
The Middle Length Lamrim

ལྷན་ཁུངས་འབྲིང་། རྒྱུ་སེམས་སྦྱོང་བའི་རིམ་པ།

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10 September 2024

Habituating our mind to altruism

As usual, please cultivate the bodhicitta motivation, which is the mind that wishes to benefit other sentient beings.

Habituating ourselves to this mind of benefiting others is very beneficial. Bodhicitta is rooted in love and compassion for all other sentient beings. If we think about it, cultivating love and compassion for other beings is the true source of peace for ourselves, as well as for our family, the community and the world.

Within each of us, we hold the main cause of true peace for ourselves and others – holding the right mental attitude. If we love and care about each other sincerely, from the bottom of our heart, there's no room for harbouring ill-will and harmful thoughts. That means we experience inner peace. With love and compassion, we will support and benefit, rather than harm, each other.

Physical and mental happiness

As human beings, what we wish for is happiness. We can talk about different types of happiness: short-term and long-term happiness, or temporary and ultimate happiness. We can also understand happiness in terms of the happiness of mind and body.

Because we are always seeking happiness, we must ask ourselves, what kind of happiness do we seek? Are we finding it or not?

For example, if we think that being physically fit and healthy is an important factor for our overall happiness, we need to know and create the right causes and conditions to achieve a healthy body. We have access to the resources and support to maintain a healthy body. It's not that difficult to educate ourselves about attaining good health, by changing our eating habits and living a healthy life. So, if we make the effort, we can improve the health of our body.

Along with a healthy body and good material conditions, we also need a healthy and happy mind; otherwise we can't be happy. So, we need to identify the causes and conditions that affect our mental happiness.

If we check, we'll see that whether or not our mind is peaceful and happy depends on the type of thoughts and emotions we generate. When our mind is crowded with disturbing thoughts, it brings inner stress, tension, turmoil, anxiety, fear, frustration, unhappiness, and so forth. If we analyse, we can relate feeling disturbed and upset mentally or emotionally to the thought patterns or mental attitude we have within us.

In order to counter that disturbing mental attitude, we need to recognise it and its object and then counter that thought pattern. To quickly get rid of such unwanted thoughts, we can simply divert our mental attention to something else. Meditation is the most effective means to do that because through it we can rest our mind in peace and happiness.

So, meditation is an effective tool, not only to achieve long-term happiness – for example, happiness in future lives – but also to achieve happiness in our everyday life, which is related to the types of mind we generate. Since what we want is happiness, we should utilise our knowledge, skills and qualifications in achieving that happiness and eliminating suffering.

As mentioned earlier, it is easier to achieve physical happiness than mental happiness. For physical happiness, we just have to gather the favourable physical factors – for example, taking care of our skin and diet to keep our body healthy and beautiful. Likewise, we know that good food, drink, a nice home, etc. will bring physical comfort.

Changing our mental habits

However, achieving stable mental peace and happiness is more difficult because we need to deal with something abstract – changing our mental habits. Sometimes we find that, no matter how hard we work or what we accomplish in life, inwardly we feel a sense of emptiness, as if something is missing or yet to be achieved.

As discussed before, if we check up on why we feel that way, it's to do with certain kinds of thoughts. This means that if we don't keep checking and correcting our mind, it's almost impossible to bring about inner peace and happiness. We need to recognise and diminish the tendency of our mind to constantly wander off, following one object after another, because this restless wandering results in us unnecessarily generating thoughts and emotions that are detrimental to our wellbeing and our view of the world.

If we closely observe our mind over time, we'll notice the immediate cause of our mental unrest is the afflictive emotions that we generate within us, such as anger and attachment.

Although it may be hard to recognise, attachment is a deep and lasting cause of mental unrest and unhappiness. It's not easy for us to overcome attachment, unless we meditate for a long period of time and put a great deal of effort into it. On the other hand, when anger arises, we can recognise it as harmful, because it's a forceful emotion that directly harms or disturbs us and others. However, while it can greatly harm us while it is present, it usually doesn't last as long as attachment. This means that, overall, attachment brings us more suffering than does anger.

