

As usual, we are here to talk about meditation practice as well as to do some practice together.

Let's first talk about the physical posture involved in meditation practice. Of course, many of you who are senior students would have heard this many times before and may be familiar with it, but there may be some of you who are new to learning meditation.

Simply listening to the teachings is not enough. After listening, we should not put our knowledge aside; we have got to do something about it, otherwise, we will end up just gathering information and all the time and effort put into studying will make no difference to your life. So, after listening to or studying the Dharma, we are supposed to contemplate its meaning by utilising our intelligence, examining what we have learnt makes sense or not and whether it is meaningful or not. If it makes sense and is meaningful, we should not stop there just saying to ourselves, 'it's great and I have learnt a lot'. We need to put that proven knowledge into practice. This is how we can reap benefits out of our Dharma and meditation practice.

In relation to the importance of paying greater attention and putting more effort into something we are interested in, let me share with you my early experience of learning English. I must say I didn't do well. This is going back to my time in Atisha Centre in Bendigo when I first came to Australia. At that time I had no translator, so the translator of the Queensland Chenrezig Centre was invited to help. She was a Tibetan Buddhist nun named Tsenga-la who I knew from Kopan. We were good friends. She was very open and straight forward, which I liked. She used to encourage me and also help me with my English. At one time we both attended an English language class in Bendigo town. As part of testing my English, they asked me to write something in English. I had great difficulty in writing English - in fact, I could not really write properly at all. So, later on the nun said to me, 'Geshe-la, I've told you a long time ago that you need to make an effort!' I realised why she had made that comment, so I didn't say anything to her. Looking back, surely if I had listened to her before, I wouldn't have a problem in writing English. I couldn't write in English because I didn't put in enough effort. I had a good and very supportive female English language teacher. Since I could not write in English, she actually wrote down everything she did in class for me, so I had something to take home. The teacher was really very good. I attended the class for about two months. At the end it may be that I was not that bad a student because the school sent me a letter with a positive remark on my progress and their appreciation of my attendance.

Whether we are studying Dharma or even mundane topics, it is important that whatever we are interested in we focus on it well, make an effort, and genuinely show interest in it. This is an important factor in our progress and success.

To return to the topic of discussion, there are a number of features of a suitable meditation posture.

- The back of the body should be kept straight, just like a stack of coins. (In Tibet, we used to have real silver and gold coins, unlike here.) The back should be neither leaning forward nor backward or tilted to either side. Keeping the back straight makes the psychic channels straight and clear. This causes the wind energy to flow in and out smoothly and as a result makes it easier to focus the mind on the object and develop concentration. Other benefits of keeping the body straight include overcoming sleepiness and mental drowsiness.
- The legs are in the full or half cross-legged vajra lotus posture. The benefit of adopting cross-legged vajra posture is to be able to meditate for a prolonged period and in ease. As this posture represents the posture of the Buddha, it is said there is the added benefit of receiving an inspiration or blessing from the Buddha.
- The hands are placed four fingers width below the navel, palm upward, the right on top of the left. The tip of the two thumbs slightly raised towards the navel. The tip of the thumbs symbolises blazing of the inner heat through the channels and thus having an effect of relaxing the channels and arousing loving kindness.
- The eyes are not completely closed or wide open but gazing down towards the tip of the nose so that your mental focus is towards the space in front of you. This helps to overcome mental sinking and excitement.
- The head is slightly bent forward to avoid the channel facing upward. This has the benefit of preventing excitement too.
- The shoulders are level and arms are positioned so that they are away from and not touching the side of the body, allowing the air to flow around the arms easily. The position represents the vulture spreading its wings. I have observed some people meditating with their arms completely touching against their bodies.
- The tip of the tongue should be touching or placed against the upper palate. This is to prevent saliva dripping from the mouth or thirst whilst meditating. So, you don't need to have water beside you all the time. The lips are kept as natural as you normally would have them. The mouth should not be open too much because if you do that it will cause a dry throat as the wind passes through it easily, and also makes you thirsty.

As mentioned earlier, all these features make a difference, especially if you are meditating for a prolonged time. In short, this cross-legged vajra posture with seven features represents the sitting posture of the Buddha. If you add the breathing technique, then there are eight features to a meditation posture.

Let's now talk about the object of meditation. As to where you position the object of meditation, it is said that the object should not be placed too high or too low. Regarding the nature or substance of the object, it is recommended to think of the object being in the form of luminous light, yet having some weight. While the object is not too high and having some weight is suitable to prevent excitement, not too low and being in the form of luminous light is suitable to prevent mental sinking.

