

Practical Mindfulness Techniques

By His Holiness Jigdal Dagchen Sakya

As human beings we experience both happiness and suffering. However, we want to have happiness and no suffering! The Buddha said happiness and suffering go together like fire and smoke. When one is present, the other is present. Of course, we really want and prefer happiness! In order to get this happiness and put aside suffering, we must understand the nature of happiness and suffering. It is through this understanding that we are able to proceed along the path to liberation.

The Buddha taught that we should work to understand our minds in order to make progress on this path. By studying the causes of happiness and suffering, we will recognize that there are actions and behaviors that can lead to true happiness and liberation, while there are also behaviors and traditions that keep us going around in the cycle of existence from rebirth to rebirth.

Within Buddhism, there are various levels of mindfulness techniques and practices to help us understand our minds and attain enlightenment. It is best to begin with the recognition that there are wholesome and unwholesome activities and thoughts. We should practice discerning whether an activity or thought is wholesome or unwholesome and in turn increase our motivation to take up wholesome activities rather than unwholesome activities.

In America, most people think in terms of their lifetime. In Tibetan Buddhism, we think in terms of infinite lives, referred to as cyclic existence (Samsara). In cyclic existence we have clinging, attachment, grasping, and desire. To better understand our motivation and to practice wholesome activities, it is good to meditate on the three endless aspects of Samsara.

The Three Endless Aspects of Samsara:

- There is no end to activity
- There is no satisfying of desires
- There is no end to births and deaths

We have performed activities in the past just as we will continue to perform activities in the future. We will always be performing activities while we are alive. There is no end to our desire. Because we live in the desire realm rather than the form or formless realm, our desires continue to arise and are strong. Whenever we get one of something, we want two, then three, or just switch to desiring something else! There is no end to birth and death. Birth and death occur endlessly in a stream of being born and dying. All beings will experience both birth and death. Humans and all other creatures are constantly being born and are dying. Reflecting upon these three endless things helps with our motivation on the path.

The Four Thoughts

To help us with our motivation along the path towards happiness and enlightenment, there are four thoughts that are very beneficial to reflect upon. These are the preciousness of human rebirth, death and impermanence, the law of cause and result (karma), and the faults of cyclic existence (Samsara).

First, it is very precious and rare to obtain the human rebirth. If you think about the different creatures that are alive, some are very small, smaller than particles of dust. There are others that are quite large - in Buddhist cosmology they say as large as Mt. Meru. Of the incredible number of births that are possible, precious human rebirth is considered the most fortunate. However, it is very difficult to obtain. As humans, we have the best opportunity to take up the spiritual path, particularly the path of the Buddha, in order to make spiritual progress.

The second thought is on impermanence. Our time with this precious human rebirth is limited. When our time to die comes there is nothing that can be done. It does not matter whether we are rich and powerful or poor; there is no method to put it off once the time has come. We are all in this condition of impermanence and we are all going to die. Reflecting on this thought brings great benefit. If we don't understand our impermanent nature, it is very difficult to proceed along the Buddha's path. If we do not understand the certainness of our death, this opens the possibility of being born in the lower realms. So we must contemplate death and impermanence to progress along the Buddha's path!

The third thought concerns karma or cause and result. Our actions have wholesome and unwholesome causes. Wholesome causes bring about good results and unwholesome causes bring about negative results. This relationship is important to think about.

The fourth thought pertains to cyclic existence. We are made up of a body and a mind to which our consciousness is connected and with them we have physical and mental sufferings, including the four great sufferings of birth, old age, sickness, and death.

The Four Thoughts encourage us to perform wholesome activities and are beneficial to help develop our pure motivation. An understanding of the different types of motivations that we as individuals have is essential for proceeding on the Buddhist path. Our motivations determine what we do. We can be motivated by worldly concerns or spiritual concerns. The worldly concerns that motivate us are of conventional nature, whereas, spiritual concerns are of ultimate nature. Spiritual motivation is pure motivation because this motivation leads us to wholesome activities that help us disengage and not be so strongly attached to our worldly concerns.

Motivation and Faith

It is important that we have faith in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha (the three objects of refuge). This faith is connected with our motivation. Having faith in them and taking refuge in them should be done daily. In fact, it should be done, not just daily, but constantly! This is the way one practices Dharma. If one does not think and meditate about the three objects of refuge, it is very difficult to get any blessings from them. If one does not think about them, one will not have motivation or faith.

