
Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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Let's begin with our usual meditation. Make sure you cultivate the proper motivation as described in the prayer for taking refuge and generating bodhicitta. We have just recited it three times in order to remind us repeatedly of the importance of beginning the practice with the right motivation.

[tong-len meditation]

Cultivating love and compassion, as you have just done, is the most beneficial meditation because it counteracts the mind that makes us unhappy and restless, which is the main source of all of our problems. If we generate love and compassion then all hostile mental attitudes towards others in the form of mental afflictions such as vengeance, anger, pride, jealousy, competitiveness etc. will cease.

As these afflictive emotions are responsible for our unhappiness, we will naturally find happiness if we subdue them. As I always say, if the relationship between two people is based on mutual love, compassion and caring for each other, then there will be less room for friction and anger. Less anger between two people means more joy and happiness in their relationship. Love and compassion is the foundation and the main protector of our life. It is a fact that in the early stage of our life we relied upon the loving care of our parents to survive. Likewise, towards the end of our life, our survival also depends upon support from others.

It is very important to realise that both happiness and suffering are dependent upon the mind itself. This is to say that within us there are cause and effect links: happiness arises from positive states of mind and suffering arises from negative states of mind. Recognising this fact will be of tremendous benefit in terms of motivating ourselves to engage in thought transformation. Just as education is the key for the success in worldly pursuits, it is equally important in spiritual pursuits. In other words, to do well in spiritual practices such as the thought transformation practice we must educate ourselves in how our mind works, and the various skills and strategies we can use to bring the mind under control.

What is the purpose of life?

We need to reflect upon and ask ourselves some fundamental questions about life. What is the purpose of life? The purpose is simply achieving happiness and avoiding suffering, and in this respect we are all the same whether we consider ourselves believers or non-believers. Even though we can be very diverse in terms of our lifestyles, work etc. we are all the same in wanting to achieve happiness and avoid suffering.

Now, if we probe into why we are all the same in wanting happiness and not wanting suffering, one reason relates to the sense of 'I' that is embedded within all of us. It is because of this sense of 'I' that we all have this natural tendency of wanting happiness but not suffering. That sense of 'I', and along with it the thought of wanting happiness and not wanting suffering arises innately and forcefully, without requiring any reason to prove it.

True happiness lies within us, not outside

Holding that fundamental wish to achieve happiness and alleviate suffering, worldly people work hard through various means, including knowledge, and are successful in terms of overcoming problems relating to physical health, food, clothes, drink, shelter etc., and making their living conditions very comfortable. Yet despite their advanced material success, they are not finding enough happiness within themselves or they experience a deficiency in mental happiness.

This is obviously because they are only rich on the outside, or materially in terms of possessing billions of dollars, but are poor inside without enough inner wealth. Inwardly they hold a strong egotistic mind accompanied by desire, pride, jealousy, miserliness etc. Whereas there are others who may not be rich externally, but they are rich internally in terms of possessing the qualities of loving kindness, compassion, lacking anger, jealousy, and pride. Between the two, those who are rich internally truly exhibit more happiness and joy. I choose the latter one. Which one you would like to choose is up to you.

On the television I saw a man who is very rich but very unhappy and experiencing a serious sleeping problem. On the other hand, I have come across a homeless man who did not have a house, proper clothes or a bed, but he was just sleeping out there very peacefully. In another instance I saw an elderly man living a life by selling a magazine. I went up to him to support him and tried to offer him some money. But the man said to me that he was doing fine and didn't want money from me because he was quite happy with what he was earning. I sometimes learn a lot by observing things around me, and you should try to learn in that way too.

The spiritual journey begins with the knowledge that no matter how great the external wealth it does not guarantee true happiness, because true happiness lies within us, not outside, and the means to access that is through spiritual practice.

