
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 have recited prayers for taking refuge and generating bodhicitta so accordingly make sure we cultivate a bodhicitta motivation. We will now do the usual meditation. [*Tonglen meditation*]

Please reinforce the motivation of bodhicitta, which is the wish for full enlightenment to benefit all sentient beings, and cultivate the thought 'I am listening to this profound teaching to achieve full enlightenment' and resolve to put it into practice.'

You should never underestimate the importance of beginning a practice with a bodhicitta motivation, which is essentially an altruistic mental attitude or concern for the wellbeing of all sentient beings. Such a concern is very much the essential element for one's spiritual development. Without going into detail, just try to understand how beneficial it is to cultivate an altruistic mental attitude, which will have the effect of decreasing your self-cherishing mind. A benefit of this is that you will find more joy and happiness within your mind, which is something we can all understand from our own experience.

If we cultivate this altruistic thought, it will automatically bring us happiness. So, it should occur to us that it is a very beneficial practice that we want to engage in. Cultivating an altruistic thought is not just advocating for the benefit of other sentient beings, but paradoxically it also benefits an individual being the most. Therefore, we should not leave it as just hearing about this mind. Rather in our everyday life we must recall its relevancy and benefits, and make an effort to cultivate, safeguard and develop it within ourselves. In this way, we will become the main beneficiaries of this precious mind of altruism.

If we imagine our everyday actions being driven by an altruistic thought, a sense of care for others, we can see the impact of our actions becoming greatly meaningful and less negative or unwholesome. Naturally we want to pursue that. Moreover, if we check what factors drive our actions, we find that in most cases these are mainly driven by the force of our mental intention. Therefore, if we have a positive mental intention, the action that follows will also naturally be positive. If the mental intention that drives an action is negative, then the action will also be negative. Having said that, there are, of course, many small movements and reflexes we do, like blinking our eyes or moving our hands, and it is hard to say that these movements have any relationship to our mental intentions. Apart from these, most of the actions we undertake in our lives are very much mentally driven or due to our motivation. Therefore, we can modify and change them by changing and modifying our mind, or the thought that drives us to undertake those actions.

It is especially beneficial to integrate the bodhicitta mind into our everyday actions. If we have bodhicitta in our mind then we will also have loving kindness, good heartedness, compassion, a sense of care for the wellbeing of others, and so on. These positive states of mind are the companions of bodhicitta. Then, whatever we do will undoubtedly become a part of our spiritual development.

In our situation, it is not that we don't have knowledge of Dharma. In fact, we may have a great deal of Dharma knowledge, or talk a lot about bodhicitta, or even about the highest yoga tantra, but we are not practising Dharma. As I have always emphasised, my key advice, which is also the essence of Dharma, is adding the kind-heartedness of bodhicitta into our daily actions.

Whatever action we do, we must try and generate the bodhicitta mind, and the rest will take care of itself. If we forget our practice in our everyday actions, then we are simply allowing our neurotic mind to run our actions and interactions. This mind operates under the command of various negative emotions such as jealousy, pride, and attachment. If we do that, all our spiritual knowledge is really of no use.

Essentially, the application of our Dharma knowledge to our everyday actions is what matters most to us. You may have a lot of knowledge but if you don't put that knowledge into practice, it is not of much use. So, when we talk about developing the bodhicitta mind we should think of bringing it into our everyday actions.

Harmful thoughts and actions towards others bring harm to us too. That is to say, any negative mental attitude and actions that we aim at others will in fact bounce back upon us. For example, if you express strong anger to others, the reaction you get affects you. Understanding and being aware of this can make us think twice before we cause harm to others, and that actually helps us to minimise harmful actions. It's important to always be mindful of our everyday actions; through these we can learn a lot about knowing what to do and what not to do. In relation to this, the great Atisha said in his thought transformation text *Jewel Rosary of an Awakening Warrior*,

Proclaim your own faults,
And seek not mistakes in others.
Hide your own good qualities
But proclaim the good qualities of others.

There is a lot to reflect on in these lines; they are absolutely relevant in terms of developing our spiritual practice and finding more happiness in our life. If we remind ourselves of this in our daily life it will be of great benefit to us. There is a lot to learn by just being aware of this.

