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

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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As is always the case we should begin by generating the bodhicitta motivation - generating the genuine wish to achieve the state of buddhahood to benefit all sentient beings - and then think that for this reason we are studying this lam rim teaching, and that we shall put it into practice.

## Antidotes To Mental Sinking (continued)

At the end of the last teaching we briefly mentioned a meditation technique to immediately overcome the obstacle of mental sinking. It involves imagining the mind in the form of a white coloured drop at the heart (in some texts it says in the form of a light). Then, as one exhales, the breath forces the drop to move up so that it exits through one's crown, rising higher and higher until it eventually dissolves into space.

If, despite the application of all the methods of remove it, mental sinking still remains, it is recommended to take a break from the meditation practice. During the break one should try to overcome the cause of this mental sinking.

## Causes Of Mental Sinking

The main causes of mental sinking include:

**Sleepiness:** There is no need to describe how if we begin to fall into sleep then we naturally lose the object of meditation.

**Mental dullness:** A symptom of this is a feeling of heaviness in our mind or body.

**Cloudiness in our mind:** This is when our mind feels overcast, as if some sort of darkness has enveloped our mind.

To eliminate these causes of mental sinking it is suggested to go to a high place, a cool place, or one with panoramic views. It also helps to splash some water on one's face. Another suggestion is to take a very relaxing enjoyable walk. These relaxing leisure activities can help to remove all the above causes of mental sinking. Then having cleared away the causes of mental sinking, you feel very mentally and physically refreshed, and can return to the meditation.

## Excitement

Now we move to the remedies to the obstacle of excitement. We learnt in the preceding teachings that even though the object of observation in the meditation has not been lost, if the mind is still under the influence of mental distraction, this is the subtle form of excitement.

It is said that one of the main causes of subtle mental excitement is that the mind is too tied to the object of

observation, so therefore the first remedy is to try to loosen the mind a little bit. If this excitement is still present after the degree of tightness between the mind and the object has been loosened a little, this shows that rather than being the subtle form of excitement, the excitement is most likely to be the coarse form. One should try to remedy this obstacle as much as possible without discontinuing the meditation.

The text *Heart Of The Middle Way* suggests a remedy for such causes of excitement: one should contemplate a topic of meditation which can bring the mind inward and so overcome the influence of external distractions. It is said that this coarse form of excitement arises because there are too many feelings of pleasantness, and so the meditation falls under the influence of these distractions. The remedy is to contemplate topics such as death and impermanence. The text says that the effect of this meditation is just like pouring cold water into hot water. In this analogy excitement which is a form of desire-attachment is likened to the hot water. The cold water of the death and impermanence meditation draws the mind inward, away from the influence of external distractions, such as attachment to the sensual pleasures of this life. With this death and impermanence meditation we gain such a deep understanding and knowledge that our mind is naturally forced towards the Dharma, rather than being influenced by worldly objects.

Contemplating the suffering and misery that exists in samsara or cyclic existence in general, particularly in the lower rebirths, and gaining a deep understanding and faith in these topics is very effective in bringing the mind inward, and overcoming any form of distraction.

If the previous remedies do not remove coarse excitement, one has to rely upon instructions about other special meditation techniques. One of these instructions is the breathing meditation. This involves not only focusing the mind on inhaling and exhaling, but at the same time trying to see how long one can place the mind single-pointedly on the breath without the influence of any distraction. This is done by mentally counting the cycles of breathing, in which each inhalation and exhalation is counted as one cycle or round of breath. Continue counting the rounds of breath without being distracted from your focus on the object of the breath. Then as mental concentration increases try to extend the length of concentration on one's breathing from five rounds of breathing, to ten, then fifteen, and twenty and so on. It is said if one can stabilise the mind on the breath for 21 rounds of breathing, one has achieved the first of the nine levels of calm abiding.

