
Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

1 May 2018

We will begin with our usual meditation. So, ensure that you cultivate the right motivation. Once again, as indicated before, you should focus on cultivating the right motivation, which is to achieve full enlightenment in order to benefit all sentient beings. That's why you are listening to this teaching and intending to properly put it into practice. You should know that getting into the habit of always commencing the practice with a proper motivation makes the practice much more effective.

Cultivating good heartedness and altruism

If we look within ourselves, we all have a state of mind in the form of a good heart or altruism, which we should recognise as being extremely precious, as if it were a priceless possession. Our job is to safeguard and increase that mind.

By equipping ourselves with that beautiful mind of altruism, our Dharma practice will become very effective. Even if we don't practise Dharma, our mundane activities will also benefit others, or at the very least we will not harm them.

It is obvious to us that if we have altruism then we won't hold any harmful thoughts, utter any harsh words or physically harm others. Rather we will be trying to benefit others mentally, verbally and physically. In this way, we can understand the benefits and values of possessing a good heart and altruism; that is really the source of our potential to be able to benefit other beings.

I think in that way, and try my best, hour-by-hour, day-by-day to tread the path of this practice of safeguarding and increasing altruism. I encourage you too to tread the same path so that you can gradually see progress in your practice.

Our own experience verifies that happiness results from a sense of empathy, concern and care for others. Just think about this! Without an altruistic mental attitude, what we will have is only a perpetually self-centred mind with the sense of 'I' constantly arising. This sense of ego or 'I' constrains or narrows our thoughts and concerns, bringing us only worries, without any consideration of other people.

Such a narrow-minded mental outlook is the source of unending problems and difficulties in our lives. If, instead of this, we open our heart to others, think about them, consider their needs and show care towards them we will then begin to find more and more joy and happiness in our own lives.

How to meditate on calm abiding (cont.)

We have been talking a lot about the benefits of gaining control over the mind, and in order to control the mind we understand that we need to meditate. If, through meditation, we achieve calm abiding, that's a marvellous

thing. That is why we are now studying how to cultivate calm abiding. The root text says in verse 39, *While the conditions for calm abiding are incomplete ...* You have learnt that you must first acquire six favourable conditions to achieve calm abiding; I assume your discussion session has touched on this topic. As to actually achieving calm abiding, there are **five faults or pitfalls** that need to be overcome by applying the eight antidotes.

The first pitfall: laziness

In the preliminary stage of our meditation, the first pitfall of laziness will come our way. Laziness affects not only our meditation practice, but also any activities that we undertake; without getting rid of it we cannot achieve our goal. The antidotes to laziness are the first four of the eight antidotes, which are conviction and faith, aspiration, perseverance and pliancy. We have already covered this. The actual antidote to laziness is pliancy, which we may not have achieved yet.

However, if we think about the benefits of meditative concentration, we will then develop conviction-faith in it and this faith, in turn, will arouse within us an aspiration or a wish to achieve it, which in turn results in a joyful generation of perseverance in achieving that concentration. The result of that is the state of pliancy. With these four, which have a cause and effect relationship to one another, we are able to automatically rid ourselves of laziness.

The second pitfall: forgetting the instruction

Now in the actual stage as we engage in meditative concentration, we will confront the second pitfall of forgetting the instruction, which means losing or not being able to retain the object of meditation that we have found. The antidote here is applying mindfulness or memory. We have finished this section too.

The third pitfall: sinking and excitement

As we try to retain or apprehend the meditation object through the power of memory, we face the third pitfall of sinking and excitement or scattered thinking. These need to be removed, otherwise we cannot develop the perfect state of meditative concentration. Sometimes sinking and excitement are categorised separately as the pitfalls of meditation, in which case we would have six pitfalls, not five.

The antidote to excitement is introspection, which in Tibetan is *she-shin*; in English it is sometimes called alertness or awareness. We will find later on that introspection may not necessarily be the direct antidote. In the previous session we discussed the difference between subtle and coarse sinking, and now we will look into the difference between subtle and coarse excitement as well as the technique for overcoming it.

Subtle and coarse excitement

The formal description of excitement as mentioned in Asanga's *Compendium of Knowledge* is:

What is excitement? It is an unsettled state of mind lacking peace, a form of attachment influenced by attractive signs. It has the function of interrupting calm abiding.

We'll leave the definition at that.

As a mental factor, excitement (Tibetan: *gopa*) is categorised as a form of attachment that causes the mind to wander off after a beautiful object and bringing to mind some beautiful or pleasant image. For instance, even a day after you have been to see a very exciting and enjoyable show, you could still have a clear memory or image of the show. This would affect your concentration so much so that you might find it difficult to stop your mind going after that image. Generally speaking, the two most favourable conditions for meditation are regarded as mindfulness and introspection, whereas the two main obstacles are sinking and excitement.

Difference between excitement and mental wandering

As stated earlier, excitement is a form of attachment. However, mental wandering (Tibetan: *trowa*) can be in the form of a virtuous or a neutral state of mind. Therefore, excitement and mental wandering are not the same. Let's say in your meditation your mind wanders off to a thought of feeling hatred towards an enemy, or a thought of engaging in different practices such as giving or morality. In both cases we say you lose your mental attention because of mental wandering or *trowa*, but this is not excitement or *gopa*. The cause of losing attention here is not an excitement because it is not a form of attachment. It is not easy to discern the difference between mental wandering and excitement in meditation.

If we were to achieve calm abiding by meditating on an image of the Buddha as the object of our meditation, then our mind should be just abiding single-pointedly on the image of the Buddha, with both mental stability and clarity. In this state of meditation, if any desirable image appears and our mind wanders off after it, this is an indication of excitement entering into our meditation, which will interrupt our meditative concentration.

If in the meditation we have a thought of someone we hate such as an enemy, then we will generate anger and because of that we will lose mental focus. In this case the cause of losing concentration is not excitement but mental wandering or *trowa*. As said before, the mental wandering that interrupts meditative concentration can also be in the form of a virtuous state of mind. For instance, you generate compassion by thinking of the suffering of other beings, or love by thinking of their lack of privileges. Although cultivating love and compassion is positive, generating it while meditating on a given object to achieve concentration will cause mental wandering. So even such virtuous thoughts should be avoided when pursuing meditative concentration.

Despite the fact that both excitement and mental wandering equally interrupt meditative concentration, only excitement is categorised as a pitfall in meditation, while mental wandering is not. Why? The answer is that of the two, excitement is the more significant cause of obstacle to meditative concentration.

Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand says:

Lack of focus [mental wandering] is slighter and of shorter duration when its object is either the object of your hostility or when your attention is being directed to something virtuous. In every day life our mind often wanders off due to attachment, so in terms of the greater amount of time or ease with

which excitement arises, only it (excitement) is mentioned.¹

As implied here, in meditation our mind wanders off due to hostile thoughts while there are fewer virtuous states of mind. They are shorter in comparison with a mind distracted by excitement. Generally speaking, hostile thoughts or anger have a shorter duration than desire or attachment, which arises relatively easily but is hard to get rid of. Therefore, excitement alone is categorised as a pitfall of meditation.

There are two types of excitement: coarse excitement and subtle excitement.

Coarse excitement means a loss of the meditation object due to the influence of a desirable object. **Subtle excitement** occurs where there is focus on the object, but a corner of the focus is gone due to the influence of a desirable object.

Introspection: the antidote to excitement

Introspection, which in Tibetan is *shey-shin*, is also known in English as vigilance, alertness or awareness. It is considered as a component of the antidote to excitement but not the main antidote.

Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand says:

... vigilance is still a component of the antidote, just as the army has its scout.

With the force of good memory or mindfulness we fix our mind on the object, ensuring there is both stability and clarity in our meditation. We also need to utilise introspection or awareness to detect if any faults arise. However, we need to be careful of not over-applying introspection.

To quote *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*:

If you apply vigilance continuously it becomes a hindrance to your meditative state, but if you do not apply vigilance regularly you may develop some serious faults in your single-pointed concentration and not be aware of it. The thief, as it were, has already carried off your possession.

When we are doing well in meditation in terms of the stabilisation of concentration, we may, through our introspection or awareness (which is a form of intelligent wisdom) detect within us some sense of discouragement or a low mental spirit. In Tibetan the term for this is *shum-pa*, a kind of indication of the arising or proximate arising of sinking. If we notice this, then we will need to uplift or widen our mind or tighten the focus a bit.

However, if we detect our mind being too uplifted or tense to the point of being close to bringing in excitement, then we will need to bring the height of the mind down, loosen up or withdraw the focus a bit.

