
Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

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We begin with our usual meditation

First, we establish the proper motivation. At the beginning of this session we recited the *Refuge and Generating Bodhicitta Prayer* three times to remind ourselves of the importance of cultivating a motivation. Each recitation of this prayer is supposed to make our motivation stronger than the last one. Of course, most of us find it difficult to properly generate this motivation even once, but we have to keep making an effort to do that, and then try to make it stronger by repeating the prayer twice and even stronger when we recite it the third time. Every time we recite this prayer we should really try to remember its meaning. Then we will also gradually develop more understanding of the meaning of the prayers.

In a way the practice that we do on a daily basis is preparation for our death, so that we will be able to practise when we are dying. If, on a daily basis, we really become familiar with taking refuge and generating bodhicitta, and develop a very good understanding of this practice, we will be in a position to put it into practice with a minimum of effort and without any difficulties when we are dying. We know that we cannot prevent death, nor can we prevent some concern about facing death, but at least when we face death we will be in a position to put these teachings into practice.

If we think about it, our spiritual practices, such as taking refuge and generating bodhicitta, will guarantee us a better rebirth or at the very least prevent us from falling into a lower rebirth. We have to understand that our true protection is our Dharma practice, which becomes our refuge when we cultivate it within ourselves.

Whatever Dharma practice we do in this lifetime also has an impact on our future rebirth as well. If, for example, in this lifetime we put Dharma into practice properly, beginning with relying on the perfect spiritual guru, and putting their advice and instructions into practice, then the Dharma practice we do will leave an imprint on our minds. Then, not only will we reap the benefit in this very lifetime, but due to our practice of properly relying on a spiritual guide now we will be able to find a perfect spiritual guide in our future life. Not only that but following Dharma practice in this current life will leave an imprint so that in our future life we will find the perfect Dharma as well. If, rather than practising the Dharma out of a very self-centred mind we think of the reason we practise the Dharma, which is to benefit other beings, then that serves as a cause to find the Mahayana Dharma in our future life, as well as sustaining this bodhicitta practice in this present life.

If we practise in this way, then we will see how fortunate we are to have met all the good conditions that enable us to follow spiritual practice in this lifetime. If we make use of all these good conditions now we will have the same good conditions in future. In fact, we will find even better conditions in the future and then we might develop even further. So, there is the possibility of making gradual but

consistent progress along the path, getting closer in each life to achieving the state of buddhahood. It comes down to making the optimum use of this perfect human rebirth, which we have all learnt about in the past.

[Meditation]

As we discussed in one of the previous sessions, it is very important to ensure that you establish right motivation at the beginning of the practice. Here it is the motivation of bodhicitta - cultivating the thought of wishing to achieve the state of buddhahood to benefit all sentient beings and then cultivating the thought, 'I will listen to this profound teaching and put it into practice'. We should look into the content of this motivation and see how it shows why we are practising, and who it is for. Also, as part of generating this motivation, we are reinforcing our intention to put whatever we learn into practice.

The reason we say, 'I shall listen to the teaching and put it into practice' is to show that simply listening and studying is not enough. In order to reap the whole benefit of the Dharma, we have to study it, and then put it into practice.

The fourth pitfall: not applying the antidote (cont.)

OVERCOMING SUBTLE SINKING

Towards the end of last week's teaching, we talked about the various practices for overcoming subtle sinking. For example, *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand* states:

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 difficulty will disappear.

If, after applying these techniques, we still cannot get rid of sinking then the text guides us on further techniques of forcefully dispelling mental sinking.

The next method to overcome the sinking is:

If your dullness will still not go away, employ a more forceful means of removing it. Visualize your mind as being a white light at your heart. As you utter the syllable PHAT, your mind comes out of the fontanelle on the top of your head and penetrates the depths of space. Think that your mind and space have become inextricably mixed. Do this as many times as seems best.

These techniques for overcoming mental sinking are implemented without actually taking a break from one's meditation. As mentioned in the text, initially you imagine your mind in the form of a white light at your heart and focus on that for a little while. Then as you utter the letter PHAT this light goes up through your crown towards the sky. It pervades space and becomes inseparable from it. This technique is said to be effective in overcoming mental sinking. Not only can we apply this in calm abiding, but the same technique is also said to be very effective in overcoming stress, anxiety, depression, fears and unhappiness in the mind. Also, there is another method whereby you utter the letter HA HA HA when you breathe out and imagine all your mental unhappiness leaves with the outgoing breath.

The text then states:

If still the problem will not go away, terminate your meditation session.

