

A dzogchen approach to meditation

**A TEACHING BY
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Iwould like to say something about meditation in terms of the Vajrayana approach to practice.

In the Vajrayana teachings it is said that it is extraordinarily important to be able to generate faith as well as humility. It is also extraordinarily worthwhile to be able to understand the real nature of one's own mind and establish the mind as intrinsically wholesome. One could say that one establishes one's mind as the dharmakaya, although we can refer to it by many other names as well.

Basically, it is much more important to appreciate the intrinsic wholesomeness within oneself than to become totally engrossed in an understanding of emptiness in the external world. In the Dzogchen context, we look at the basic awareness of the mind and try to interpret everything that we experience from the way in which consciousness functions. That is called "self-consciousness." Basic awareness is intrinsically related with that particular way of experiencing things.

It is therefore extremely important for us to rise in the morning like a human being with full awareness, rather than like an animal waking up. We should have pure awareness from dawn until the time we go to sleep; there needs to be unceasing awareness. When we wake up, we should imagine that we are in the presence of varieties of lineage holders who are the embodiments of the buddhas and bodhisattvas and we must remain in that particular state. Having done that, we should try to practice what is known as "the purification of the textures of the air." However, first we must apply what are known as "the seven characteristics of Vairochana's style of sitting meditation." According to the Vajrayana teachings, it is extraordinarily important for one to pay attention to one's physical condition and to remember that there are four authentic conditions.

If one places oneself in a physically authentic way, with a physically erect posture, one's channels become straightened. If the channels become straightened, the wind is able to travel much more conveniently. If the wind is able to travel conveniently through the channels, the

bindu or “life essence” becomes that much more purified. One’s mind will then become more authentic, in proportion to the development of those three principles. When the mind becomes authentic and genuine, wisdom becomes authentic and genuine as well.

Adopt the Posture of a Buddha

In Vajrayana, the body is referred to as the “city of the vajra.” The reason one has to adopt the Vairochana posture in meditation is because Vairochana is the embodiment of the physical aspect of all the buddhas and, therefore, engaging in that particular practice is a worthwhile thing. Vairochana is traditionally understood as a symbol that is totally related with the notion of the sambhogakaya. The first characteristic of Vairochana’s posture is sitting cross-legged. The second is sitting erect so that one’s spine is as straight as an arrow. The third is resting one hand upon the other, just below the navel. The fourth characteristic is leaving one’s arms loose and outstretched so that one’s elbows are not touching one’s waist. The fifth characteristic is having one’s head slightly tilted forward, so that it is not flung backwards nor completely bent forward. The sixth characteristic is touching the roof of the mouth with the tip of the tongue and breathing normally. Lastly, one’s eyes should be half-closed and one’s gaze should be resting on the tip of one’s nose.

In relation to the practices of Mahamudra and Dzogchen, the reason one keeps one’s eyes open is that the emphasis is placed upon not rejecting one’s concepts and thoughts, but rather, on trying to incorporate them. If one is trying to put concepts and ideas out of one’s mind, one should have one’s eyes closed. In relation to Dzogchen, for instance, there are practices such as the three ways of gazing, which involve keeping one’s eyes open during meditation. Having one’s eyes open is intimately related with not wanting to reject one’s concepts and ideas and so forth.

It is very important to sit in a posture that is correct. The important thing is to rest in one’s authentic condition, the natural state of one’s own mind, so that one does not take too much interest in the mental events or feelings that are taking place. There has to be this unceasing awareness in relation to the varieties of experiences that one may be going through.

The seven characteristics of the Vairochana style of meditating are related to one’s body. The “purifying the texture of the air” practice has to do with wind. This is therefore an extraordinarily important practice. When one adopts the kind of physical posture just described, one will have one’s channels arranged in such a manner that they begin to become pliable. Once the channels become pliable, one’s winds become enhanced in the way in which it travels through the channels.

Breath Purification

It has been said that there are three principal channels and so forth, but one does not have to think too much about that. Different teachers and different cycles of tantra can present this practice in a variety of ways; there is no single way in which must be done. When we do the practice of purifying the texture of the air, the thumbs press on the base of the ring fingers and the hands rest against your body. In this way, the thumbs are pressing particular channels related to the fingers and the hands are pressing certain channels in the body. We do this because the right channel travels to the right nostril and the left channel terminates at the left nostril.

