
Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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We will begin with our usual meditation. So, ensure that you cultivate the right motivation. Once again, as indicated before, you should focus on cultivating the right motivation, which is to achieve full enlightenment in order to benefit all sentient beings. That's why you are listening to this teaching and intending to properly put it into practice. You should know that getting into the habit of always commencing the practice with a proper motivation makes the practice much more effective.

Cultivating good heartedness and altruism

If we look within ourselves, we all have a state of mind in the form of a good heart or altruism, which we should recognise as being extremely precious, as if it were a priceless possession. Our job is to safeguard and increase that mind.

By equipping ourselves with that beautiful mind of altruism, our Dharma practice will become very effective. Even if we don't practise Dharma, our mundane activities will also benefit others, or at the very least we will not harm them.

It is obvious to us that if we have altruism then we won't hold any harmful thoughts, utter any harsh words or physically harm others. Rather we will be trying to benefit others mentally, verbally and physically. In this way, we can understand the benefits and values of possessing a good heart and altruism; that is really the source of our potential to be able to benefit other beings.

I think in that way, and try my best, hour-by-hour, day-by-day to tread the path of this practice of safeguarding and increasing altruism. I encourage you too to tread the same path so that you can gradually see progress in your practice.

Our own experience verifies that happiness results from a sense of empathy, concern and care for others. Just think about this! Without an altruistic mental attitude, what we will have is only a perpetually self-centred mind with the sense of 'I' constantly arising. This sense of ego or 'I' constrains or narrows our thoughts and concerns, bringing us only worries, without any consideration of other people.

Such a narrow-minded mental outlook is the source of unending problems and difficulties in our lives. If, instead of this, we open our heart to others, think about them, consider their needs and show care towards them we will then begin to find more and more joy and happiness in our own lives.

How to meditate on calm abiding (cont.)

We have been talking a lot about the benefits of gaining control over the mind, and in order to control the mind we understand that we need to meditate. If, through meditation, we achieve calm abiding, that's a marvellous

thing. That is why we are now studying how to cultivate calm abiding. The root text says in verse 39, *While the conditions for calm abiding are incomplete ...* You have learnt that you must first acquire six favourable conditions to achieve calm abiding; I assume your discussion session has touched on this topic. As to actually achieving calm abiding, there are **five faults or pitfalls** that need to be overcome by applying the eight antidotes.

The first pitfall: laziness

In the preliminary stage of our meditation, the first pitfall of laziness will come our way. Laziness affects not only our meditation practice, but also any activities that we undertake; without getting rid of it we cannot achieve our goal. The antidotes to laziness are the first four of the eight antidotes, which are conviction and faith, aspiration, perseverance and pliancy. We have already covered this. The actual antidote to laziness is pliancy, which we may not have achieved yet.

However, if we think about the benefits of meditative concentration, we will then develop conviction-faith in it and this faith, in turn, will arouse within us an aspiration or a wish to achieve it, which in turn results in a joyful generation of perseverance in achieving that concentration. The result of that is the state of pliancy. With these four, which have a cause and effect relationship to one another, we are able to automatically rid ourselves of laziness.

The second pitfall: forgetting the instruction

Now in the actual stage as we engage in meditative concentration, we will confront the second pitfall of forgetting the instruction, which means losing or not being able to retain the object of meditation that we have found. The antidote here is applying mindfulness or memory. We have finished this section too.

The third pitfall: sinking and excitement

As we try to retain or apprehend the meditation object through the power of memory, we face the third pitfall of sinking and excitement or scattered thinking. These need to be removed, otherwise we cannot develop the perfect state of meditative concentration. Sometimes sinking and excitement are categorised separately as the pitfalls of meditation, in which case we would have six pitfalls, not five.

The antidote to excitement is introspection, which in Tibetan is *she-shin*; in English it is sometimes called alertness or awareness. We will find later on that introspection may not necessarily be the direct antidote. In the previous session we discussed the difference between subtle and coarse sinking, and now we will look into the difference between subtle and coarse excitement as well as the technique for overcoming it.

Subtle and coarse excitement

The formal description of excitement as mentioned in Asanga's *Compendium of Knowledge* is:

What is excitement? It is an unsettled state of mind lacking peace, a form of attachment influenced by attractive signs. It has the function of interrupting calm abiding.

We'll leave the definition at that.

As a mental factor, excitement (Tibetan: *gopa*) is categorised as a form of attachment that causes the mind to wander off after a beautiful object and bringing to mind some beautiful or pleasant image. For instance, even a day after you have been to see a very exciting and enjoyable show, you could still have a clear memory or image of the show. This would affect your concentration so much so that you might find it difficult to stop your mind going after that image. Generally speaking, the two most favourable conditions for meditation are regarded as mindfulness and introspection, whereas the two main obstacles are sinking and excitement.

