

What is Contemplation and Why is it Necessary?

From the Buddhist point of view, the main cause for all our problems is the basic ignorance that expresses itself as our instinctive clinging to a personal self, to really existing phenomena, and to a mistaken understanding of what happiness is and how we can attain it. This leads to various afflictive emotions and the actions that ensue from these, all of which result in more suffering. The only means for eliminating this fundamental blind spot of ours is to develop its opposite, a sharp and clear awareness through which we see our mind and things as they really are. In general, Buddhism provides a large variety of skillful means to generate insight into the true nature of mind and phenomena. Contemplation or analytical meditation is the way in which this insight is developed and enhanced in a very systematic and thorough way, leading to incontrovertible certainty.

When we realize that afflictions and suffering are the negative repercussions of our ignorance and clinging, this may strengthen our wish to tackle them. These repercussions do not only manifest on the private or personal level. Especially in this present day of globalization it is easy to see how devastating it can be for the whole world when even a single person clings to certain fixed views or mental afflictions such as anger, especially if this person has great power. When we examine our personal or national defense of our territories and interests, it becomes clear that the attachment and hatred developed in this process, and the many world conflicts these behaviors produce, are basically rooted in “ego clashes.” Of course, in the midst of such conflicts, be they interpersonal or international, we usually have no idea where and how things started. Sometimes that doesn’t even matter anymore, because we are so engrossed in justifying our emotions.

In this context, we could take a break from our usual behavioral patterns and contemplate, “What are we doing here?” In other words, we could sit down and run a thorough check on whether our highly subjective and habitual reactions make any sense and will give us

what we really want. When placed within a wider perspective, do our assumptions stand up to the facts? Once we contemplate that a confusion concerning the clinging to a personal self is at the root of our misguided behavior, then is it not possible that we can act in a way that produces benefit for ourselves and others?

However, mere study and reflection on the teachings is not sufficient. Even if we understand all the Buddhist teachings, particularly those on the lack of a self and on compassion, that alone will not prevent us from continuing to behave in many ego-centered ways, disregarding others, and taking things to be solidly real. There is definitely a difference between understanding a wall to be empty of inherent existence and being able to walk through this wall, or between understanding suffering and not experiencing it anymore. However, the solution for doubts and questions is not just blind faith or believing something that other people tell us, but certainty through investigating our own experiences through mindfulness and meditation.

Furthermore, all Buddhist traditions agree that just resting the mind in a one-pointed and tranquil state will not lead to lasting liberation from our habitual patterns. The main reason for this is that whatever meditation we may practice, if it does not work to sever the root of our problems, it will at best calm down our manifest suffering and afflictions. Moreover, it will not eradicate the habitual tendencies or seeds in our mind that make suffering and afflictions arise again when at some later point we meet the right conditions. Most of the fixating on ourselves and other phenomena, which provides the fertile ground for our habitual tendencies, operates at the level of instinctive and largely unconscious impulses. Hence, this fixating can only be brought into awareness as we scrutinize our ingrained worldviews and expose them to the light of insight. Through contemplation we can gain unshakable certainty about what is really going on in our mind and undermine these habitual tendencies.

When we hear and study the teachings, be it in the presence of great masters or on our own, we may be convinced, even enthusiastic, about certain things, and our minds may seem very resolved. But when we return to our everyday life with its challenges and other people who do not share our views, it is very easy for what we considered certainty to become shaky and even be lost completely. Our usual habitual tendencies of thinking in certain ways, our pattern of emotional reactions, and our acting accordingly are very strong, since we have been acquainted with them for a very long time. In particular, we have grown greatly accustomed to and

solidified our belief in our cherished self and in the need to defend it and provide pleasure for it. In fact, this is our most deeply rooted conviction. However, our habituation to the Buddha's teachings is rather new and weak. Thus, it is very easy to forget this new habituation, especially in the middle of difficult situations. Since our conviction in a self is so entrenched in us, we cannot expect that a little bit of understanding of egolessness will have the power to overthrow this firm belief immediately. Rather, the only way to replace this mistaken notion is by gradually and thoroughly deconstructing it and cultivating its opposite, the living experience of there being no such self or any unchanging, truly existing reality.

To properly understand and employ his teachings, the Buddha recommended working with four reliances:

1. Do not rely on persons but on the teachings.
2. As for these teachings, do not rely on the words but on the meaning.
3. As for the meaning, do not rely on the expedient meaning but on the definitive meaning.
4. As for the definitive meaning, do not rely on ordinary consciousness but on wisdom.

