

Meditation

By Shamar Rinpoche, Los Angeles On October 4, 2002

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There are **two levels of benefit** experienced by the practitioner of meditation.

The first benefit is the immediate improvement in the conditions of daily life. The practice of meditation leads to a mind that is more peaceful, more tranquil and more at ease. Because the mind is more relaxed, events that usually disturb us seem to take on less importance and we stop taking them in such a serious way. Likewise, through meditation the mind gradually learns to be independent of external conditions and circumstances. This mind that is unaffected by outer conditions is then able to discover its own stability and tranquility. A stable mind, one that is not disturbed, leads to the experience of less suffering in our lives. These are the immediate benefits that come from regular meditation practice.

The long-term benefit of meditation is that when the mind is pacified, this gradually leads to purification of the mind's basic ignorance, which ultimately leads to buddhahood or enlightenment. In this state of enlightenment, the confusion of ordinary, everyday life no longer exists.

To experience pacification and tranquility, the mind must learn how to remain still. This is not our usual experience of mind. The mind is usually agitated, always in motion, thinking about many different things. We need to look deeply at the causes of this. Since beginningless time to the present moment we have cultivated a perception, a way of seeing things that is based on duality. We have a strong sense of 'I,' of personal existence due to what we call ego-clinging. This gives rise to the perception of external objects that are separate from the ego. This misconception inevitably involves a relationship between 'self' and the world around us, the objects with which we interact. This is the dualistic experience of the world that we all share. This fundamental sense of duality gives rise to all sorts of thoughts, ideas and movement in the mind. Therefore, when we initially sit down to meditate our experience of the mind is far from being peaceful or at ease. This is because the mind is completely distracted by strong activity in relation to external objects. This is the basic cause; this is how mental distraction comes about.

We need to apply a method to train this unstable mind to remain stable in one place. In this way, the mind becomes accustomed to the experience of stability. For this reason, in meditation we give the mind one single object to rest upon.

Qualities of mind

Before we begin to meditate, we should understand something about the qualities of mind, what the mind actually is. The mind is not a thing – it is not a material substance, a fixed object. It is comprised of the nature of knowing. It has this capacity. The mind is simply a succession of moments of consciousness, moments of awareness or moments of knowing. In essence, the mind is without obstruction, it is vast, it is unlimited. The mind is not an entity that exists as such and that lasts for a certain length of time. As the mind enters into relationship with objects, there arise a series of ever-changing instances of perception; therefore, the mind is not one continuous thing – it is impermanent. Thus, this mind, which has the capacity to know and is by nature unobstructed, must be trained to remain stable.

Stability to recognize itself

We need stability in order for the mind to recognize its true essence. Without this stability the mind is unable to recognize itself. The mind has the capacity to know or to recognize its own instability, its own impermanence. Because it is by nature something that knows, it can have knowledge of itself, i.e., knowledge of the fact that it is not stable. It is on the basis of that knowledge, that understanding of itself that the mind can then learn to be stable. So this mind, even though it is agitated, always in motion, nonetheless, it recognizes this instability and can transform it. This is quite different than the wind, for example. The wind is also constantly moving, but, because it is not comprised of mind, it cannot know that it is moving and therefore cannot calm itself down. It cannot stabilize itself. It is this knowing aspect of mind that allows the mind to work on itself.

The instability of mind will not be permanently removed simply by a meditation technique. In order to stabilize the mind, we need the mind to recognize its own nature. Once the mind has recognized its own nature it can reach true stability. Mind can experience itself directly. This means that the mind is capable of experiencing its true nature, unobstructed, free from grasping and fixation on the endless stream of mental content – our thoughts, perceptions and concepts. We habitually grasp at mind's appearances as if our own version is quite solid and real, thus losing the perspective to recognize the unobstructed quality of mind. We say that mind's true nature is emptiness. By empty, we mean that mind is clear; that it is empty of anything that is solid, permanent, or inherently self-existent.

