
Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

8 May 2018

Having taken refuge and generated bodhicitta, we will now do the usual meditation. [*meditation*]

It is wonderful to do this meditation of 'taking and giving' whenever you can. In this meditation, we imagine all sentient beings in front of us. We meditate on 'giving' to further enhance the focus of love and we meditate on 'taking' to further enhance the focus of compassion. If we meditate on taking and giving repeatedly and become acquainted with it, then this will actually bring tears to our eyes. Of course, to have such an effect we need to cultivate love and compassion from the depth of our heart, forcefully and spontaneously, wishing other beings to have happiness and be free from suffering.

In verse 90 of the *Guru Puja* there is a verse which says all sentient beings are the same in never finding contentment and happiness, and never desiring even the tiniest suffering.

There is no difference between ourselves and others
None of us wishes even the slightest of sufferings
Nor is even content with the happiness we have.

We are all similar: no matter how much happiness we possess we never feel that we have enough, and we always want more and more; and we do not want even the slightest suffering and always feel grumpy about ourselves. Based upon this similarity, love and compassion for others can arise automatically within us. We have been doing this meditation of giving and taking for awhile which is wonderful, but we should also try to see if it has had some effect in transforming our mind. If we don't do something to overcome the unhappy mind, which is like a thorn poking through things, then we cannot hope to find more happiness.

We need to put in effort to diminish hostility and increase our good heart. Each and every day when we wake up in the morning we should, as a matter of habit, generate a good motivation and resolve, 'I will be kind and helpful to others throughout the day and I will not cause harm to any other beings'. If we do this today, the next day, and the day after, then eventually every morning we remember to start the day with a positive frame of mind. Likewise, we should build a positive habit of going to bed in a positive frame of mind. As a result, we will live a happy life.

Normally we begin the day with a negative frame of mind and go to bed in a disturbed state of mind. We want the meditation to break this negative mental pattern. I always stress that meditation should have some positive effect on our mind. I have shared this story with you in the past on numerous occasions about my interaction with a younger geshe who casually asked me, 'How do you define meditation?' He is a learned geshe

and takes Dharma classes in the monastery. I replied, 'To me meditation practice means becoming familiar with a virtuous state of mind throughout every action, even just sitting, standing, walking or sleeping'. He was quite pleased with my reply, and with a deep sense of appreciation thanked me from the depth of his heart, saying, 'This is really an excellent pith instruction for me'. Therefore, it is important to understand that the purpose of meditation is to subdue an unsubdued mind. Meditation simply means putting into practice what you know of Dharma.

Once again, establish a proper motivation of aspiring to achieve the precious state of Buddhahood to benefit all sentient beings thinking, 'For this reason, I will listen to the profound Dharma teaching and will put it into practice well'. When we think of this statement we see a sequence of first listening to the Dharma and then practising it.

We need to understand that listening and practising go hand in hand. We should not be like those who listen but never practise, or those who don't practise what they learn. The implication here is also that after listening or studying the Dharma, then we must practise it. Practising means relating Dharma to our own mind in terms of subduing mental afflictions. If, as a result of studying Dharma, you feel superior to those with less knowledge, jealous of those with more knowledge, or a sense of competitiveness with those who are equal in knowledge, then you have totally defeated the purpose of learning, which is to subdue the mind and rid it of mental afflictions. Rather, your mental afflictions have increased. Hence, your Dharma learning has ended up being no different from a worldly activity. This applies not just to those who listen, but teachers must also be wary of this kind of wrong mental attitude. When the teacher occupies a high seat, their mind can easily be influenced by pride, jealousy and competitiveness.

In his *Treasury of Knowledge* Vasubandhu says, 'when we give Dharma teachings, our mind should not be polluted with delusions and we should teach Dharma in accordance with the sutras and the commentaries on them'. As he said, if the teacher's mind is filled with pride, jealousy and competitiveness, then his mind is polluted with afflictions which he should not have. Furthermore, he should ensure that what he teaches is in accordance with sutras and commentaries on them by the later masters. As for me, I am not saying that I know Dharma well nor am I praising myself here, but I can say that I always ensure that I have the right motivation for teaching prior to coming here and taking my seat. In order to prevent mental afflictions, the teacher performs three prostrations to counteract pride, and then after sitting on the throne, he reflects on impermanence, which also helps to prevent pride.