To a large extent we need to rely on our own experience of meditation to determine the right application of the antidote, knowing precisely when and how to apply it. The text uses the analogy of carrying a bowl full of tea in your hand. Let's say we were to carry a glass full of water in our hand without spilling a drop. Holding the glass in our hand is likened to the single-pointed focus on the object and holding the glass firmly is likened to having

¹ This is a corrected translation of *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*.

intensity or sharpness in the cognitive clarity of the object. Keeping our eyes on the glass to observe or be aware of the movement of our hand and the water, and thereby preventing the water from spilling is likened to introspection or awareness in the meditation. This detects the presence of any meditation faults such as sinking or excitement so that we can apply the respective antidote. For instance, if our mental focus on the object is too relaxed, sinking will creep in and as a result we will lose the sharpness or intensity in the cognitive clarity of the object; if our mental focus is too tight excitement will arise.

The fourth pitfall: not applying the antidote

This fault will happen if one recognises the risk or danger of sinking or excitement but doesn't do anything about it. It is very important to apply an appropriate antidote as soon as one becomes aware of the type of the fault, whether it is sinking or excitement, and whether it is coarse or subtle.

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Edited Version

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Block: 3

Week: 2 (1 May 2018)

1. Give the definition of excitement.

The formal description of excitement as mentioned in the Asanga's *Compendium of Knowledge* is:

What is excitement? It is an unsettled state of mind lacking peace, a form of attachment influenced by attractive signs. It has the function of interrupting calm abiding.

2. Explain the difference between excitement and mental wandering

Difference between excitement and mental wandering

As stated earlier, excitement is a form of attachment. Mental wandering or *trowa* in Tibetan can however be in the form of a virtuous or a neutral state of mind. Therefore, excitement and mental wandering are not the same. Let's say in your meditation your mind wanders off to a thought of feeling hatred towards an enemy, or a thought of engaging in different practices such as giving or morality. In both cases we say you lose your mental attention because of mental wandering or *trowa*, but this is not excitement or *gopa*. The cause of losing attention here is not an excitement because it is not a form of attachment. It is not easy to discern the difference between sinking and excitement in meditation.

If we were to achieve calm abiding by meditating on an image of the Buddha as the object of our meditation, then our mind should be just abiding single-pointedly on the image of the Buddha, having both mental stability and clarity. In this state of meditation, if any desirable image appears and our mind wanders off after it, then this is an indication of excitement entering into our meditation, which will interrupt our meditative concentration.

If in the meditation we have a thought of someone we hate such as an enemy, then we would generate anger and because of that we will lose mental focus. In this case the cause of losing concentration is not excitement but mental wandering or *trowa*. As said before, mental wandering which interrupts meditative concentration can also be in the form of a virtuous state of mind. For instance, you generate compassion by thinking of the suffering of other beings, or love by thinking of their lack of privileges. Although cultivating love and compassion is positive, generating it while meditating on a given object to achieve concentration will cause mental wandering, so even such virtuous thought should be avoided when pursuing meditative concentration.

Despite the fact that both excitement and mental wandering equally interrupt meditative concentration, only excitement is categorised as a pitfall in meditation, while mental wandering is not. Why? The answer is that of the two, excitement is more significant cause of obstacles to meditative concentration.

3. Explain coarse excitement and subtle excitement

There are two types of excitement: coarse excitement and subtle excitement.

Coarse excitement means a loss of the meditation object due to the influence of a desirable object. **Subtle excitement** occurs where there is focus on the object, but a corner of the focus is gone due to the influence of a desirable object.

4. Explain the antidote to excitement

Introspection: the antidote to excitement

Introspection which in Tibetan is *shay-shin* is also known in English as vigilance, alertness or awareness. It is considered as a component of the antidote to excitement but not the main antidote.

Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand says:

... vigilance is still a component of the antidote, just as the army has its scout.

With the force of good memory or mindfulness we fix our mind on the object, ensuring there is both stability and clarity in our meditation; we also need to utilise introspection or awareness to detect if any faults arise. However, we need to be careful of not over-applying introspection.

Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

8 May 2018

Having taken refuge and generated bodhicitta, we will now do the usual meditation. [meditation]

It is wonderful to do this meditation of 'taking and giving' whenever you can. In this meditation, we imagine all sentient beings in front of us. We meditate on 'giving' to further enhance the focus of love and we meditate on 'taking' to further enhance the focus of compassion. If we meditate on taking and giving repeatedly and become acquainted with it, then this will actually bring tears to our eyes. Of course, to have such an effect we need to cultivate love and compassion from the depth of our heart, forcefully and spontaneously, wishing other beings to have happiness and be free from suffering.

In verse 90 of the *Guru Puja* there is a verse which says all sentient beings are the same in never finding contentment and happiness, and never desiring even the tiniest suffering.

There is no difference between ourselves and others
None of us wishes even the slightest of sufferings
Nor is even content with the happiness we have.

We are all similar: no matter how much happiness we possess we never feel that we have enough, and we always want more and more; and we do not want even the slightest suffering and always feel grumpy about ourselves. Based upon this similarity, love and compassion for others can arise automatically within us. We have been doing this meditation of giving and taking for awhile which is wonderful, but we should also try to see if it has had some effect in transforming our mind. If we don't do something to overcome the unhappy mind, which is like a thorn poking through things, then we cannot hope to find more happiness.

We need to put in effort to diminish hostility and increase our good heart. Each and every day when we wake up in the morning we should, as a matter of habit, generate a good motivation and resolve, 'I will be kind and helpful to others throughout the day and I will not cause harm to any other beings'. If we do this today, the next day, and the day after, then eventually every morning we remember to start the day with a positive frame of mind. Likewise, we should build a positive habit of going to bed in a positive frame of mind. As a result, we will live a happy life.

Normally we begin the day with a negative frame of mind and go to bed in a disturbed state of mind. We want the meditation to break this negative mental pattern. I always stress that meditation should have some positive effect on our mind. I have shared this story with you in the past on numerous occasions about my interaction with a younger geshe who casually asked me, 'How do you define meditation?' He is a learned geshe

and takes Dharma classes in the monastery. I replied, 'To me meditation practice means becoming familiar with a virtuous state of mind throughout every action, even just sitting, standing, walking or sleeping'. He was quite pleased with my reply, and with a deep sense of appreciation thanked me from the depth of his heart, saying, 'This is really an excellent pith instruction for me'. Therefore, it is important to understand that the purpose of meditation is to subdue an unsubdued mind. Meditation simply means putting into practice what you know of Dharma.

Once again, establish a proper motivation of aspiring to achieve the precious state of Buddhahood to benefit all sentient beings thinking, 'For this reason, I will listen to the profound Dharma teaching and will put it into practice well'. When we think of this statement we see a sequence of first listening to the Dharma and then practising it.

We need to understand that listening and practising go hand in hand. We should not be like those who listen but never practise, or those who don't practise what they learn. The implication here is also that after listening or studying the Dharma, then we must practise it. Practising means relating Dharma to our own mind in terms of subduing mental afflictions. If, as a result of studying Dharma, you feel superior to those with less knowledge, jealous of those with more knowledge, or a sense of competitiveness with those who are equal in knowledge, then you have totally defeated the purpose of learning, which is to subdue the mind and rid it of mental afflictions. Rather, your mental afflictions have increased. Hence, your Dharma learning has ended up being no different from a worldly activity. This applies not just to those who listen, but teachers must also be wary of this kind of wrong mental attitude. When the teacher occupies a high seat, their mind can easily be influenced by pride, jealousy and competitiveness.

In his *Treasury of Knowledge* Vasubandhu says, 'when we give Dharma teachings, our mind should not be polluted with delusions and we should teach Dharma in accordance with the sutras and the commentaries on them'. As he said, if the teacher's mind is filled with pride, jealousy and competitiveness, then his mind is polluted with afflictions which he should not have. Furthermore, he should ensure that what he teaches is in accordance with sutras and commentaries on them by the later masters. As for me, I am not saying that I know Dharma well nor am I praising myself here, but I can say that I always ensure that I have the right motivation for teaching prior to coming here and taking my seat. In order to prevent mental afflictions, the teacher performs three prostrations to counteract pride, and then after sitting on the throne, he reflects on impermanence, which also helps to prevent pride.

Last week we stopped at the fourth pitfall or fault of meditation, which is not applying the antidote.

The fourth pitfall: not applying the antidote

As is clearly explained in the text, *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*,

If your vigilance has detected any dullness or excitement - whether in coarse or subtle form - you must apply the antidotes without further ado. The

seventh of the eight adjustments - readjustment - is actually the antidote to the eighth of the adjustments - equanimity, also known as non-adjustment 1. Adjustment has to be mentally applied against non-adjustment. These two are like enemy scouts: as soon as one sees the other, he tries to stop him.

So as soon as we recognise any sinking or excitement arising in our meditation we need to apply the antidote. This is mainly alertness, or introspection, which functions like a spy. Then we exert ourselves to overcome that sinking or excitement.

How should we remove sinking and excitement?

OVERCOMING SUBTLE SINKING

We have already discussed mental sinking in previous teachings. In *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*, discouragement or low mental spirit, which in Tibetan is *shum-pa*, is also used to describe mental sinking.