What we're talking about here is how to make the 'I' happy or how to reduce the suffering of the 'I'. We each have within us this natural sense of 'I', and we're always concerned about the wellbeing or needs of this 'I'. This 'I'

within us always seeks happiness and tries to avoid suffering.

Happiness and suffering result from their respective causes and conditions. There are external and internal causes and, of the two, internal causes are more important and powerful. If we have the internal causes of happiness, we'll be happy, even if we lack external causes, but not vice versa.

For example, externally we could have everything: a comfortable house, car, and the rest. But these material things won't automatically give this 'I' a sense of satisfaction and happiness. As we probe the causes that bring unhappiness to the 'I', we'll find the main cause is the afflictive or destructive emotions, such as attachment and anger, which we generate in the mind. As long as this 'I' is under the power of the afflictive emotions, we or the 'I' can never find a true sense of peace and happiness.

Hence, true peace and happiness will only arise when we defeat the afflictive emotions.

About meditation: posture, object, duration and aim

Meditation practice is all about counteracting afflictive emotions, freeing our mind and our self from its control. Which afflictive emotions should we counteract first? We should initially counteract the afflictive emotion that is the most harmful or overwhelming for us.

Meditation is a physical and mental discipline or activity. When we meditate, if we can, we should assume the cross-legged vajra sitting posture (ideally, full lotus posture), which is characterised by the seven features of Vairochana Buddha. This satisfies the physical requirement.

The object of meditation is where we place or direct our mind. A suitable object should have the effect of preventing any afflictive emotions or distracting thoughts from arising. When we place the mind on that object, it should have the effect of completely resting and calming our mind.

Having assumed the most suitable and relaxing sitting posture, we begin our meditation by emptying our mind and switching off all thoughts. Let the mind completely rest and abide one hundred percent within us. Just remain in that inner stillness and enjoy it for a little while or until our mind is just about to wander, and then direct the mind to the chosen meditation object.

We can talk a bit more about meditation objects. As Buddhists, it's recommended we use an image of a buddha, such as a Buddha statue or painting. However, keep in mind that the statue or painting is only an aid for meditation, not the actual object where you direct your mental focus. The *actual object* you focus on is the *mental image* of the object that you use - it is therefore an internal object.

In Tibetan, the actual object is called *gom-ki mikten*: *gom* means meditation and *mikten* means the basis of observation. So, literally, it is the basis of observation of meditation, or an observed object of meditation on which

to direct our focus. Thus, the observed object of meditation is an internal object or mental image that represents an external image of, for example, the Buddha.

In a sense, the observed object of meditation can't be an object of a sense faculty, such as our eye-sense consciousness. Hence, we say that when we meditate, our mind abides within us if it attends to the object. It is only through training our mind to focus on an internal object that we can achieve clairvoyant power; we cannot achieve that by looking at the object with our eyes.

Furthermore, it is recommended to imagine the object as small as possible. If we train first in focusing on a small object, we'll then find it easier to focus on a larger object, but not necessarily vice versa.

It's also recommended that initially we keep the duration of meditation short. We should extend that time once we get used to meditating. The key is to meditate effectively over a short period of time, rather than ineffectively over a longer period. In fact, if we keep meditating while our mind is distracted, we'll develop the bad habit of being distracted during meditation.

The sole purpose of meditation is to get rid of disturbing thoughts and afflictive emotions. Meditation is a practice whereby we train and habituate our mind to focus on positive objects, bringing about a genuine sense of inner peace and comfort. The disturbing thoughts and emotions, which bring turmoil within us, are caused by lack of control over our mind. With meditation we are controlling our mind by settling it on positive objects and ways of thinking. In Tibetan, *gom*, the word for meditation, literally means habituating our mind to a positive way of thinking and positive objects.

For example, if we meditate by simply directing our attention to the inhalation and exhalation of the breath, by the time we finish 21 rounds of breathing, we'll find our mind completely at peace and relaxed. Even if our meditation practice isn't a direct antidote to the afflictive emotions, in terms of eliminating them from their root, it's an effective tool for immediately preventing afflictive emotions from arising, and also enhancing the peace and joy within us.

