
The Quick Path to Enlightenment

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Breathing meditation

At Tara Institute, before beginning every Wednesday teaching, we do a few minutes of breathing meditation together, which I think is a very good idea. Everyone who comes to listen to the teachings has a different frame of mind. Some people may be unhappy and disturbed. Others may not have such a disturbed and unhappy state of mind but find that their mind is not used to staying focussed. So, breathing meditation is a very useful tool for everyone, enabling them to immediately rid themselves of mental disturbances and distractions, and stabilise their mind from the inside. When our mind is stabilised in this way then whatever activity we do, such as listening to teachings, we will be able to focus our minds on that, and the teachings will become more effective. Not only do we engage in the breathing meditation here, but we can also do it anywhere to counteract any restless and disturbing thoughts. We will find this easy and simple meditation is very effective in immediately getting rid of disturbing thoughts.

Breathing meditation is a very simple technique because all we do is focus our direct mental attention on our breathing. By doing this, we are displacing all the thoughts and external objects that we may have in our minds. This is necessary because the unease, stress, anxiety and tension we are experiencing is conditioned by these thoughts and mental objects. For example, we may be disturbed by thoughts about the past or worrying about the future or objects of attachment and aversion. However, when we undertake this breathing meditation, we direct all of our minds to our breathing, which will naturally stop all these disturbing thoughts from arising. The result, which is increased peace and happiness, lets us appreciate the benefits of this simple meditation technique.

When we meditate, we need an object of meditation. In breathing meditation, the object is our own inhalation and exhalation of our breath, something we are very familiar with. So, we don't need to study the object of meditation as we have to do with some other meditation practices, where we must first study the meditation objects and topics, otherwise, we cannot engage in the meditation practice. From the point of view of the object, breathing meditation makes it easy to practise. Another added benefit of using breathing as a meditation object is its efficacy in preventing mental distractions. This is because breathing is not a concrete object with colours and shapes, and this makes it less likely that mental distractions will arise.

In short, we do a bit of breathing meditation before the teaching to get rid of all the disturbing thoughts, and thus making our minds a lot more receptive and attentive to the teaching.

Regarding the optimum physical posture for meditation, the scriptures mention many features of the correct posture. Of all those features, the most important is to keep our backs straight as much as possible. In the actual breathing meditation, we need to keep our mental attention just on our breathing, being aware and knowing we are breathing in, and we are breathing out. Other than this, we don't let any thoughts or objects arise in our minds.

As we begin the breathing meditation, place your mind on the incoming and outgoing breath – anyone can do that. However, how long we can maintain our mental focus on our breathing varies from person to person. It is natural that eventually, after a few rounds of breathing, especially if you are a beginner, you may lose this mental attention very quickly. That is natural. When this happens, when we lose our focus, we simply need to bring our mind back onto our breathing again and not feel frustrated. We just repeat the same process of bringing our mind back onto the object and keeping it there. By repeating this process, we will become more familiar with the meditation, and be able to prolong our mental focus and the meditation will become easier and better.

Sometimes when people meditate, especially if they are beginners, they easily feel so frustrated because they realise how difficult it is to keep their mind on the object. They also feel that their mind seems more agitated when they meditate. Then they try harder, but the result is just more frustration. If you experience that, you must understand that the fact that recognising when distraction occurs during your meditation is a positive thing and is normal, simply because it indicates that you are aware of your mind. We normally have a mind full of mental distractions, but we are not aware of it. So, we should not think that we are not meditating properly when we notice how easily our mind wanders off after external objects. We should think that this is normal. Without getting too concerned, all we need to do is simply bring the mind back to the object. If we continuously repeat the same meditation, then through training our mind regularly, we will note our progress in terms of our mind remaining on the object for longer without losing our mental focus.

This is a very brief explanation of meditation for the time being. Later, we will find more details about meditation, including the specific features of the sitting posture and so forth, under the topic of relying on the spiritual teacher.

Bearing in mind what we have just discussed, let us now do a couple of minutes of breathing meditation together.

[Pause for meditation]

How the Buddha's teachings are included within the three stages of the path

Relating to the lamrim teaching, we have been talking about the greatness of the Dharma, which refers to Atisha's text *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*. Here, we find out about the special qualities of Atisha's *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*.

