

Looking Into The Nature of The Mind

by His Holiness the Sakya Trizin

The practice of looking into the nature of the mind is called “insight meditation”. In order to practise insight meditation, we first need to develop a steady mind, a mind free from conceptual thought. We do this through the cultivation of single-pointed concentration, whereby the mind can become stable and devoid of thoughts, thus allowing us to rest in its clarity.

There are many different levels of concentration, but the very basic requisite for entering into concentration is that we must be in a place away from noise and distractions, a quiet, comfortable place. We should sit, if possible, in the full lotus position, or at least with our back straight and our two hands resting on our lap, one on top of the other, facing up.

For beginners, it is difficult to bring the mind into concentration without using an object, and so it is better to use an object of concentration like a statue of the Buddha, or anything inspirational, such as a flower. This should be at the level of our eyes, about two feet away; it should be placed on a stable support, so that it doesn't shake or move, as any movement can cause thoughts to arise.

Then, we should try to bring three things together: our breath, our eyes, and our mind, and place them on the object. We should refrain from thinking about the qualities of the object, such as its shape or colour, and try to keep these three things fixed on the object.



We'll find that if, for example, we hear a sound, immediately thought arises. If we sense any kind of stimulus, thought arises. At that time, instead of following that sound or sense stimulus and becoming distracted by it, we should straight away try to bring our mind back to the concentration object and keep it there.

Our mind and our body are interlinked, and when our mind is strong, even if we are unwell physically, we will feel all right. But when our mind is not strong, physical problems will cause us to feel pain.

In the practice of concentration, there are five major faults that we must avoid: laziness, forgetfulness, sinking and scattering, not applying the antidote, and over-application.

The first one, laziness, refers to not practising concentration, not making the effort of bringing our mind to the concentration object. The second, forgetfulness, is what happens when we forget the instructions of how to practise concentration. The third fault that we must avoid is sinking and scattering. Sinking is when our mind slumps, feels heavy, a bit like sleeping, or sinking in water. And scattering is the opposite, when our mind can't remain on the concentration object, when our thoughts are dispersed and go off in different directions. The fourth fault is not applying the necessary antidote to each fault. And the fifth is over-application of the antidote where, rather than helping, it becomes a hindrance to concentration.

So these are the five faults to be avoided. And, in order to counter these faults, there are eight antidotes.

The antidotes to the first fault, laziness, are: interest, effort, faith and contentment. The first one is the intention of practising concentration, the desire to do so. The second antidote is effort. When

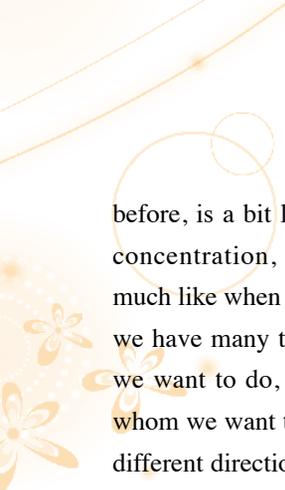
we are interested in the practice, then we make the necessary physical and mental efforts to do it well. The third is faith, faith in the fact that by practising concentration, we can achieve results, temporary results and finally the ultimate result. Faith makes the practice a lot stronger. The fourth antidote to laziness is contentment.

The practice of concentration produces physical and mental calm and comfort; when we experience this, we develop an interest in the practice. Like a businessman who, when he sees that something offers the possibility of making a profit, he'll develop an interest in it, and invest effort in it. Similarly, when we see the results that the practice of concentration brings, we develop an interest in it. This becomes even more so when we realize that it not only brings the ultimate result, but also temporary ones, such as physical and mental calm and contentment.

Our mind and our body are interlinked, and when our mind is strong, even if we are unwell physically, we will feel all right. But when our mind is not strong, physical problems will cause us to feel pain. So it is important to apply these four antidotes to laziness, and the most important one among these is effort, the effort of making our mind strong by bringing it into concentration. Even if we are feeling lazy, or encounter any of the other faults, we can make the effort of coming back to the concentration, for example by remembering the failings of samsara, or by reading an inspiring book.

The antidote to the second fault, forgetfulness, is remembering; constantly remembering the instructions that we received on how to practise concentration. These must always be kept in mind, so that whenever we start to practice, we automatically remember how to do it.

The antidote to the third fault is awareness, watching the mind. It is important to always watch our mind, whether it's gone off in the wrong direction, whether it's sinking or scattering. Sinking, as we said



before, is a bit like sleeping. When we try to practise concentration, sometimes our mind becomes dull, much like when we're sleeping. Or the opposite, where we have many thoughts, we're thinking of things that we want to do, places that we want to go to, people whom we want to see, and so forth – our mind goes in different directions. It is very important to watch these two things continually, the sinking and scattering. And so, watching the mind is the antidote to the third fault.