Love and compassion is the essence of the spiritual practice

Cultivating love and compassion is the essence of spiritual practice; in fact, it is the fundamental teaching of all the spiritual traditions. The Lord Buddha's saying, 'Do not harm other beings' is a distinguishing feature of Buddhism. The Buddha guides his followers to approach learning and practice on the basis of adhering to the principle of non-violence or non-harmfulness. We know that the principle of non-violence is the key factor for world peace and happiness. We also know that if we prevent harm to each other then there will be a genuine peace and happiness.

My frequent advice to you all is to try to keep a positive state of mind because it brings happiness in your life and

try to eliminate a negative state of mind because that upsets you and brings unhappiness. I tell people all the time that if you keep a good heart then you will be happy. Is there really any point in harming other beings? No, there isn't any point or any benefit. In fact, if you harm other beings, harmfulness comes back to you.

Recognising this fact that harming other beings just brings you trouble will make you think twice before you cause harm to other beings. Taking into account the law of karma and its result, harming other beings equals directly or indirectly harming oneself. We can see how when we harm other beings our mind is immediately disturbed, and as a result we lose peace and happiness and all the goodness in our life. I advise people to start cultivating love and compassion for those with whom you live in the same house, with whom you eat and drink, and stay or go out together. In this way you will be creating a congenial atmosphere in the house and all the people living there will be happy living together and will be friendly, trusting and supportive of each other. After this we gradually extend our love and compassion towards all other beings.

In the last two weeks you held discussion sessions. I hope you have found them useful. As all of you already have a sound knowledge, it is important not to lose it. Participation in such discussion sessions provides an opportunity to review and refresh one's learning. Otherwise there is a risk of forgetting and losing it.

How to meditate on calm abiding (Cont.)

Now let us go back to the teaching topic, which is on calm abiding meditation. The term for 'calm abiding' in Tibetan is *shi-ne*, *shi* means calm, meaning being calm from disturbing thoughts and *ne* means abiding single-pointedly on a given inner object. Having finished the presentation of the limbs or the favourable conditions of achieving calm abiding, we moved on to the topic of the actual means of achieving calm abiding under which we learnt that calm abiding can be achieved by applying the eight antidotes that overcome the five faults or pitfalls.

The first pitfall: laziness

Of the five faults the first is laziness. If we don't overcome laziness when we engage in meditation, then we won't get anywhere. The antidotes to laziness are four, namely, faith, aspiration, perseverance and pliancy. Of these four, the actual antidote to laziness is pliancy which we don't have at the moment. Nevertheless, if we gain **faith** or conviction in the benefits of attaining calm abiding, we will then generate an **aspiration** to achieve calm abiding and this in turn generates **perseverance**, as a result of which we will achieve **pliancy**. This state of serviceability or functionality of mind and body enables us to remain in meditation. Therefore, pliancy serves as the actual antidote to laziness.

The second pitfall: forgetting the instruction

During the actual time of meditation, losing the object of meditation after having found it previously is called the fault of forgetting the instruction. This is the second fault. The antidote to it is applying mindfulness, which as we have covered in a previous talk has three distinguishing features. One of the features of mindfulness is its

function of apprehending the focused object. When we apply mindfulness we need to vividly hold or retain the object of meditation without our focus drifting to any other objects.

The third pitfall: mental sinking and excitement

As we hold the object of meditation by applying mindfulness, the mind will begin to abide within us. However, we then confront the next fault or obstacle to meditation which is mental sinking and excitement. There are many antidotes to overcoming this mental sinking, but the primary ones are mindfulness and introspection, which are generally regarded as the two main tools of meditation.

Sinking and excitement are the two main obstacles for the single-pointed concentration, which must possess two factors: the stability of the single-pointed focus, and the clarity of the object. Excitement prevents mental stability, whereas sinking prevents clarity as well as the intensity or sharpness of that clarity within the mind. It is said that we will find it useful to overcome mental sinking by imagining the object in the form of flickering light, whereas to overcome excitement, we imagine the object as being something solid or having a bit of weight. For instance, if we are carrying some heavy weight we would find it difficult to move. Just as we cannot defeat an enemy unless we identify it, likewise we cannot overcome sinking, mental fogginess or dullness, and excitement unless we precisely identify them.