See the mind is agitated so we train the mind

If we do not meditate on the mind as it is, that is our personal experience of mind as it is in the moment, we will not be able to clearly see how the mind is agitated, how it is constantly distracted with an endless stream of thoughts. Once we realize that we are unable to experience a stable mind, we understand the necessity to train the mind, to tame it to bring it to a state of tranquility and stability. However, in order to train the mind, we need a reference point. We need to give the mind something to focus on. In the Buddha's teachings are explanations about the different supports or reference points to help stabilize the mind. Among those supports, the Buddha emphasized the method of resting the mind on the breath. The Buddha explained that in living beings, the mind is closely connected to the body. Therefore, mind and body are in close relationship, particularly mind and the subtle energy system of the body. This means that one way to experience tranquility is through working with the breath, because breathing is related both to the body and its subtle energies. This is why the initial meditation instruction recommends counting the breath.

The first meditation technique we use to tame the mind is called shamatha (Sanskrit) or shinay (Tibetan) meditation, which means 'calm abiding.' Shamatha consists of six steps – counting the breath, following the breath and resting on the breath are the first three steps. After you practice these for a long time, the mind will become tame. Then you progress to the next three steps that develop from concentration on the breath. Here we use analysis to see the connection between mind and the breath. Through this analysis you will realize the emptiness of the mind's nature. You can develop an intuitive feeling for the mind and then you can play with it. You can change the concentration, the image upon which you focus and know that the mind is like a mirage – you can play with. After that you concentrate upon the nature of objects to see the essential emptiness of phenomena. This is how you complete shamatha, the concentration practice that trains the mind.

The purpose of a one-day teaching such as this is to give an overview of the different steps in meditation practice. When it comes to actually learning a meditation technique, then it is better to have a systematic series of explanations on a regular basis so that one can gradually develop one's understanding of the practice of meditation.

When we are using the meditation method of counting the breaths, we count the breathing cycles (in-breath and out-breath being one complete cycle). We initially count continuously from one through five, the idea being to rest the mind on the breathing without any distraction until we reach five cycles and then continue to repeat the process. When we feel we can do this easily, we increase the number of cycles we count, but only for the duration of time we're able to remain undistracted. All the time the mind is resting on the breathing and is not distracted elsewhere. With time we can

actually reach a count of one thousand using this method without the mind wandering away from the breathing during that time. This constitutes the measurement of a certain level of stability wherein the mind is definitely under our control. This is what we call the pacified mind, tranquil or tamed mind.

Through this practice we develop in our meditation an inner experience of tranquility. As we improve our skills in this meditation technique, this ease and tranquility becomes an ongoing experience of the mind. This is the result of shamatha practice.

Correct and incorrect meditation

In general, when we receive teachings on meditation it is not customary to describe all the various different meditation techniques in the space of one single lecture. We have to systematically learn the practice of meditation, beginning with being able to sit in the correct posture. Sitting properly in meditation is the first subject that is taught. This is followed by a second series of explanations that describe how the mind learns to rest on the meditation object. This is followed by a third level of explanations where we learn to distinguish faults of incorrect meditation and how to prevent these kinds of defects from arising in our meditation. We also learn to recognize the qualities that arise in correct meditation. Actually, the initial meditation instruction is of very important because it provides the foundation for which development of our future meditation practices rest. Thus, the instructions on experiencing a mind that is tranquil and pacified are of utmost importance.

Lhaktong or Vipashyana

After practicing shamatha meditation where we've learned to develop the mind's tranquility and stability, we then move into the second phase of meditation called vipashyana (Sanskrit) or insight meditation. This is a meditation practice in which we gain a profound insight into the true nature of mind. When we look into the mind we discover what is called primordial awareness. This primordial awareness is non-dualistic and it is only through insight meditation that we can access or recognize this non-dual mind. Without insight meditation we will always be caught up in dualistic clinging and the mind's true nature – the wisdom or primordial awareness aspect – will remain obscured and we will not be able to access it at all.