In breathing meditation, the object of focus in the meditation is the incoming and outgoing breath. First of all, we need to ensure that we are breathing properly so that our breathing

is not noisy; breathing in and out evenly in the sense of not having a long breath out and a short breath in. The breathing is natural in the sense of not needing to make any effort to breathe.

Now in the actual meditation, we should be mentally focussed on the breath single-pointedly. One way to keep the focus is to mentally count the cycles of inhalation and exhalation by utilising our mindfulness and memory, mentally saying, 'I am breathing in', now I am breathing out' and so on and so forth. The next important topic is to recognise the suitable conditions that we need to gather and the obstacles that we need to get rid of for the meditation. If we recognise these, then as we are very well prepared, we will progress well in meditation.

The suitable conditions that we need to gather in meditation practice are primarily two: mindfulness or memory, and mental alertness or awareness. Whenever we engage in meditation, we must equip ourselves with these two important meditation tools. The obstacles to get rid of for the meditation are also mainly two, which are mental excitement and mental sinking. The perfect state of meditation really depends upon achieving the perfect state of meditative concentration, free of these two main obstacles of excitement and mental sinking. The effective means of remedying these two obstacles are applying the above two suitable conditions of mindfulness and alertness.

Asanga's *Compendium of Knowledge* indicated that there are three features of mindfulness. The first feature is that the object of mindfulness has to be something known or familiar to you. The second feature is the mental attitude or aspect of mindfulness that is an ability to remember the object. Good mindfulness will not allow one to lose or forget about the object. The third feature of mindfulness relates to its function. The mental function of mindfulness is to engage the mind in being fully focused on the object, without any distractions. So, the mental function of mindfulness is to prevent mental distraction.

We can now understand how, if we are able to apply mindfulness properly, we can direct our mental attention onto the object without falling under the influence of any wandering thoughts or distractions. As a result of this, we can develop a single-pointed state of concentration. Mindfulness practice is also key to many other practices such as developing a clear sense of discerning the things to accept and the things to reject. We will benefit greatly if we are able to maintain mindfulness about what we ought to do and not do at all times.

Besides mindfulness, another very important suitable condition to develop concentration is cultivating alertness or awareness. Meditation practice is not simply about keeping the mind on the object and staying in stillness. It should also enhance mental clarity, and through it, a discriminating wisdom. Alertness or awareness is a mental factor which belongs to the category of discriminating wisdom. Applying alertness in the meditation will enable us to recognise if any faults arise in our meditation. In other words, it will alert us if any faults arise in our practice and we can then correct them by applying an appropriate remedy. Not only in meditation practice, but in any other activities that we undertake, applying alertness or awareness is as important as mindfulness. Being always aware of what we are doing means clearly knowing whether what we are doing is working or not, beneficial or not, and if not, then allowing us

to take appropriate measures. It is said that mindfulness is like a master and alertness is the servant.

Now let's briefly discuss the two main obstacles in meditation, which are excitement and mental sinking.

Excitement occurs when there are distractions in the meditation. As we engage in meditation practice, a part of our mind focuses on the object, while another part of the mind wanders off after other things due to distracting thoughts. Such distraction indicates the presence of a gross form of excitement in the meditation. This can be resolved by making an effort to bring our mental attention back to the object. Having placed the mind on the object, if after a little while a part of the mind slips away to a distraction due to desire, this is an indication of a subtle form of excitement occurring in the meditation.

The other obstacle is called mental sinking. The sign of a gross sinking is when there is a good focus of the mind on the object, but it is lacking clarity or vividness. If the clarity is lacking force or intensity, then this is an indication of a subtle form of mental sinking.

We will stop the talk here. It is quite hot, but we will do a little bit of breathing meditation together. Please ensure that you fully relax your body. Then, try to gently remove all the outgoing thoughts and let the mind completely settle within. We should then try to direct our mind onto the incoming and outgoing breath as much as possible, with full mental attention, without losing any part of the attention to other objects of distraction.

[Meditation]

Now we will chant the Buddha's mantra. Try to keep the mind inward, focussing on the sound of the mantra while we chant and when we stop chanting, try to retain the mind inward.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNIYE SOHA

In March, Geshe Lobsang Dorje will be teaching on the *Thirty-Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva* on Wednesday nights. The following month Sandup will be in India for a couple of weeks, and Geshe Doga will teach on the other Wednesdays. After that, Geshe-Doga will teach once a month and Geshe Lobsang Dorje will take the other Wednesday nights.

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