

Study Group - “Liberation *in the Palm of Your Hand*”

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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ལྷོ་ལམ་རིམ་རྒྱུ་གྲོ་ལ་ལག་བཅུངས།



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Cultivate the bodhicitta motivation, thinking “To achieve the full state of enlightenment for the sake of all beings I shall listen to these teachings properly, and afterwards I shall put them into practice”.

422.331.212.3 Mental Sinking And Excitement

ཉེས་པ་གསུམ་པ་བྱིང་ཚོད་གཉིས་འབྲུང།

In calm abiding meditation, the next main obstacles we confront are mental sinking and excitement. To recognise them we must know their characteristics.

Excitement

ཚོད་པ།

Excitement is said to have three characteristics.

1. The **object** of excitement is something which is attractive or appealing to the mind.
2. The **aspect** of excitement is a form of attachment which is a cause of distraction which destroys peace of mind.
3. The **function** of excitement hinders the mind from abiding on a mental object

The scriptural source describing these three characteristics is Asanga’s text, *The Compendium Of Knowledge*¹. This text says that excitement is a form of attachment to an attractive object, which causes the mind to become very agitated. So excitement is an obstacle to achieving calm abiding. This basically describes the three characteristics, which have just been listed.

This term “excitement” has a very specific meaning. In the Tibetan language excitement is called ‘go ba’. There are also the terms “distraction” or “agitation”. There is a difference in the way that these terms are used, and in their meaning. “Excitement” is not equivalent to, or synonymous with, the term “distraction” because, as we just mentioned, excitement is a form of attachment to some pleasant object. “Distraction”, however, is not necessarily the result of attachment.

Generally speaking, there are two causes of distraction: those caused by delusions other than attachment, and those caused by virtuous objects. In fact if we study the topic of the mind and mental factors, then distraction as a mental factor is only one of the twenty mental factors of delusions.

The Lam Rim text, *Liberation In The Palm Of Your Hand* explains very clearly the difference between excitement and distraction in general. It also clarifies the fact that while excitement which arises from attachment is categorised as an obstacle to calm abiding meditation, the mental factors of distractions are not, although they are also obstacles. The text says, for instance, that if while engaged in meditation

practice you suddenly think of someone you hate this might induce anger in your mind, and as a result you lose the object of your meditation. Obviously your mind has been distracted by external objects. Likewise if while engaged in calm abiding meditation you have a positive virtuous thought such as thought of other Dharma practices like generosity or morality, that too is regarded as a distraction. If you do not overcome such distractions then you will never achieve calm abiding.

Whatever form the distraction takes, it can interrupt meditation practice. The text discusses very clearly how these different forms of distraction are different to excitement. Excitement arises when your mind drifts towards other objects because of your attachment to them. For instance if you have just been to a most enjoyable concert this can cause a distraction in your mind. For a long time your mind can still be thinking about that music. The reason why only excitement is regarded as an obstacle to meditation practice is because it is one of the main causes of distracting our mind to external objects.

Even in our every-day life attachment or excitement is the main cause of a distracted mind, and is of course the reason why our mind is not at peace, or abiding within itself. Not only that, but our mind is so used to being attached to any appealing object, that attachment arises very easily, and the degree of attachment is also very great.

Therefore excitement is emphasised as a fault in meditation practice.

Compared to excitement, distractions are not the usual cause of our mind not abiding within itself. For instance we are so rarely distracted by virtuous thoughts, and even though anger and some other delusions can be very distracting, in general we do not experience them very often. So for these reasons even though distractions are an obstacle to meditation, only excitement is listed as a fault.

Excitement can be divided into two - coarse excitement and the subtle excitement.

Subtle excitement occurs when the object of meditation is not completely lost. However due to the influence of some attachment part of our mental focus is distracted.

Coarse excitement is when we totally lose the meditation object due to the influence of attachment.

Excitement is said to be not very hard to recognise. However the next obstacle, mental sinking, is hard to identify.

Mental Sinking

བྱིང་བ།

Mental sinking is different from a form of dullness in the mind is called in Tibetan ‘moog pa’ which is a form of dullness. Asanga’s text *Compendium Of Knowledge* says that

¹ Also known as *Compendium of Valid Cognitions* and *Compendium Of Metaphysics*. The title was clarified in the editing process.

dullness makes us mentally and physically very heavy and sleepy. Mental dullness is not mental sinking, however it can be a cause for mental sinking to occur. When mental dullness occurs it results in physical and mental inactivity, and due to this you lose interest in practising meditation.