Last week we stopped at the fourth pitfall or fault of meditation, which is not applying the antidote.

The fourth pitfall: not applying the antidote

As is clearly explained in the text, *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*,

If your vigilance has detected any dullness or excitement - whether in coarse or subtle form - you must apply the antidotes without further ado. The

seventh of the eight adjustments - readjustment - is actually the antidote to the eighth of the adjustments - equanimity, also known as non-adjustment 1. Adjustment has to be mentally applied against non-adjustment. These two are like enemy scouts: as soon as one sees the other, he tries to stop him.

So as soon as we recognise any sinking or excitement arising in our meditation we need to apply the antidote. This is mainly alertness, or introspection, which functions like a spy. Then we exert ourselves to overcome that sinking or excitement.

How should we remove sinking and excitement?

OVERCOMING SUBTLE SINKING

We have already discussed mental sinking in previous teachings. In *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*, discouragement or low mental spirit, which in Tibetan is *shum-pa*, is also used to describe mental sinking.

So, how should this antidote be applied? Subtle dullness is a state of depressed mental activity. Thus, both depression and dullness have much the same consequences. With subtle dullness you have clarity and stability of the image, but the quality of its retention has dropped and the clarity, therefore, is not as intense.

The indication of this subtle form of sinking is when, in our meditation, we notice that, though there's good mental attention in terms of the stability of our mental focus and the clarity of the object of our focus, that clarity lacks intensity. When this happens, we will notice a lowering of our mental retention of the object. The way we hold the object has become a bit looser and a bit too relaxed. This is the sign of subtle sinking arising in the form of the clarity of the object lacking sharpness. The key here is recognising that subtle sinking only occurs when there is both very good stability and clarity. This is indicated by a feeling of looseness in the apprehension of the object.

The advice here is that:

Whenever you develop this form of dullness there is no need to break off visualizing since it is sufficient to tighten up your retention of the image.

One's state of concentration can be very good initially, in terms of both single-pointed focus as well as the clarity of the object. However, one might notice that the level with which one holds the object is becoming looser and a bit too relaxed. When this happens all one needs to do is simply tighten up the *dzin-tang*, the mode of apprehension of the object, to just the right degree.

It has to be just the right amount of tightening because:

However, when your hold becomes too tight, you develop excitement, and you should then loosen your hold.

It's important to ensure that the level of holding the object has to be not too tight and not too loose. When there's mental sinking then there's a feeling of the mind going down a bit and to correct that we need to brighten the mind up a little. However, at the same time it's very important that you don't lift the mind too high, or leave it too low: it has to be exactly in the middle in order to prevent both sinking and excitement.

Liberation in the Palm of Your Hands quotes the Buddha:

As the Bhagavan said:

If the vina's string is too taut, loosen it; tighten or loosen it as needed, making sure that it does not get too slack. In the end the sound will be sweet.

It continues:

You should do the same thing: loosen a little when you feel you will develop excitement and tighten your hold a little when you feel that dullness will ensue if you loosen any more.

So, meditators have to be very intelligent and skilful in tuning their meditation practice so that there is no room for sinking or excitement, and then their single-pointed concentration will be perfect. The meditator has to know from experience if the way their mind is focussed on the object is too tight. And if it is too tight, they need to know that it is too tight and then through this introspection, know of the risk of bringing the fault of excitement into the meditation. So accordingly, they loosen the tightness of their hold on the object a little bit.

If the hold then becomes too relaxed, and you feel your mind starting to become very low then that is a sign of sinking and tightening up is necessary.

The cultivation of the perfect state of single-pointed concentration is very much dependent on the skill and experience of the meditator, based on their knowledge of how to combat even the most subtle forms of sinking and excitement.