Contemplation of these reliances clarifies the method of how to investigate and cultivate the actual meaning of the Buddha's teachings. On the Buddhist path, it is always emphasized that we should gain firsthand experience, direct knowledge, and personal certainty about the way things really are. Just as with our ordinary experiences in life, whatever we have thoroughly examined and found to be true becomes an incontrovertible part of our understanding. We no longer need to rely on other people or books. Doubts will not arise, nor will our minds be changed when others question our realization. Moreover, when we have an experientially founded understanding of the correct view, we will increasingly be able to evaluate any experiences that might come up in our meditation practice and our daily life. We can compare them with the correct view as confirmed by our own certainty and see clearly whether our practice and realization accords with what the teachings say.

How to Practice a Session of Contemplative or Analytical Meditation

Practically speaking, a session of contemplative meditation starts with a brief period of calm abiding to create the proper ground for engaging in the actual analysis. Then, within this

state of calm abiding, we clearly bring to mind the particular object or topic to be analyzed, which can be assisted by re-reading the particular materials that we will contemplate. However, the idea is not just to echo these materials, but to be a bit more creative in our analytical approach once we are more familiar with them.

Contemplative meditation is meant to provide the ground for experimenting with our basic curiosity and openness to investigate ourselves and the world around us. Thus, it is often quite helpful to consider what we actually want to know about this world and ourselves, what our real questions of immediate personal concern are, and then apply our investigation rather than just follow the beaten track of a standardized formula. For example, we may feel overworked and depressed, have an identity crisis, quarrel with our partner, see someone as our enemy, or be very happy and newly in love, or self-indulgent, or proud, but all these states can be scrutinized for their solidity and reality. This includes coming up with our own reasons, examples, and questions. Furthermore, instead of trying to prove that there is no ego or real phenomena, we may as well take the opposite route, looking for reasons that our self and things really do exist and then checking out whether these reasons withstand analysis.

Whichever approach we choose, it is important to pick a distinct object or topic, clearly bring it to mind, and then stay with it as our object of analysis until some degree of certainty as to its features, or the lack thereof, is achieved. This means that there is no point in just thinking in a general way. “Everything is impermanent,” or “The whole world is suffering,” without relating this to our concrete experiences. Nor is it helpful to jump from one object to the next every few minutes without having gone any deeper. Especially in the beginning, it is very important to restrict our analysis to a rather limited portion of a given object or topic and to try to gain some certainty about it. This is accomplished through looking into it as thoroughly as possible. For example, if we feel that our house is impermanent, we should not just leave it at some vague feeling, but try to come up with as many reasons as we can find that explain why it is impermanent and what this means in terms of how we deal with our house, or to find the absurd consequences if it indeed were permanent.

The next step is to go beyond conceptual analysis in order to gain incontrovertible, experiential certainty. In principle, conceptual analysis will serve only to enhance our conceptual or intellectual certainty. Such analysis is important as a start, but it is not sufficient to

affect the deeper levels of our habitual tendencies and fixations. Hence, we need to let whatever degrees of conceptual certainty we may have attained sink in into our mind and create a tangible imprint. This means pausing the analysis once we have a degree of conceptual certainty and then resting in our certainty. Through this method, we familiarize our mind with the insights we have gained through the preceding investigation. Especially at the beginning, such insights may not be and do not have to be world-shattering or fully enlightening. Rather, we may and should use any level of new understanding about our specific object of analysis.

When we rest the mind in this way and thus absorb our newly developed convictions, the analyzing facet of our mind naturally settles into mind's basic ground, just as a wave rolls back into the ocean. In this way, we allow for and cultivate a very lucid nonconceptual certainty on the level of immediate experience that gradually can become an intrinsic and natural part of our way of seeing the world and acting on it. So the main purpose of contemplative meditation is not only to gain increasingly clear insights into how things actually are, but to stabilize these insights and bring them to deeper levels of our being. In other words, this kind of meditation is the way to bring the teachings from our head into our heart.

What is the reason for alternating between analyzing and resting? Each approach performs a different but mutually enhancing function. To analyze means to see through our useless grasping, while to rest provides the space to adapt to this seeing. Through analytical meditation, we relinquish our many-layered conscious and unconscious reifying tendencies of holding on to fixed beliefs about ourselves and the world. The remedy for these tendencies is the irreversibly certainty about how things truly are. These two mental states—fixed ideas which are to be relinquished and certainty about what is actually going on as their remedy—are mutually exclusive and cannot exist in our mind at the same time, just as it is impossible to experience love and hatred simultaneously. Therefore, to whatever degree our rigid views become gradually undermined through analysis, to that same degree certainty about reality increases.

At this point, other than just resting in this very state of the lucid presence of such certainty, there is no need to actively or deliberately redevelop it over again since we have already accomplished this certainty through prior analysis. For example, when we have determined through close examination that a hose on the ground with a zigzag pattern is not a snake, this very certainty stops us from apprehending the hose as a snake. To continue to

analyze the hose at this point and to keep telling ourselves “It is not a snake” would seem pointless and foolish. However, we might need to take a minute to let that knowledge sink in and see the consequences of having taken the hose to be a snake. Then, once we have gained irreversible certainty that there is no snake and this conviction has become a natural part of our experience, the thought of such a hose being a snake will never cross our mind again. However, if we become afraid of the hose again the next time we see it, this is a clear sign that our certainty is not stable and that we need to work on it further.