We slowly move our hands from the top of the legs downwards to the knees (palms facing up), because those two channels are structured in the legs. We move our hands to the knees and then turn the wrists so that the palms face down, and retrace the same process in an upward motion.

We pull the hands up our sides and, as soon as we reach the level of the nipples, we shoot out our hands right in front of us and stretch our arms out. Then, we let our right arm drop inwards and our left arm makes an inward twist until our hand is resting on the side of our face and we are able to block the left nostril. Then we let the air out through our right nostril. It does not matter what kind of force we let the air out with. We can breathe out with extraordinary force or we can breathe out naturally and slowly.

In order to do the same with the right nostril, we have to go back to the original posture. We follow the same process: moving the hands to the knees and then up to the level of the nipples and then stretching out. Instead of the left hand, we adopt the right hand in order to block the right nostril; then we release the air through the left nostril; then we drop both of our hands on our knees and breathe evenly from both nostrils. This cycle should be done up to nine times in each session, but no less than three.

All of this concerns the way in which we must relate to our body. Then we have to think about the internal object of our intention. The reason we have to block the left nostril to begin with and let the air out from the right nostril is because the winds that we have in our daily life are totally impure. We should imagine that anger resides in the right side of the body, colored a darkish yellow. When we breathe out, we imagine that all of that impure air has been released. As a result, the aggression has left one's channel structure as well. When we breathe out through our left nostril, we imagine that our wind, which is impure, is darkish red. We should think that all of our emotional conflicts related with desire have gone out with the breath. When we breathe out through both nostrils, we visualize the impure element of air as ignorance, and it leaves the body as a mass of darkish blue material. When we breathe out through both of our nostrils, that impure element of ignorance is also released.

One should not view this as some kind of device for relating to desire, anger, and ignorance, thinking, "Maybe this will work and maybe it won't." One must have a real conviction that this particular technique is the way to relate to one's desire, aggression and ignorance. This is so because the tantric idea of transformation is an extraordinary one. One's body can be transmuted into the authentic state of Buddha's body, one's speech can be transmuted into the authentic state of Buddha's speech, and one's mind can be transmuted into the authentic state of Buddha's mind. One's concepts, ideas, and thoughts can all be transmuted into a state of wisdom. As ordinary beings, we have to use the available materials at hand.

The tantric tradition is about being able to attain buddhahood in one lifetime. One does not have to spend three countless aeons and so forth following this path, as in the sutric tradition. One can attain buddhahood in one's own lifetime. If one asks what kind of proofs there are for this, the answer is that the proofs are actually too great to enumerate.

If the posture of the body were not important, Milarepa would have simply lain down and gone to sleep in his cave. In fact, it did not happen that way. He sat up and adopted the posture of Vairochana. Not only that, even after he was able to realize that his own mind was inseparable from that of the buddhas' minds, he did not cease adopting Vairochana's posture and sitting upright.

Occasionally, he would place a lamp on his head so that every time he dozed off the lamp would fall off. Sometimes, he would be sitting so consistently that part of his buttocks would be stuck to the rock underneath. What this particular story really illustrates is the fact that no matter what one is doing, one must not downplay or underestimate the importance of adopting the posture of Vairochana.

Guru Yoga

Having done this particular exercise, one must do Guru Yoga. In fact, Guru Yoga is known as “Calling the Guru from Afar.” One has to remind oneself all the time that the practice has been transmitted from guru to disciple and guru to disciple in an unbroken lineage and practice. Someone has not just popped up and said, “This is how it should be done.” If one were not adhering to a proper lineage system, this unbroken transmission would not be taking place. One’s guru becomes the embodiment of the whole history or legacy of a particular tradition, preceded by one’s teacher’s teacher and teacher’s teacher’s teacher and so on, right up to the fact that all the teachers have understood the authentic condition. The source of the lineage started with Samantabhadra or Vajradhara, depending on whether you adhere to the Dzogchen or Mahamudra tradition. Both represent the authentic mode of being at the source of these traditions.

Whether you are following the Kagyu system of Mahamudra or the Nyingma system of Dzogchen, in relation to Guru Yoga you can simply follow the same procedure. If you do not have any specific set of procedures in relation to this particular practice, you can simply imagine all the buddhas and bodhisattvas as the embodiment of your teacher and visualize that particular person present in front of you. Then, contemplate on that.