Experience dictates the border-line between these two. If you do not analyze intelligently through your vigilance it will be very hard for you to put your finger on it.

When the meditator has this very high level of introspection then they're really in a good position to recognise the most subtle forms of the faults that arise in meditation, as well as having the ability to correct those faults immediately.

This very fine tuning is, however, not easy. Here *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand* quotes the great Indian master Acharya Chandragomin.

Acharya Chandragomin said:

Apply effort and you get excited;
Abandon it and you develop depression.
"If this is true, and it is so hard to gain absorption,
Why do this: it will only disturb my mind!"

The only way to find this balance is through actual experience in meditation, and this can take some time. The text goes on to say:

Doing this sort of thing may be mentally fatiguing; but among all types of enemies, an enemy you mistake for one of your family is the hardest of all to identify. Because of this, they are more dangerous. Likewise, there is great danger in mistaking this type of dullness for single-pointed concentration; so you must be skilled in this fine-tuned state.

It's easy to mistake mental sinking for the meditative state of concentration. Therefore, it's very important for the meditator to have a lot of experience in knowing whether you need to relax or tighten the focus on the object of the meditation.

Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand continues:

Thus, in spite of having fine-tuned your mind, you may again lose the intensity of the image's clarity. When this happens, the retention lapses as though the thought has died, and the image is no longer clear. If this will not go away, coarse dullness has returned.

Then *the text* quotes Bhavaviveka:

It says in the *Heart of the Middle Way*:

When depressed, meditate on expansive visualizations
And thus open yourself ...

The text goes on to give us many different strategies:

That is, the fault is that your mind is in a great knot; so you should meditate, broadening the visualization.

Discouragement is combatted by widening one's mental view, and as a result of that you'll feel an opening of a wide space within yourself. Here you are trying to overcome this mental sinking without actually leaving the object of the meditation, in other words while still focussing on the object.

As Bhavaviveka mentioned, we need to try to widen the mental focus rather than being too withdrawn.

Deep down there's a sense of what we call *shum-pa*, a sense of discouragement, which is a bit like a form of depression. If we fail to remove mental sinking by tightening the focus, then the next strategy is to leave the object of the meditation and do things that will bring joy to the mind, uplifting your whole spirit.

If the problem does not then go away and your mind becomes depressed when you resume the visualization, try a method to be uplifted, or cheer yourself up by contemplating how difficult it is to find the most beneficial optimum human rebirth. Or you could contemplate the good qualities of the Three Jewels, study the benefits of devoting yourself to a spiritual guide, contemplate the benefits of bodhichitta, etc. These will uplift your mind.

As we just mentioned, when there's mental sinking, the mind is very withdrawn and mental spirits are low. In order to overcome this and uplift the mind, the text suggests reflecting on the precious human rebirth, reflecting on the qualities of the three objects of refuge, or the excellent qualities of relying on a spiritual friend, or spiritual guru, or the benefit of listening to the Dharma.

Reflecting on these positive topics helps to overcome discouragement and mental state of depression.

You could imagine rays of light shining on you, or meditate on things like the giving visualization. Such meditations will raise your mind to a higher plane, and it will then retain the visualization.

It also helps if you imagine going to a very clear and open space filled with brilliant light.

If through doing these kinds of reflections you manage to overcome this discouragement or sinking, then as the text says:

If these clear your mind, resume your visualization as before.

As just mentioned, some of the topics to reflect upon in order to uplift the mind include thinking on the precious human rebirth, and so forth.

Our minds have not been familiar with this sort of thing in the past and it will be difficult to gain immediate benefit from these techniques. But when we become familiar with them, the contemplation of things such as how hard it is to gain a human rebirth will be like splashing cold water on our faces. The problem will disappear.

For those who are really familiar with the topics mentioned earlier, then engaging in those kinds of meditations will generate really positive feelings, give you courage and you will feel more optimistic.

The text goes on to give further strategies to forcefully dispel mental sinking. We will go over these next week.

*Transcript prepared by Mark Emerson
Edit 1 by Adair Bunnett
Edit 2 by Sandup Tsering
Edited Version*

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