

Ready, set, go!

Mind and Its Potential: Teachings and Meditations

Because Discovering BUDDHISM is experiential in nature, it is becoming increasingly popular with people looking for practical ways to engage with Buddhism – people who want to transform their minds, and thus their lives. Here we present an edited transcript of the very beginning of this dynamic process, in this instance presented by Thubten Yeshe (T.Y).

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“Everything is based on mind, is led by mind, is fashioned by mind. If you speak and act with a pure mind, happiness will follow you, as your shadow follows your body.”

hen we come to serious study of Tibetan Buddhism, we come to our study with a loading of philosophical and religious ideas which often seem to be, or are, in conflict with Buddhist thought. We can call this our world view. Your world view may be seriously challenged by your study and meditation. So be prepared to look deeply into your own mind to discover its nature, its functions and the profound depth of its potential. Be prepared to look into the particular mind-set generated by your culture and society, education, religious background and environment, and the upbringing you have had within your family. Be prepared to be challenged. Allow your doubts to surface; own them, reflect on them and discuss them with other students and your teachers. Doubt can be a great tool for learning, opening doors and leading us into further exploration.

But, sometimes our skeptical mindset can be a hindrance, closing doors and leading you away from learning and growth. Watch out for this destructive form of doubt, and nip it in the bud before it has a chance to turn you away from your enquiries. But, when that doubt leads you forward into more questioning and reflection arises, seize the moment and use it well.

Another major hindrance to learning and spiritual development is pride or arrogance. I'm talking about the rather dismissive 'I-know-that' state of mind. It often arises when we have read

something in a book and think that means we know it in an integrated way. When, in fact, what has really happened is that we have merely collected another piece of knowledge which has not had an effect on our state of mind or life; in other words, which has had no transformative effect on an inner level. We become like a library, a repository of words, concepts and facts which produce no action, internally or externally. No action, no change.

A story from the Zen Buddhist tradition speaks to this state of mind. I call it The Full Cup Story. A man came to a Zen master and asked for teachings; the master invited him in for tea. When the tea was ready the master placed a cup in front of the man and began to pour the tea, but he didn't stop when the cup was full, he continued to pour tea until it overflowed onto the table and then the floor. Finally, the man could stand it no longer, "What are you doing?" he shouted. The master looked up at him and said calmly, "Your mind is like this cup, full. Come back for teachings when you have made some space for them."

Come to these teachings with a receptive, open mind. Maintain your skepticism and enquiring mind, but keep it open and fresh, like the mind of a child who is eager to learn.

This all sounds pretty serious, so please remember as you embark upon this journey, above all, your study and practice should be

enjoyable. It should be fun. If you are not having a good time, check up! Something is wrong, usually the approach you are taking. Maybe you are pushing too hard and trying to do too much at once – a common occurrence! Or, making comparisons between yourself and other practitioners, or having too many expectations. Perhaps you have not found the most conducive way for you to practice in your particular circumstances. Check up, using your wisdom to discover the problem; consult with your teachers and older, more experienced students – then, using their advice and your own wisdom, fix the problem. Don't be hard on yourself. My teacher, Lama Thubten Yeshe, often advised his students to go "slowly, slowly."

Sometimes we need help to see what the problem is and to understand the best way to alleviate it. Part of the job of "your wisdom" is to know when this is the case. Don't wait for a disaster. Don't wait until you are so bogged down or disgusted that you give up altogether. Seek help wherever you can find it – from your spiritual teachers, from other practitioners, at Dharma centers, on the Discovering BUDDHISM Bulletin Board, and so forth. Working on your own is difficult, so use all the resources at your disposal.

Breathing Meditation and Motivation

Now, I will introduce a breathing meditation and a short reflection on your motivation and aspirations, or your focus for this course. This is a traditional way to begin any action, study or meditation in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition This breathing meditation clears and settles the mind, creating a focused and receptive inner environment within which there is space for the teachings and where they can take hold.

The motivational reflection is used to set your intention for study and meditation, or any other actions during your day, grounding your work in the reality of your aspirations and goals. It creates a framework within which your study and meditation become meaningful, giving these activities direction and purpose.

I strongly suggest that you use these techniques each time you begin a new session of study, reflection or meditation – whether you are in a group, or studying on your own. Even if you sit down for just a half-hour to read one of the books, do a short breathing meditation and adjust your focus – five minutes or less to create a conducive inner environment. As with any endeavor, the outcome of your spiritual practice will be much more satisfactory if you do the appropriate preparations and groundwork before you start.

Breathing Meditation

Sit comfortably with a straight back, relaxed and settled. The appropriate posture for meditation will be discussed at length in Module 2. For now, pay attention to your back. If you are sitting on a chair try not to use the back of the chair for support unless, of course, you have a back problem or illness that requires you to do so. Sit on the front edge of the chair on your sitting bones, with a straight back, hands in your lap (don't use the arm rests), shoulders relaxed. The same goes for those of you who sit on the floor on a cushion or meditation bench. Sit on the front edge of the cushion or bench with straight back, and relaxed. As you might have guessed by the repetition, straight and relaxed are essential aspects of your posture.