Once we have seen into the nature of mind, then through further insight meditation we improve the quality of our experience of primordial awareness. With time, this becomes natural, something that will develop by itself. This is the point where there is spontaneous growth of our experience of primordial awareness. If the mind is agitated, however, we will not be able to see this primordial awareness. This is why it is important in the initial practice of meditation to cultivate mental calm, tranquility and stability.

This, then, is how one experiences through meditation the growth of primordial awareness in the mind. The method to develop this is the practice of insight meditation where we learn not to grasp at the reality or the fixed existence of external objects. Inwardly we recognize that the mind itself is not something that is dull or obscured, but is in fact the nature of clarity. When we encounter directly in our meditation the non-grasping at objects and the inner clarity of mind, these two work together to allow us to see the essence of mind. We can only see the essence of mind if the mind is unobscured by thoughts. A thought arises through the contact or the relationship between the mind as subject and an object that is being related to by the mind. Thus, thought is necessarily a dualistic process. When the mind is in a state of dualistic clinging it will think. When, however, the mind knows its own essence and can recognize its true nature, then this is the experience of non-dualistic, primordial awareness. In fact, the mind at that point is seeing itself.

To illustrate this process at this level of meditation, when we wake up in the morning the sunlight is already beginning to filter into the world and the day is getting lighter. As the day goes by the light increases as the sun gets higher and as the light increases the darkness is dispelled. This is the automatic effect of sunlight. This is analogous to what happens in our meditation. The more we see the nature of mind, the more clearly the nature of mind shines. This all happens because the mind has the capacity to know itself. It can initially recognize what is already there in the mind and because of that, the mind is no longer affected by uncontrolled thinking. This is like the unobscured, cloudless sky. The sunlight is free to shine without hindrance; just as through the gradual continuance of our insight meditation practice, the ability to light up or to see the nature of mind increases without interruption. Gradually, the practice becomes completely natural.

It is through the practice of meditation as outlined that we accomplish the last two of what are referred to as the six paramitas or the six transcendental virtues. These two are the practice of meditative concentration and the practice of full knowledge or full understanding, wisdom. Paramita is a Sanskrit word that means literally something that has reached its fulfillment. Here, we are talking about these two qualities of meditation and wisdom having reached their full achievement, their full accomplishment. The transcendental or fully accomplished meditative concentration, the fifth of the six paramitas, is related to the practice of tranquility meditation as explained earlier. It is through training the mind and the gradual development of our experience that we come to the complete fulfillment of this quality of mental stability or meditative concentration.

Three stages of stability

When we discuss the stability of mind, we often refer to the three stages of stability. The first stage might not seem like stability at all because it is in fact the recognition of just how agitated our mind

really is. Our experience in meditation may be that there seems to be an increase in thought, that the mind is greatly agitated like a river flowing down a rocky mountain. This, however, is not a defect in our meditation. It just means that the mind is now calm enough to be able to recognize its own agitation. Not being involved in that agitation, it can actually recognize just how agitated it is.

Once we recognize this, we should not become stuck on it, but move on with our tranquility practice until the mind becomes more trained. At that point, we will experience mind as a constantly flowing river, gently moving along. This is the result of the mind being more pacified and trained. This is followed by a third stage of practice during which the mind is able to remain in a state of stability for as long as it likes. Here, one has complete control or mastery of the state of stability.

These three stages of meditative concentration are called the three stabilities. In the first stage we still need to teach the mind to stabilize itself by resting on an external reference point – some kind of object. This is absent in the second and third stages where there is no longer any need for a reference point.

In the second stage, while we do not have a reference point, there is still certain watchfulness. We need to observe when the mind is stable and when it is moving and thinking. We need to recognize these states and gradually stabilize the mind further. There's a certain amount of deliberate effort required in this phase in order to maintain the quality of our meditation.

