
Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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With the motivation of bodhicitta we will begin the usual meditation. This motivation is included in the *Refuge and Generating Bodhicitta Prayer* we recited earlier.

[Tong-len meditation]

Again, we need to make sure we cultivate the proper motivation, which is to achieve full enlightenment to benefit all sentient beings and think 'I shall listen to this profound Dharma and put it into practice'. Every time we cultivate our motivation in this way, we are also reminding ourselves that after listening to teachings we will put them into practice.

As the great yogi Dharmarakshita wrote in his text, *The Wheel of Sharp Weapons*,

Our spiritual promises are grand, yet our practice of helping (others) is tiny.

This line says that the more some people take pledges, the less they put them into practice. We should not be like that and take pledges that we cannot keep. We should not think that our Dharma practice can be measured by the number of times we do a certain practice or listen to a certain teaching. Rather, the point is to integrate the practices into our daily lives. If our practice is not having any impact on lessening our mental afflictions, this clearly shows that our practice is lagging.

We are all supposedly engaged in the practice of listening, contemplating and meditating on the scriptures of Lord Buddha. However, if we ask ourselves whether we are truly integrating these three things we will find that almost all of our learning and knowledge is just on paper. What is required, and what is really important, is to listen to and then contemplate the meaning of the teachings. Then, having contemplated their meaning, engage in meditation practice. We must understand that the essence of the whole spiritual process is recognising that everything is about controlling or calming our mind. This is why practice is so important.

In terms of listening to teachings, there are a lot of topics we may have heard hundreds or even thousands of times. But in terms of the benefit we accrue from our study, we should understand, as the Lord Buddha said, that happiness is a result of a calm or subdued mind. The Buddha said in Chapter 3 of the *Dhammapada*:

Wonderful, indeed, it is to subdue the mind, so difficult to subdue, ever swift, and seizing whatever it desires. A tamed mind brings happiness.

Therefore, if our learning is not put into practice, it will not subdue our mind and we cannot expect to find true happiness. In other words, we should understand that experiencing unhappiness, or confronting dissatisfaction or any painful experience indicates that we have not subdued our mind.

Instead of blaming our own unsubdued or negative states of mind for the problems and difficulties we encounter in our lives, we normally blame external factors. Not only that, we also have the idea that our happiness and fulfilment should come from outside conditions. This is why we often think, 'If I had the right friends ... if I had the right partner ... if I was secure financially, I would be happy.' We have this fixed idea, yet I have observed many people suffer and go through lots of problems because they *have* all of these things: a partner, companions and doing well in business. I hear about a lot of problems and difficulties these people have. I also see people who live a single life and others who are materially not so well-off. Overall, they seem to have a more contented and happy life than those who are living with others and are rich.

Of course, we have to acknowledge that certain problems are just part of human existence! No matter how much we feel that everything is right and in good order, we are still susceptible to the ups and downs of life. For instance, you may think that living as a single person is the better option, but this doesn't mean that you will always be happy. It will be natural to experience some sense of isolation every now and then. Therefore, it is important to remind ourselves of the advice from Lord Buddha that 'you can be your own master'. What does that mean? The emphasis here is that the happiness we look for lies within ourselves. Likewise, the main cause of what we do not want in our life lies within ourselves, and this is something that we have to recognise.

It is important to have sustainable peace and happiness within ourselves. How can we bring this about? Mainly through cultivating a very subdued or very calm state of mind. The reason it is important for everyone to realise this is because without some level of peace or happiness within ourselves, then what we achieve externally cannot bring joy and happiness.

I am not saying that creating favourable external factors is not beneficial to our lives. What I am saying is that even the happiness that primarily results from all our good external conditions depends upon having some degree of a peaceful and subdued state of mind. If we lack inner peace and stability, we know from our own experience that even if we are successful externally, in terms of having gathered good conditions, we cannot find joy and happiness. If external good conditions don't bring us happiness and satisfy our needs, then we might ask what is the point of having them.

You have heard from me about the advice I gave to a young Tibetan who asked me what was my secret or key to finding happiness. I replied, 'Overcome disturbing thoughts'. I also find that the more I read great Buddhist literature, the more I find them verifying some important things that I have been emphasising in my teachings. In the Wednesday teaching last week, I quoted the pith instruction from the Kadampa Geshe Shawa that a happy life begins with lessening the various desires within our mind. This is essentially pointing us towards taming or subduing the mind.