So, how should this antidote be applied? Subtle dullness is a state of depressed mental activity. Thus, both depression and dullness have much the same consequences. With subtle dullness you have clarity and stability of the image, but the quality of its retention has dropped and the clarity, therefore, is not as intense.

The indication of this subtle form of sinking is when, in our meditation, we notice that, though there's good mental attention in terms of the stability of our mental focus and the clarity of the object of our focus, that clarity lacks intensity. When this happens, we will notice a lowering of our mental retention of the object. The way we hold the object has become a bit looser and a bit too relaxed. This is the sign of subtle sinking arising in the form of the clarity of the object lacking sharpness. The key here is recognising that subtle sinking only occurs when there is both very good stability and clarity. This is indicated by a feeling of looseness in the apprehension of the object.

The advice here is that:

Whenever you develop this form of dullness there is no need to break off visualizing since it is sufficient to tighten up your retention of the image.

One's state of concentration can be very good initially, in terms of both single-pointed focus as well as the clarity of the object. However, one might notice that the level with which one holds the object is becoming looser and a bit too relaxed. When this happens all one needs to do is simply tighten up the *dzin-tang*, the mode of apprehension of the object, to just the right degree.

It has to be just the right amount of tightening because:

However, when your hold becomes too tight, you develop excitement, and you should then loosen your hold.

It's important to ensure that the level of holding the object has to be not too tight and not too loose. When there's mental sinking then there's a feeling of the mind going down a bit and to correct that we need to brighten the mind up a little. However, at the same time it's very important that you don't lift the mind too high, or leave it too low: it has to be exactly in the middle in order to prevent both sinking and excitement.

Liberation in the Palm of Your Hands quotes the Buddha:

As the Bhagavan said:

If the vina's string is too taut, loosen it; tighten or loosen it as needed, making sure that it does not get too slack. In the end the sound will be sweet.

It continues:

You should do the same thing: loosen a little when you feel you will develop excitement and tighten your hold a little when you feel that dullness will ensue if you loosen any more.

So, meditators have to be very intelligent and skilful in tuning their meditation practice so that there is no room for sinking or excitement, and then their single-pointed concentration will be perfect. The meditator has to know from experience if the way their mind is focussed on the object is too tight. And if it is too tight, they need to know that it is too tight and then through this introspection, know of the risk of bringing the fault of excitement into the meditation. So accordingly, they loosen the tightness of their hold on the object a little bit.

If the hold then becomes too relaxed, and you feel your mind starting to become very low then that is a sign of sinking and tightening up is necessary.

The cultivation of the perfect state of single-pointed concentration is very much dependent on the skill and experience of the meditator, based on their knowledge of how to combat even the most subtle forms of sinking and excitement.

Experience dictates the border-line between these two. If you do not analyze intelligently through your vigilance it will be very hard for you to put your finger on it.

When the meditator has this very high level of introspection then they're really in a good position to recognise the most subtle forms of the faults that arise in meditation, as well as having the ability to correct those faults immediately.

This very fine tuning is, however, not easy. Here *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand* quotes the great Indian master Acharya Chandragomin.

Acharya Chandragomin said:

Apply effort and you get excited;
Abandon it and you develop depression.
"If this is true, and it is so hard to gain absorption,
Why do this: it will only disturb my mind!"

The only way to find this balance is through actual experience in meditation, and this can take some time. The text goes on to say:

Doing this sort of thing may be mentally fatiguing; but among all types of enemies, an enemy you mistake for one of your family is the hardest of all to identify. Because of this, they are more dangerous. Likewise, there is great danger in mistaking this type of dullness for single-pointed concentration; so you must be skilled in this fine-tuned state.

It's easy to mistake mental sinking for the meditative state of concentration. Therefore, it's very important for the meditator to have a lot of experience in knowing whether you need to relax or tighten the focus on the object of the meditation.

Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand continues:

Thus, in spite of having fine-tuned your mind, you may again lose the intensity of the image's clarity. When this happens, the retention lapses as though the thought has died, and the image is no longer clear. If this will not go away, coarse dullness has returned.

Then *the text* quotes Bhavaviveka:

It says in the *Heart of the Middle Way*:

When depressed, meditate on expansive visualizations
And thus open yourself ...

The text goes on to give us many different strategies:

That is, the fault is that your mind is in a great knot; so you should meditate, broadening the visualization.

Discouragement is combatted by widening one's mental view, and as a result of that you'll feel an opening of a wide space within yourself. Here you are trying to overcome this mental sinking without actually leaving the object of the meditation, in other words while still focussing on the object.

As Bhavaviveka mentioned, we need to try to widen the mental focus rather than being too withdrawn.

Deep down there's a sense of what we call *shum-pa*, a sense of discouragement, which is a bit like a form of depression. If we fail to remove mental sinking by tightening the focus, then the next strategy is to leave the object of the meditation and do things that will bring joy to the mind, uplifting your whole spirit.

If the problem does not then go away and your mind becomes depressed when you resume the visualization, try a method to be uplifted, or cheer yourself up by contemplating how difficult it is to find the most beneficial optimum human rebirth. Or you could contemplate the good qualities of the Three Jewels, study the benefits of devoting yourself to a spiritual guide, contemplate the benefits of bodhichitta, etc. These will uplift your mind.

As we just mentioned, when there's mental sinking, the mind is very withdrawn and mental spirits are low. In order to overcome this and uplift the mind, the text suggests reflecting on the precious human rebirth, reflecting on the qualities of the three objects of refuge, or the excellent qualities of relying on a spiritual friend, or spiritual guru, or the benefit of listening to the Dharma.

Reflecting on these positive topics helps to overcome discouragement and mental state of depression.

You could imagine rays of light shining on you, or meditate on things like the giving visualization. Such meditations will raise your mind to a higher plane, and it will then retain the visualization.

It also helps if you imagine going to a very clear and open space filled with brilliant light.

If through doing these kinds of reflections you manage to overcome this discouragement or sinking, then as the text says:

If these clear your mind, resume your visualization as before.

As just mentioned, some of the topics to reflect upon in order to uplift the mind include thinking on the precious human rebirth, and so forth.

Our minds have not been familiar with this sort of thing in the past and it will be difficult to gain immediate benefit from these techniques. But when we become familiar with them, the contemplation of things such as how hard it is to gain a human rebirth will be like splashing cold water on our faces. The problem will disappear.

For those who are really familiar with the topics mentioned earlier, then engaging in those kinds of meditations will generate really positive feelings, give you courage and you will feel more optimistic.

The text goes on to give further strategies to forcefully dispel mental sinking. We will go over these next week.

*Transcript prepared by Mark Emerson
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Edited Version*

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Homework

May 8 2018 teachings

1. What is the indication that subtle sinking has arisen during our meditation?
2. How should the meditator apply the antidote to subtle sinking?
3. What are further strategies to overcome subtle sinking during meditation while still maintaining focus on the object of meditation?
4. If the meditator is unable to overcome subtle sinking while maintaining focus on the object, what other strategies can he or she adopt?

Homework

May 8 2018 teachings

1. What is the indication that subtle sinking has arisen during our meditation?

The indication of this subtle form of sinking is when, in our meditation, we notice that, though there's good mental attention in terms of the stability of our mental focus and the clarity of the object of our focus, that clarity lacks intensity. When this happens, we will notice a lowering of our mental retention of the object. The way we hold the object has become a bit looser and a bit too relaxed. This is the sign of subtle sinking arising in the form of the clarity of the object lacking sharpness. The key here is recognising that subtle sinking only occurs when there is both very good stability and clarity. This is indicated by a feeling of looseness in the apprehension of the object.

2. How should the meditator apply the antidote to subtle sinking?

The advice here is that:

Whenever you develop this form of dullness there is no need to break off visualizing since it is sufficient to tighten up your retention of the image.

One's state of concentration can be very good initially in terms of both single-pointed focus as well as the clarity of the object. However, one might notice that the level with which one holds the object is becoming looser and a bit too relaxed. When this happens all one needs to do is simply tighten up the *dzin-tang*, the mode of apprehension of the object, to just the right degree.

It has to be just the right amount of tightening because:

However, when your hold becomes too tight, you develop excitement, and you should then loosen your hold.

It's important to ensure that the level of holding the object has to be not too tight and not too loose. When there's mental sinking then there's a feeling of the mind going down a bit and to correct that we need to brighten the mind up a little. However, at the same time it's very important that you don't lift the mind too high, or leave it too low: it has to be exactly in the middle in order to prevent both sinking and excitement.

Liberation in the Palm of Your Hands quotes the Buddha:

As the Bhagavan said:

If the vina's string is too taut, loosen it; tighten or loosen it as needed, making sure that it does not get too slack. In the end the sound will be sweet.