Mental fogginess or dullness

Mental fogginess or dullness, which in Tibetan is *mugpa*, refers to either a non-virtuous or an obscured state of neutral mind that occurs when there is a feeling of heaviness, or when one is near dozing off to sleep. This makes our mind feel low or depressed and acts as a cause to bring mental sinking, but it is not mental sinking itself.

Mental sinking

Let's now talk about mental sinking which can be two types: coarse mental sinking and subtle mental sinking. The term mental sinking in Tibetan is *jingwa* which literally means sinking or drowning. In Tibetan we use the verb, *jingwa* for sinking or drowning in water. Here *jingwa* or sinking occurs in the meditation when the cognitive clarity of the object fades away, or when we feel the height of the mind lowering down, or we begin to experience a kind of depressed state of mind. This fault of sinking occurs even though our mind remains on the object and there is a good stability of focus on the object. In other words, if our mind is not focusing on the object, mental sinking cannot occur; in fact when the mental sinking arises our mind is focused very well on the object. There is a good stability of the mental focus on the object but if the concentration lacks the clarity or vividness of the object, this indicates that there is **coarse mental sinking**.

Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand says:

When you recall your meditation device, [and] its image may be steady but unclear.

Subtle mental sinking occurs when there is a good stability as well as clarity of the object, but the concentration lacks the required intensity or sharpness of

the clarity of the object due to over relaxation or loosening of the apprehension or retention of the object by mindfulness.

To quote *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*:

You have not lost the retained features of the visualisation, you even have steadiness and clarity of image, but the force of your retention has slackened, and its clarity is not as intense.

Subtle mental sinking is considered as the main obstruction to meditation because it can be easily mistaken for a perfect meditative concentration as it has the good stability of single-pointedness. There were many experienced meditators who mistook subtle sinking for perfect concentration and so they failed to achieve calm abiding and thereby higher meditative states such as special insight. Some of them even boasted that perfect relaxation is perfect meditation.

In short, we can say that even though subtle mental sinking is a form of a highly developed single-pointed concentration, nevertheless it is an obstacle to achieving perfect concentration. Here we speak of the lack of the intensity or sharpness of the clarity of the object. What does that mean? It means that although there is mental stability and clarity it lacks the right degree of intensity, because the mind is too relaxed or too slack in its retention or apprehension of the object through mindfulness. At this point, the best way to go about recognising this is observing one's own meditational experience. From this you can learn to identify the arising of subtle sinking or excitement, knowing whether the mental height is too high or low, or whether the apprehension of the object too relaxed or tight.

To quote the text,

At such a time though the image's stability is quite firm, the slackness has acted as a cause for subtle dullness ... they say that this will become very clear in the light of experience in contemplation ... it is impossible to put it into words.

It is said that the sign of the intensity of the clarity is when the mind remembers its object forcefully, sharply and vividly, just like the thought of food is to a starving person.

To quote *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*,

If the image has an intense clarity, the mind is sharp, fresh, vital, and still on the meditation device.

Here the clarity of the object relates to the subjective mind rather than to the object. As mentioned earlier, whether the degree of intensity of the clarity is right or not is something that the meditator has to find from experience. If the meditator experiences something that is obscuring their mind, that may be a sign of sinking. The example is that if someone is very hungry, the thought of food will appear in their mind almost spontaneously; it is always present. This is the level of mindfulness with which one should hold the object, to ensure there is the right intensity of the clarity of the object. Another example which is given in the text is:

Suppose you are holding a rosary and bowl in your hands. You may hold them differently, one tightly and one loosely.

If you are not holding the object firmly enough or holding it loosely, that can bring about subtle sinking.

Furthermore, as *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand* says:

If you mistake subtle dullness for meditation your meditations will not even act as causes for rebirth in the Form and Formless Realms, and even in this life you will be more absent-minded

Next week, we will discuss the fault of meditation called 'excitement'.

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Edited Version

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