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## **Meditation in the Theravada and Mahayana Traditions**

Once you connect genuinely with meditation practice, you will develop a true passion for it and your practice will begin to mature. If you do not understand the essence of meditation, it is because you have not properly experienced it. Only when you experience its essence does meditation really become interesting. Mind is not used to being in balance. Rather, we are much more used to the state of constantly arising thoughts, uninterrupted streams of thought. We are distracted, confused, and restless. We are comfortable with this habitual state of mind. Because our mind is addicted to being restless, constantly in motion, meditation feels unnatural. Meditation runs contrary to our familiar experience. Therefore we must put effort into the meditation. It requires more than just having a spontaneous or momentary interest in it. What we need is diligence and patience. To make progress, diligence is especially required, along with the knowledge of how to meditate. This combination will bring results. But the path can be misunderstood. Meditation brings one-pointedness, a mind that is stable and clear, not distracted or confused. It is not about entering into a special state where you have visions, see lights, or experience fantastic things. Some people might think so. They take LSD or play music and they are just manipulating their experience. This has nothing to do with meditation, since mind is still distracted and confused. The 8th Karmapa meditation is often misunderstood in this way, because one visualizes different Dakinis flying through the sky. Many people in the early seventies asked for explanation of the 8th Karmapa meditation, then they took LSD and meditated on the 8th Karmapa. This is not what I want to pass on to you. So what is meditation, really? It enables us to experience the mind as it is, in its original nature. What happens in our mind now is that thoughts occur uninterruptedly, hindering us from experiencing mind's true nature. You can distinguish two levels of thoughts: outer and inner. Sensory experience is one such outer level. Mind continuously orients itself towards outer experiences, such as smells, forms, sounds and so on. Mind keeps itself constantly busy experiencing outer objects, thus creating the outer world. It feels like it is beyond our control to keep the mind resting in itself. Why? Because the mind is absorbed in its inner experiences - the second level that underlies our perception at each moment.

Since our mind inwardly constantly follows its thoughts, we are also not able to control the sense impressions when the mind focuses outward. When we manage to control our inner thoughts, the outer level will no longer be a problem. When the inner distraction disappears there is no way to be disturbed when experiencing sense impressions. So meditation is about getting control over the constant stream of thoughts, practicing concentration in order to keep the mind focused. Winning this kind of concentration, you can get deeper into much more calm states of awareness. At that point, the mind is quite vast and rests in itself. It is as if you have opened a gate, a gate that in turn opens many other gates to go further and ever deeper. One develops a profound appreciation for the actual quality of mind. For this reason, in the Theravada tradition, practitioners sleep only six to seven hours and meditate all day long. People meditate this way to achieve inner calm in a short period of time. Furthermore, they do not eat anything after lunch. They are allowed to drink only beverages that do not have any real nutrition, like water or tea. This benefits meditation in that the mind is clearer and less sleepy. Everybody who practices intensive meditation should do this. It is also the custom to go to bed early, at about nine or ten, and then get up early, at about five in the morning. One's life is focused completely on meditation. Today a schedule like this may not be practical. The reason people adopted this meditation schedule during the time of the Buddha is that the Buddha taught that samsara is suffering, and that one cannot accomplish anything while trapped within it. Therefore, complete retreat from samsara to focus exclusively on meditation has become the special focus of the Theravada tradition. However, the motivation of the Theravadans is not particularly for the benefit of others. Of course they are not opposed to others who try to benefit