The crux of the matter in relation to Guru Yoga is to remain in that state and not be disturbed by your conceptual proliferations and constructions. Some may be able to remain in this state for ten minutes or so. If you are able to do that, you should consider yourself extraordinarily fortunate, because most beginners are not able to do even that. In any case, the idea here is that you should always be aware of the conceptual constructions that govern your mind. You should work with the mind in such a manner that you are not trying to handle the mind with kid gloves. In this case, the relationship between the one who works with something and the one who is worked with is totally identical. The one who is worked with is oneself and the one who is working with that particular thing is also oneself. So there is an internal relationship in relation to someone who is working with the mind and the mind that is being worked with.

Up to this point, one has never really worked with one’s own mind. The mind that has not been worked with is traditionally understood as being like a mad elephant, or a horse that has not been tamed. Usually, the way in which we work with our mind has to do with, “What can I do in relation to my behavior that would enhance my appearance?” and so on. Or one might work with one’s mind in relation to intellectual exercises in order to get a degree. But one has not directly worked with one’s mind.

When we start to lose touch with our own authentic condition, or the true nature of the mind, we begin to become totally disassociated. Then, at worst, people might think that committing suicide will somehow or other bring them closer to their own true condition. The reason this situation can come about is because a person has failed to realize that things are not so substantial and real. No matter what we experience, nothing is solid and permanent and real. Because someone has not been able to understand that insubstantial nature of their experience, they want to commit suicide.

Usually the reason such tendencies arise is because we normally try to find happiness external to ourselves. We believe that some kind of external input will make us happy, not realizing that true happiness resides within oneself. If we are not able to find satisfaction within ourselves, with what is already there, we try to find satisfaction with things outside ourselves. Sometimes we try to sing and dance, other times we might try to get stoned on dope. Although we try a number of

things like that, eventually everything we do has the component of a hangover. If we do not really look at the way in which the mind operates, we can never satisfy ourselves. When we have a particular thing, we find that we only need more of that thing and then we need more again. We just want to accumulate and accumulate but we are never truly satisfied.

When we start to become totally disassociated from our authentic condition, we become childish. Shantideva said, “The reason that we are childish is because we elaborate upon even trivial things, magnifying the whole situation so that one single incident can turn our life around.” For instance, one moment we feel that so-and-so is our friend and the next moment we hear that they have said something terrible about us and decide that they are our enemy. When somebody says, “You are an extraordinarily intelligent person,” we feel so happy and begin to feel so arrogant. The next moment, when somebody says, “You have got such-and-such a flaw in your character,” we lose our confidence and begin to become totally agitated. That is why Shantideva said that we are childish — because we are so fickle in relation to our personalities.

If we are not able to work with our mind, our mind will continue to play tricks on us. The mind is able to do this because we have never really looked at what the true condition of the mind is. So, in this particular context, if we understand what the true, authentic condition of the mind is, we will begin to find that all happiness resides within oneself. We begin to realize there are so many resources that are already contained within what we are. However, because we do not understand our authentic condition, we feel totally helpless. This is because we have never worked with our mind, we have not tried to understand the authentic condition. Whenever anybody asks us a question, all we can say is, “I don’t know.” Even when we are going to die, we have absolutely no idea what is going to happen to us. This is because we have never been able to work out what our true, authentic condition is. For instance, when Gampopa parted with his teacher, Milarepa, he was given certain instructions. Milarepa said: “When you go back to your home-land, instead of getting too involved with your uncles and aunties and so on, try to look at your own true, authentic condition, the dharmakaya, as your home. When you want to indulge in delicious meals, try to think about living on your own meditation. When you want to wear warm clothing, think that the practice of inner heat yoga is your clothing.”

What that really portrays is the fact that everything that we do and everything that we engage in has an inner component to it. Milarepa was trying to present the side to what we normally believe to be the case. The basic point here is to be able to realize that the continuation of the lineage and transmission is an extraordinarily important thing.

Shamatha — Calm Abiding Meditation

In terms of meditation, if we simply want to gain a certain amount of composure and a certain amount of concentration, the practice of Shamatha is quite sufficient. However, if we think that Shamatha practice is a state where one is totally devoid of thoughts, that is not the true way to practice Shamatha. In Shamatha practice, one has to have an intentional object. One can have two intentional objects, in fact — one real, the other ideal. The real object can be some external, physical object and the ideal one is our inner mental processes.

If one has a physical, intentional object, such as a table or some such thing, one can concentrate one’s mind on that. However, one is not free from struggle during this process. One has to continuously try to bring one’s mind back to that intentional object. So Shamatha is far from being a blank state of mind.