In short, what we need to do to control our mind is to initially listen to the teaching and also gain a knowledge arising from listening to others or studying texts written

by others. In order to refine that knowledge, however, it is very important that we think about and contemplate on what we have learnt by applying our own intelligence and then we will gain a knowledge that arises from the force of our contemplation. In the process of contemplation, we are validating the knowledge we have acquired from listening by critically analysing and questioning everything we have learnt with the full force of our own discernment and intelligence. Is it true or not? Does it have a valid reason or not? As a result of such analysis, we gain knowledge by the virtue of our own firm conviction and ascertainment. Such knowledge is called knowledge arising from contemplation, which in turn serves as the perfect basis for meditation, through which our knowledge is further refined and developed.

We frequently hear that simply listening to the teaching is not enough and that we must put it into practice. Knowledge arising from listening alone is, in fact, not even our own knowledge. So it is not all that firm or reliable and does not have real influence on our development. In a way, this methodology of following listening with contemplating gives us the liberty to accept, or reject, or believe in, or not believe something that we learn from others. As mentioned before, at the stage of listening, the acquired knowledge is even not our own, and to make it our own we must establish it in our mind by contemplating and fully utilising our wisdom. From this we gain a firm conviction backed by our own reason and rational mind.

In order for the meditation to be very effective, we need to cultivate a state of calm abiding. This is the topic that we have been studying. In terms of the means of cultivating calm abiding, we have learned that there are eight antidotes to combat five faults or pitfalls.

The fifth pitfall: the over application of the antidote

The antidote to this fifth fault of over application of the antidote is the antidote of non-application.

Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand states:

When you have put an end to your dullness or excitement, readjustment becomes a pitfall, although it is in fact an antidote. The antidote to re-adjustment is number eight of the adjustments, non-adjustment. You must cultivate this equanimity.

When the single-pointed meditation is going perfectly well without being affected by any faults, applying the antidote will be a fault, because it will interrupt the meditation.

As the text states:

You will be subject to interruptions from dullness or excitement until you get to the eighth mental state. At that stage you may have pacified dullness and excitement, but all the same you have to investigate to see whether they are present or not.

Therefore, as the text says here, what is required is to cultivate or maintain a state of equanimity.

The text continues:

But if in your zeal you apply an antidote, you will interrupt this mental state; and so readjustment is a pitfall. Nevertheless do not put effort into your vigilance: it is best to loosen up a little and to cultivate the adjustment of equanimity.

When it says *it is best to loosen up a little*, it is referring to the eighth of the nine mental abidings. It doesn't mean that you leave the object. It is saying that inwardly there should be not be any tension, and there should be some sort of relaxation in the way the meditation object is held in the mind. Basically, at this stage no meditation faults are present, and the text is saying that it is best to remain in that state of equanimity. Trying to make an effort to do it better is excessive. We can recollect our early discussion about how some past Tibetan meditators prided themselves on the state of relaxation when in fact sinking was present. They were taking pride in remaining relaxed too early. Here at the eighth stage one should be content with the relaxation in one's meditation.

The text continues:

Everyone says that you need to be loose at this point because you were so tight before. By the end of the eighth mental state, you do not fall under the power of mental dullness or excitement, and it is said that you should only loosely apply vigilance. But it was quite a different matter before you reached this point, and the looseness referred to here is not that referred to in the discussion on memory and on loosening the intensity of the retention of the visualisation. The Tibetans of the past did not recognise the right point to slacken off, and they claimed that they had "deep meditation in deep relaxation." Their mistake was to slacken their hold on memory too soon. So do not fall into the same trap that they did. Why should you not do as they? Because it would take you far away from the sort of single-pointed concentration that would allow you to gain stability of the image quickly and shed subtle dullness

Posture for engaging in meditation

Having finished the presentation of the actual means for cultivating calm abiding, what now follows are guidelines for engaging in meditation. Assuming you have gathered all the favourable conditions for achieving calm abiding, including the suitable place and so forth, you then begin the actual meditation by sitting on a suitable cushion with a meditation sitting posture endowed with the seven features of the meditation posture of the Vairochana Buddha.

