

Lo-jong

Mind training, the Tibetan tradition of mental and emotional cultivation: Part II

Scholar and chief translator for His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Geshe Thupten Jinpa, discusses the Tibetan tradition of mind training (*lo-jong*), which forms the basis of his important book *Mind Training: The Great Collection*.

One of the key themes of mind training [*lo-jong*] practices is a radical re-orientation of our personality, attitudes, and thoughts. The idea is that we *can* re-orient our very being, so that we can shift from our habitual self-centeredness to other-centeredness.

Mind training begins with an emphasis on cultivating a completely new way of relating to other beings. As Geshe Langri Tangpa (1054-1123) says in his *Eight Verses for Training the Mind*, “May I be able to perceive all others as true friends, as precious as a wish-granting jewel.” So when we see others, we try to see them as a source of our well-being. We see them with a perspective of gratitude, and we recognize that for our own happiness, for our own well-being, the presence of others is indispensable.

Mind training practice (*lo-jong*) is a down-to-earth, practical approach. Because Buddhism is as much a philosophy as it is a religion, sophisticated philosophizing sometimes arises. *Lo-jong* is quite suspicious of this tendency, and sometimes deliberately eschews or rejects any form of systematization. So this mind training approach is a way of practicing whatever is most appropriate at any given moment, emphasizing that which is most relevant to your current situation.

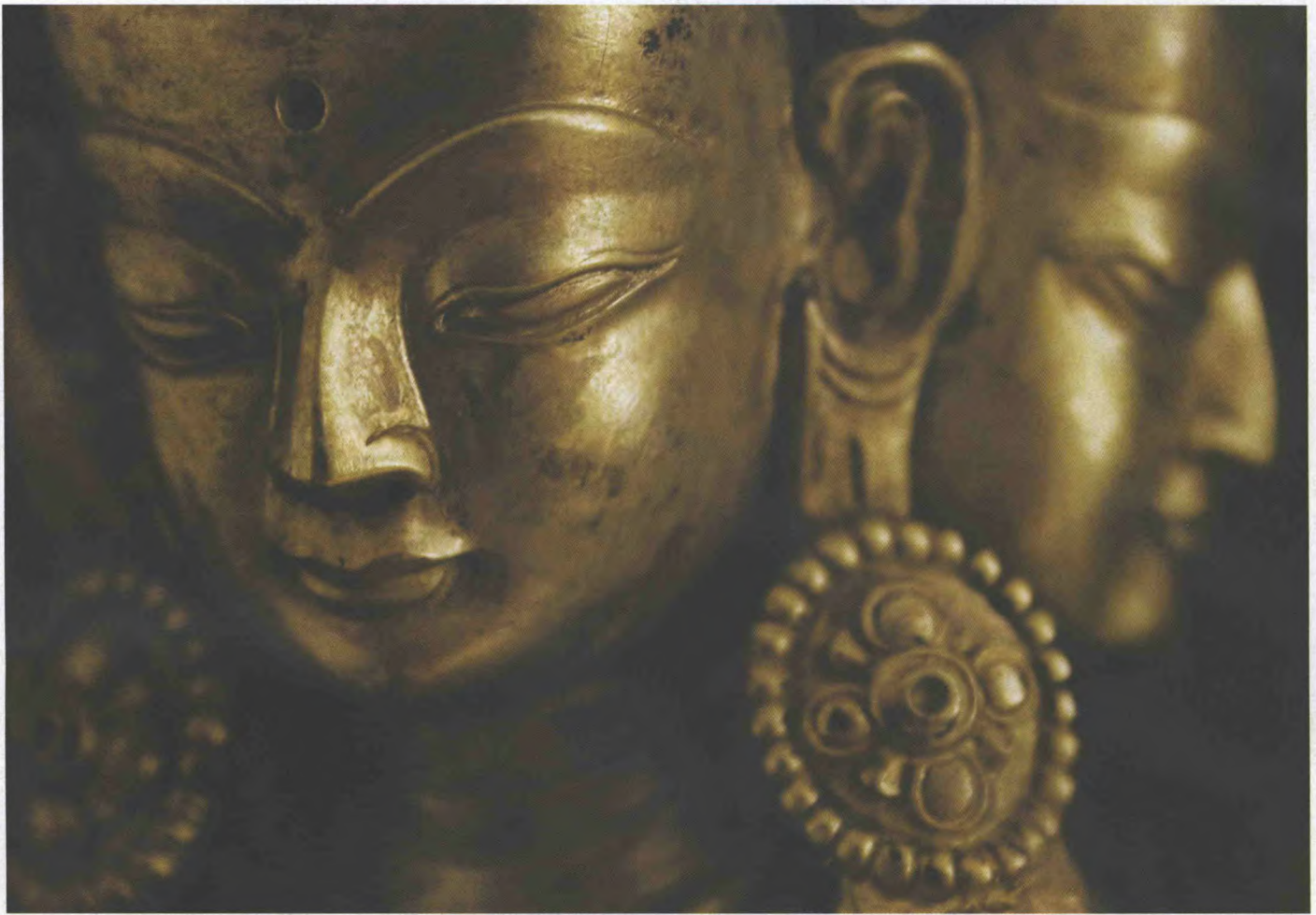
For example, there is the principle “Purify first whichever affliction is strongest.” This is based on the premise that generally you are perhaps the best judge of your own emotions and attitude. So if you find yourself more prone to anger and irritation, then that is where you have to start first. If you are more prone to lust and attachment and greed, that is where you have to begin to work on yourself. If you are more prone