One of the special qualities of the Dharma is that there is no contradiction within the teachings of the Buddha, such as the teachings on the three vehicles, or the difference between Sutrayana and Tantrayana. The text explains that

all the Buddha's teachings can be included within the stages of the path for persons with great, middling and small mental scopes. The question is how all the Buddha's teachings are included within the path of the three types of persons.

It says here that before we cultivate the path of a person of great scope, we must first follow the path that is in common with the path of the person of middling scope. And before we follow the stages of the path in common with the person of middling scope, we must follow the stages of the path that is in common with the person of small scope.

Why is this order of development necessary? The text explains this by saying that the purpose of all the activities of the Buddha is for the sake of other sentient beings – generating an altruistic mind of enlightenment in the beginning, accumulating merit and wisdom in the middle and achieving complete enlightenment at the end. The purpose is fulfilling their temporary goal of higher status or a happy rebirth and the ultimate goal of definite goodness. To accomplish the temporary goal, the Buddha gave a discourse on the practice of the ten virtuous actions and impermanence and so forth.

Regarding the ultimate goal of definite goodness, there are two: the state of liberation from cyclic existence and complete enlightenment. The Buddha taught the four noble truths and the twelve links to help other sentient beings achieve the definite goodness of the state of liberation from samsara. And to achieve the definite goodness of complete enlightenment, the Buddha taught how to cultivate the bodhicitta mind and engage in the six perfections or deeds of bodhisattvas.

All these teachings are called the stages of the Great Vehicle path. Likewise, the teaching on achieving the state of liberation from cyclic existence is called either the middling stages of the path or the path in common with the person of middling scope. The teaching on achieving a higher rebirth is called either the small stages of the path or the path in common with the person of small scope. So, in this way, we can understand how all the Buddha's teachings can be included in the stages of the path for people of the three scopes – great, middling and small.

In this text, we also find an explanation of the three stages of the path in reverse order. The text states that entering into the Great Vehicle has two paths – the Sutra or the Perfection of Wisdom path, and the Mantra or Tantrayana path. Whichever path you follow, the entry door is bodhicitta, an altruistic aspiration to achieve complete enlightenment for the sake of all beings. Then, the text goes on to explain the cause of bodhicitta, which is compassion. It then traces the cause of compassion, which is a sense of renunciation aspiring to achieve self-liberation. Next, it explains how to cultivate renunciation, the teaching related to the person of small scope. This way of explaining and contemplating the three stages of the path is the reverse of the way we progress along the path.

As previously mentioned, to generate great compassion for all other sentient beings we must first generate true renunciation, which is an aspiration to achieve liberation for oneself. To generate such renunciation, it is necessary to recognise the unbearable suffering nature of the whole

of cyclic existence. Prior to this we must recognise the suffering of lower rebirths and so on.

So, it's obvious that without first being aware of the suffering of cyclic existence, particularly the suffering of the lower rebirths, we can't generate true renunciation or an aspiration to achieve a state of liberation from cyclic existence. In other words, if we have no wish to free ourselves from the suffering of cyclic existence, we can't have the same wish with respect to other sentient beings. Hence, renunciation is an indispensable cause for great compassion. It is impossible to produce great compassion, which is the wish for all other beings to be free from cyclic existence and lower rebirths, if you lack a strong desire or wish to be free from the fear of being stuck in cyclic existence and free from lower rebirths, and the suffering that entails.

According to the *Sutra of Ten Wheels*:

If you have no ability to sip a small bit of water, how can you gulp down the great ocean? If you cannot practise the two vehicles, how can you practise the Great Vehicle?

As stated in the *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*:

When you think of yourself roaming in samsara, lacking happiness and tortured by suffering, you should be terrified with your hair standing on end. And if this doesn't happen, you will not be able to bear the torture of other living beings roaming in samsara, lacking happiness and tortured by suffering.'

In his text *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* the master Shantideva also says:

If, before generating bodhicitta, these living beings
Do not even dream of such a mind
For their sake,
How will they develop it for the sake of others?'

