

The Importance of Meditation

Lama Zopa Rinpoche talked with Ven. Birgit Lobsang Drime.



Ven. Birgit: Lama Zopa Rinpoche inquired about the meditation component of the Basic Program which we had conducted in Italy at Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa over the last two and a half years. I told him we had done meditations daily, either on a general topic like bodhicitta or love and compassion, mostly though on the topic we were currently studying. This was easy when we studied the Lam Rim and Lojong, but could be quite challenging when we studied Tenets or Lorig. How do you meditate on the definition of a Vaibhashika? Or on the seven types of cognition? However, the students were very kind and accepting and we would always come up with something worthwhile. At first, the meditations were guided by the teaching assistant, and later on by the students themselves before each of the afternoon review classes. Actually, when the students guided the sessions – usually after initial hesitation – they became the most interesting, heart-warming and rewarding meditations.

Beyond that, we have done eleven meditation retreats. We concluded each of the texts we studied with a group meditation retreat lasting between one week and three months. These retreats have been extremely appreciated by the students and have led them to significantly deepen their experiences with the learned materials. Not only that, many students told me that they gained confidence in their own practice after having done so much guided meditation together, and felt they would find it easy now to set up their own retreats. Guided meditation doesn't mean that I talked all the time. (The students would have freaked out, especially since we always have two languages here at the Institute!) Here, 'guided meditation' means that we sat together, read the prayers together, and did the same meditations together according to schedule. The meditation leader would give a few minutes of introduction of the topic, but there was no talking during sessions.

Rinpoche wanted to know *how* we had done them and I told him we had compiled a very nice short *sadhana*, slightly different for each retreat, which would usually include refuge and bodhicitta, the four immeasurables, a seven-limb prayer, a mandala offering, brief mantra recitation, and a short prayer on the stages of the path into which we inserted the respective meditation topic accordingly.

The first retreats were study retreats, in which the students could study silently for the exam from their text books. We soon realized, however, that this was not a suitable way as there were too many distractions from turning pages to people writing and highlighting. There was no meditation and the conditions were worse for studying than in their own rooms alone. So

everybody was soon frustrated and we changed to strict meditation retreats which worked out very well.

The students would have a schedule on the meditation topics beforehand, so they knew what the respective topics of the day or the week were, and could prepare before they would come to the meditation class. During class, no extensive materials were allowed, only concise hand-outs outlining the essential points or the relevant verses of the root texts.

We had based our schedule on Rinpoche's suggestions for retreat. There is a strict version and one for people who are not capable of following the strict schedule. On that basis, we created an even softer third one which we called "marshmallow-version." However, Rinpoche had kindly approved of it, saying "excellent." Thus, we generally conducted four to six meditation sessions a day and during the final three-month Lam Rim retreat we added Lama Chöpa in the morning and Vajrasattva sessions in the evening. That was just right, not too loose and not too tight for our group and we were very happy retreaters.

Rinpoche asked how we had done the retreat on the Heart Sutra, and I said that following [the late] Geshe Jampa Gyatso's advice we had focused on the conventional bases of emptiness, mainly the four noble truths, rather than on emptiness itself because the Heart Sutra retreat was one of the earlier retreats and the students hadn't received many teachings on that topic at that point. Geshe-la had postponed the teachings on emptiness until the very end of the Basic Program. Rinpoche advised us to include teachings on *sa-lam* (grounds and paths) before the teachings on the Heart Sutra and also the Seventy Topics in the future, as this would make the Heart Sutra retreat really easy. So, this is something to be remembered.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche: "These meditation components are so beneficial, so essential for subduing one's mind. The Tibetan monasteries don't do much meditation, they don't retreat, they just debate. Of course this becomes meditation too, but it must subdue the mind. All the studies, all the big subjects, are just for subduing the mind. Basically, in the Tibetan monasteries it would depend on how a teacher presents the topic. Whether he only emphasizes the studies, or whether he makes the students implement the studies in order to subdue their mind; if it is only to defeat others in debate, if the motivation is only that, then the students will carry out only that.

"Of course it depends also on the student's own karma, but mainly it depends on the teacher. Whether he encourages only studies, or whether he encourages using the studies for the sake of subduing delusions. Sometimes, if a student has a lot of merit, she will use the studies as laid down in the *lam rim*, i.e. in order to subdue the mind.

"When Western people first met the teachings in 1968, during the hippie movement, meditation became known in the West as a sort of a discovery, like a necessity in life. Of course we have to analyze what proper meditation is, what correct meditation is. [Correct meditation is] that which becomes the Dharma - that which becomes a cause for happiness in future lives, a cause for liberation from samsara and a cause for enlightenment. That is the whole process; that is what meditation must accomplish: happiness of future lives, liberation and enlightenment. If it is a cause for that, then it is Dharma, then you can call it correct meditation.

“Meditation became really famous at that time, almost inseparable from Buddhism. Therefore for Western people I think it fits very much. If you learn Buddhism in this way it becomes very useful, that is what is needed. Otherwise even if a person writes a book, it remains only paper, only tape, nothing in the heart, nothing transformed. Some people have good memory, they can explain difficult subjects, but that alone can become a cause of pride. At that time meditation becomes a huge need, very famous, something everybody should do.

“To study the Dharma makes a huge difference in life even without talking about the purpose. But if you want to go deeper, if you really want to experience Buddhism, it is through meditation, not through words. What can make you trust that [fact] is the example of the great pandits and yogis of the past, beginning with Buddha Shakyamuni. [Also,] Manjushri. Also, Nagarjuna, Chandrakirti, Saraha and many others. The fact that they attained the state of completion by meditating on the path [is the proof].

“If you don’t meditate, the teachings are only words, no[t] peace. The great pandits, beginning with Buddha Shakyamuni ceased suffering by ceasing the causes of suffering through meditation, not only that, they also ceased the subtle defilements and thus achieved a state of liberation and enlightenment. Of course, the main founder is Buddha Shakyamuni. He practiced for three countless great eons, following the path by practicing charity, morality, patience, perseverance, concentration and wisdom, pacifying all obstacles and creating extensive merit through meditation.

“Some ordinary beings who stay in the monasteries will learn only words, but that alone doesn’t bring them peace.

“What made Tibet famous are the teachings of the Buddha. The Indian pandits, who practiced the teachings and achieved enlightenment, that’s the proof, that’s why so many Tibetans became liberated and achieved enlightenment. The teachings of the Tibetan tradition are so valuable, so precious. [They are] the Mahayana teachings according to Buddha’s direct teachings and also the commentaries of the great pandits and yogis, all of whom practiced and achieved liberation and enlightenment.

“Now with respect to Geshe Jampa Gyatso, he was not in favor of a one-year retreat at the end of the Masters Program, he did not agree with me on that. Of course it is not that Geshe-la did not meditate, he even meditated at the time of death, which is the most difficult time to meditate and he remained for a week in meditation on clear light. In order to be able to do that you must have meditated intensely throughout your life.

“Anyhow the students who followed my advice, doing meditation retreat after the Masters Program found it so beneficial, so meaningful. That is the meaning, putting into practice what you have learned, that is the actual meaning.”

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