It continues:

You should do the same thing: loosen a little when you feel you will develop excitement and tighten your hold a little when you feel that dullness will ensue if you loosen any more.

So, meditators have to be very intelligent and skilful in tuning their meditation practice so that there is no room for sinking or excitement, and then their single-pointed concentration will be perfect. The meditator has to know from experience if the way their mind is focussed on the object is too tight.

3. What are further strategies to overcome subtle sinking during meditation while still maintaining focus on the object of meditation?

Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand continues:

Thus, in spite of having fine-tuned your mind, you may again lose the intensity of the image's clarity. When this happens, the retention lapses as though the thought has died, and the image is no longer clear. If this will not go away, coarse dullness has returned.

Then *the text* quotes Bhavaviveka:

It says in the *Heart of the Middle Way*:

When depressed, meditate on expansive visualizations
And thus open yourself....

The text goes on to give us many different strategies:

That is, the fault is that your mind is in a great knot; so you should meditate, broadening the visualization.

Discouragement is combatted by widening one's mental view, and as a result of that you'll feel an opening of a wide space within yourself. Here you are trying to overcome this mental sinking without actually leaving the object of the meditation, in other words while still focussing on the object.

As Bhavaviveka mentioned, we need to try to widen the mental focus rather than being too withdrawn.

4. If the meditator is unable to overcome subtle sinking while maintaining focus on the object, what other strategies can he or she adopt?

Deep down there's a sense of what we call *shum-pa*, a sense of discouragement, which is a bit like a form of depression. If we fail to remove mental sinking by tightening the focus, then the next strategy is to leave the object of the meditation and do things that will bring joy to the mind, uplifting your whole spirit.

If the problem does not then go away and your mind becomes depressed when you resume the visualization, try a method to be uplifted, or cheer yourself up by contemplating how difficult it is to find the most beneficial optimum human rebirth. Or you could contemplate the good qualities of the Three Jewels, study the benefits of devoting yourself to a spiritual guide, contemplate the benefits of bodhichitta, etc. These will uplift your mind.

As we just mentioned, when there's mental sinking, the mind is very withdrawn and mental spirits are low. In order to overcome this and uplift the mind, the text suggests reflecting on the precious human rebirth, reflecting on the qualities of the three objects of refuge, or the excellent qualities of relying on a spiritual friend, or spiritual guru, or the benefit of listening to the Dharma.

Reflecting on these positive topics helps to overcome discouragement and mental state of depression.

You could imagine rays of light shining on you, or meditate on things like the giving visualization. Such meditations will raise your mind to a higher plane, and it will then retain the visualization.

It also helps if you imagine going to a very clear and open space filled with brilliant light.

If through doing these kinds of reflections, you manage to overcome this discouragement or sinking, then as the text says:

If these clear your mind, resume your visualization as before.

As just mentioned some of the topics to reflect upon in order to uplift the mind include thinking on the precious human rebirth, and so forth.

Our minds have not been familiar with this sort of thing in the past and it will be difficult to gain immediate benefit from these techniques. But when we become familiar with them, the contemplation of things such as how hard it is to gain a human rebirth will be like splashing cold water on our faces. The problem will disappear.

For those who are really familiar with the topics mentioned earlier, then engaging in those kinds of meditations will generate really positive feelings, give you courage and you will feel more optimistic.

The text goes on to give further strategies to forcefully dispel mental sinking. We will go over these next week.

Tara Institute 'Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment' Study Group 2018

Homework

May 12, 2018 teachings

1. What is meditative concentration and how can we recognize it?

2. What are the obstacles to meditative concentration?

3. What is the difference between mindfulness, alertness and concentration?

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4. What are the nine mental abidings?

5. Describe the first mental abiding and how it can be achieved.

6. Describe the second mental abiding and how it is achieved.

7. What is the third mental abiding and how is it achieved?

8. What is the fourth mental abiding and what are the powers that help to achieve it?

9. Describe the fifth mental abiding and how it can be achieved.

Homework

May 12, 2018 teachings

1. What is meditative concentration and how can we recognize it?

The *Great Stages of the Path* defines concentration.

Concentration is the part of the mind which enables it to focus single-pointedly and enables to sustain the continuity of the focus. Therefore, concentration is a mental factor which has a specific role or the function of enabling the mind to have a sustained single-pointed focus. It is very important to recognise actual concentration. Obviously without a good recognition of what that is we cannot cultivate it.

In his *Great Stages of the Path* Lama Tsongkhapa says that the kind of concentration that we are trying to achieve here should have two features.

The two features are the intensity of the clarity of the extremely clear state of the mind and the non-conceptualised stability of the single-pointedness on the focus object.

Other lam-rim texts mention this as well. We need to understand from this that when we engage in meditation practice, our mind should be focusing on the object with these two features of concentration: an intense or sharp state of the clarity of the object in the mind and also a state of stability of the single-pointed focus such that there is absolutely no distraction and wavering away from the object. These two features indicate that effectiveness of the concentration

2. What are the obstacles to meditative concentration?

The main obstacle to having an intense clarity in one's mind is mental sinking. We have talked in detail about how there can be two types of sinking: a coarse one and a subtle one. The other main obstacle to having single-pointedness stability is excitement. As the *Great Stages of the Path* says this explains why sinking and excitement are the two main obstacles to achieving the perfect state of concentration.

3. What is the difference between mindfulness, alertness and concentration?

In meditation we apply various mental factors such as mindfulness, alertness and so forth, and each of these mental factors has its own specific role. In order to develop concentration, we need to apply mindfulness to fix the mind on the object single-pointedly. But, technically the mindfulness itself is not the concentration nor the generic mind that focuses on the object single-pointedly. It's important that you understand the distinguishing features of each of the mental factors such as concentration, mindfulness and alertness. The *Great Stages of the Path* continues:

Furthermore, there is a need of a means by which not wavering off from the initial object whatever it may be, and a means by which knowing whether or

not distraction has occurred or will occur or not. The first means is mindfulness (memory) and the second means is introspection (awareness).

4. What are the nine mental abidings?

Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand says that to be successful in achieving the perfect state of concentration, one has to gain an experiential realisation of all nine stages of mental abiding. As such you should recognise the features of each of these nine mental abidings.

As listed in the text these are:

Placing the mind; placement with continuity; patch-like placement; the close placement; taming the mind; pacifying; complete pacification; single-pointedness and then the placement with equanimity.

5. Describe the first mental abiding and how it can be achieved.

For the first mental abiding, the text says:

This is achieved by the power of studying the instruction on visualisation with your guru. However you are only evoking the visualisation at this stage. It does not stay and you can not make it persist.

From this we should note that there are six powers. The first mental abiding is primarily achieved through the *power of listening*. At that stage there is only the ability to rest or abide the mind on the objects just a little bit. There is no ability to sustain the continuity of the concentration.

In the first level of mental abiding the meditator is just able to rest their mind on the object but is unable to sustain the continuation of the focus or mental stability. As described in the text, at this time the meditator would feel as if their distracting thoughts have increased. In fact, it is not that distracting thoughts have increased but it is a sign that they are becoming more aware of conceptual thoughts. I know people say that they experience more conceptual thoughts when they meditate than they do on normal days.

So 'placing the mind' is an appropriate name for this stage because at that stage the meditator is only able to place their mind on the object, and that's all. They cannot sustain or continue the mental abiding.

6. Describe the second mental abiding and how it is achieved.

After the first mental abiding, the meditator reaches the point where they can not only place their mind on the object, but they can also maintain the continuity of the placement. Having just a little continuation of mental abiding is the second mental abiding of placement with continuity.

Here 'continuation' refers to the duration it takes one to recite one round of the mala of the six-syllabled OM MANI PADME HUM mantra.

The text says,

... when you can meditate for about the time it takes to say a rosary of OM MANI PADME HUM without being distracted.

As described in the text, at this level disturbing thoughts are sometimes pacified and they arise at other times. Hence, the meditator experiences the retreat of disturbing thoughts.

In terms of the six powers, the second mental abiding is achieved mainly through the *power of thinking*, following the power of listening in the preceding stage.

During the first and second mental abidings, the moments of sinking and mental excitement arising are great, whereas the moments of resting or mental abiding are small. Therefore, in terms of the four mental attentions, *forcible mental attention* is required at the first and the second stages.

7. What is the third mental abiding and how is it achieved?

The third mental abiding is patch-like placement. This is quite self-explanatory; the text gives an example of a garment with patches. Just as like you would fix a hole in a garment by stitching a patch on it, in this stage of meditation you have some ability to continue the concentration if any interruptions or distractions occur. There is an ability to recognise and fix it.

In terms of interruption from mental distractions, the text states that the main difference between the second and third mental abidings is the duration of the distraction. Due to the greater force of mindfulness or power of memory, the duration of distraction is shorter in the third stage in comparison with the second stage, and hence the duration of the state of stability is longer here.