If the sinking still doesn't leave, take a break from the meditation and think about the causes of this mental sinking.

Mental fog is causing you to develop dullness. Use some means to make the mental fog, sleepiness, or grogginess go away. Settle down in some cool spot, go for a walk on some high, open place, go for a visit, splash water on your face, and so on. If these clear your mind, resume your visualization as before.

However, when you engage in all these activities it is important to keep the mind within rather than being completely distracted by various thoughts and deeds.

When there is a fault in meditation then you need to apply an antidote. Not applying the antidote of the compositional mental factor to the fault is the fifth fault or pitfall of meditation.

OVERCOMING SUBTLE EXCITEMENT

The subtle form of excitement arises when you lose a part of your focus or retention of the object.

Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand says:

Subtle excitement is when you do not lose track of the meditation device but the mind is distracted. When this happens, the fault is that the mind is too tight. Slightly loosen your retention of the image.

This is important to recognise. While your mind is focused on or holding onto the object, you need to know whether the mental focus is completely there on the object or not. If the focus is not completely there, then that is an indication of subtle excitement.

Why does this occur? It is because the way you hold onto or retain the object is too tight; there is a bit of tension there. Obviously, the solution is to gently loosen or relax the hold on the apprehension (Tib: *dzin-tang*) of the object.

If you try that and the excitement doesn't go away, then:

If this does not help and your mind is still distracted, you now have a coarse form of excitement.

The coarse form of excitement arises under conditions where there is a bit too much excitement or pleasure about something in our mind. A little bit of pleasure is fine; too much pleasure is not good!

Here we are talking about the experience of the meditator. Earlier on we learnt how, in order to overcome mental sinking, the meditator engages in reflecting on how fortunate they are to have found this precious human rebirth and other topics such as the excellent qualities of the three objects of refuge and so forth. Reflecting on those kinds of topics uplifts the mind, bringing very positive feelings. Of course, this won't happen for those who are not really familiar with these topics. But for someone who is really familiar with these topics, in both learning and practice, the outcome of such a practice can be as soothing as splashing refreshing water on your face when you are feeling very hot. However, as mentioned above, when the meditator faces the challenge of overcoming excitement. As the text says:

This has developed only because of your happy state of mind, so you should not increase your happiness any more.

The reason the coarse form of excitement has arisen is because the level of pleasure is too high. The remedy is to bring that down, so that the pleasure doesn't bring excitement, which would interrupt the meditation.

Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand then quotes from Bhavaviveka's *Essence of the Middle Way*¹:

In this kind of situation, don't stop the meditation session, for, as it is said in the *Heart of the Middle Way*:

Calm your excitement by
Thinking of impermanence and the like.

In other words, contemplate things that cause mental depression, weariness, or renunciation. Death and impermanence or the sufferings encountered in samsara and the lower realms are just such things.

Those who are really familiar with meditating on such topics as the impermanence of things find this meditation very effective in calming down their mind from all that is exciting or entertaining. One of the causes of gross excitement is that our mental spirit is too high or that there is too much of a sense of joy or excitement in the mind. This is combatted by meditating on impermanence and other topics that have the immediate effect of lowering mental spirits, or subduing a hyperactive mind, or bringing a sense of discouragement (Tib: *shumpa*). This in turn eliminates excitement. So, the various topics of Dharma you are familiar with can be utilised here as an aid to cultivating single-pointed concentration.

The text continues:

If this does not clear up the problem, employ a more forceful method to rid yourself of excitement. Because your conceptual thinking has increased, you should do the following visualization when you breathe in or out. When you breathe, think, "I am breathing out" or "I am breathing in." Also think, "That's the first time," and continue to count mentally the number of times you have been breathing out and in. At first you will only be able to manage up to three or four cycles. Just resume counting from one again. Being able to keep this up till you get to twenty-one without the mind becoming distracted is the criterion for having achieved the first mental state.

This breathing meditation is said to be particularly effective in getting rid of disturbing, conceptualised thoughts. You simply focus on the incoming and outgoing breath, being fully aware of the thought of the breath going out and coming in and so forth. Make sure that both the incoming and outgoing breath are very even, and the flow is also very natural. Then as we breathe in and out we count 'now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out'; that is one round.

At first you will only be able to manage up to three or four cycles. Just resume counting from one again. Being able to keep this up till you get to twenty-one without the mind becoming distracted is the criterion for having achieved the first mental state.