In analyzing our motivation to do the practices and follow the path there are three levels of individuals. The three levels are described as a beginner, an intermediate, and a person of highest intellect. The beginner, a person of low intellect, or smallest scope, is one that aims merely for a more fortunate rebirth as a god or as a fully endowed human. The person of intermediate intellect is one who aims for liberation for him or herself alone. The person of the highest intellect, an advanced person of the highest scope, is one who exhibits a bodhisattva motivation and aims for complete enlightenment and Buddhahood in order to eliminate the suffering of others and bring happiness to all sentient beings.

To further explore these principles, I suggest reading *Atisha's Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* by Geshe Sonam Rinchen. "Enlightenment" refers to the elimination of the defilements and the acquisition of good qualities. "The Path" refers to the way or methods one follows in order to reach the enlightenment state. "The Lamp" refers to the illumination, which eliminates or dispels the darkness of ignorance, or the darkness of the various defilements.

Atisha's Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment describes the three levels of individuals and explains Bodhicitta, the thought of enlightenment; how one meditates on it, what it is, and the practices involved. We hear about Bodhicitta and the thought of enlightenment, but often it is hard to understand. This is an excellent book for studying about the thought of enlightenment.

There is a saying by Sakya Pandita relevant to the three types of individuals and the question of where one might fit in. He said "we have two eyes with which we can see other people, but we need a mirror in order to see ourselves." This refers to the fact we can look out and see what is going on with other people, including their good parts and their weaknesses because they are out there to be seen. However, it is hard for us to see our own situation because our eyes are looking outward, not into ourselves, and therefore we need a mirror to see our own thoughts, situations, activities, and actions.

Mindfulness Meditation Techniques

Every day we have different mental experiences. We are in a good mood or a bad mood. We are happy or unhappy. These thoughts are always working on us. These experiences are natural, but it is important to understand their nature. They arise, abide, and cease, continually and seemingly without end.

We must understand the origins of our thoughts. To accomplish this, we should practice Calm Abiding and Insight Meditation. As part of one's meditation, posture should be considered. When you sit up straight, your psychic channels open up, and stabilize our mental state; it helps to straighten our mind, and improves the breathing. Analyzing the function and nature of the mind, and observing how thoughts, emotions, and feelings arise for a moment, cease, and then change into another thought or feeling is very beneficial for pacifying the mental sufferings. In Calm Abiding meditation, as we observe our thoughts, the number of thoughts decreases until we can naturally experience calm, abiding peace and happiness.

When we examine the mind, we notice that it has no color, shape or size and as much as we look, the “mind” or “I” cannot be found. The conclusion is that the mind is empty of a singular or plural nature.

Advanced Meditation Practices

We practice Buddhism through different levels of teachings including the Sutra and Tantra. The Sutric teachings are known as the outer or exoteric teachings, while the Tantric teachings are referred to as the inner or secret teachings. In the Sutra (Mahayana) level of teachings, one must practice The Six Perfections including generosity, moral behavior, patience, diligence, meditation, and wisdom. In Tantric (Vajrayana), the individual meditates on a particular deity.

Meditating on deities helps us to alleviate our physical suffering. Our active minds cause us to have mental discomfort. Impure visions occur when we have clinging or grasping or attachment to the activities of Samsara. This clinging and grasping acts like a burden, dragging us down, and it makes our mind heavy. If we have a pure vision, we are free of these attachments and our consciousness, our spirit, rises.

Motivation plays a very important role in our practice and has a connection to pure and impure visions. Impure vision and pure vision are very much connected to our motivation. If we have a pure motivation for doing the practice, then we will naturally have a pure vision or pure attitude. With a pure motivation, we do not have clinging or attachment providing a solid foundation for our practice. Likewise, if our motivation is wrapped up with our worldly concerns, which are naturally connected with our attachments (clinging and grasping), our practice will be characterized by an impure vision.

It is very important to practice mindfulness techniques. For those spiritual practitioners who are interested in detailed instructions on some of the mindfulness techniques covered in this article, I refer you to *The Beautiful Ornament of the Three Visions* by Ngorchen Konchog Lhundrub and also to *The Three Levels of Spiritual Perception* by Deshung Rinpoche.

##

H.H. Jigdal Dagchen Sakya is a Head Lama of the Sakya sect and Sakya Monastery of Tibetan Buddhism (www.sakya.org) in Seattle. Dagchen Rinpoche was raised and trained as a religious leader in old Tibet. The Sakya leaders hold a position third only to His Holiness the Dalai Lama in rank. Dagchen Rinpoche is also one of the few elder non-sectarian (ri-me) lineage holders living today. He is currently working on completion of his four-volume biography documenting his life in old Tibet and his life in the West. Jessica Bard transcribed and edited all of Dagchen Rinpoche's teachings used in this article.