The text says:

The duration of your distraction is shorter than in the previous two states. At this stage you are developing more powerful memory.

8. What is the fourth mental abiding and what are the powers that help to achieve it?

The fourth mental abiding is called close-placement. An advantage of having generated a greater power of memory or mindfulness during the third level is that at the fourth level, the meditator has gained the ability of not losing the focus on the object at all. We can clearly see how this fourth level is distinguished from the previous three mental abidings. Although there is no risk of losing the focus of the object, there is still the danger of strong mental sinking and excitement arising, so it is necessary to be able to apply the antidotes for those two.

The text says,

Just the same, while all this is happening you fall prey to the strongest forms of dullness and excitement, and you must apply antidotes to these two.

Of the six powers, the third and the fourth mental abidings are achieved mainly by the *power of mindfulness*. In fact, in the fourth stage the meditators reach a state where they have fully completed the power of mindfulness.

The text says:

...from now on, memory is like a man at the height of his powers, for the power of memory has been perfected.

9. Describe the fifth mental abiding and how it can be achieved.

The fifth mental abiding is called subduing or taming the mind. This is because during the fourth level of mental abiding, the meditator gains a fully developed state of mindfulness or memory. However as they apply mindfulness, the result can be too much withdrawing of the focus of their mind inward. Therefore, at the fifth level, the meditator confronts the fault of this 'over withdrawing' in the form of subtle mental sinking and combats it through applying and reinforcing the *power of alertness* or introspection. They apply various techniques to overcome sinking such as reflecting upon the benefits of developing meditative concentration and uplifting the height of the mental spirit. If such reflection doesn't work then there are other techniques for overcoming the sinking problem, which we discussed earlier on, so we won't discuss here again. The main difference between the fourth and fifth mental abiding is as the text says:

Only the fourth has coarse dullness and excitement

Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

15 May 2018

We begin with our usual meditation

First, we establish the proper motivation. At the beginning of this session we recited the *Refuge and Generating Bodhicitta Prayer* three times to remind ourselves of the importance of cultivating a motivation. Each recitation of this prayer is supposed to make our motivation stronger than the last one. Of course, most of us find it difficult to properly generate this motivation even once, but we have to keep making an effort to do that, and then try to make it stronger by repeating the prayer twice and even stronger when we recite it the third time. Every time we recite this prayer we should really try to remember its meaning. Then we will also gradually develop more understanding of the meaning of the prayers.

In a way the practice that we do on a daily basis is preparation for our death, so that we will be able to practise when we are dying. If, on a daily basis, we really become familiar with taking refuge and generating bodhicitta, and develop a very good understanding of this practice, we will be in a position to put it into practice with a minimum of effort and without any difficulties when we are dying. We know that we cannot prevent death, nor can we prevent some concern about facing death, but at least when we face death we will be in a position to put these teachings into practice.

If we think about it, our spiritual practices, such as taking refuge and generating bodhicitta, will guarantee us a better rebirth or at the very least prevent us from falling into a lower rebirth. We have to understand that our true protection is our Dharma practice, which becomes our refuge when we cultivate it within ourselves.

Whatever Dharma practice we do in this lifetime also has an impact on our future rebirth as well. If, for example, in this lifetime we put Dharma into practice properly, beginning with relying on the perfect spiritual guru, and putting their advice and instructions into practice, then the Dharma practice we do will leave an imprint on our minds. Then, not only will we reap the benefit in this very lifetime, but due to our practice of properly relying on a spiritual guide now we will be able to find a perfect spiritual guide in our future life. Not only that but following Dharma practice in this current life will leave an imprint so that in our future life we will find the perfect Dharma as well. If, rather than practising the Dharma out of a very self-centred mind we think of the reason we practise the Dharma, which is to benefit other beings, then that serves as a cause to find the Mahayana Dharma in our future life, as well as sustaining this bodhicitta practice in this present life.

If we practise in this way, then we will see how fortunate we are to have met all the good conditions that enable us to follow spiritual practice in this lifetime. If we make use of all these good conditions now we will have the same good conditions in future. In fact, we will find even better conditions in the future and then we might develop even further. So, there is the possibility of making gradual but

consistent progress along the path, getting closer in each life to achieving the state of buddhahood. It comes down to making the optimum use of this perfect human rebirth, which we have all learnt about in the past.

[Meditation]

As we discussed in one of the previous sessions, it is very important to ensure that you establish right motivation at the beginning of the practice. Here it is the motivation of bodhicitta - cultivating the thought of wishing to achieve the state of buddhahood to benefit all sentient beings and then cultivating the thought, 'I will listen to this profound teaching and put it into practice'. We should look into the content of this motivation and see how it shows why we are practising, and who it is for. Also, as part of generating this motivation, we are reinforcing our intention to put whatever we learn into practice.

The reason we say, 'I shall listen to the teaching and put it into practice' is to show that simply listening and studying is not enough. In order to reap the whole benefit of the Dharma, we have to study it, and then put it into practice.

The fourth pitfall: not applying the antidote (cont.)

OVERCOMING SUBTLE SINKING

Towards the end of last week's teaching, we talked about the various practices for overcoming subtle sinking. For example, *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand* states:

But when we become familiar with them, the contemplation of things such as how hard it is to gain a human rebirth will be like splashing cold water on our faces. The difficulty will disappear.

If, after applying these techniques, we still cannot get rid of sinking then the text guides us on further techniques of forcefully dispelling mental sinking.

The next method to overcome the sinking is:

If your dullness will still not go away, employ a more forceful means of removing it. Visualize your mind as being a white light at your heart. As you utter the syllable PHAT, your mind comes out of the fontanelle on the top of your head and penetrates the depths of space. Think that your mind and space have become inextricably mixed. Do this as many times as seems best.

These techniques for overcoming mental sinking are implemented without actually taking a break from one's meditation. As mentioned in the text, initially you imagine your mind in the form of a white light at your heart and focus on that for a little while. Then as you utter the letter PHAT this light goes up through your crown towards the sky. It pervades space and becomes inseparable from it. This technique is said to be effective in overcoming mental sinking. Not only can we apply this in calm abiding, but the same technique is also said to be very effective in overcoming stress, anxiety, depression, fears and unhappiness in the mind. Also, there is another method whereby you utter the letter HA HA HA when you breathe out and imagine all your mental unhappiness leaves with the outgoing breath.

The text then states:

If still the problem will not go away, terminate your meditation session.

If the sinking still doesn't leave, take a break from the meditation and think about the causes of this mental sinking.

Mental fog is causing you to develop dullness. Use some means to make the mental fog, sleepiness, or grogginess go away. Settle down in some cool spot, go for a walk on some high, open place, go for a visit, splash water on your face, and so on. If these clear your mind, resume your visualization as before.

However, when you engage in all these activities it is important to keep the mind within rather than being completely distracted by various thoughts and deeds.

When there is a fault in meditation then you need to apply an antidote. Not applying the antidote of the compositional mental factor to the fault is the fifth fault or pitfall of meditation.

OVERCOMING SUBTLE EXCITEMENT

The subtle form of excitement arises when you lose a part of your focus or retention of the object.

Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand says:

Subtle excitement is when you do not lose track of the meditation device but the mind is distracted. When this happens, the fault is that the mind is too tight. Slightly loosen your retention of the image.

This is important to recognise. While your mind is focused on or holding onto the object, you need to know whether the mental focus is completely there on the object or not. If the focus is not completely there, then that is an indication of subtle excitement.

Why does this occur? It is because the way you hold onto or retain the object is too tight; there is a bit of tension there. Obviously, the solution is to gently loosen or relax the hold on the apprehension (Tib: *dzin-tang*) of the object.

If you try that and the excitement doesn't go away, then:

If this does not help and your mind is still distracted, you now have a coarse form of excitement.

The coarse form of excitement arises under conditions where there is a bit too much excitement or pleasure about something in our mind. A little bit of pleasure is fine; too much pleasure is not good!

Here we are talking about the experience of the meditator. Earlier on we learnt how, in order to overcome mental sinking, the meditator engages in reflecting on how fortunate they are to have found this precious human rebirth and other topics such as the excellent qualities of the three objects of refuge and so forth. Reflecting on those kinds of topics uplifts the mind, bringing very positive feelings. Of course, this won't happen for those who are not really familiar with these topics. But for someone who is really familiar with these topics, in both learning and practice, the outcome of such a practice can be as soothing as splashing refreshing water on your face when you are feeling very hot. However, as mentioned above, when the meditator faces the challenge of overcoming excitement. As the text says:

This has developed only because of your happy state of mind, so you should not increase your happiness any more.

The reason the coarse form of excitement has arisen is because the level of pleasure is too high. The remedy is to bring that down, so that the pleasure doesn't bring excitement, which would interrupt the meditation.

Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand then quotes from Bhavaviveka's *Essence of the Middle Way*¹:

In this kind of situation, don't stop the meditation session, for, as it is said in the *Heart of the Middle Way*:

Calm your excitement by
Thinking of impermanence and the like.

In other words, contemplate things that cause mental depression, weariness, or renunciation. Death and impermanence or the sufferings encountered in samsara and the lower realms are just such things.

Those who are really familiar with meditating on such topics as the impermanence of things find this meditation very effective in calming down their mind from all that is exciting or entertaining. One of the causes of gross excitement is that our mental spirit is too high or that there is too much of a sense of joy or excitement in the mind. This is combatted by meditating on impermanence and other topics that have the immediate effect of lowering mental spirits, or subduing a hyperactive mind, or bringing a sense of discouragement (Tib: *shumpa*). This in turn eliminates excitement. So, the various topics of Dharma you are familiar with can be utilised here as an aid to cultivating single-pointed concentration.

The text continues:

If this does not clear up the problem, employ a more forceful method to rid yourself of excitement. Because your conceptual thinking has increased, you should do the following visualization when you breathe in or out. When you breathe, think, "I am breathing out" or "I am breathing in." Also think, "That's the first time," and continue to count mentally the number of times you have been breathing out and in. At first you will only be able to manage up to three or four cycles. Just resume counting from one again. Being able to keep this up till you get to twenty-one without the mind becoming distracted is the criterion for having achieved the first mental state.

This breathing meditation is said to be particularly effective in getting rid of disturbing, conceptualised thoughts. You simply focus on the incoming and outgoing breath, being fully aware of the thought of the breath going out and coming in and so forth. Make sure that both the incoming and outgoing breath are very even, and the flow is also very natural. Then as we breathe in and out we count 'now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out'; that is one round.

At first you will only be able to manage up to three or four cycles. Just resume counting from one again. Being able to keep this up till you get to twenty-one without the mind becoming distracted is the criterion for having achieved the first mental state.

As it says in the text, initially you won't be able to do more than three or four rounds, but for many of us it may be only one or two. If you are no longer able to maintain your focus, then you have to start from round one again. Then you repeat this meditation over and over again until, as the text says, you are able to maintain single-pointed concentration without any distractions for twenty-one rounds. That is the sign of reaching to the first of the nine mental abidings.

If doing this does not cut your excitement, take a bit of a break from the session.

¹ *Heart of the Middle Way* and *Essence of the Middle Way* are the same text.

If you find it very difficult to retain your focus, then it is advised that you should not push yourself too hard. Rather, it is better to take a break from the meditation.

Then meditate in shorter sessions, preceding these by a firm resolve.

Commence meditation again with very short sessions. It is also important to start each session with a very strong intention. With shorter meditation sessions you don't get bored with your meditation practice - in fact you will enjoy it and want to keep it going. As said before, it is important to cultivate the right intention at the start of the meditation practice over a period of time that suits you.

If you lengthen your sessions, the very sight of your meditation mat may make you feel lethargic or nauseated. It is most important to break off your meditations at the right point, "while it is still a pleasure to meditate," as it is said.

We have mentioned numerous times in the past that if we push ourselves too much to meditate for a longer duration and better outcome, then we will end up with more stress and frustration and end up finishing it in a very negative way. We may give ourselves a second, third or even more chances to do the meditation but still end up feeling negative because of our wrong approach. Consequently, we will completely lose interest in meditation to the point where we feel sick as soon as we see the meditation cushion. We will look at it and say, 'I am not interested'. That is why it is important to finish at the right time so that not only will you enjoy it while you are meditating but you will be inspired to meditate more later on.

To illustrate: if two people part at the right moment, they will later be pleased to see each other again. As it is said, if the image is still clear, you should stop; but if the image is unclear, you should stop in any case. If you draw the line while you still feel, "It would be fine if I meditated a little more," you will want to meditate again from the depth of your heart. This is the best way to meditate. Even if you are unfocused, if you do things this way, your meditation will be excellent. However, while you have no clarity and keep trying to fix it, if it does not go away and you stubbornly persist in fixing it, you will fatigue yourself; later the lack of clarity will grow even worse.

You have heard this in the past. If two people part from each other in a spirit of close and intimate friendship, then they will be very excited when they meet each other again. If they parted with resentment and some hatred, then of course they don't want to see each other again. Therefore, the text says, it is important that we don't push ourselves too hard with our meditation practice.

If you lack a good focus or clarity in meditation, don't force yourself to the point of becoming completely exhausted with your meditation practice. Otherwise, you will finish the meditation in a negative frame of mind. Then, not only will you lose interest in the practice, but you will also end your practice in a negative frame of mind.

As it is said, if the image is still clear, you should stop; but if the image is unclear, you should stop in any case. If you draw the line while you still feel, "It would be fine if I meditated a little more," you will want to meditate again from the depth of your heart. This is the best way to meditate. Even if you are unfocused, if you do things this way, your meditation will be excellent. However, while you have no clarity and keep trying to fix it, if it does not go away and

you stubbornly persist in fixing it, you will fatigue yourself; later the lack of clarity will grow even worse.

It is very auspicious and effective to finish your meditation at the point where you feel like continuing it for a little bit longer. We can also apply the same rationale to our mundane life activities and events for which the duration is very important, in that if it is too long people will get bored and won't be interested in participating again. However, if the duration is right, which is to say that it is interesting and enjoying right to the end, people will go home with a good memory of the activity or event. Therefore, they will be more motivated to join it again in the future.

We have found out that the main obstacles to achieving single-pointed concentration are mental sinking and excitement, both of which arise very easily, are difficult to recognise and difficult to remove. We cannot achieve single-pointed concentration unless we completely overcome this sinking and excitement. That is why the advice, especially for beginners, is to divide the meditation into many short sessions and then slowly extend them as one gradually makes progress with the meditation.

Even those who already know how difficult it is to get to rid of mental sinking and excitement can, if they are not careful in their practice, easily mistake these two faults for perfect meditative concentration. Then, despite their high level of concentration they don't make any progress.

Therefore, it is recommended that as a beginner you should have sessions with a shorter duration. However eventually, when you have achieved the state of single-pointed concentration where sinking and excitement are completely overcome, then you have the capacity to remain in single-pointed meditative concentration effortlessly for as long as you wish without any distraction.

It is very important to rely upon the writings of the great masters to achieve the perfect state of single pointed concentration called *shamatha* or calm abiding. These masters state that the means to achieve calm abiding is the application of the eight composing mental factors called the eight antidotes to overcoming the five faults.

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Edited Version*

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Homework

May 15, 2018 teachings

1. What are further techniques to forcefully overcome subtle sinking?

The text guides us on further techniques of forcefully dispelling mental sinking.

The next method to overcome the sinking is:

If your dullness will still not go away, employ a more forceful means of removing it. Visualize your mind as being a white light at your heart. As you utter the syllable PHAT, your mind comes out of the fontanelle on the top of your head and penetrates the depths of space. Think that your mind and space have become inextricably mixed. Do this as many times as seems best.

These techniques for overcoming mental sinking are implemented without actually taking break from one's meditation. As mentioned in the text, initially you imagine your mind in the form of a white light at your heart and focus on that for a little while. Then as you utter the letter PHAT this light goes up through your crown towards the sky. It pervades space and becomes inseparable from it. This technique is said to be effective in overcoming mental sinking. Not only we can apply this in calm abiding, but the same technique is also said to be very effective in overcoming stress, anxiety, depression, fears and unhappiness in the mind. Also, there is another method whereby you utter the letter HA HA HA when you breathe out and imagine all your mental unhappiness leaves with the outgoing breath.

2. If the subtle sinking will still not go away, what should one do?

The text then states:

If still the problem will not go away, terminate your meditation session.

If the sinking still doesn't leave, take a break from the meditation and think about the causes of this mental sinking.

Mental fog is causing you to develop dullness. Use some means to make the mental fog, sleepiness, or grogginess go away. Settle down in some cool spot, go for a walk on some high, open place, go for a visit, splash water on your face, and so on. If these clear your mind, resume your visualization as before.

However, when you engage in all these activities it is important to keep the mind within rather than being completely distracted by various thoughts and deeds.

3. What is the indication that the subtle form of excitement has arisen?

The subtle form of excitement arises when you lose a part of your focus or retention of the object.

Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand says

Subtle excitement is when you do not lose track of the meditation device but the mind is distracted. When this happens, the fault is that the mind is too tight. Slightly loosen your retention of the image.

This is important to recognise. While your mind is focused on or holding onto the object, you need to know whether the mental focus completely there on the object or not. If the focus is not completely there that is an indication of subtle excitement.

4. How should one overcome subtle excitement?

Why does subtle excitement occur? It is because the way you hold onto or retain the object is too tight, there is a bit of tension there. Obviously, the solution is to gently loosen or relax the hold on the apprehension (Tib: *dzin-tang*) of the object.

