

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

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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ལྷོ་ལམ་རིམ་རྒྱུ་ལ་ལག་བཅུངས།



22 August 2000

Ensure that you cultivate the proper motivation.

422.331.223 The Measurement Of Having Gained Special Insight

Having gained calm abiding on emptiness, one should then make an effort to gain special insight. As we have learned, a fully-fledged calm abiding is gained by depending on the nine stages of mental abiding, and is qualified by the bliss of pliancy. Generally speaking, one has to gain calm abiding before gaining special insight, however calm abiding alone is not sufficient to gain special insight.

You can take any object, or in fact any object of knowledge, as an object to gain special insight. For instance you can use impermanence or a vase as your object. In the discussion here however, we are talking about special insight with respect to the selflessness of a person.

Before engaging in meditation to realise special insight, we have to develop a calm-abiding understanding of emptiness through applying the four essential points of analysis, to prove that the person is empty of inherent existence. In other words we have to develop the realisation which refutes the object of an innate sense of ‘I’, and which grasps at the inherent existence of ‘I’. We have to make sure that we have gained this fully-fledged calm abiding realisation before engaging in special insight meditation.

According to the lam rim text, calm abiding is a state of meditation wherein we are able to effortlessly focus and concentrate single-pointedly on the meaning of emptiness, and then by the virtue of this single-pointed concentration experience the bliss of mental and physical pliancy. In order to further sustain this realisation, mindfulness has to be applied; this is remembering the object of one’s realisation, which is the lack of inherent existence of a person. Alertness is also applied to prevent any mental sinking or excitement from hindering one’s single-pointed concentration.

If there is not enough clarity in the meditative concentration, or if there is some weakness in the mode of apprehension of the object as to the realisation of the emptiness, then this realisation has to be reinforced by reapplying the four essential points of analysis. It is said that if one is able to fix the mind on emptiness with calm abiding realisation, then one is in stabilising meditation.

Once in that state, in order to achieve special insight then, without in any way interrupting that state of stabilising meditation, one further analyses the depth of emptiness by further applying the four points of analysis.

This further analysis to achieve special insight is done in a state of calm abiding.

The text uses the analogy of calm abiding as being a very clear, still lake, such as when there is no wind. The analysis that one does at that moment is compared to a fish, which is moving here and there underneath that still, clear lake. You engage in the meditation where, along with the degree of stability provided by calm abiding, you also use the mind of discriminating wisdom to analyse emptiness. As you continue this further analysis using these four essential points within the state of calm abiding, then it is said that eventually your realisations go further just by the force of the discriminating wisdom which analyses the emptiness. Then by that force of discriminating wisdom, one can experience a very special mental and physical pliancy which is said to be superior to that which is experienced at the time of gaining calm abiding. It is said that one gains special insight by this experience of mental and physical pliancy, which is achieved through the force of the discriminating wisdom analysing emptiness, in conjunction with calm abiding.

In a nutshell calm abiding is the state of meditation which is achieved by means of the nine mental abidings. In that state of meditation one has the ability to effortlessly focus single-pointedly on the objects as one wishes. In that state there is also the mental and physical bliss which results from single-pointed concentration. This is calm abiding.

The Difference between Calm Abiding and Special Insight

The difference between calm abiding and special insight is not a case of seeing something that you have not seen before. They differ in the degree of the mental and physical bliss of pliancy. The bliss of pliancy is achieved in association with calm abiding; it arises by virtue of one’s single-pointed concentration. The mental and physical pliancy and bliss that you experience with special insight is a superior form of this pliancy. This is because it is achieved through the force of discriminating wisdom analysing emptiness in addition to the force of single-pointed concentration of calm abiding. Literally when we say ‘special insight’ the ‘special’ refers to the superior bliss of pliancy that is achieved at the time of gaining special insight.

Earlier in the lam rim text there was discussion about the benefit of achieving the union of calm abiding and special insight. In that discussion another analogy for calm abiding and special insight was used: calm abiding being likened to a butter lamp which is not disturbed by

wind, whereas special insight is like the brilliant light or clarity provided by that lamp. From that example we can gain the very clear and complete understanding that both calm abiding and special insight are essential, and that special insight is necessary to gain a clear understanding of the object. In many ways this example is the same as the analogy of calm abiding being like a still lake, and special insight as the fish swimming in the lake.

The lam rim text then cites a quotation from Lama Tsong Khapa, which goes something like this:

“Having gained a thorough knowledge
Of the three principal aspects of the path,
One should then spend time in a solitary place
To achieve the ultimate purpose of one’s life.”

Here we are being urged to direct all our effort into putting into practice the lam rim teachings we have heard. Consider the considerable knowledge we have gained of the three principal paths; we learned renunciation as part of the small and medium stages of the path, we have learned about bodhicitta, and also the perfect view of emptiness. If someone asks us what the state of liberation means, or what the three principal aspects mean, we have some knowledge. For instance if we talk of the state of liberation we know that the most suitable form of life to achieve liberation is the human life of leisure and endowment. We have a fair idea of what causes we have to create to achieve liberation, and what obstacles we have to remove to achieve liberation. This shows that as a result of hearing it, we have gained some hearing-knowledge about the Dharma. The effort that we put into following these teachings has left some seed in our mind.

In the quotation above Lama Tsong Khapa urges us to engage in spiritual practice. This includes knowledge gained from both listening to the Dharma, and as a result of contemplating it for ourselves. Therefore Lama Tsong Khapa says we should rely upon a solitary life. In one way, this is also saying that if we do not now seriously begin our practice then we may not get such an opportunity again, for this life can end at any moment. When we think about what Lama Tsong Khapa said, there is no reason not to seriously pursue meditation practice. As said before, through hearing the teachings we have gained some knowledge of the Dharma, and tested that knowledge with our own intelligent mind. That is, by examining our hearing-knowledge with our own mind, we have validated our hearing-knowledge of the teachings.

Lama Tsong Khapa asked why do we not now enhance our knowledge with meditation practice, by relying on a solitary life? Relying on a solitary life can mean two things: it can be solitary in terms of place, and solitary in terms of mental attitude. It is said that living a solitary life in terms of mental attitude is the more important. We can lead a solitary life in terms of being in a place free from busy crowds and the noise, but our mind may not be solitary. Having a solitary mind means being free from all worldly concerns, like the eight worldly concerns, or dharmas, and all the very mundane unnecessary thoughts that can inhabit our mind.

What we need to do is to develop a practice to calm our mind, so that we can make progress along our spiritual

path. As discussed on the weekend course on Six Session Yoga, making progress means training our mind stage by stage. There is no way to make a sudden very fast leap to higher goals without that stage by stage progress.

We have to apply whatever we have learned about Dharma to our mind, in order to calm it, and remove it from the influence of all the negative states of mind. Apart from learning about Dharma, practising Dharma is for us the most important thing to do, because it is only through practice that Dharma will be of benefit to us.

On the other hand if we do not practise, it is even possible that our knowledge of Dharma will poison our mind, rather than heal it. For example, if our knowledge of Dharma becomes a cause for us to be very competitive with fellow practitioners, or to feel jealousy or pride towards others, then how sad and pathetic our practice of Dharma has become.

Lama Tsong Khapa said that it is important to try to make the best use of our human life and seize the opportunity before it is too late.

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

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