The antidote to the fourth fault is applying the antidote. As soon as we notice that our mind has gone in the wrong direction, we make an effort to apply the antidote.

The antidote to the fifth fault, over-application, is to apply the correct dose of the antidote. We strive to bring equanimity to a mind that is overly relaxed, or overly agitated. This means that we find a balance between a dull mind and an unsettled one.

And so, by applying these antidotes, we can eliminate the five faults of concentration.

There are nine levels of concentration.

On the first level, we place our mind on the object, we make no physical movements, we don't blink, and

we make sure that the object of concentration is not moving either, and that we can see it clearly. Then we try to meditate. Our eyes are neither wide open nor closed, just halfway opened, and our breathing should be normal, a slow, natural breathing. And so we should bring all three together, our mind, our eyes and our breathing, and place them on the object.

On the second level of concentration, because it is difficult for the beginner to practise for a very long period of time, we try to do many short sessions. If, at the beginning, we try to do long sessions, then we become physically and mentally exhausted. This can make us grow cross with the meditation. In the beginning we should try do many, many very short sessions. So we should continue placing the mind again and again for short periods of time.

On the third level, whenever something occurs that distracts our mind, such as a sound, or any sense stimulus, we immediately try to place our attention back onto the object.

On the fourth level also, we strive to again and again place our mind on the object.

On the fifth level, we remember the qualities obtained through concentration, so that if our mind is affected by sinking and scattering, then we have more incentive to apply the antidotes and bring our mind back to the subject.

On the sixth one, although we are trying to bring our mind to the object of concentration, our mind is distracted or agitated. So here again, we try even harder to bring our mind back to the concentration object, in order to break away from this state of distraction.

On the seventh, if we are experiencing the complete opposite to a calm mind, such as thoughts of anger, envy or any negative emotion, then we shouldn't follow those thoughts. For example, if we're angry with someone, then we'll tend to think of that person, we'll build up a story around him, what he's like, what he did, and so forth. Instead of following

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these thoughts, we should immediately try to bring our mind back to the concentration object.

On the eighth level, if we're doing our best to eliminate the sinking or scattering through the application of the antidotes, but are unable to do so and our mind is still dull or scattered, then we should try something else, like investigating where these thoughts came from, what their nature is, and so on, and with this try to bring the mind back to the object of concentration.

And on the ninth level, after going through the beginning stages, where we did many short sessions, and then gradually increasing the length of these sessions, now the practice becomes easy. Once we're used to it, we are able to remain in this state of concentration without much effort. So these are the nine stages of concentration.

Through inner concentration, without using an outside object, one can eliminate thoughts and remain with a steady, single-pointed mind, and concentrate on the clarity of mind.

In practising concentration in this way, we encounter certain experiences. Generally, there are five kinds of experiences that we meet.

The first experience that we come across is one called the "waterfall". When we try to concentrate, many thoughts arise, one after another, just like a waterfall. In a waterfall, there are no gaps, the water flows uninterruptedly; similarly, we find that thoughts flow uninterruptedly. We might feel discouraged because, no matter how hard we try, many thoughts

keep arising. Normally, although many, many thoughts arise, we don't notice them, but when we practise concentration, we do notice them. This is a good sign, and we shouldn't become discouraged. It's called the experience of recognising the thoughts, or of experiencing the thoughts.

The second experience that we encounter is that of resting thoughts. Although thoughts arise, there are some gaps between them. So now there are some thoughts, but they're sort of tired. They arise, and then there's a gap.

The third experience is that of tired thoughts. If there is an outside cause, then thoughts arise. But if there is no outside cause, then thoughts don't arise.

The fourth experience is called "ocean with waves". Oceans are normally very settled, but occasionally waves arise. In the same way, although our concentration is very settled and our mind is very calm and can remain on the concentration object very steadily, occasionally one or two thoughts emerge, just like waves on the ocean.

The fifth experience is called "ocean without waves". Once we are used to the concentration, we can remain very firmly fixed on the object, just like an ocean without waves. Even though there are external causes for distraction, our mind is very steady, single-mindedly remaining on the object, and thoughts don't arise. When we are able to do this, instead of looking at the outside object, we should try to look inwardly into our own mind, at the clarity of the mind, and concentrate on this. Through inner concentration, without using an outside object, one can eliminate thoughts and remain with a steady, single-pointed mind, and concentrate on the clarity of mind.

This is a brief description of how to practise concentration.

(To be continued in the next issue...)