Thus, it is important not to do just a bit of analysis and then drop it, totally forgetting about any insights (however limited they may be) that we have gained through this analysis and shifting into merely resting the mind. There should be some sense of the insights gained through analysis being carried over into the phase of resting meditation. To facilitate bringing the analysis into the resting phase, it is helpful to briefly summarize the insight from our analysis in one sentence before engaging in the actual resting meditation. We even can briefly recall whatever insight we have obtained a few times during the resting meditation and then let it sink in again. After resting the mind in this way for a while, or when the mind starts to get dull, we resume our analysis of the same object. We do not have to start our analysis completely anew but can just continue from where we stopped before the resting meditation. Depending on how complete our analysis has been, we may also shift to another object at this point.

As a simple example to illustrate this process, let’s use contemplating on the impermanence of an apple. An apple is initially produced by many causes and conditions. Examine this in a way that is as concrete and detailed as possible, that is, how impermanence applies to the individual causes and conditions of this apple, such as an apple tree, water, earth, sunshine, minerals, and so on. Trace back the origins of these factors themselves and find out how each one of them influences the arising, staying, and ceasing of this apple. When we feel convinced that these reasons for impermanence apply to the apple, do not continue the analysis further. Initially, we may have gained only a somewhat more vivid and comprehensive picture of the many constantly changing factors that are involved in the appearance of each moment of such a fruit. Then, just let our mind rest one-pointedly in this certainty, or on this wider picture of the apple’s presence, and absorb it for a while without reflecting on its impermanence or anything else. This provides the initial opportunity for such an understanding to sink in into the

deeper levels of our mind and thus create a much more powerful mental habit than just saying a few times, “This apple is impermanent.”

If in this process we get distracted and lose our focus on the object of analysis, we may initially try to gently bring our mind back to the object and continue investigating it. However, if our analysis becomes discursive and the mind runs all over the place, or if we become too tired and thus cannot focus anymore, we should not push or strain. Strained analytical meditation deteriorates into mere ordinary thinking, in which one train of thought just follows after the other without leading anywhere. As long as there is precision, clarity, and mindfulness during the investigation, it is analytical meditation. But if these features are lacking, it is neither analysis nor meditation. Hence, when we become aware that our analysis loses these qualities, then it is definitely better to shift into a period of calm abiding. If that does not help either, we should simply take a break. Just sit and relax without trying to do any meditation at all for a while. (Another possibility at that point is to end the session altogether and come back for another one later.) After a while, we can resume the analysis where we left off while still in a state of clear focus, and thus repeat this shift from analytical to resting meditation and back several times. To conclude, it is recommended to end the session with a brief period of calm abiding.

It is generally much better to meditate repeatedly for short periods with good concentration and wakefulness than to ineffectively prolong a state of distraction or mental fatigue and misconstrue this as meditation. The latter will eventually make us fed up with meditation. Thus, it is said that the best way to meditate is to start out by welcoming meditation like a dear old friend and to stop meditating while we are still good friends. If we end our session while still focused and awake, we will look forward to coming back to that state, but if we always stop our session when we feel dull, distracted, or weary, this will not inspire us to return to our practice. It will only create bad habits for our meditation.

Obviously, this process of alternating analytical meditation and resting meditation has to be repeated many times in order to truly affect our strong tendencies to see things as really existent, lasting, and unchanging. The purpose of all this could be said to be “reprogramming our mental habitual patterns.” Such is effected by gradually replacing concepts that are not in accord with basic reality, and thus produce suffering, with stronger tendencies of progressively refined concepts, finally leading to a direct experience of reality that relinquishes all concepts

and suffering altogether. As the contemporary master Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche says, Buddhism is a system of increasingly subtle concepts that counteract relatively coarser concepts. However, this should certainly not be misunderstood to mean that we try to brainwash ourselves or make something up in our analytical meditation. Through the analytical approach, we proceed toward realizing for ourselves how things really are. If we do not apply essential Buddhist notions to the deeply ingrained habitual tendencies of our belief systems and only work with them on a superficial intellectual level, the teachings will be merely words without a deeper impact on our experiential world. This is especially important with such key Buddhist topics as suffering, impermanence, karma, compassion, and egolessness, since what governs our experience and actions is precisely the instinctive assumptions of the opposites of these notions. Making them personally relevant to our life cannot be accomplished without some degree of personal investigations, which entails honestly looking into our own view of the world and being willing to revise it.