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# The Middle Length Lamrim

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## **Breathing meditation and its benefits**

We will do some meditation together. As much as possible, try to completely relax your body, and if you can, choose the meditation posture which has the seven features of Vairochana Buddha. The main purpose of this meditation is to achieve a calm mind by preventing it from being overpowered or controlled by mental afflictions.

Mental afflictions are the main source of all our unwanted thoughts and emotions. When we say faults of the mind, these faults refer to mental afflictions, but not the mind itself. If we have no mental affliction, such as anger, then there is no cause or reason for us to be unhappy or experience any suffering.

Meditation is a remedy to counteract mental afflictions. Since our mind has been habituated to follow mental afflictions, without applying meditation it will get distracted and disturbed by mental afflictions, and hence it will lack peace and stability.

Besides, whether we are happy or not primarily depends on the type of mind that we have and where it leads us. If our mind is overpowered by mental afflictions, then we will undergo suffering or do wrong as a result. Therefore, when we meditate, it is important that we always make sure we are working on our mind, and fully direct our mind to the object of meditation.

For example, if we are doing a breathing meditation, then we make sure that we direct our mental attention to breathing in and out. Mentally counting our breaths - in and out - can help us to maintain mental focus. It is said that if we can maintain our mental attention on breathing - up to twenty rounds of breathing - counting each in and out breath as one round of breathing, then our mind will settle inward with peace with clarity.

If we meditate on a different object, then we must ensure that the object we focus on is in our mind. We may have an external object, but in meditation the object we direct our mind to is the mental image representing that object. This is very important and ensures that when we meditate our mind abides within. The meditation then becomes an effective tool for completely relaxing and stabilising our mind inward. Having a calm, clear and stable mind makes a huge difference to the effectiveness and joy of whatever we do, since our mind is with us and at our service.

For the breathing meditation, we need to make sure that the breathing in and out is not too long or too short, not too forceful or too weak, not too noisy or too quiet. The breathing is slow and natural. The exception is when we are engaging in breathing meditation in conjunction with the meditation of giving and taking. In this case, it is suggested we forcefully breathe in and out for the giving and taking meditation to be effective. Since a lot of us do

not have much time or can sit in meditation for long periods, engaging in breathing meditation is good, as it is a simple technique but is effective and fast in terms of immediately getting rid of any disturbed states of mind, thoughts and emotions, and finding peace, tranquillity and ease within. We can also use the breathing meditation technique as a tool to sustain any mental peace and joy we possess.

## **Effectiveness of meditation**

How does the meditation work in subduing the mind? Meditation is the most effective means for subduing the mind. While meditating, since the mind is directed onto a virtuous object or is being tied to that object, it can't be on a non-virtuous object. Just as if there is one seat, if someone has already occupied it, no other person can sit there at the same time. This is to say that the mind can engage in only one object at a time. So, with meditation, when we engage or discipline the mind to abide in virtue, it can't engage in non-virtue. This is how we train the mind to habituate with virtuous thoughts and objects.

## **Full mental attention is crucial in meditation**

Doing the meditation properly is more important for its effectiveness and progress than the duration. For example, having full mental attention on the object is very crucial in meditation. Especially for beginners, they should make the meditation short, but can have more sessions.

What is important is to apply mindfulness to retain the object. You extend the meditation time as you make progress in retaining the mental attention for a longer period. For example, initially you try, through mindfulness, to keep the mind on the object for one minute. After you have achieved that, you then try to extend the duration of concentration to two minutes, slowly extending it further. In this way we gradually and progressively move in the meditation practice.

## **The patience of acceptance**

Just as in accomplishing any other activity, we must be patient with meditation and Dharma practice. There is a type of patience called the patience of acceptance - voluntarily accepting hardship or suffering. If we have that patience, then whatever hindrances we face, we won't see it as a problem or hardship, rather we will see it as a challenge or thing that we must get over to reach our desired goal. Whereas if we lack patience, we may get overwhelmed by the hindrances, and either we find it too hard or we suffer a lot, or we may even lose hope and give up. For example, we may find the problem so hard to handle that we even become short of breath. So, it is beneficial to be aware of all the benefits and virtues of patience to be successful in our endeavours, be that our meditation or Dharma practice, or any other mundane activity we do.