As it says in the text, initially you won't be able to do more than three or four rounds, but for many of us it may be only one or two. If you are no longer able to maintain your focus, then you have to start from round one again. Then you repeat this meditation over and over again until, as the text says, you are able to maintain single-pointed concentration without any distractions for twenty-one rounds. That is the sign of reaching to the first of the nine mental abidings.

If doing this does not cut your excitement, take a bit of a break from the session.

¹ *Heart of the Middle Way* and *Essence of the Middle Way* are the same text.

If you find it very difficult to retain your focus, then it is advised that you should not push yourself too hard. Rather, it is better to take a break from the meditation.

Then meditate in shorter sessions, preceding these by a firm resolve.

Commence meditation again with very short sessions. It is also important to start each session with a very strong intention. With shorter meditation sessions you don't get bored with your meditation practice - in fact you will enjoy it and want to keep it going. As said before, it is important to cultivate the right intention at the start of the meditation practice over a period of time that suits you.

If you lengthen your sessions, the very sight of your meditation mat may make you feel lethargic or nauseated. It is most important to break off your meditations at the right point, "while it is still a pleasure to meditate," as it is said.

We have mentioned numerous times in the past that if we push ourselves too much to meditate for a longer duration and better outcome, then we will end up with more stress and frustration and end up finishing it in a very negative way. We may give ourselves a second, third or even more chances to do the meditation but still end up feeling negative because of our wrong approach. Consequently, we will completely lose interest in meditation to the point where we feel sick as soon as we see the meditation cushion. We will look at it and say, 'I am not interested'. That is why it is important to finish at the right time so that not only will you enjoy it while you are meditating but you will be inspired to meditate more later on.

To illustrate: if two people part at the right moment, they will later be pleased to see each other again. As it is said, if the image is still clear, you should stop; but if the image is unclear, you should stop in any case. If you draw the line while you still feel, "It would be fine if I meditated a little more," you will want to meditate again from the depth of your heart. This is the best way to meditate. Even if you are unfocused, if you do things this way, your meditation will be excellent. However, while you have no clarity and keep trying to fix it, if it does not go away and you stubbornly persist in fixing it, you will fatigue yourself; later the lack of clarity will grow even worse.

You have heard this in the past. If two people part from each other in a spirit of close and intimate friendship, then they will be very excited when they meet each other again. If they parted with resentment and some hatred, then of course they don't want to see each other again. Therefore, the text says, it is important that we don't push ourselves too hard with our meditation practice.

If you lack a good focus or clarity in meditation, don't force yourself to the point of becoming completely exhausted with your meditation practice. Otherwise, you will finish the meditation in a negative frame of mind. Then, not only will you lose interest in the practice, but you will also end your practice in a negative frame of mind.

As it is said, if the image is still clear, you should stop; but if the image is unclear, you should stop in any case. If you draw the line while you still feel, "It would be fine if I meditated a little more," you will want to meditate again from the depth of your heart. This is the best way to meditate. Even if you are unfocused, if you do things this way, your meditation will be excellent. However, while you have no clarity and keep trying to fix it, if it does not go away and

you stubbornly persist in fixing it, you will fatigue yourself; later the lack of clarity will grow even worse.

It is very auspicious and effective to finish your meditation at the point where you feel like continuing it for a little bit longer. We can also apply the same rationale to our mundane life activities and events for which the duration is very important, in that if it is too long people will get bored and won't be interested in participating again. However, if the duration is right, which is to say that it is interesting and enjoying right to the end, people will go home with a good memory of the activity or event. Therefore, they will be more motivated to join it again in the future.

We have found out that the main obstacles to achieving single-pointed concentration are mental sinking and excitement, both of which arise very easily, are difficult to recognise and difficult to remove. We cannot achieve single-pointed concentration unless we completely overcome this sinking and excitement. That is why the advice, especially for beginners, is to divide the meditation into many short sessions and then slowly extend them as one gradually makes progress with the meditation.

Even those who already know how difficult it is to get to rid of mental sinking and excitement can, if they are not careful in their practice, easily mistake these two faults for perfect meditative concentration. Then, despite their high level of concentration they don't make any progress.

Therefore, it is recommended that as a beginner you should have sessions with a shorter duration. However eventually, when you have achieved the state of single-pointed concentration where sinking and excitement are completely overcome, then you have the capacity to remain in single-pointed meditative concentration effortlessly for as long as you wish without any distraction.

It is very important to rely upon the writings of the great masters to achieve the perfect state of single pointed concentration called *shamatha* or calm abiding. These masters state that the means to achieve calm abiding is the application of the eight composing mental factors called the eight antidotes to overcoming the five faults.

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