
The Quick Path to Enlightenment

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Breathing meditation

As usual, we will start with a short breathing meditation, where we place our mind on the incoming and outgoing breath rather than on any other object. This meditation is very effective and handy tool for dealing with immediate disturbing thoughts and emotions. For example, how you would feel when you get strong feeling of anger, and at that very moment someone advises you to be more patient and compassionate to the person who harmed you. Not only will it be too difficult to do that but also you might also become angrier and more frustrated, even with the person who gives that advice. There are some meditations that you can apply to overcome anger, but in such a situation the simple breathing meditation is more appealing.

What you need to do is say to yourself, 'I need to take a break from the problem.' Try to relax and take a few rounds of long breaths in and out. This will make you feel a little calmer and more relaxed. After that, try to breath in and out normally and then just direct your whole mental attention onto your breath. Keep the mind bringing back on the breath if it moves away from you. To help keep your attention on the breath you can mentally count a round of breathing thinking, 'I am inhaling and I am exhaling', as one round of breathing and so forth.

We can think of the breathing meditation as an effective tool for immediately handling any strong bursts of afflictive emotions, such as anger, desire etc. Once your mind is calm and you are back to your normal self, contemplating the downfalls of afflictive emotions and the benefits of practising patience and loving kindness will provide a remedy to prevent afflictive emotions such as anger from arising.

We will now do a short breathing meditation together. Make sure the motivation for engaging in the meditation and coming here today is to learn about the Dharma for the sake of all other beings.

[Meditation]

Death is certain

In the preceding teaching we focused on how to meditate on death and impermanence. We learned that there are three roots and nine reasons – three reasons for each root – to consider. The three roots are: death is certain, time of death is uncertain and only the Dharma is of benefit at the time of death. I explained these in the last teaching. Relating to the third root – the uncertainty of the time of death – the lamrim texts say that when we are alive we find no time for Dharma practice. We keep procrastinating thinking, 'I will do that practice later' and never get around to doing it before we die. Guntang Rinpoche wrote, 'Twenty years goes without knowing and then another twenty years goes by and we are still saying, I will do it, I will do it'. That makes forty years. Then you say, 'It's now too late, too late. That's a story of empty life.' This line very much resonates with what the

scriptures say about how we die without finding time for practising the Dharma.

Why we meditate on death and impermanence?

Meditation on death and impermanence – how death is certain but the time of death is uncertain, and how only the Dharma will benefit us at the time of death – helps to arouse awareness of the fact that we all must die. So, the reason for cultivating this awareness is to motivate us to engage in Dharma practice.

How do we practise the Dharma? Great yogis such as Milarepa completely renounced the world including their family, possessions and comforts of life. Their practice was inspirational and profound, however it is not recommended or practical for everyone. We should not think that the only way for us to practise the Dharma and make our life meaningful is by giving up everything – our job, family, house and so forth. It is not necessary that everyone who wishes to practise the Dharma must give up everything and pursue the life of mendicant. Everyone is different and must follow the practice that is most suited them and what works the best for them. For example, in our case, good physical health is paramount for Dharma practice or achieving anything in life. To have a healthy body we need to eat well and have a good shelter. We must therefore work to earn money to facilitate our good living conditions. So we should be practical in our approach to our Dharma practice. Renouncing the world may be not a practice that is within our capacity. Besides, we note that one of attributes of the precious human life is that all the organs are intact. Being mentally and physically handicapped because of poor conditions is a disadvantage for practising the Dharma.

Reduce attachment

Hence, through the meditation on death and impermanence, we should try to reduce attachment to things and people. Whilst we need to depend on people and other material conditions, we should not get attached them because they are all impermanent and changing all the time. Attachment to things, people, pleasure and so forth is the major cause of suffering and impediment for our Dharma practice. Not only that, it is also a cause of anger, jealousy and competitiveness – all these emotions are harmful to our wellbeing.

Thinking about our future life

The meditation on death and impermanence also makes us contemplate what happens after death. Do we become non-existent? Do we take another rebirth? We say that after death we take another rebirth. According to Buddhism we can take either a higher or lower rebirth, of which there are six: three higher rebirths of godly beings, demi-gods and humans and three lower rebirths of hell, hungry ghosts, and animals. Obviously we don't want to be born in a lower rebirth. But are we doing anything to prevent it? Engaging in the death and impermanence meditation is a preparation for our future life.