5. If one does not overcome subtle excitement, what may happen?

If you try that and the excitement doesn't go away, then you now have a coarse form of excitement.

The coarse form of excitement arises under conditions where there is a bit too much excitement or pleasure about something in our mind. A little of pleasure is fine, too much pleasure is not good!

Here we are talking about the experience of the meditator. Earlier on we learnt how, in order to overcome mental sinking, the meditator engages in reflecting on how fortunate they are to have found this precious human rebirth and other topics such as the excellent qualities of the three objects of refuge and so forth. Reflecting on those kinds of topics uplifts the mind, bringing very positive feelings. Of course, this won't happen for those who are not really familiar with these topics. But for someone who is really familiar with these topics in both learning and practice the outcome of such a practice can be as soothing as splashing refreshing water on your face when you are feeling very hot. However, as mentioned above, when the meditator faces the challenge of overcoming excitement. As the text says:

This has developed only because of your happy state of mind, so you should not increase your happiness any more.

6. How should one overcome the coarse form of excitement?

The reason the coarse form of excitement has arisen is because the level of pleasure is too high. The remedy is to bring that down, so that the pleasure doesn't bring excitement, which would interrupt the meditation.

Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand then quotes from Bhavaviveka's Essence of the Middle Way:

In this kind of situation, don't stop the meditation session, for, as it is said in the Heart of the Middle Way:

Calm your excitement by
Thinking of impermanence and the like.

In other words, contemplate things that cause mental depression, weariness, or renunciation. Death and impermanence or the sufferings encountered in samsara and the lower realms are just such things.

Those who are really familiar with meditating on such topics as the impermanence of things find this meditation very effective in calming down their mind from all that is exciting or entertaining. One of the causes of gross excitement is that our mental spirit is too high or that there is a too much of a sense of joy or excitement in the mind. This is combatted by meditating on impermanence and other topics that have the immediate effect of lowering mental spirits, or subduing a hyperactive mind, or bringing a sense of discouragement (Tib: shumpa). This in turn eliminates excitement. So, the various topics of Dharma you are familiar with can be utilised here to as an aid to cultivating single-pointed concentration.

The text continues:

If this does not clear up the problem, employ a more forceful method to rid yourself of excitement. Because your conceptual thinking has increased, you should do the following visualization when you breathe in or out. When you breathe, think, "I am breathing out" or "I am breathing in." Also think, "That's the first time," and continue to count mentally the number of times you have been breathing out and in. At first you will only be able to manage up to three or four cycles. Just resume counting from one again. Being able to keep this up till you get to twenty-one without the mind becoming distracted is the criterion for having achieved the first mental state.

If you find it very difficult to retain your focus, then it is advised that you should not push yourself too hard. Rather, it is better to take a break from the meditation.

7. When is the right time to finish one's meditation session?

It is very auspicious and effective to finish your meditation at the point where you feel like continuing it for a little bit longer. We can also apply the same rationale to our mundane life activities and events for which the duration is very important in that if it is too long people will get bored and won't be interested in participating again. However, if the duration is right which is to say that it is interesting

and enjoying right to the end, people will go home with a good memory of the activity or event. Therefore, they will be more motivated to join it again in the future.

Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

22 May 2018

With the motivation of bodhicitta we will begin the usual meditation. This motivation is included in the *Refuge and Generating Bodhicitta Prayer* we recited earlier.

[Tong-len meditation]

Again, we need to make sure we cultivate the proper motivation, which is to achieve full enlightenment to benefit all sentient beings and think 'I shall listen to this profound Dharma and put it into practice'. Every time we cultivate our motivation in this way, we are also reminding ourselves that after listening to teachings we will put them into practice.

As the great yogi Dharmarakshita wrote in his text, *The Wheel of Sharp Weapons*,

Our spiritual promises are grand, yet our practice of helping (others) is tiny.

This line says that the more some people take pledges, the less they put them into practice. We should not be like that and take pledges that we cannot keep. We should not think that our Dharma practice can be measured by the number of times we do a certain practice or listen to a certain teaching. Rather, the point is to integrate the practices into our daily lives. If our practice is not having any impact on lessening our mental afflictions, this clearly shows that our practice is lagging.

We are all supposedly engaged in the practice of listening, contemplating and meditating on the scriptures of Lord Buddha. However, if we ask ourselves whether we are truly integrating these three things we will find that almost all of our learning and knowledge is just on paper. What is required, and what is really important, is to listen to and then contemplate the meaning of the teachings. Then, having contemplated their meaning, engage in meditation practice. We must understand that the essence of the whole spiritual process is recognising that everything is about controlling or calming our mind. This is why practice is so important.

In terms of listening to teachings, there are a lot of topics we may have heard hundreds or even thousands of times. But in terms of the benefit we accrue from our study, we should understand, as the Lord Buddha said, that happiness is a result of a calm or subdued mind. The Buddha said in Chapter 3 of the *Dhammapada*:

Wonderful, indeed, it is to subdue the mind, so difficult to subdue, ever swift, and seizing whatever it desires. A tamed mind brings happiness.

Therefore, if our learning is not put into practice, it will not subdue our mind and we cannot expect to find true happiness. In other words, we should understand that experiencing unhappiness, or confronting dissatisfaction or any painful experience indicates that we have not subdued our mind.

Instead of blaming our own unsubdued or negative states of mind for the problems and difficulties we encounter in our lives, we normally blame external factors. Not only that, we also have the idea that our happiness and fulfilment should come from outside conditions. This is why we often think, 'If I had the right friends ... if I had the right partner ... if I was secure financially, I would be happy.' We have this fixed idea, yet I have observed many people suffer and go through lots of problems because they *have* all of these things: a partner, companions and doing well in business. I hear about a lot of problems and difficulties these people have. I also see people who live a single life and others who are materially not so well-off. Overall, they seem to have a more contented and happy life than those who are living with others and are rich.

Of course, we have to acknowledge that certain problems are just part of human existence! No matter how much we feel that everything is right and in good order, we are still susceptible to the ups and downs of life. For instance, you may think that living as a single person is the better option, but this doesn't mean that you will always be happy. It will be natural to experience some sense of isolation every now and then. Therefore, it is important to remind ourselves of the advice from Lord Buddha that 'you can be your own master'. What does that mean? The emphasis here is that the happiness we look for lies within ourselves. Likewise, the main cause of what we do not want in our life lies within ourselves, and this is something that we have to recognise.

It is important to have sustainable peace and happiness within ourselves. How can we bring this about? Mainly through cultivating a very subdued or very calm state of mind. The reason it is important for everyone to realise this is because without some level of peace or happiness within ourselves, then what we achieve externally cannot bring joy and happiness.

I am not saying that creating favourable external factors is not beneficial to our lives. What I am saying is that even the happiness that primarily results from all our good external conditions depends upon having some degree of a peaceful and subdued state of mind. If we lack inner peace and stability, we know from our own experience that even if we are successful externally, in terms of having gathered good conditions, we cannot find joy and happiness. If external good conditions don't bring us happiness and satisfy our needs, then we might ask what is the point of having them.

You have heard from me about the advice I gave to a young Tibetan who asked me what was my secret or key to finding happiness. I replied, 'Overcome disturbing thoughts'. I also find that the more I read great Buddhist literature, the more I find them verifying some important things that I have been emphasising in my teachings. In the Wednesday teaching last week, I quoted the pith instruction from the Kadampa Geshe Shawa that a happy life begins with lessening the various desires within our mind. This is essentially pointing us towards taming or subduing the mind.

In short, what we need to do to control our mind is to initially listen to the teaching and also gain a knowledge arising from listening to others or studying texts written

by others. In order to refine that knowledge, however, it is very important that we think about and contemplate on what we have learnt by applying our own intelligence and then we will gain a knowledge that arises from the force of our contemplation. In the process of contemplation, we are validating the knowledge we have acquired from listening by critically analysing and questioning everything we have learnt with the full force of our own discernment and intelligence. Is it true or not? Does it have a valid reason or not? As a result of such analysis, we gain knowledge by the virtue of our own firm conviction and ascertainment. Such knowledge is called knowledge arising from contemplation, which in turn serves as the perfect basis for meditation, through which our knowledge is further refined and developed.

We frequently hear that simply listening to the teaching is not enough and that we must put it into practice. Knowledge arising from listening alone is, in fact, not even our own knowledge. So it is not all that firm or reliable and does not have real influence on our development. In a way, this methodology of following listening with contemplating gives us the liberty to accept, or reject, or believe in, or not believe something that we learn from others. As mentioned before, at the stage of listening, the acquired knowledge is even not our own, and to make it our own we must establish it in our mind by contemplating and fully utilising our wisdom. From this we gain a firm conviction backed by our own reason and rational mind.

In order for the meditation to be very effective, we need to cultivate a state of calm abiding. This is the topic that we have been studying. In terms of the means of cultivating calm abiding, we have learned that there are eight antidotes to combat five faults or pitfalls.