By the time we reach the third stage, mental pacification and tranquility automatically occur without any effort whatsoever. The second stage leads to the third stage without any intervention on our part. This third and final stage corresponds to the accomplishment of tranquility meditation. This is the equivalent of the accomplishment of meditative concentration or what we call the fifth paramita, the transcendental virtue of meditative concentration. It is from then on that we can enter into the phase of insight meditation.

Lhagtong

The stage of insight meditation is much more difficult for us to actually judge or measure because it is endless. In fact, we continue insight meditation practice right up until the very moment of enlightenment. Therefore, it is not a practice that can be judged to last for a certain amount of time and then we do something else. Insight meditation will take us to enlightenment itself.

Insight meditation is so vast it is difficult from our point of view to comprehend what it really is; it is a realm of meditation that takes us beyond dualistic manifestation. Initially, insight meditation brings some minor experience of reality or the true nature of things. As we continue with this practice it expands and grows – it develops beyond our current ability to follow its progress. That’s why we say it is endless. Insight meditation is the perfection of wisdom, the sixth paramita or the sixth perfection.

Presently, we are unable to see the nature of mind, even though mind has the capacity to see its own nature. Right now our mind is full of obscurations. However, these very obscurations can become the means through which we can access the genuine qualities of mind. The minds of most all living beings are currently in a state of ignorance. This ignorance forms the basis upon which the obscurations of the mind appear. However, all of these obscurations can be purified and lead to the attainment of enlightenment. The capacity to transform obscurations into qualities is what we refer to as buddha-nature. Each and every living being has this capacity to transform their mental obscurations into the qualities of enlightenment.

Karma

To better understand obscurations, we will briefly discuss karma, the law of cause and effect. This will help us to understand the relationship between our actions and the results we experience. The practice of virtue is the remedy that allows us to purify all past karmic actions.

Karma is the accumulation of actions based on thoughts in our mind and actions that are produced by that thinking. If we look at how the mind thinks, or the ideas or concepts that come up in the mind, we see that they are based upon the interrelationship between mind and objects that is produced by the emotions. Sometimes the mind is influenced by ego-clinging or selfishness. Sometimes the mind is influenced by strong anger or aggression and sometimes by strong desire or attachment, pride, or jealousy. All of these emotional states cause the mind to create ideas and to perform actions that create what we call a karmic potential, a karmic seed. These karmic seeds are collected in the mind where they continue as habitual tendencies. As these tendencies ripen, as the karma created by confused thought or action comes to full fruition, this produces the experience of an event in our impression of the world around us. This is our karma, the manifestation of the confused mind. So karma can be either in the consciousness as a potential; it can be in the process of ripening; or it can be fully-ripened karma.

If instead of developing negative emotions in the mind such as desire, anger or jealousy, we develop the qualities of love and compassion, then we have good motivation as a basis for the actions we perform. The result will then be that all our actions will strengthen the quality of virtue. All actions

that are motivated by genuine love and compassion are inevitably going to result in virtuous actions. There is no way that a genuine loving or compassionate action could produce a non-virtuous result. These virtuous actions are also collected in the mind stream and they will ripen into an experience of the world – an illusion or a manifestation around us that contains positive qualities and fortunate circumstances.

When we talk about positive and negative we have to view or understand these terms in relation to attaining enlightenment. We define fortunate karma as conditions that help us move closer to enlightenment and negative karma as unfortunate conditions that compromise our opportunity to reach enlightenment.