all beings, but this is not their goal. Their goal is solely to concentrate on meditation in order to reach liberation as quickly as possible. But we are Bodhisattvas. We eat in the afternoon and in the evening. Since Bodhisattvas do not think so much of themselves, they are not in such a hurry to reach their own goal. Bodhisattvas are not afraid to be reborn again and again; they are willing to keep coming back. This is why they do not practice a form of meditation that simply cuts off the world, as do the Theravadans. Following the Theravada path, even if you wanted to, you would not be able to be reborn anymore. Through the concentration states the Theravadans reach in their meditation, they can analyze their state of mind. Whatever disturbing emotions arise such as anger, attachment, jealousy, or envy, based on their ability to concentrate, they are able to analyze the nature of their emotions in subtle detail. This can be compared to a dream where after you wake up, you find that your dream was not real; it was not actually happening. Similarly, practitioners who have accomplished the Theravada path can see that their disturbing emotions are not truly existent. They understand the true nature of emotions and then, on the basis of this understanding, they remove the basis or cause that otherwise would automatically lead to a rebirth in samsara. After they have removed the cause of rebirth in samsara, they will not be able to be reborn again. This is the logical consequence of this form of meditation. The usual word in Tibetan for meditation is gom. There are other very precise terms in Tibetan, such as tingdzin which is a translation of the Sanskrit word samadhi. Ting means depth, as in experiencing the calm depth of mind. Dzin means to hold, as in to hold the unwavering quality of mind. Tingdzin also has other meanings. The Tibetan term samten is another word for meditation. Samten means stable, to experience a stable state of mind. Again there are several different stages of samten. In the Theravada tradition you progress through these stages: first the stages of samten, of concentration meditation, and then the stages of tingdzin. Similarly, Bodhisattvas proceed through stages in their meditation. When a Bodhisattva has reached a stage of samadhi or deep insight, he has the ability to use this inner calm to help beings. Here the stages or bhumis are primarily based on the increasing ability to benefit beings, while in the Theravada tradition they are entirely focused on reaching the state of liberation quickly. It is very powerful to apply analytical meditation to our experience. The point is to carefully analyze every movement of mind. Through recognizing thoughts as such, you will reach an understanding concerning the true nature of mind. Therefore you will not be distracted by thinking, but will recognize thoughts as they are to see the inherent inner stability of mind. Analyzing thought reveals the nature of mind. Gradually, you develop certainty regarding what is otherwise hidden within the ongoing stream of thoughts. Analyzing thoughts brings about the ability to experience their nature, which is of course the nature of mind itself.

Buddhism precisely describes negative disturbing emotions like anger and jealousy. Analyzed as products of our mind they are like all the other mental contents, simply thoughts and feelings. They are negative in the sense that they trigger negative consequences. Thoughts have different karmic propensities. For example, if you notice the carpet and think, "this carpet is blue;" this type of thought is neutral. It does not create a positive or negative result. Thoughts like anger, or jealousy, originate in the mind in the same way. However, they differ in that they bring about strong negative results. So through analytical meditation, we first recognize all kinds of mental activity, and then through this method learn to avoid their negative results. There are two benefits to this kind of meditation. The first is the control of mind by recognizing mental processes and then slowly uprooting negative emotions to uncover the nature of mind. The second benefit of this practice is a reduction in attachment and clinging to sense impressions. To develop concentration, it is helpful to refrain from excessive sensory input. If you are strongly outwardly oriented and also project great expectations onto the world, it will be difficult to calmly concentrate the mind on itself. Automatically clinging to outer sense impressions creates useless distraction. Conversely, when the mind observes itself, you experience a calm and peaceful mind. At this stage meditation becomes effortless. This is because all the neurotic movement of mind, which used to be the subject of analytical meditation, has been so greatly reduced. Quite possibly the meditator could become attached to this state of total inner peace and start clinging again. This attachment hinders us from progressing to more profound experiences. At this point, one again needs further insight. The antidote here is, as before, an analytical form of meditation with the focus on this attachment to peace. Analytical meditation on

subtle feelings of attachment is the key that opens the door to further development. These are the phases of the development of concentration. Meditative experience is difficult to describe, because of the limits of human language. Good practitioners of the past have coined terms to describe their actual experience. They were probably able to communicate very well, however, in our case it is not so easy, since we do not experience what stands behind those terms. It is essential to experience for oneself what is meant in order to understand realized states of mind. The Buddha once taught the Samadhiraja Sutra in which different stages of meditation are described. Nowadays, who can actually understand the descriptions? But why then did the Buddha teach them? One can be sure that at the time of the Buddha, he had disciples who had all those different experiences and thus understood what the Buddha was talking about. Today we still have this sutra so we also have the opportunity to come to that point where we can understand the meaning. So how should we proceed? We must work with what we have as human beings to understand the meaning of these precious teachings. Bodhisattvas progress through different stages of developing concentration and at the same time preserve a certain attachment to the human form, the physical form to be able to be reborn in samsara. So on the one hand, one proceeds as the Theravadans in attaining levels of concentration, and on the other hand, one uses inner peace to create a cause to be reborn in samsara for the benefit of beings. These two qualities define a Bodhisattva: the combination of courage to be reborn in samsara, and the ability to control the illusion of samsara. These two aspects must be combined for the benefit of others. Madhyamaka philosophy explains how the whole world and all beings are an illusion. Everything stands in the context of cause and effect and exists only in reciprocal dependency. Since everything is interdependent, things do not have independent reality. Things are not truly existent in and of themselves, because they are dependent on each other. Bodhisattvas understand this very precisely. They see the illusory nature of the world, so they can see illusion and can work with it. In this way, Bodhisattvas skillfully work for the benefit of beings entangled in samsara.

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