The fifth pitfall: the over application of the antidote

The antidote to this fifth fault of over application of the antidote is the antidote of non-application.

Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand states:

When you have put an end to your dullness or excitement, readjustment becomes a pitfall, although it is in fact an antidote. The antidote to re-adjustment is number eight of the adjustments, non-adjustment. You must cultivate this equanimity.

When the single-pointed meditation is going perfectly well without being affected by any faults, applying the antidote will be a fault, because it will interrupt the meditation.

As the text states:

You will be subject to interruptions from dullness or excitement until you get to the eighth mental state. At that stage you may have pacified dullness and excitement, but all the same you have to investigate to see whether they are present or not.

Therefore, as the text says here, what is required is to cultivate or maintain a state of equanimity.

The text continues:

But if in your zeal you apply an antidote, you will interrupt this mental state; and so readjustment is a pitfall. Nevertheless do not put effort into your vigilance: it is best to loosen up a little and to cultivate the adjustment of equanimity.

When it says *it is best to loosen up a little*, it is referring to the eighth of the nine mental abidings. It doesn't mean that you leave the object. It is saying that inwardly there should be not be any tension, and there should be some sort of relaxation in the way the meditation object is held in the mind. Basically, at this stage no meditation faults are present, and the text is saying that it is best to remain in that state of equanimity. Trying to make an effort to do it better is excessive. We can recollect our early discussion about how some past Tibetan meditators prided themselves on the state of relaxation when in fact sinking was present. They were taking pride in remaining relaxed too early. Here at the eighth stage one should be content with the relaxation in one's meditation.

The text continues:

Everyone says that you need to be loose at this point because you were so tight before. By the end of the eighth mental state, you do not fall under the power of mental dullness or excitement, and it is said that you should only loosely apply vigilance. But it was quite a different matter before you reached this point, and the looseness referred to here is not that referred to in the discussion on memory and on loosening the intensity of the retention of the visualisation. The Tibetans of the past did not recognise the right point to slacken off, and they claimed that they had "deep meditation in deep relaxation." Their mistake was to slacken their hold on memory too soon. So do not fall into the same trap that they did. Why should you not do as they? Because it would take you far away from the sort of single-pointed concentration that would allow you to gain stability of the image quickly and shed subtle dullness

Posture for engaging in meditation

Having finished the presentation of the actual means for cultivating calm abiding, what now follows are guidelines for engaging in meditation. Assuming you have gathered all the favourable conditions for achieving calm abiding, including the suitable place and so forth, you then begin the actual meditation by sitting on a suitable cushion with a meditation sitting posture endowed with the seven features of the meditation posture of the Vairochana Buddha.

The back of the cushion should be slightly higher than the front so when you sit on it, your back will be lifted a little and it will help you to keep your back straight. Keeping the back of the body straight aligns it with the position of the central, right and left psychic channels

The seven features of the Buddha Vairochana's sitting posture are:

The **back** is straight so that the spinal cord is like a stack of coins. The body should not be tilted to the left or right, nor should it be bent forward or backward. When the back of the body is straight, the channels will be straight too and as a result the wind energy in them will flow smoothly, which in turn helps stabilise the mind just as water flows better in a straight pipe than in a bent pipe. It is said that keeping the body straight also has the benefit of eliminating sleepiness and mental foginess.

The **legs** should be in the cross-legged sitting posture. Tsongkhapa's *Great Stages of the Path* mentions five features here, whereas the tantra mentions four features.

The cross-legged posture is said to have the benefit of enabling one to meditate for a prolonged period of time. With the back of the body straight you can either sit in full or half vajra cross-legged posture. The half vajra sitting posture is in fact how you normally sit and that is also fine.

Since Tsong Khapa's *Great Stages of the Path* is available in English, I advise you to read the section on the sitting posture. In fact, most of the lam-rim teachings including the *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hands* all follow the outlines of Tsong Khapa's *Great Stages of the Path*. Rather than explaining everything here, it is best for you to study the *Great Stages of the Path* yourself, so that you are studying an original and authentic scripture written by a great master. Reading the text directly has the benefit of understanding its meaning, as well as receiving a blessing from the author.

The two **hands** should form the gesture of meditative equipoise. Just below the navel your right hand is placed over the left hand with the tips of two thumbs touching at the level of the navel. The significance of holding the tips of the thumbs at one's navel is to induce inner heat, thereby enhancing meditative concentration and also cultivating love.

The **eyes** should not be wide open or completely shut, they should be just slightly open, gazing towards the tip of the nose but not in the sense of actually trying to see the tip of the nose. Wide open eyes can bring excitement, whereas completely closing them can bring mental sinking. For instance, if you close your eyes you mentally feel as if you have been blindfolded.

The **head** should be just slightly bent forward to align with the bend or the arch at the tip of the channels. The benefit of this is to prevent excitement and also disturbing thoughts.

The **shoulders** are level and elbows are kept slightly away from the sides to allow air circulation between the arms and torso.

The **mouth** should be slightly open with the tip of the tongue slightly touching against the front of the palate. If the mouth is open too much during a longer meditation period it can cause dryness in the throat, and if it is completely closed it can make breathing difficult. The tongue resting against the upper palate can help prevent thirst, as well as saliva dripping from the mouth.

The lam-rim text clearly explains the whole process for achieving calm abiding. Thus far we have covered the main pitfalls that we face in meditation. Today we have talked about the fifth fault which is over application and readjustment. This fault is inevitable unless one is well prepared beforehand. We understand here that if there are no faults in the meditation, such as sinking or excitement, there is no need to exert any effort by applying the antidote. Rather one needs to keep the meditation going on with the state of equanimity.

In summary, in order for our meditation to achieve calm abiding, we need to ensure we have gathered all the suitable conditions such as a conducive place with five features and so on. We also need to ensure we are well prepared with a good knowledge of the meditation process, which is very well explained in the text. The text

even guides us on choosing the right cushion to sit on, and then goes on to explain the correct sitting posture. Then there is an explanation of what actually happens during the meditation, such as facing various obstacles and the remedies to overcome them etc. It is very important to familiarise ourselves with all of these. What follows next are the nine stages of mental abiding one develops as one progresses towards achieving calm abiding. We will discuss these later.

Tonight, we also talked about the fact that the main cause or the main thing to blame for all our problems in life lies within us in the form of an unruly state of mind. Accordingly, it's important to remind ourselves in the face of difficult situations that the real blame lies with this unruly mind within us, rather than, as usual, blaming the outside world and people and expressing hostile thoughts and anger, or showing unpleasant facial or physical gestures to people around us. Instead of that, we should try to direct our angry mind to the unruly mind within us.

We will leave it here for tonight.

Tonight, we will recite the *Eight Veres of Thought Transformation* and dedicate it to the late Ani Tsewu who passed away only a couple of days ago. Some of you here know her too; Ani-la was the sister of Geshe Sonam and a very close friend of mine. We also dedicate the prayer to another local Tibetan man in Dandenong who passed away a few days ago. Although we are praying for other people, this is, in fact, the most effective practice for increasing our own spiritual merits, purifying our negativities, and prolonging our life span.

When we recite prayers together, we are accumulating a collective merit which, due to its collective force, is greater and more powerful than any merit created individually.

*Transcript prepared by Bernii Wright
Edit 1 by Jill Lancashire
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Edited Version*

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Homework

May 22, 2018 teachings

1. What do we need to do to control our mind?

2. What is the fifth pitfall in our calm abiding meditation? And what is its antidote?

3. How should one meditate at the eighth stage of mental abiding?

4. What is the correct posture for engaging in meditation?

Homework

May 22, 2018 teachings

1. What do we need to do to control our mind?

In short, what we need to do to control our mind is to initially listen to the teaching and also gain a knowledge arising from listening to others or studying texts written by others. In order to refine that knowledge, however, it is very important that we think about and contemplate what we have learnt by applying our own intelligence and then we will gain a knowledge that arises from the force of our contemplation. In the process of contemplation, we are validating the knowledge we have acquired from listening by critically analysing and questioning everything we have learnt with the full force of our own discernment and intelligence. Is it true or not? Does it have a valid reason or not? As a result of such analysis, we gain knowledge by the virtue of our own firm conviction and ascertainment. Such knowledge is called knowledge arising from contemplation, which in turn serves as the perfect basis for meditation, through which our knowledge is further refined and developed.

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3. How should one meditate at the eighth stage of mental abiding?

Basically, at this stage no meditation faults are present, and the text is saying that it is best to remain in that state of equanimity. Trying to make an effort to do it better is excessive. We can recollect our early discussion about how some past Tibetan meditators prided themselves on the state of relaxation when in fact sinking was present. They were taking pride in remaining relaxed too early. Here at the eighth stage one should be content with the relaxation in one's meditation.

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