Difference between excitement and mental wandering

As stated earlier, excitement is a form of attachment. However, mental wandering (Tibetan: *trowa*) can be in the form of a virtuous or a neutral state of mind. Therefore, excitement and mental wandering are not the same. Let's say in your meditation your mind wanders off to a thought of feeling hatred towards an enemy, or a thought of engaging in different practices such as giving or morality. In both cases we say you lose your mental attention because of mental wandering or *trowa*, but this is not excitement or *gopa*. The cause of losing attention here is not an excitement because it is not a form of attachment. It is not easy to discern the difference between mental wandering and excitement in meditation.

If we were to achieve calm abiding by meditating on an image of the Buddha as the object of our meditation, then our mind should be just abiding single-pointedly on the image of the Buddha, with both mental stability and clarity. In this state of meditation, if any desirable image appears and our mind wanders off after it, this is an indication of excitement entering into our meditation, which will interrupt our meditative concentration.

If in the meditation we have a thought of someone we hate such as an enemy, then we will generate anger and because of that we will lose mental focus. In this case the cause of losing concentration is not excitement but mental wandering or *trowa*. As said before, the mental wandering that interrupts meditative concentration can also be in the form of a virtuous state of mind. For instance, you generate compassion by thinking of the suffering of other beings, or love by thinking of their lack of privileges. Although cultivating love and compassion is positive, generating it while meditating on a given object to achieve concentration will cause mental wandering. So even such virtuous thoughts should be avoided when pursuing meditative concentration.

Despite the fact that both excitement and mental wandering equally interrupt meditative concentration, only excitement is categorised as a pitfall in meditation, while mental wandering is not. Why? The answer is that of the two, excitement is the more significant cause of obstacle to meditative concentration.

Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand says:

Lack of focus [mental wandering] is slighter and of shorter duration when its object is either the object of your hostility or when your attention is being directed to something virtuous. In every day life our mind often wanders off due to attachment, so in terms of the greater amount of time or ease with

which excitement arises, only it (excitement) is mentioned.¹

As implied here, in meditation our mind wanders off due to hostile thoughts while there are fewer virtuous states of mind. They are shorter in comparison with a mind distracted by excitement. Generally speaking, hostile thoughts or anger have a shorter duration than desire or attachment, which arises relatively easily but is hard to get rid of. Therefore, excitement alone is categorised as a pitfall of meditation.

There are two types of excitement: coarse excitement and subtle excitement.

Coarse excitement means a loss of the meditation object due to the influence of a desirable object. **Subtle excitement** occurs where there is focus on the object, but a corner of the focus is gone due to the influence of a desirable object.

Introspection: the antidote to excitement

Introspection, which in Tibetan is *shey-shin*, is also known in English as vigilance, alertness or awareness. It is considered as a component of the antidote to excitement but not the main antidote.

Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand says:

... vigilance is still a component of the antidote, just as the army has its scout.

With the force of good memory or mindfulness we fix our mind on the object, ensuring there is both stability and clarity in our meditation. We also need to utilise introspection or awareness to detect if any faults arise. However, we need to be careful of not over-applying introspection.

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

If you apply vigilance continuously it becomes a hindrance to your meditative state, but if you do not apply vigilance regularly you may develop some serious faults in your single-pointed concentration and not be aware of it. The thief, as it were, has already carried off your possession.

When we are doing well in meditation in terms of the stabilisation of concentration, we may, through our introspection or awareness (which is a form of intelligent wisdom) detect within us some sense of discouragement or a low mental spirit. In Tibetan the term for this is *shum-pa*, a kind of indication of the arising or proximate arising of sinking. If we notice this, then we will need to uplift or widen our mind or tighten the focus a bit.

However, if we detect our mind being too uplifted or tense to the point of being close to bringing in excitement, then we will need to bring the height of the mind down, loosen up or withdraw the focus a bit.

To a large extent we need to rely on our own experience of meditation to determine the right application of the antidote, knowing precisely when and how to apply it. The text uses the analogy of carrying a bowl full of tea in your hand. Let's say we were to carry a glass full of water in our hand without spilling a drop. Holding the glass in our hand is likened to the single-pointed focus on the object and holding the glass firmly is likened to having

¹ This is a corrected translation of *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*.

intensity or sharpness in the cognitive clarity of the object. Keeping our eyes on the glass to observe or be aware of the movement of our hand and the water, and thereby preventing the water from spilling is likened to introspection or awareness in the meditation. This detects the presence of any meditation faults such as sinking or excitement so that we can apply the respective antidote. For instance, if our mental focus on the object is too relaxed, sinking will creep in and as a result we will lose the sharpness or intensity in the cognitive clarity of the object; if our mental focus is too tight excitement will arise.

The fourth pitfall: not applying the antidote

This fault will happen if one recognises the risk or danger of sinking or excitement but doesn't do anything about it. It is very important to apply an appropriate antidote as soon as one becomes aware of the type of the fault, whether it is sinking or excitement, and whether it is coarse or subtle.

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Edited Version

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