The ideal intentional object has to do with imagining something in the external world that does not exist. For instance, if you are looking at the floor at a distance of about three feet, you can imagine a ball of light on the floor. The ball of light is not part of the feature of the carpet or the floor; one has created it. That is known as the ideal intentional object.

For instance, Vimalamitra said that it is good to practice Shamatha meditation by relying on a particular Buddha image—whether it be a painting or a statue or whatever—and simply try to concentrate on that. This is a totally worthwhile exercise.

The Six Flaws

In terms of meditation, the most important thing is to be able to have mindfulness and awareness. When we start to meditate, there are all kinds of conflicts that may happen between the meditator and his or her inner states. Every time we meditate, we begin to be completely misled by our thoughts, ideas and so on. We have to continuously bring our attention back to whatever we are experiencing. It is too much to expect that the moment we sit down, we should be a great meditator. According to the Buddha, there are six flaws that can arise in relation to one's meditation. We have to know how to notice them when they arise.

The first flaw is the obstacle of laziness. Whenever we start to think about meditation, we think we should do it tomorrow.

The second flaw is the obstacle of forgetfulness. Even though we may have read about meditation and philosophy and so on, as soon as we start to meditate, we forget what the instructions are all about. Even though we persevere with meditation and are not lazy and forgetful, that does not mean that we can be totally free from obstacles.

There is also an obstacle known as depression. Depression is intimately related with elation or agitation. When there is depression, this basically means that the person is not able to think anything, or able to identify their experiences. They are simply in a state of total blankness. Agitation has to do with the mental factor where someone is so elated or agitated that their mind is travelling too fast to be able to catch up. If someone looks at that person, they may appear to be sitting in perfect meditation posture, but internally, they are all over the place.

There is a story about Drukpa Kunley, who was known as the Divine Madman. At one stage, he and his brother decided that they would go and meditate in total isolation, without any human contact whatsoever. They tried to make a pledge with each other that they would have no human contact. Drukpa Kunley was told by his brother, "I hope that you will keep your word about having no human contact and not leave your meditation cave." However, after about three days, things started to change. Drukpa Kunley's brother found Drukpa Kunley running around town doing all kinds of things—carrying other people's loads, acting as a coolie, and so on. His brother said, "What is happening? I thought we promised each other that we were going to live in total solitude, yet here you are running around in the marketplace." However, Drukpa Kunley was behaving in this manner because he knew that his brother had all these conceptual ideas running through his mind, despite being locked up in his meditation cell. This was his way of telling his brother that physical solitude does not mean mental solitude.

Meditation has to do with seeing one's body as an embodied body. The body becomes the locus within which the mind resides. If the mind is somewhere else, running all over the place, one can be in perfect meditation posture, but it is hardly worthwhile because one has become disembodied in some ways.

If we look at meditation and how we should meditate, it is extremely worthwhile to break one's meditation sessions up into short periods, rather than thinking that meditation means to be able to sit for a very long time. As Guru Padmasambhava instructed, "It is better to persevere with meditation at short intervals, than to meditate for a long period of time without any results." He gave the example of water drops: when water drops accumulate, they can gather force; but each drop remains separate, each drop is unique unto itself. In a similar way, meditation sessions should be allowed to accumulate by being broken up into short intervals.

The fourth obstacle is related to when the application of the antidotes backfires. When one becomes so engrossed in thinking that one must be mindful and aware, then one becomes completely saturated by all kinds of ideas and concepts and so on. By applying the antidotes too much—always trying to be mindful, always trying to be aware—awareness and mindfulness begin to backfire. This obstacle is known as the "misapplication of the antidotes."

The fifth obstacle is related to not applying the antidotes enough. With this one, one becomes too relaxed, too lax, too careless. We might allow the mind to become distracted during meditation, or we might not bother to meditate at all. Even though we know we should be doing sitting meditation—even though we know how to do it, how to relate to the breath—we still tend to think that we would rather be doing something else.

The sixth obstacle is absence of coordination. This means that when we are doing sitting meditation, we just give in and become completely vulnerable and sensitive so that we feel pierced by the bullet of emotions—depression, drowsiness, laziness, passion, and aggression—all of those things. We become a victim of all these emotions, because we are not able to coordinate things properly and precisely. We just give in to our own discursive thoughts and subconscious gossip.

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