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Meditation on Love and Compassion

In general when we practice the dharma and we commit ourselves to accomplishing positive actions we encounter obstacles and difficulties. This is due to the fact that our minds are laden with emotions. Of these negative emotions, the main one is pride which leads us to feel contempt for others (due to an over-estimation of oneself: I am the best, the strongest, etc). The existence of pride automatically gives rise to jealousy, hatred, or anger. With pride as its underlying cause, the emotion of anger creates the most powerful effects. This is because it leads us to carry out all kinds of seriously negative actions that will bring about future rebirths in the lower realms.

In Western societies, the distinction between pride and firmness of mind is often confused. A lack of pride is construed to be a weakness. Pride is a built-up and concentrated form of ego grasping. So in this respect, it is a weakness. A person can have great strength of character, and a strong resolve to achieve a goal, such as enlightenment, for example, without pride ever manifesting.

We need to dissociate pride -- the affirmation of our own supremacy over others which suggests a certain blindness -- from firmness of mind that is a quality free of all the negative aspects of pride. In the same way we often have a distorted view which equates humility with a weakness of character. What we really need is courage and strength of character, without developing pride.

Mental calm and stability

The meditation on love and compassion goes hand in hand with the cultivation of mental stability. Indeed, with respect to pride and anger, it is difficult for the beginner to give up these emotions straight away. Until we are able to do this we need to practice mental calm in conjunction with the meditation on love and compassion. This is the very essence of Shi'nay meditation.

For example we can examine the mental image or concept of anger. Think of a person who appears unpleasant to you, someone whom you regard as your enemy. If you do not have an enemy, try to think of a person who can make you angry. Once you actually feel the anger, do not act it out, as you may end up hurting someone. Instead, try to relate to the anger as a type of thought and try to see what it looks like and where it comes from? Does it come from the person or from yourself? If you think it comes from the mind, where does it arise from, how does it remain, and where does it go when it disappears? In this way one takes the anger itself as the object of meditation and reflection.

From time to time, you can practice a method of exchanging roles. Once you feel really angry with someone, you can put yourself in that person's place. For example, I am Shamar Rinpoche. I am angry with you. Then I imagine that I am you. In this way, I adopt a different viewpoint, your viewpoint. The same exchange can be applied to the emotions of jealousy and pride. This is a form of Shi'nay (the pacification of the mind). By observing the strong emotional state of anger and then a peaceful state of mind, you will come to observe the nature of mind itself. This is the superior form of insight which we call Lhaktong. If you can apply this method for all of the disturbing emotions, then it will be extremely beneficial for you.

If there are many thoughts in the mind and you manage to pacify them with this method, this is excellent. However when the emotions are so strong that we cannot control them, we need to

stabilize the mind by focusing on our breathing. Concentrating on the in-and- out breaths in this case is more effective.

Many people often take this meditation to be a breathing exercise. In fact, the important point here is not in the breathing but in composing the mind, through being constantly aware of the in-and-out breaths without being distracted. The main point is really this concentration itself, this mental stability. Some people think that the physical aspect of the practice is significant, but this is not the case. What is essential is our familiarity with the practice. The success of meditations such as Shi'nay and Lhaktong does not depend on the conceptualization of these meditative states. Rather, the essence of these practices is in our becoming accustomed to the meditation process itself. We have to differentiate between Gompa which means to conceive and Sgompa which means to meditate, to train oneself or to become familiar.

The correct conception and understanding arises from meditation and familiarization with the practice. Therefore, the meditation itself must be established on very precise foundations. In order to obtain the state of a Buddha, we have to turn away radically from becoming, in other words from all the forms of worldly happiness associated with the different realms. One might, for example, aim to achieve a relative happiness in a higher state of existence, or to be free from the sufferings of the lower realms. One might aspire to acquire the peaceful state of the Shravakas where there is no possibility of benefiting others. However it is only in the ultimate state of enlightenment that the real power and capacity to act for the benefit of others can be found.

Love and compassion - Relative level

The remedy for an attachment to the happiness of becoming is to reflect on impermanence and the "four fundamental thoughts which turn the mind away from the cycle of existences." As our attachments start to weaken, we may experience a certain peace in our mind. Grasping, or clinging to this mental state of calm may then arise. The remedy for grasping on to this peaceful state is to meditate on altruistic love and compassion. We should develop love and compassion within us until they have become completely natural attitudes for us. Love and compassion are qualities that will accompany us throughout our entire spiritual progression: from the moment we first give rise to the enlightened attitude right up until we achieve Buddhahood itself. This enlightenment will then be endowed with the body, speech, mind and qualities of a Buddha. Through the power of love and compassion, all unfavourable conditions, the disturbing emotions, samsara and its causes will be destroyed and completely annihilated. Without love and compassion, we simply do not have enough energy. Even while we remain trapped in this prison of samsara, subjected to the influences of the emotions and karma, the qualities of love and compassion allow us to be guided in the right direction.