to apathy and indifference, this is where you have to start. If you are more prone to jealousy, this is where to start. Some might have a simple lack of focus as their biggest obstacle, in which case spiritual practice has to start from there. Basically *lo-jong* is saying that there is no one formula for everybody. Each individual needs to adapt their own practice.

But what the mind training approach also says is that when you engage in profound spiritual practice, and when you see it working, there is a very natural tendency of human beings to solidify this practice, to put it on a pedestal, make it rarefied and start grasping and clinging at it. Therefore mind training says that the remedy itself must be pacified, so that the remedy does not turn into another problem. We notice that people who have a high moral standard can let self-righteousness creep in, and this self-righteousness can lead to intolerance of others who are perceived as falling below their standards. *Lo-jong* mind training practices warn us that when something works for us, we want to extol it above everything else, and therefore make it absolute. When *lo-jong* says “The remedy, too, is freed in its own place,” this is a wonderful insight and reflects a deep understanding of the human mind.

Our Own Witness

As captured in the line, “Of the two witnesses, uphold the principal one,” mind training teachings say that we should always make ourselves the principal witness of our thoughts, emotions, habits, behaviors, and so on. Others can bear witness to us, but in the end we are our own witness, because we can never escape ourselves. Wherever we are, there we are.



There are certain levels of our emotions and prejudices that are quite private. Dostoyevsky, the Russian existential novelist, wrote that there are certain things which we know to be true, but we speak of them falsely, and we call them *lies*. There are others which we know to be true, which we don't want others to know, and we call them *secrets*. There is another level of these lies that we don't even want to tell ourselves, and these are *self-deceptions*. So you can see how the mind can be so tricky, and that at so many different levels it can deceive itself. But at the same time, one is one's own best witness.

Beginning and End

Another helpful piece of mind training advice is to remember, "There are two tasks - one at the start and one at the end." This means that whatever we are engaging in, we should start by making sure that our moti-

vation is pure and altruistic, and when we finish the task, we should dedicate it for the benefit of others. You will find this creates a wonderful framework, which has an auspicious beginning and an auspicious end.

So every morning when you get up, set yourself the habit of "projecting a thought" for the day. For example, you could say, "In this day today, during these twelve hours, I am going to use my day, my mind, my emotions, my attitudes, as much as possible, to the extent I know, to do something that is beneficial to others and to myself." You project the thought, and that intention is already going to have an impact - not necessarily by remaining manifest and being obvious - but because you have projected it, it will set the tone for the day. And because you have established this intention very strongly at the beginning, you will catch yourself if you do something contrary to the values you espouse, because of the

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strength of that intention. Your own spiritual practice will permeate your day-to-day life so that there becomes no distinction between spiritual practice time and time outside of practice. The two will become seamless.

Finding the Sorcerer's Stone

Mind training teachings say it is crucial to be able to learn how to transform any adverse circumstances into something that is a condition for further spiritual growth. So in other words, you find yourself on a daily basis confronting all sort of difficulties, something you didn't foresee, or some disappointment. If you find a way of transforming these adversities into something that is constructive, then you have really found something analogous to a "philosopher's stone" (as the young boy Harry finds in one of the books of the hugely popular *Harry Potter* series). If you find a way of transforming *all* adversities into something that is constructive, it can certainly further your spiritual growth in a most astonishing way.

Here, the emphasis is not just on transforming adversities, but also on transforming successes, because success and joy can lead to arrogance, which creates a whole host of other problems. So you need to find a way to respond to these events in a balanced and appropriate manner.

One of the early mind training teachers, the Indian Kashmiri teacher, Shakyashri, who came to Tibet in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, wrote: "*When happy I shall dedicate my virtues to all. May benefit and happiness pervade all of space. When suffering I shall take on the pains of all beings. May the ocean of suffering become dry.*" The sentiment being presented here is this. When you find yourself in suffering or in other difficulties, you should use that opportunity to take upon yourself the suffering and pain of all other beings so that they may not have to go through a similar experience. In a sense he is saying that since you are suffering anyway, you might as well use it for a good purpose. When you can relate to the events in your life in this manner, then you will have a tremendous degree of resilience, the basis of strength and fortitude.