## **What meditation should I do?**

Meditation practice counteracts mental afflictions. What sort of mental afflictions should we target? Lama Tsongkhapa said that we should first target the mental affliction which causes us the most harm. This is very practical advice because, for example, if an unfulfilled desire is too strong, it can impede all our activities,

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including our meditation practice. Therefore, it makes sense to first do something to counteract it, such as engaging in a meditation where we reflect on the undesirable aspect of the object. Since this goes against the way the object is perceived through the lens of the mind of desire, it can counteract that desire.

### **How to meditate**

Meditation is an effective means for developing mental concentration or focus and mindfulness. Increased concentration and mindfulness also help us succeed in whatever activity we undertake. When we meditate, we must maintain our mental focus and employ mindfulness, so it helps us to develop concentration and mindfulness. If we check our experience, we note that while our mind remains completely on the object it is calm and subdued and the effect is that we have more peace and joy within us.

The benefit of meditation to our mental and physical health is commonly known these days. We note that if we are distracted by something else or mentally not focused completely on what we are doing, we can't function well, and eventually we get bored, or we hate what we are doing. Whereas if the mind is completely on the object or on what we are doing, we will find that activity easier, more enjoyable, and more effective. If our mind is scattered all over the place, then what we do will become ineffective. For example, say you are physically sitting on a chair and working on something at your desk, if your mind is wandering outside, then you can't do the activity well.

The reason why we are not able to achieve the result is not necessarily because we lack the capacity but because we are not fully utilising our capacity due to the distracted mind. The Sanskrit word for human being is *purusha*, which literally means 'one with capacity'. So, as a human being we are the one with capacity or potential. However, when our mind is too distracted our capacity is depleted and we cannot focus and think properly or achieve much.

If we check our current state of mind, most likely we will find that it has the habit of wandering outside, from one thing to another thing, and not settling down. This triggers various mental afflictions and results in bringing stress, anxiety, worry, frustration, pain and so forth. Therefore, we must engage in the meditation practice which is a very effective means for training the mind to settle down and breaking the habit of mentally wandering outside. Instead of our mind being overpowered by wandering thoughts and mental afflictions, we should have control over it. This is what the meditation is all about, disciplining our mind and getting rid of mental afflictions.

If we have control over our mind, then we can make it work in alignment with our self and our body, so that wherever we are, our body and mind is also there, instead of our body being here but our mind being elsewhere. When this happens, we can't even go to sleep. For instance, we may physically lie in bed and be trying to sleep, but we can't because our mind is busy and not in the bed.

### **Happiness is a mental factor**

If we closely observe our mind, we can recognise that what we emotionally go through depends primarily on our state of mind, not so much on external conditions, such as how much wealth we possess etc. At the end of the day, what we all seek in our life is living a healthy and happy life. Happiness is a mental factor. If we have that factor, we will be happy. If we don't, then even if we possess huge wealth, it won't bring us happiness. So, what is the point of wealth? Sometimes even wealth itself becomes a direct cause of stress and problems in our life.

So, we need to engage in meditation and mind training to tap into inner peace and happiness, as well as to transform outer things and events in our favour. Most times when we undergo suffering, it is because of having anger, attachment, jealousy, or pride and hence the causes are related to our mind and emotions. To overcome or reduce suffering we must work on our minds and emotions which is what meditation and Dharma practice is all about.

Mental afflictions really make us suffer. For example, when we feel jealous towards another person's goodness, we can check how we feel and if we want that feeling. Of course we don't want it, because we feel horrible and it is painful. At that time we are controlled or overpowered by jealousy, which is a mental affliction. In a way we become the victim of the mental afflictions within us.

When mental afflictions such as strong attachment arise, rather than simply being overwhelmed or succumbing to them, observe them closely to understand them more, in this way you will be more motivated and better equipped to combat them. Even simply recognising how destructive and harmful they are will be very beneficial.

While we make a conscious effort to reduce mental afflictions, we must also make an effort to cultivate positive thinking. For example, we must have some sense of contentment to find satisfaction and meaning in our lives. Contentment will arise when we say to ourselves that whatever wealth, friends etc. we have is good enough. It is also beneficial to maintain positive and holistic thinking, as this will ease and open our heart and mind.

Now we will do a short meditation using an image of the Buddha. Remember that the focal object is the mental image of the Buddha in your mind, not an external image of the Buddha outside. Try to have this mental image of the Buddha as clear and vivid as possible. Having clarity and vividness helps to overcome the meditation fault of laxity or mental sinking. Imagine the image of the Buddha in the nature of light, which is clear, but having a bit of weight helps to overcome the meditation fault of excitement or distraction.

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