If you are used to meditating with your eyes closed, you may continue to do so, but eyes slightly open is best. There are two ways to do this: with your gaze directed downwards past the tip of your nose to the floor in front of you, close your eyes softly but completely, then open them until you just see a blur of light; alternatively, gazing downwards, gently close the eyes until a soft blur of light is all that remains.

For those of you who have previously done Theravadan Vipassana or a similar practice and have focused on the area at the opening of your nostrils where you can feel the sensation of the breath, you can continue to use this method. Don't switch. For the rest of you, use the method described above, for the rest of your life.

Then, settled in a comfortable posture, just allow your awareness to rest on the in/out cycle of your breathing. Bring your attention to your lower abdomen (just below your navel) where you can feel expansion and contraction as you inhale and exhale. Use this experience of breathing – the rising and falling of the abdomen – to ground your awareness. The advantage of using the lower abdomen as your focal point is that it helps to settle the mind; it brings it down, literally. Breathe naturally and gently without any manipulation of the breath whatsoever. Ground the mind in that gentle rhythmic cycle of inhalation and exhalation – in the rising and falling of the abdomen. Sometimes the breath will be long and deep, sometimes shallow and fast. Sometimes coarse, other times subtle. Just let it be, and watch. That's all.

As thoughts, emotions, feelings and so forth arise as distractions to your awareness of the breath, gently let them go without any consideration or involvement, and softly bring the mind back to the breath. Breathing in, breathing out. Letting go. Breathing in, breathing out. Sitting still.

Letting the mind be. Simply watching, and returning to the breath each time the mind becomes caught up in the flow of mental events. Maintain a neutral awareness, simply watching the breath, without any involvement whatsoever in the contents of your thoughts. Think of yourself as a cool scientific observer working in your internal laboratory; you are neutral, detached but always vigilant. Do this for five to ten minutes. As you become comfortable with this exercise, you can slowly extend the time up to twenty minutes. And, you can use this exercise anytime during the day, even for just 30 seconds, when you feel the need to settle the mind and become focused.

Motivation

Then, with your still, clear mind imagine that you are surrounded by all the people of your life. All your friends and loved ones – those people for whom you care deeply, those with whom you have positive, constructive relationships – spouses, lovers, children, relatives, colleagues and dear friends. Next imagine all those people with whom you have some difficulty – people who are irritating, for whom you feel anger, or those who are angry with you – whoever poses a problem for you, those people in your life you would like to avoid. Finally, imagine all the strangers in your life – the person in the queue in front of you at the supermarket, the bank teller, someone in the car next to you at the traffic lights, and so forth. These people pass through our lives every day, but we don't think about them; we don't know their names, we don't know them, and for the most part we treat them with disregard.

Imagine that all these people of your life – friends, enemies, strangers – are surrounding you, doing this course

with you, studying, reflecting and meditating with you.

They are, as Zen master, Katagiri Roshi, said, “the contents of your life.” Then, reflect on what brought you to this course. Why do you want to do it? What are your aspirations with regard to doing it? What do you want to take away with you, what are your goals? What do you want?

Consider how the fulfillment of these goals might affect you and those around you. Then, try to expand your aspirations to include not only your own welfare, but also the benefit of all those people of your life.

Beginning to think beyond your own individual desires and wishes, expanding your mind and heart, opening out to others is a way that, in and of itself, begins the transformation process that is at the heart of Indo-Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism. So, make a strong determination to reap the benefits of this course, to achieve your goals, for yourself and for all the people of your life ...

This has been just a taste of the richness in store for students undertaking FPMT's "Discovering BUDDHISM at Home" course available in MP3 and audio CD. You will learn how to follow the Path, all about karma, death and rebirth, developing bodhichitta, the wisdom of emptiness, introduction to Tantra and a whole lot more. Other teachers are Ven. Sangye Khadro, Ven. Robina Courtin, Ven. Constance Miller, Dr. Nicholas Ribush, Renate Ogilvie, Ven. Thubten Dondrub, Kendall Magnussen, Ven. Fedor Stracke, Ven. Kaye Miner, Ven. Tenzin Tsaphel, Tubten Pende and Jon Landaw. To find out how to start this amazing self-paced study program, and meet like-minded students in a virtual world, go to www.fpmt.org/education/dbdescription.asp



Thubten Yeshe (T.Y.) met her teachers Lama Thubten Yeshe and Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche in 1974, and was a Buddhist nun for nine years. T.Y. has received teachings from many lamas, including Serkong Tsenshab Rinpoche, Geshe Ngawang Dargye, Kyabje Song Rinpoche, Ribur Rinpoche, Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche and His Holiness the Dalai Lama. In 1985 she moved to Australia, where she teaches, lead retreats and engages in other work within the FPMT.



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