Life's end

The true test of our life and success comes when we turn to look back on our life on that last day and see what we have done. I once heard someone quote advice from Saint Benedict, the founder of Christian monasticism, which says that we should always keep death in front of us. This is profound

spiritual advice, because when you have death in front of you all the time, it will bring into your life a sense of urgency and seriousness, and you will also appreciate the preciousness of every moment that you are alive.

Now regardless of your own metaphysical view of how we got here – whether we are creations of a transcendent being (the theistic view), a product of our own karma (the Buddhist view), or the accidents of a biological evolutionary process (the secular view) – the fact remains, we have this life. Each of us is a unique being, and at one point we have to go.

When famous lo-jong teacher Chekawa was dying, he wrote these four lines: "*Because of numerous aspirations/ I have defied the tragic tale of suffering/ And have taken instructions to subdue self-grasping./ Now, even if death comes, I have no regret.*" The Tibetan tradition states that the true measure of a person's spiritual realization can be determined on the basis of how he or she will react when death arrives. The highest spiritual practitioner is someone who, when the final moment of death comes, will actually embrace it with joy. The middling level of a spiritual practitioner will have no fear. And the least degree of spiritual practitioner may have fear, and may not be able to embrace the final moment with joy, but should at least not have remorse. This is quite beautiful, isn't it?

Compassionate Action

Whatever metaphysical explanation we might personally find satisfactory on the fundamental question of why we are here, a fact that is indisputable, at least for a spiritually-minded person, is that we have to use our life in a way that is most constructive. As Buddhists understand it, this is to cultivate the compassionate dimension of our human psyche and engage in compassionate action. There is a wonderful passage in the work of the eighth-century master Shantideva, where he writes that the fully-enlightened Buddhas have for eons reflected on what is the highest and most valuable thing to do, and they have found that other than helping others, there is nothing else. This really captures the key value that is promoted in Buddhism – the welfare of others. What we should seriously think about is that each of us is not an island: Each of us is a being with a history, a family, a social connection, so if you sit down and think through how many lives are interconnected with your life, you will begin to see a network. Then ask yourself: Have I affected these lives in a constructive, positive way? If the answer is "Yes," then your life is going in a more meaningful direction. If the answer is "No," then you have a serious and an urgent task at hand.

Happiness

Furthermore, whether we are consciously aware of it or not, the driving force behind each of our lives is the quest for happiness. This says something very profound about our nature. From the Buddhist point of view, this includes not just human beings, but animals as well. But in our habitual self-centered way of doing things, instead of accomplishing what we are trying to seek, we achieve the contrary – suffering and pain – and by re-orienting, and re-structuring the way in which we see the world and relate to others, then we will be able to fulfill this fundamental aspiration to achieve happiness. Even if you ask people who are not religiously inclined, especially if they are parents, if there is one thing they would like to teach their children, almost everyone says, “I would like the child to be happy and a good person.” Almost everyone!

From the Buddhist point of view, happiness can only arise as a by-product. At some level we all know that if we try very hard to be happy, it just does not work. Happiness is experienced when we lose ourselves, and all of us know

this from our experience. I am not just talking about pleasure or sensation, I am talking about that deep sense of fulfillment, that deep sense of satisfaction, and one of the characteristics of that experience is a loss of sense of self or ego. And so I would like to assure you that if we pursue our life in the restructured way that the mind training teachings are recommending, then we will also find what we are all seeking: happiness. ☸



Geshe Thupten Jinpa

Mind Training: The Great Collection, Geshe Thupten Jinpa, Translator, is part of the Library of Tibetan Classics series and is published by Wisdom Publications www.wisdompubs.org

Langri Tangpa's Eight Verses for Training the Mind

1. Determined to obtain the greatest possible benefit from all sentient beings, who are more precious than a wish-fulfilling jewel, I shall hold them most dear at all times.
2. When in the company of others, I shall always consider myself the lowest of all, and from the depths of my heart hold others dear and supreme.
3. Vigilant, the moment a delusion appears in my mind, endangering myself and others, I shall confront and avert it without delay.
4. Whenever I see beings who are wicked in nature and overwhelmed by violent negative actions and suffering, I shall hold such rare ones dear, as if I had found a precious treasure.
5. When, out of envy, others mistreat me with abuse, insults, or the like, I shall accept defeat and offer the victory to others.
6. When someone whom I have benefited and in whom I have great hopes gives me terrible harm, I shall regard that person as my holy Guru.
7. In short, both directly and indirectly, do I offer every happiness and benefit to all my mothers. I shall secretly take upon myself all their harmful actions and suffering.
8. Undeiled by the stains of the superstitions of the eight worldly concerns, may I, by perceiving all phenomena as illusory, be released from the bondage of attachment.

Translated by Lama Zopa Rinpoche