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In conjunction with this common breathing meditation technique, one can also incorporate the technique of holding the wind energy in one's body at the naval, and then fixing the mind on that as long as possible. With this technique as one inhales through the nostrils, try to move all the wind in the upper part of your body, or all the downward-voiding wind down through the heart to the level of your naval. Then while holding that, bring up all the wind from the lower part of the body, or all the upward moving wind energy to the level of the naval, so the wind from the upper and lower parts of the body is joined. Then try to focus the mind on that. This technique is said to be most effective if, when one can no longer hold the wind at one's naval, one exhales slowly, preferably through the nostrils.

During the sitting meditation it is essential to maintain the object in the mind through mindfulness and alertness, and not to loosen the mode of apprehension of the object, but rather to concentrate the mind single-pointedly on the object. It is also important to know how it is necessary to check to make sure that there is no influence of any fault or obstacle such as mental sinking and excitement. Not only does the meditator have to be able to concentrate the mind on the object single-pointedly by relying mainly on mindfulness, but he or she must also be fully alert and aware so that he or she is immediately able to recognise if any fault like mental sinking or excitement arises. Of course having identified a fault one has to know all the various techniques to remove it.

In Lama Tsong Khapa's *Great Exposition Of The Stages Of The Path* it is recommended that beginners commence the meditation session with a very forceful motivation, and make the duration of their meditation short. This means that the first part of the meditation is to bring to mind the chosen object, for instance some visual form, as vividly as possible. Then one directs or, we literally say, ties the mind to that object. At this point generate a strong forceful motivation or determination saying "I shall concentrate and fix my mind single-pointedly on that object without a flicker of movement for as long as possible". Having generated this intention, the actual meditation practice begins. Throughout the meditation practice make sure that the mind is on the object by checking on the mind every now and then to see if it is still tied to the object. This is the way of applying mindfulness: checking or remembering the object every now and then.

We should try to focus more on the quality of our meditation rather than focussing on the quantity in terms of how long we meditate. It is suggested in the lam rim text *Liberation In The Palm Of Your Hand* that it is good to make the session short, in the sense of finishing the session while it is still going well and you are still enjoying the meditation. This will make you feel that you want to do it again. If you try to push yourself too hard, and practise with no enjoyment it will take a lot of motivation to repeat the practice, and you may even begin to hate it. As you can read in the lam rim commentary text, it says that it is a good time to stop if the object is clear and the meditation is going well. You should also stop if the meditation object is not clear and the meditation is not going well. What this instruction

means is that you should finish the session at the point that it makes you want to do it again. It also implies that if it is not going well, and you are not achieving anything and finding it very difficult, then you should not force yourself. It is better to end the session.

The most effective way of making progress in meditation is to have as few obstacles or faults as possible, especially the faults of mental sinking and excitement. In the beginning, when our mind is not used to single-pointed concentration it is more beneficial to make meditation as short as possible, and focus on trying to do it without any fault of mental sinking and excitement. Look for quality in the meditation. You can perform this short session as many times as possible - in a single day you can do up to 18 sessions. Before you can extend the session you have to make sure that your mental concentration can be sustained and not influenced by distractions or mental sinking. By doing that short meditation over and over again, you can eventually develop to the point that you hardly have to make any effort to concentrate the mind, which can focus on the object naturally. When you get to that point then try to extend it, making your meditation a bit longer. This is the way that you eventually progress to achieving the state of calm abiding.

It is very important that we always enjoy our practice, and end it while we are still enjoying it, so that we have the thought of wishing to do the same practice again. The text uses the example of two people being separated for a long time. If they parted good friends, then when they meet again, they will naturally like each other. However if they hated each other at the time of separation, then when they meet again they will still hate each other. If we do not put the right amount of effort into our practice in the right way, it becomes a great hardship and burden. Then later on, let alone doing it, even the thought of the practice will discourage you. This should not be the case.

Next week there will not be discussion, but we shall continue with teaching on the remedy of equanimity, the antidote to the fifth fault, which is Over Application Of The Remedy.

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**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**

Transcribed from the tape by Adair Bunnett

Edited by Adair Bunnett and Alan Molloy

Checked by Sandup Tsering and Alan Molloy