In our case, we mostly do the opposite of what the great Atisha said. In the mundane world it is very common to see people always criticising others or digging up their faults. And they do everything possible to hide their own faults and weaknesses. This could be, in fact, the single most important cause of misunderstanding, friction, confusion, and suspicion in our relationships and interactions with others. In the end we live a miserable and difficult life.

We should instead admire others for their good qualities and successes and rejoice in them. In that way we will be inspired by and will learn from them. A person who is always trying to hide his own faults, but looking for faults in others, would appear as a very selfish, arrogant and mean person, and nobody wants to associate with them. There is a Tibetan saying that goes, 'When it comes to a fault of another being, even if it is as small as a head louse, you can recognise it. However, when it comes to your own faults, even if it is as big as a yak, you still can't recognise it.' If we take Atisha's advice and try to practise humility and speak of the good qualities of others and so on, then this can be a good contributing factor for us to develop good healthy relationships with others, and all involved will find it meaningful and joyful.

Atisha's *Jewel Rosary* also says:

Examine your speech when amidst many people,
Examine your mind when living alone.

This is also very practical and beneficial advice for us. When we are alone, if we do not observe our thoughts and calm them, we can easily find ourselves mentally very busy and burn out. Likewise, if we are not careful about our speech when with others, then there is a great likelihood that our speech can cause a lot of harm to other beings.

What is meditative concentration?

We have finished the subject of overcoming the five faults of meditation by applying the eight antidotes. What follows is the importance of recognising actual concentration. Obviously without a good recognition of what that is we cannot cultivate it.

In his *Great Stages of the Path* Lama Tsongkhapa says that the kind of concentration that we are trying to achieve here should have two features.

The two features are the intensity of the clarity of the extremely clear state of the mind and the non-conceptualised stability of the single-pointedness on the focus object.

Other lam-rim texts mention this as well. We need to understand from this that when we engage in meditation practice, our mind should be focusing on the object with these two features of concentration: an intense or sharp state of the clarity of the object in the mind, and also a state of stability of the single-pointed focus such that there is absolutely no distraction and wavering away from the object. These two features indicate the effectiveness of the concentration.

The main obstacle to having an intense clarity in one's mind is mental sinking. We have talked in detail about how there can be two types of sinking: a coarse one and a subtle one. The other main obstacle to having single-pointed stability is excitement. As the *Great Stages of the Path* says, this explains why sinking and excitement are the two main obstacles to achieving the perfect state of concentration.

In meditation we apply various mental factors such as mindfulness, alertness and so forth, and each of these mental factors has its own specific role. To develop concentration, we need to apply mindfulness in order to fix the mind on the object single-pointedly. But technically, the mindfulness itself is not the concentration

nor the generic mind that focuses on the object single-pointedly. So what is concentration? The *Great Stages of the Path* continues by defining concentration.

Concentration is the part of the mind which enables it to focus single-pointedly and enables it to sustain the continuity of the focus.

Therefore, concentration is a mental factor which has a specific role or the function of enabling the mind to have a sustained single-pointed focus.

It's important that you understand the distinguishing features of each of the mental factors such as concentration, mindfulness and alertness. The *Great Stages of the Path* continues:

Furthermore, there is a need of a means by which not wavering off from the initial object whatever it may be, and a means by which knowing whether or not distraction has occurred or will occur or not. The first means is mindfulness (memory) and the second means is introspection (awareness).

Again, the two main obstacles to concentration are sinking and excitement, and the two main means of maintaining concentration are mindfulness and alertness.

How to train in calm abiding (cont)

TAKING THIS AS THE BASIS, HOW TO ACHIEVE THE NINE MENTAL STATES

Going back to *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand* we are up to how to achieve the nine mental abidings. It says that to be successful in achieving the perfect state of concentration, one has to gain an experiential realisation of all nine stages of mental abiding. As such, you should recognise the features of each of these nine mental abidings.

As listed in the text these are:

Placing the mind; placement with continuity; patch-like placement; the close placement; taming the mind; pacifying; complete pacification; single-pointedness and then the placement with equanimity.

