminating the external causes of distractions and disturbances; it is for internal causes, and as a result, it brings peace and relaxes us.

It is useful to think of times when our minds are preoccupied and overpowered by distracting and disturbing thoughts; at that time we are not relaxed and we do not experience any internal peace. Then, think of times when we can get rid of all those mental distractions and how we experience respite and a true sense of calmness and relaxation. In that way, we will know what it is like to have inner peace within us and appreciate meditation even more.

When our mind wanders after various distracting thoughts or becomes scattered, we lack the power of focus and feel weak and incapacitated. It is like diverting a river in many directions - it loses the force of its current. Likewise, we will become weak if our mind is scattered by various thoughts and we will lack vigour and strength in our activities. Having our minds fully within us will give us more self-confidence, courage, vision, and the motivation to achieve our goals.

Meditation is a good tool to safeguard and secure both mental and physical happiness. What we all seek is happiness, even though we find ourselves in all sorts of problems. Those who

consider themselves to be Dharma practitioners, and those who don't consider themselves as such; whatever actions we are doing, good or bad, deep down we are all the same in seeking happiness and not wanting to suffer. Both happiness and suffering are dependent upon causes and conditions. We, as human beings, are gifted with excellent qualities such as discriminating knowledge.

So, meditation practice means simply utilising that knowledge in terms of safeguarding our interest in obtaining happiness and getting rid of things that bring suffering. The happiness of human beings can only be gained by human beings. So, we are responsible for achieving our happiness and if we have obtained this, it is our responsibility to protect it. If we consider our situation, we may be surrounded by all the right conditions for happiness, on both a mental and physical level. However, we feel unhappy either because we don't recognise or appreciate our situation or we let some circumstances spoil it. In a sense, we are not properly taking care of ourselves, or our interests.

For example, to manage our happiness on a physical level, we need to take good care of the health of our body by building good habits of healthy eating and drinking, and adequate exercise. We are mainly responsible for the health of our bodies. As to our happiness on a mental level, we are talking about our mental health which is also our own responsibility. We will find meditation very effective in bringing mental happiness and rest. Meditation can bring about wholesome and positive states of mind within us. With it comes a calm, clear and happy mind. When we have such a positive state of mind, we can truly say we are happy and feel great, and this will also benefit our physical wellbeing.

Conversely, on a mental level if we have disturbing and worrying thoughts, and even though these thoughts are not beating us with sticks or striking us with weapons, we will suffer a lot and sometimes even feel pain in our back. And to overcome that pain, we take a day off work and get a massage. Therefore, meditation is good for both mental and physical wellbeing.

As mentioned earlier, meditation practice is to habituate our mind with virtuous objects so that virtuous states of mind easily arise within us. If we do more meditation practice and make progress in it, we will note that as a result there is more stability of peace and happiness in our life. Whereas if the result of whatever we normally do and achieve in our mundane life is not bringing us satisfaction and rest, bringing unending problems instead, then this is an indication that the mind that normally leads us is over-powered by mental afflictions or delusions. This shows us that our mind is more habituated toward non-virtuous states of mind. Then, there are times we feel sad, restless, disturbed, confused, and lonely for no obvious reason. This unwanted experience persists no matter what we do. In such times, it is good to be aware of the suffering of pervasive conditioning, one of the three types of suffering that all beings in samsara experience.

But in our case, maybe it's more to do with not directing our time and effort into what truly brings us happiness, both on the mental and physical level. Mostly, all of our time, skill and knowledge, throughout our whole life, is directed towards changing our external circumstances, such as gathering money, making friends, finding better houses, buying things and so on, believing these things will automatically bring the happiness that we seek. We haven't

given serious attention to changing our mental attitudes, such as cultivating virtuous states of mind which bring mental happiness and the things that impact our physical health which bring physical happiness. If we pause for a moment and ask ourselves, 'What are the true causes of our mental and physical happiness? How much effort have we put into gathering those?' we will see that we have invested our effort and time in external distractions.

Overcoming the most forceful mental affliction first

In terms of the meditation practice we should engage in, Lama Tsong Khapa advises us to first engage in meditation practice to overcome the mental afflictions that are most predominant and strongest. If that is attachment, then you must first apply a meditation to tackle that. Otherwise, you will find it very difficult to place your mental focus on anything else, because of the overwhelming influence or emotional turmoil of that attachment.

Similarly, if you are enraged with strong feelings of hatred, then you first need to apply a meditation to counteract that or at least bring it down a bit. Overcoming whatever mental affliction that is most predominant or having an immediate detrimental effect on you will make you feel relaxed and spacious. You can then find it easier to engage in whatever practice you want to do. Having said that, if you advise someone who is feeling strong anger that he should cultivate loving kindness and compassion, the person may become even angrier.