We want to ensure that we go to a higher rebirth, and that we don't fall into a lower rebirth. We need protection and such protection must be found within ourselves. There are many religions in the world and each presents their own object of faith to their followers – an object in which they place hope and seek help from in time of need. According to the theistic religions, the Almighty God is the ultimate object of refuge and hence developing faith in Him is the key to good future.

Buddhism doesn't accept the Almighty God, and explain that the suitable refuge objects be qualified with the following qualities.

- They are free from all fears and suffering
- They are skilful in rescuing others from suffering. For example, a mother who can't swim is helpless if she sees her child drowning in water
- They have compassion for others. Even if you have capacity and skill to help others, you won't reach out to them if you lack compassion.
- Compassion is unconditional and without any prejudices of holding some close and others distant. If the compassion is afflicted with prejudice there is no guarantee that you will receive any benefit.

The Lord Buddha has these qualifications and hence he is a perfect object of refuge. The Buddha is free from all fears and suffering. He is endowed with all the skills of benefiting others with impartial compassion for all beings. In the distant past the Buddha was also ordinary sentient being like us and even born in a lower rebirth and hence was subject to the suffering we endure. How did the Buddha reach complete enlightenment? He initially cultivated the bodhicitta mind, a good heart, based on loving kindness and compassion for other sentient beings, and then fully developed all the excellent qualities such as perfect wisdom and so forth. As a result, he became a fully awakened one. After achieving complete enlightenment, the Buddha taught others the path to enlightenment based on his own experiences and realisations. Realising that he cannot wash away the defilements of other beings, like stains on clothes, the Buddha said that only way he can benefit others is by teaching the Dharma that he realised himself.

Taking refuge in the Three Jewels

In Buddhism we have three objects of refuge which are called the Three Jewels – the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. Shakyamuni Buddha is an example of the Buddha refuge object, or jewel. The Sangha refuge objects are the noble beings who are the followers of the Buddha and who have gained the direct realisation of emptiness but not yet achieved enlightenment. The Dharma Jewel refers to the actual path that will provide us with protection or refuge. Therefore, the Buddha Jewel is a spiritual guide on the path, the Sangha Jewel an assistant and the Dharma Jewel are our refuge.

The Dharma teachings given by the Buddha are the Dharma Jewel. Technically speaking the Dharma Jewel refers to the inner direct realisation of the truth that we gain through integrating the Buddha's teaching into our practice. This inner realisation of the truth is called the noble truth of the path. The attainment of the quality of being free from mental afflictions is the noble truth of cessation, while the Dharma refuge object or Jewel serves as the actual refuge or protection for us.

To explain the truth of cessation, consider the example of someone who is addicted to alcohol or smoking. They have to go through a long process if they want to give up that habit. Initially, they need the motivation to overcome the addiction. But simply having the motivation may not be enough as the strong desire for the substance to which they are addicted will arise. To overcome that desire, they will need to think of the disadvantages of the addiction and use that to strengthen their motivation and determination. Eventually they can reach a stage where, even if they have easy access to whatever

they are addicted to, they won't have any craving or desire. They will then have a sense of confidence that no matter what, they will never go back to that habit. Likewise, we can also counteract the force mental afflictions such as anger and jealousy by thinking of their shortcomings and making a consistent effort in our practice. Eventually, as we make progress on the path, we can get to the stage where we can completely overcome all the mental afflictions through the attainment of the truth of cessation. In the next week's session we will examine the meaning or the manner of taking refuge.

Do you have any questions?

Question: what does practising the Dharma mean?

The main focus of the Dharma is our mind, and cultivating a positive mental attitude. When we hear about Dharma practice we must relate that to our mind. Dharma practice means not holding a negative mental attitudes, such as anger, hatred, jealousy and so forth. On the one hand, it means putting an effort into cultivating positive states of mind. From a positive mental attitude positive deeds will come.

Dharma practice also involves being mindful of our daily thoughts and actions. What we want from our thoughts and actions is that they are beneficial and helpful to ourselves and others. We must understand that just as we want happiness and do not want suffering, all other beings are same in this regard. Therefore, we should be mindful of our interactions with others, keeping in mind that they want happiness and do not want suffering. Through mindfulness we will have the right mental attitude and actions. This is the real Dharma practice.

In a way, the quality of the Dharma is already within us. When we talk about love, compassion and a good heart towards others, some people might have more and some less, but everyone is born with the qualities of love and compassion. Therefore, Dharma practice is putting an effort into further developing and enhancing the good qualities that we already possess, such as love, compassion, tolerance and so on. It is about enhancing and developing our inborn nature.

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