Bodhicitta is the only entry door to the sutric and tantric paths

Whichever path of the Mahayana you follow, Sutrayana or Tantrayana, there is only one entry door, which is bodhicitta. So, here bodhicitta is said to be the entry door to the Great Vehicle (Mahayana Vehicle of Perfection) and Sutrayana. This means that if you don't have bodhicitta, you cannot be a Mahayanist – you don't enter the Mahayana path, and you don't enter the Sutrayana path, no matter what other qualities you may possess. So, from this perspective, we can understand why bodhicitta is the entry door to the Mahayana and Sutrayana paths. However, here, bodhicitta is said to be the entrance door to the Tantric path, or Tantrayana too. What does this mean exactly? We need to think about this, and we need to ask questions.

The question is: if we have ever generated the bodhicitta mind, does it automatically grant entry into the Tantric path or Tantrayana? That is one question. The other question concerns a way to enter the Tantrayana. To enter into tantric practice, we normally receive initiations from the lamas. So, is bodhicitta a prerequisite to receiving initiations and entering the Tantric path?

[Student:] *I think the answer is because you must have the desire to quickly and more quickly achieve enlightenment on the basis of bodhicitta to then enter the tantric path.*

So, are you saying that you must have bodhicitta?

[Student:] *You must have, yeah.*

So, are you saying that unless all of us who have received initiations have a bodhicitta mind? Otherwise, although we have received initiations, we have to say that we have not yet entered the Tantric path?

[Student:] *Yes.*

But you are practising?

[Student:] *We are practising.*

So, you are engaging in Tantric practice? Are you saying that doing Tantric practice is not sufficient to qualify as Tantra?

[Student:] *Yes.*

So that is one question. The other question we can raise here is: if bodhicitta is the entry door to the Tantric path, then does it mean that anyone who generates bodhicitta automatically enters the Tantric path?

[Student:] *No.*

If not, then it doesn't satisfy the point of bodhicitta being the entry door to the Tantric path. You have cultivated bodhicitta, but you are still not on the Tantric path. How can bodhicitta be the entry door to the Tantric path?

[Student:] *It's not the only requirement.*

The entry door.

[Student:] *It's not the only requirement.*

In the text, the word 'only' is used. Also, we normally say that bodhicitta is the entry door to the Mahayana path because whoever generates or possesses bodhicitta is on the Mahayana path. Also, if they lose bodhicitta, then they are off the Mahayana path. So that's the meaning.

But we have a problem understanding the same meaning with respect to bodhicitta as the entry door to the Tantric path.

[Student:] *The person is also required to be accepted or enter into the Mandala or has to enter the Tantric path.*

It says here that bodhicitta is the only entry door.

[Student:] *Yes. There is no other entry door.*

Yes. When talking about 'the entry door', that's what you are trying to understand. If something is an entry door, when you go in, you are in. So, if bodhicitta is the entry door to the Tantric path, then when you have bodhicitta, you are through the door and onto the Tantric path. That is what we are saying. Otherwise, it doesn't make sense for it to be an entry door.

[Student:] *So whoever has bodhicitta has then entered the Tantra path? Is that what you're saying? I am saying that it is not true that whoever has bodhicitta has entered the Tantrayana path.*

Yes, I understand that. Then how are you going to explain what is said here. We can't say the lamrim text is wrong? Tsongkhapa's *Great Treatise* says the same thing.

[Student:] *To enter the Tantrayana path, you must have bodhicitta.*

What is said in Tsongkhapa's lamrim and also here is that bodhicitta is the only entry door to both the Sutra and Tantric paths.

[Student:] *There is no other door?*

So according to you, even if we have taken initiations and whatever other tantric practices we may be doing, unless we have generated bodhicitta, we have not entered the path of Tantra.

[Student:] *Yes.*

Some scholars distinguish between entering Tantra and entering the Tantric path, through the use of the word 'path'. So, they have interpreted bodhicitta as an entry door to the Tantric path. From this perspective, we can say that we have entered Tantra, but we are not on the Tantric path. Of course, we can raise the same question even if you say that bodhicitta is the entry to the Tantric path or the Mantra path, you still raise the same question. Do those who possess or generate bodhicitta enter the Tantric path as well?

[Student:] *Same ... yeah [inaudible]*

Well, you are going to have a go at these questions, but this is mentioned in Tsongkhapa's *Great Treatise* and is also mentioned in the text we are studying. So, what does that mean?

We will return to this next week.

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