However, if you just express your empathy and tell him that it may be beneficial to take long breaths and to try to keep his mind on his breath and stay calm and relaxed, this might be very beneficial to him in terms of cooling down his anger and giving him immediate relief from anger. It is said that breathing meditation practice is a simple technique but very effective in immediately bringing calmness to the mind. Once the person has rid themselves of their strong anger through simple breathing techniques, then any advice about practices that directly oppose the anger might be beneficial.

Lord Buddha was his audience very skilful in the way he taught others. He taught according to the background and needs of his audience, not just saying whatever he knew. The Buddha's view was that everything is empty of an intrinsic self, but to some listeners, he taught that there is an intrinsic self. And though teaching them this view of an intrinsic self, he skilfully leads them to the view of selflessness in the end.

The Buddha demonstrated perfect skill in guiding others as he saw that developing true knowledge is crucial for spiritual development. Therefore, the Buddha said to his followers that they should never accept his speech out of respect for him, but rather they must examine and find their reasons before believing in what he said. On other hand, as a fully awakened one, the Buddha had the excellent quality of fearlessness, so when the Buddha said to examine his speech, it indicated his absolute quality of fearlessness.

Breathing meditation

Before we begin the breathing meditation, let me say a few words about it. Breathing meditation can be done as a preliminary or preparatory practice for the main session, or it can be the actual practice. For example, let's say your main practice is to develop love and compassion. Doing the breathing meditation before to it will help settle your mind from any distracting thoughts so your main meditation can

be more effective. With the breathing meditation, as much as possible, we keep our mental attention on the incoming and outgoing breath by turning off all other thoughts. We will find that very effective in completely relaxing our mind and body.

Then, as we experience inner peace, stillness, and clarity, our minds transform into a state of indifference to outer objects or a state of neutrality, such that we can easily abide on whatever object we want. We can also engage in the breathing meditation as our main practice by adding details, such as ensuring that both the in and out breaths are neither too long nor too short and not so loud or forceful that we can actually hear them. Most important is knowing and developing the skill of applying mindfulness and introspection. Furthermore, you can incorporate giving and taking meditation into your breathing meditation. You imagine giving happiness and its causes to all other beings as you breathe out with a bit of force, and taking in the suffering of others and its causes as you take a long breath in.

The verse from the *Guru Puja* quoted below is handy for the meditation of giving and taking. Also, you can refer to the course I gave on the meditation of giving and taking based on a teaching by His Holiness's late junior tutor, Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche.

And thus, O venerable compassionate Gurus, we seek
your blessings,
That all karmic debts, obstacles and sufferings
Of mother beings may without exception ripen upon us
right now,
And that we give our happiness and virtue to others
And thereby invest all beings in bliss.

Alternatively, we can do the breathing meditation in conjunction with a purification visualisation. As you breathe out with a bit of force, you imagine all your negativities in the form of dark smoke going out. When you breathe in, you imagine breathing in the blessings, enlightened qualities and activities of all the buddhas. You then imagine that this transforms your body into a pure and stainless body like crystal clear glass.

The meditation posture

For the meditation practice, we should also adopt the right physical posture such as the seven features of the meditation posture of the Vairochana.

- Your two legs are placed in a cross-legged vajra posture. But if this is not convenient you can choose the posture that is most suitable for yourself.
- Keep the back of the body straight and ensure you feel relaxed and comfortable in the posture. If your body is straight, the channels inside the body will become straight which in turn allows the winds in it to flow well and hence benefit the stability and clarity of the mind. The Buddha taught the seven features of the sitting posture, but also said to choose the most comfortable posture. The Buddha was always very considerate and understanding of individual situations in deciding what is beneficial.
- Place your two hands in your lap, the right on the left hand with the tips of two thumbs touching at the level of the navel. Placing your two hands in the lap is relaxing for the body while tipping the thumbs towards the navel has the benefit of firing the inner heat.
- Your head should be slightly bent forward.
- Your two eyes should not be completely open nor closed,

but slightly open, gazing towards the tip of the nose.

- Your shoulders should not be too close to or touching against the sides of the body, rather there should be a bit of space between the side of the body and your elbows. This is to allow the air to flow through.
- Your mouth should not be completely closed or wide open. If it is wide open it will make you thirsty. The tip of the tongue should be touching the upper palate which is to prevent thirst as well as saliva dripping from the mouth which can happen when you meditate for a long time. Your teeth are kept in their natural position.

Adopting the right position of the head, shoulders and eyes has the benefit of overcoming both mental sinking or dullness and excitement in the meditation.

The object of meditation

If you are taking the Buddha as an object of your meditation, then familiarise yourself with the details of the Buddha's features. You might initially have a close look at a statue or painting of the Buddha. This will help you remember the details of the Buddha's features such as his face, colour, shape, hand gestures, and so on.