We talk about existence as being either fortunate or unfortunate. A fortunate existence is to be born as a human being with a human body in a human world with human friends. Our experience of life is a very positive one, giving us many opportunities to further our progress towards enlightenment. An example of an unfortunate rebirth is if we manifest as a ghost rather than as a human being. In that case we would have the body of a ghost; we'd live in a ghost world; we would perceive the world around us as the kind of manifestation experienced by a ghost and all our friends would be ghosts. Life would be very unfortunate indeed. However, things could get worse – we could have the karma to manifest as an insect. Even though the insect may be flying through the human world, it doesn't have the ability to contact human beings and benefit from the human world. The world in which the insect is living is not a human world; it is a world that is experienced from the point of view of an insect. This means that in order for the insect to make meaningful contact with another living being, such a contact can only take place when it makes contact with another insect. If the insect makes contact with a human being the insect doesn't perceive that as beneficial or of any use whatsoever. This is the life of an insect. The insect has various faculties and sense perceptions, as well as certain tendencies. Driven by its instinct to survive, an insect can easily commit a negative act; whereas, even though all beings have buddha-nature, in the insect realm accomplishment of virtuous actions is of extremely difficult.

Therefore, we can see how important it is to have a fortunate existence with all the faculties, potential and capacities to develop toward enlightenment. It is highly beneficial to have this kind of rebirth, this human situation. What do we do to ensure that it continues? We need to engage in actions and behaviors that are motivated by love and compassion. For instance, one of the kinds of actions that we can engage in is the practice of generosity, cultivating generosity based upon the motivation of love and compassion. If we practice generosity with this kind of pure motivation then everything we do will continue to create good fortune and fortunate conditions. This means that

from year to year, from life to life, we will be getting closer to attaining enlightenment. That is the practice of generosity, the first paramita, the perfection of generosity.

The second paramita is the perfection of ethical conduct. This affects everything we do, including all the other paramitas. Here we work within the illusion that we are caught in order to develop something positive within that illusion. In these practices, whether it is meditation where we are dealing directly with the causes of the illusion, or the practice of generosity where we're dealing with the situation of the illusion, we should not harm living beings by our actions. This is the essence of ethical conduct. It means that whatever our practice we should avoid causing any harm to living beings. Even in our practice of virtue, we must ensure that it doesn't cause harm to others. If we do this, then the mind can be more firmly rooted in positive karma and this will mean that our meditation progresses, the confusion of mind diminishes, the mind becomes freer and ultimately becomes more able to see its own true nature. All this is the result of the perfection of the paramita of ethical conduct.

The discipline of ethical conduct is to enable us to give up or renounce anything that can be harmful to our practice and to encourage all things that can be beneficial to our practice. The practice of ethical conduct becomes the basis for purification and improvement in whatever practice we are doing.

Concerning the third paramita, the practice of patience, there are two categories. Patience or tolerance can be exercised in relation to outer circumstances or to inner circumstances. If we look at outer circumstances, this means not replying in kind when we are attacked or insulted in some way, but instead reacting from the basis of love and compassion. We must learn to respond to aggression with love and compassion. As for the inner kind of patience, there is a strong practice and a more subtle practice. The more obvious practice of inner patience is accomplished when we cut off thoughts and feelings of anger as soon as we are aware they are arising in the mind. We don't follow or engage with these thoughts and emotions. The more subtle practice of patience is related to overcoming the darkness of ignorance in the mind. This means that when any thoughts or ideas of a dualistic nature develop in the mind, we exercise the practice of wisdom – the practice of complete understanding of the nature of thoughts so as to not get caught up in dualistic thinking. In this way we see through or into the very nature of our thoughts. This is also patience.

Concerning the fourth paramita, the practice of perseverance, initially this is quite simply the exercise of cultivating exertion or will power in more circumstances and applying it. This is followed by a second stage that involves constant effort. That means our efforts to do anything should be

continual, not off and on, but regular. There is then a third phase where our ability to persevere, to exercise energy and to deal with a situation is something that is easy, automatic and completely untainted by any deliberate effort because this is a natural functioning of the mind. This kind of ingrained or innate perseverance will lead us as we continue with this practice to the very threshold of enlightenment. As we travel the path it will allow us to be of great benefit to living beings.

The cultivation of the perfections of ethical conduct, patience and perseverance will be of great benefit to our practice of the other three perfections – generosity, meditation and wisdom. It is through the gradual accomplishment of all six paramitas that we progress on the path towards enlightenment.