The back of the cushion should be slightly higher than the front so when you sit on it, your back will be lifted a little and it will help you to keep your back straight. Keeping the back of the body straight aligns it with the position of the central, right and left psychic channels

The seven features of the Buddha Vairochana's sitting posture are:

The **back** is straight so that the spinal cord is like a stack of coins. The body should not be tilted to the left or right, nor should it be bent forward or backward. When the back of the body is straight, the channels will be straight too and as a result the wind energy in them will flow smoothly, which in turn helps stabilise the mind just as water flows better in a straight pipe than in a bent pipe. It is said that keeping the body straight also has the benefit of eliminating sleepiness and mental foginess.

The **legs** should be in the cross-legged sitting posture. Tsongkhapa's *Great Stages of the Path* mentions five features here, whereas the tantra mentions four features.

The cross-legged posture is said to have the benefit of enabling one to meditate for a prolonged period of time. With the back of the body straight you can either sit in full or half vajra cross-legged posture. The half vajra sitting posture is in fact how you normally sit and that is also fine.

Since Tsong Khapa's *Great Stages of the Path* is available in English, I advise you to read the section on the sitting posture. In fact, most of the lam-rim teachings including the *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hands* all follow the outlines of Tsong Khapa's *Great Stages of the Path*. Rather than explaining everything here, it is best for you to study the *Great Stages of the Path* yourself, so that you are studying an original and authentic scripture written by a great master. Reading the text directly has the benefit of understanding its meaning, as well as receiving a blessing from the author.

The two **hands** should form the gesture of meditative equipoise. Just below the navel your right hand is placed over the left hand with the tips of two thumbs touching at the level of the navel. The significance of holding the tips of the thumbs at one's navel is to induce inner heat, thereby enhancing meditative concentration and also cultivating love.

The **eyes** should not be wide open or completely shut, they should be just slightly open, gazing towards the tip of the nose but not in the sense of actually trying to see the tip of the nose. Wide open eyes can bring excitement, whereas completely closing them can bring mental sinking. For instance, if you close your eyes you mentally feel as if you have been blindfolded.

The **head** should be just slightly bent forward to align with the bend or the arch at the tip of the channels. The benefit of this is to prevent excitement and also disturbing thoughts.

The **shoulders** are level and elbows are kept slightly away from the sides to allow air circulation between the arms and torso.

The **mouth** should be slightly open with the tip of the tongue slightly touching against the front of the palate. If the mouth is open too much during a longer meditation period it can cause dryness in the throat, and if it is completely closed it can make breathing difficult. The tongue resting against the upper palate can help prevent thirst, as well as saliva dripping from the mouth.

The lam-rim text clearly explains the whole process for achieving calm abiding. Thus far we have covered the main pitfalls that we face in meditation. Today we have talked about the fifth fault which is over application and readjustment. This fault is inevitable unless one is well prepared beforehand. We understand here that if there are no faults in the meditation, such as sinking or excitement, there is no need to exert any effort by applying the antidote. Rather one needs to keep the meditation going on with the state of equanimity.

In summary, in order for our meditation to achieve calm abiding, we need to ensure we have gathered all the suitable conditions such as a conducive place with five features and so on. We also need to ensure we are well prepared with a good knowledge of the meditation process, which is very well explained in the text. The text

even guides us on choosing the right cushion to sit on, and then goes on to explain the correct sitting posture. Then there is an explanation of what actually happens during the meditation, such as facing various obstacles and the remedies to overcome them etc. It is very important to familiarise ourselves with all of these. What follows next are the nine stages of mental abiding one develops as one progresses towards achieving calm abiding. We will discuss these later.

Tonight, we also talked about the fact that the main cause or the main thing to blame for all our problems in life lies within us in the form of an unruly state of mind. Accordingly, it's important to remind ourselves in the face of difficult situations that the real blame lies with this unruly mind within us, rather than, as usual, blaming the outside world and people and expressing hostile thoughts and anger, or showing unpleasant facial or physical gestures to people around us. Instead of that, we should try to direct our angry mind to the unruly mind within us.

We will leave it here for tonight.

Tonight, we will recite the *Eight Verses of Thought Transformation* and dedicate it to the late Ani Tsewu who passed away only a couple of days ago. Some of you here know her too; Ani-la was the sister of Geshe Sonam and a very close friend of mine. We also dedicate the prayer to another local Tibetan man in Dandenong who passed away a few days ago. Although we are praying for other people, this is, in fact, the most effective practice for increasing our own spiritual merits, purifying our negativities, and prolonging our life span.

When we recite prayers together, we are accumulating a collective merit which, due to its collective force, is greater and more powerful than any merit created individually.

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Edited Version*

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