This love and compassion has an object which is all beings. By beings, we do not simply mean those who are around us -- humans. Anything that possesses a mind is a being. And where there is a being, there is suffering. Just as we have a mind and through this we experience suffering, the same goes for all other types of beings. Here, we must distinguish between that which is living and that which has a mind. A living thing does not necessarily have a mind. But where there is mind, there is consciousness, and there is life. There are all kinds of beings, some which are very small like the insects. A common misconception is to attribute consciousness only to beings of a certain size. We often associate the existence of consciousness first with a certain degree of intelligence and then to a certain size. In this way, scientists and certain schools of philosophical thought are reluctant to acknowledge that smaller animals, insects, or tiny marine life possess a consciousness similar to ours even though they recognize that some larger sea dwellers such as dolphins do have consciousness.

In fact, even the tiniest and most miniscule of insects seeks pleasure and fears suffering. If we try to touch the fin of a small fish, its initial reaction is to move away. If it is tamed, then it may recognize the hand that feeds it to be a source of satisfaction. It will then approach the hand

quite simply because, in the same way as humans, it seeks a state of well being and flees suffering.

Beings have various sizes, but the mind is not proportional to the physical appearance. The degree of suffering or happiness depends on individual karma. The same mind can reincarnate in a tiny feeble body, or in the body of a whale, or as a king endowed with a higher faculty of mind than that of an animal. However, size does not have any bearing on the quality or power of the mind.

Therefore, all beings, without any exception, should be the object of our love and compassion. Cultivate the same attitude for all beings as you would feel for your father, mother, or those whom you love the most. In traditional cultures, particularly in the East, family ties are extremely strong. The father and the mother are the people whom one reveres the most, and the idea of any harm coming to them is unbearable. For this reason, when we meditate on the enlightened attitude, we take this example considering all beings as our parents.

In the West, esteem for parents does not have the same intensity. But this difference does not matter for the meditation. Simply use someone whom you love the most and consider all beings as that person.

Of course, it is not possible for us to develop this love and compassion for each being individually. But we can regard all beings collectively as one entity and meditate on the fact that they, too, wish to have happiness with the same fervor as we do. We develop this intense wish for their happiness by putting ourselves in their place. However, be careful not to make the wish into a fixation or attachment. Rather, concentrate on what beings have to go through. We must then continue to maintain the mind in this aspiration for their happiness while applying the same contemplation of its essence as was previously mentioned for the emotions such as anger, pride and jealousy.

Love and compassion -- Ultimate level

This love for all beings is, in the beginning, an artificial and fabricated attitude. We do not really feel it automatically. By training ourselves, it will develop gradually, and sooner or later this impartial love towards all beings will become a natural feeling. Right now, when we feel love for one or several beings, very often, this love is partial because it is selective, and it comes from our attachment. When we talk of spiritual love, this is not a partial and exclusive attitude, but it is founded in the nature of mind which is emptiness. It is from emptiness that everything manifests.

We meditate on love; its nature is emptiness, non-existence. The object of this love (i.e. beings) is also empty in nature from the ultimate point of view. However, its relative nature does exist; it arises without contradicting its essence. If it were different and the existence of an intrinsic ultimate reality were enough in itself; it would not enable relative phenomena to manifest. If a dream were real, it could not take place in the space of the mind. If the dream's essence does not have an empty mirror-like quality, images cannot be reflected in it. Thus, the nature of beings' confusion is emptiness. Otherwise, how could it appear, if it was exclusively solid, and material?

Although this contemplation of Bodhicitta's ultimate nature is something that one must realize; this comes later on. In the beginning, it is advisable to cultivate mainly the relative aspect of love and compassion, in order to progress afterwards into a recognition of emptiness or ultimate Bodhicitta. Parallel to this meditation on ultimate Bodhicitta, a profound understanding will develop. If one meditates on love by means of emptiness, it becomes a superior love. Not only that, but at the same time, while meditating on the nature of love, we will achieve a stable pacification of mind (Shi'nay), and simultaneously the force of our positivity will increase. By constantly recollecting the enlightened attitude, we will be able to create a source of

considerable benefit for others. Through the samadhi (complete absorption) of love, we will penetrate the ultimate and authentic benefit. Our mind will be united with the unchanging ultimate reality so that our consciousness will no longer be inhabited by anything other than love for all beings. It will never be separated from this.

By the force of our meditation, our love for beings will be like the mother hen's love for her chicks. This process will develop itself by its own nature, until it embraces all beings in the state of enlightenment. Gradually we will gain the capacity to be beneficial towards an increasing number of beings. This has nothing to do with telepathy or any particular intention, as if we were sending energy waves to help those who are inferior to us. But spontaneously, beneficial and positive activities will arise through the force of virtue. The power of this meditation is so strong that it has the ability to spread to others. This love extends outwards and radiates, and is born in the minds of other beings, particularly in small animals such as birds.