Placing the mind

For the first mental abiding, the text says:

This is achieved by the power of studying the instruction on visualisation with your guru. However you are only evoking the visualisation at this stage. It does not stay and you cannot make it persist.

From this we should note that there are six powers. The first mental abiding is primarily achieved through the *power of listening*. At that stage there is only the ability to rest or abide the mind on the object just a little bit. There is no ability to sustain the continuity of the concentration.

In the first level of mental abiding the meditator is just able to rest their mind on the object but is unable to sustain the continuation of the focus or mental stability. As described in the text, at this time the meditator would feel as if their distracting thoughts have increased. In fact, it is not that distracting thoughts have increased but it is a sign that they are becoming more aware of conceptual thoughts. I know people say that they experience more conceptual thoughts when they meditate than they do on normal days.

So 'placing the mind' is an appropriate name for this stage because at that stage the meditator is only able to

place their mind on the object, and that's all. They cannot sustain or continue the mental abiding.

Placement with continuity

After the first mental abiding, the meditator reaches the point where they can not only place their mind on the object, but they can also maintain the continuity of the placement. Having just a little continuation of mental abiding is the second mental abiding of placement with continuity.

Here 'continuation' refers to the duration it takes one to recite one round of the mala of the six-syllable OM MANI PADME HUM mantra.

The text says,

... when you can meditate for about the time it takes to say a rosary of OM MANI PADME HUM without being distracted.

As described in the text, at this level disturbing thoughts are sometimes pacified, and they arise at other times. Hence, the meditator experiences the retreat of disturbing thoughts.

In terms of the six powers, the second mental abiding is achieved mainly through the *power of thinking*, following the power of listening in the preceding stage.

During the first and second mental abidings, the moments of sinking and mental excitement arising are great, whereas the moments of resting or mental abiding are small. Therefore, in terms of the four mental attentions, *forcible mental attention* is required at the first and the second stages.

Patch-like placement

The third mental abiding is patch-like placement. This is quite self-explanatory; the text gives an example of a garment with patches. Just like you would fix a hole in a garment by stitching a patch on it, in this stage of meditation you have some ability to continue the concentration if any interruptions or distractions occur. There is an ability to recognise and fix it.

In terms of interruption from mental distractions, the text states that the main difference between the second and third mental abidings is the duration of the distraction. Due to the greater force of mindfulness or power of memory, the duration of distraction is shorter in the third stage in comparison with the second stage, and hence the duration of the state of stability is longer here.

The text says:

The duration of your distraction is shorter than in the previous two states. At this stage you are developing more powerful memory.

Close-placement

The fourth mental abiding is called close-placement. An advantage of having generated a greater power of memory or mindfulness during the third level is that at the fourth level, the meditator has gained the ability of not losing the focus on the object at all. We can clearly see how this fourth level is distinguished from the previous three mental abidings. Although there is no risk of losing the focus of the object, there is still the danger of strong mental sinking and excitement arising, so it is necessary to be able to apply the antidotes for those two.

The text says,

Just the same, while all this is happening you fall prey to the strongest forms of dullness and excitement, and you must apply antidotes to these two.

Of the six powers, the third and the fourth mental abidings are achieved mainly by the *power of mindfulness*. In fact, in the fourth stage the meditators reach a state where they have fully completed the power of mindfulness.

The text says:

... from now on, memory is like a man at the height of his powers, for the power of memory has been perfected.

Subduing or taming the mind

The fifth mental abiding is called subduing or taming the mind. This is because during the fourth level of mental abiding, the meditator gains a fully developed state of mindfulness or memory. However, as they apply mindfulness, the result can be too much withdrawing of the focus of their mind inward. Therefore, at the fifth level, the meditator confronts the fault of this 'over withdrawing' in the form of subtle mental sinking and combats it through applying and reinforcing the *power of alertness* or introspection. They apply various techniques to overcome sinking such as reflecting upon the benefits of developing meditative concentration and uplifting the height of the mental spirit. If such reflection doesn't work then there are other techniques for overcoming the sinking problem, which we discussed earlier on, so we won't discuss that here again. The main difference between the fourth and fifth mental abiding is as the text says:

Only the fourth has coarse dullness and excitement.

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