Meditation is about cultivating positive or virtuous states of mind that result in peace and happiness, whereas negative mental attitudes, in the form of various disturbing thoughts and afflictive emotions, bring us restlessness and unhappiness. Meditation practice works because positive and negative states of mind are two opposing forces, meaning they can't arise or be present at the same time. For example, love and hatred are two opposing mental states. So, when we have love towards someone, we can't have hatred for them at the same time.

Mental transformation

While our mind may be positive or negative, it is our mind, under our control. That means we can train and change it if we want to. But to change it, we must put effort into meditation. If we put effort into it, we'll find meditation to be very effective in training our mind and hence beneficial.

For example, we can meditate to develop loving kindness and compassion towards others. To meditate means to overcome our negative mental outlook and cultivate a positive one. Whenever we see any other beings – whether they're close to us like a friend, distant from us like an enemy, or neither close nor distant, like a stranger – if they're lacking happiness, we should train our mind to sincerely wish them happiness or, if they are suffering, to train our mind in wishing them to be free of suffering.

Even for those you hate, you can see that person as being afflicted with suffering or facing certain problems. Without training our mind, we would hold a negative attitude of jealousy towards others' happiness and even wish them to have more suffering. This is totally wrong, even harmful, and not beneficial and healthy for us.

Instead, if we develop a positive mental attitude, such as love and compassion for others, the result will be more peace and happiness for us. With love and compassion, we extend benefit to others if we can; if we can't, we can at least feel empathy, and wish and pray, 'How wonderful it would be if other beings had happiness and were free from suffering. May they have happiness and be free from suffering. May I be a cause to bring them happiness and free them from suffering.'

Training our mind in this way will foster genuine love and compassion, and eliminate any contempt and hatred we feel towards others, including those we don't like. We can even develop a feeling of closeness to those we keep distant or consider as enemies, as well as those we consider strangers, in that we're careless about their wellbeing and happiness. In reality, whenever we hold hatred and anger, we lose our inner peace, joy and stability.

We also need to be careful in cultivating genuine love rather than attachment, which is based on self-satisfaction and delusion. If we think about it, attachment is a deep and lasting source of suffering for us. Once, someone said to me that he cried the whole night – so much so that the pillow was wet through – because of the breakdown of his relationship with someone.

We can see how much we suffer because of our afflictive emotions. And, since meditation is an effective tool for remedying these afflictive emotions, we can understand its practical benefits in our life. In fact, the main purpose of meditation is to free ourselves from afflictive emotions, such as attachment, anger, and jealousy. When we're able to effectively manage our thoughts and emotions, and can control our afflictive emotions, we'll have a stable life and find lasting peace and happiness. So, meditation offers us a more reliable and sustained means of finding happiness and peace.

Happiness is not conferred on us by external objects. Even if we possessed much wealth and reputation, there's no guarantee we'd have peace and happiness. True peace and happiness lie within us and depend on our mental attitude. If we check up, the most effective means for finding inner peace and happiness is meditation and Dharma practice. Dharma practice is really about training our mind. It enables us to access

true inner peace and happiness and achieve the cessation of suffering and inner chaos.

Mental peace and happiness also contribute to a healthy body. Western neuroscientists have found that people who enjoy stable mental peace and happiness enjoy better physical health and live longer. We know that to live a long life, we must also have a willingness to live. However, for some people, when there's too much suffering and misery, it's difficult for them to maintain the will to continue living; unfortunately, some will even commit suicide because of their unhappiness. It seems having a negative outlook on life is detrimental not just to one's health, but also to one's longevity.

While Dharma practice is the means to overcome mental afflictions and train our mind, we must directly apply it to our own mind.

For example, we practise Dharma to generate love and compassion within us. Love is the genuine wish for other beings to have happiness, while compassion is the genuine wish for them to be free of suffering. As part of our Dharma practice to generate love and compassion, we pray, 'May all beings have happiness and be free from suffering'. But, unless we infuse the meaning of the prayer with our mind and from the depths of our heart, it will be just empty words.

When we say we meditate on love and compassion, what does it mean? It means *transforming our mind into the mind of love and compassion*. By contrast, when we say we are meditating on impermanence or emptiness, it means we take impermanence or emptiness as the object of our mental contemplation so that we can gain an understanding of them.

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Edited Version*

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