But, when you begin the meditation, the actual object of meditation where you direct your mental focus is not the external visual object, but the image of that object in your mind, so the object of meditation refers to an inner object. From this point of view, it makes sense that when you meditate your mind abides within. We have to make sure our mind absorbs or enters the object and becomes one with the object. In this way, we can also understand meditation practice in terms of enhancing inner peace and tranquillity.

In meditation practice, we are focussing on the inner object which is the mental picture representing the external object. Although the external object is not focussed upon by our mind, what is being focussed upon corresponds to or represents that object. Hence, as we progress in the meditation, we can reach the point whereby we can mentally perceive the object as clearly and directly as we would with our eye sense consciousness. Having said that, as beginners, the initial sense of clarity and vividness that we will achieve is more like our mental experience rather than the clarity of the object itself. So, on the mental level even as beginners, we can develop clarity and stability through meditation practice and hence reap great benefits in our life.

[Pause for meditation]

Question: In tonight's teaching, you said a beginner will develop more clarity at a mental level than on the object itself. What does that mean?

You have to take into account your own experience of meditation to find this out. When you meditate on an image of a Buddha and make some progress, you may gain some clarity in your mind. You need to check if that clarity is just your mental experience, how you feel, or whether it is in relation to the object. In your mind, you only have a very vague image or picture of the Buddha, more like some sort of dark lump. To perceive the object clearly you have to remove that lump, which is not easy and that takes a lot of meditation practice.

If you make a progress in meditation, you have to expect to achieve some sort of clarity and stillness in your mind. Not achieving this means you are not making any progress in your meditation practice even if you have been doing it for a long time. However, the clarity with respect to the object of meditation itself will come later.

Question: In visualising Tara, how big should she be?

It is better to start by thinking of the object as being about the size of a thumb.

If you start meditating on a large size object, then later you will find it difficult to meditate on a small object. Whereas if you start meditating on a small object and then use a larger size object later, you won't have a problem. Imagining a very large object on your head will be a problem, won't it? Our mind functions on an ordinary level of perspective, so it is recommended the visualised object should not be touching our head. We can overcome any inconveniences of feeling the weight of the object by imagining the object sitting upon a mass of clouds, just as a plane flies over clouds.

One master advised his disciple to meditate with the object on the crown of the head who took that to mean visualising himself on the crown of his master who had a smooth-shaven head. So, the disciple said to his master that when he meditates, he keeps slipping off the master's head. Of course, the disciple misunderstood the instruction, but the fact that he raised his problem with his meditation was a good sign that he was actually meditating and speaking from his meditational experience.

Question: I've got a friend who is in an intensive care unit very close to dying. She's a very kind person. Is there some kind of meditation that is beneficial for someone in her situation without being Buddhist?

You can do a Buddhist practice for her sake - you don't need to let her know. What is important is that your practice is beneficial for her. For example, it will be very beneficial to meditate by imaging the medicine Buddha above her, with blessing nectar light descending into her. I can confirm that once I did the same for someone who was dying and the benefit to the person was obvious.

Buddha loves and benefits all sentient beings equally. One Christian friend said to me that love should be extended to all living beings, not just to only those who follow their own traditions. This makes sense, even from the point of view of a theistic religion according to which everything is a creation of God and so must be loved.

Question: With any worldly activity, I feel that you've got a clear idea of what you can achieve. In terms of practising meditation, what's a realistic goal?

Ultimately the goal of Dharma practice is to achieve complete enlightenment, or buddhahood which in turn is to benefit all sentient beings. We are a long way from reaching that. But the practice we engage in is supposed to be a cause for that goal. In fact, the bodhicitta mind says everything about our practice including our goal. So, to achieve our spiritual goal we must engage in meditating on bodhicitta. There are various techniques to engage in

the practice to generate bodhicitta, which has been explained clearly. There is an order for the development of our mind to give rise to bodhicitta, beginning with meditating on equanimity followed by the seven-fold cause and effect method.

With the seven-fold cause and effect method, the last cause is the special intention of universal responsibility which we cultivate by progressing through all the previous steps. The effect of all that is the cultivation of bodhicitta. So, there is a clear goal in our practice and a sequential order of the practices to follow to reach that goal.

Question: For me, I feel those steps seem to be very distant.

The Lord Buddha taught also tantra, which is the quick path. But to follow the tantric path, you are required to generate an even greater force of bodhicitta and greater skill and wisdom. According to the sutra path, you have to accumulate merit and wisdom over three countless aeons. Hence, bodhisattvas on the sutra path have incredible courage, determination and patience in terms of engaging in their path and benefiting sentient beings. On the other hand, those who follow the tantric path accumulate merit and wisdom faster because they combine both method and wisdom in an instant.

Hence, they don't require countless eons to complete the accumulation of merit and wisdom to achieve Buddhahood.

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