What is mental sinking? In his lam rim text, *Great Expositions Of The Stages Of The Path*, Lama Tsong Khapa says that mental sinking arises when in meditation the mind loses the apprehension of the object. It also arises in meditation when the mind is not apprehending, or holding, the object tightly enough. Another indication of mental sinking is the degree of clarity of the apprehension of the object. Some masters have said that it is not something, which can be fully described in words, and that the only way to recognise mental sinking precisely is through personal experience. Compared with excitement mental sinking is very subtle.

Laziness is one of the main causes of mental sinking. As said before one can only really know mental sinking from personal experience, however there are some signs. It is said mental sinking is when you have the apprehension of the object in your mind, but somehow there is a feeling of over relaxation, as if your mind is falling down, and becoming overly peaceful. In other words it is when you lose intensity of mind, or force of engagement with the object. We also talk of mental sinking in terms of the degree to which you tie your mind to the object. If it is not tied enough, the looseness of the meditation is a sign of mental sinking. Like excitement, mental sinking can be divided into two forms - coarse and subtle.

The **course form of mental sinking** arises when there is stability in meditation, but there is no clarity of the object. This form of mental sinking arises when your mind is holding the object very well, but you lack the clarity of the object in your apprehension of it.

The **subtle form of mental sinking** arises when, although there is stability and clarity in the apprehension of the object, there is no intensity in the clarity of it. This is because of not holding the object tightly enough. In fact without knowing about the subtle form of mental sinking we might think that our meditation is going perfectly well. It is said that it is very easy to confuse this fault of mental sinking with true meditative concentration. If this confusion exists there is no hope of achieving calm abiding.

The only way to differentiate between subtle mental sinking and true meditative concentration is through experience in meditation. Both true meditative concentration and mental sinking have some common elements. Each can only be experienced when our mind is perfectly seated and stabilised on the object, and when there is some degree of clarity of the object. One needs to check very thoroughly whether we are engaging in true meditative concentration, or whether we have fallen prey to mental sinking. If it is mental sinking, then let alone being a cause to achieve calm abiding and a higher level of existence such as the form and formless realms in future lifetimes, it can be a cause of increasing forgetfulness and ignorance in this life too

Mental sinking is so easily confused with meditative concentration, that when you experience it you may appear to be in such a deep concentration that you even cease breathing externally. You have to check not only the stability and clarity of the object, but the degree of intensity of focus in the meditation. It is something you have to judge from experience. If you see that there is some laxity of intensity, even though there is stability and clarity in the

way the mind perceives the object, then that is a sign of mental sinking.

Of the eight remedies, the remedy of alertness is applied to overcome mental sinking and excitement. Alertness is likened to the secret agent in war who is sent to keep an eye on the enemy's tactics and preparations for war. The job of the secret agent is to inform. The actual force which defeats the enemy is the troops. Similarly if you apply alertness in your meditation you will be able to recognise when any fault such as mental sinking and excitement arises. Alertness plays a very key role in defeating the enemy.

Alertness is also an outcome of mindfulness. In meditation one first brings the object to mind. It is not a new object but a familiar one. Once the object appears, one applies mindfulness so that it is not lost. Alertness comes after mindfulness in the sense that after one applies mindfulness, alertness is the tool for mindfulness not to lose its object.

Without mindfulness alertness cannot function effectively. Consider the example of sending someone to search for a particular person. It is most important that you give a full description in terms of complexion, size of body, name and so on, and that this is committed to memory before they set out. He or she cannot afford to forget any part of the description. Then if he happens to meet with the right person he immediately recognises them. The fact that he identifies the right person is alertness. This analogy shows how mindfulness and alertness work together.

It is said that alertness should not be applied continuously, rather it should be applied every now and then. Like the secret agent the role of alertness is to inform the mind how the meditation is going. As you begin your meditation your mind focuses on the object, and in order to retain the object you have to apply very powerful mindfulness, qualified with the three characteristics we discussed last week. Then you have to apply alertness to check whether your mind is focussing solely on your given object, or whether it is distracted by some other object. Alertness keeps an eye on the mind to see if it is sitting on the object, or if it is distracted. However as we shall discuss later, we are also warned not to apply alertness unnecessarily, because that too can also be an obstacle to progress.

With regard to alertness, Shantideva said in *A Guide To The Bodhisattva's Way Of Life* that alertness is that which observes every instance of the mind and body over and over again.

Here alertness is specifically used to check whether or not there is any fault of mental sinking or excitement occurring in one's meditation. It is said that having recognised these faults of mental sinking or excitement, one must of course overcome them by applying the antidote. If no antidote is applied even though the fault has been recognised through alertness, then this is another of fault of meditation - not applying the remedy. The antidote to overcome this fault is the remedy of applying the antidote, which we shall discuss next week.

Headings with outline numbering are derived from the Text. Headings without outline numbering are derived from Geshe Doga's commentary.

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Note on authentication

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