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**Meditation as Bardo**

The meditative state in which one rests directly in the nature of mind is the experience of genuine bardo; it is the experience of “gap”—the non-conceptual awareness that is beyond samsara and nirvana, or confusion and liberation. It is a moment of truth when we are at a fork in the road. When that moment ends—no matter how long that moment is—we exit either in the direction of liberation or confusion. To recognize the nature of mind is to take the fork in the road that leads us to liberation; to fail to recognize mind’s nature is to follow the way of confusion.

If we have followed the latter course, then we must continue to deal with impure appearances in the form of duality: we feel a solid sense of “me” that is separate and distinct from an equally solid “you” or “it,” or a cumulative “other.” The ever-questionable and shifting relationship between these two breeds a state of constant struggle. We are moved now by hope, now by fear. Dissatisfied with who we are, we react toward the “other” with aggression, passion or a dismissive indifference. One moment we are happy, but in the next, we may be perturbed, angry, desirous, or simply dull and blank. In the space of this environment, we feel oppressed and burdened to the degree that our minds are obscured or constricted by confusion.

The simple difference lies in our habituation either to states of awareness or states of ignorance. It is a difference that marks our experience of this life as well as our experience of death. When we die, our habitual mind continues. We may be beset with fear and overwhelmed by the reflections of our own mind that appear to us, reflections from which we cannot escape. There is nowhere we can go to hide from our mind. If we have glimpsed the nature of mind and trained ourselves to rest in its nature, then we will recognize those appearances as the self-display of mind. They will help us to further recognize and realize mind’s nature. We will have an opportunity to attain complete liberation; failing that, we will at least know with confidence that we possess the skill to direct our passage through the bardos of death. We can master any moment of uncertainty. Whatever thoughts, emotions or appearances arise, we will not be pulled in the direction of confusion or fear. Our training in vipashyana meditation is a direct means of entering into and stabilizing that experience.

**Vipashyana**

When you return home exhausted after a long day of hard work, you are usually very ready to take a break from that work and simply rest. If you have been engaged in particularly arduous physical labor, such as construction, cleaning, or even exercising on a treadmill, then you will naturally feel extremely tired. When you have reached the very peak of your exertion, when you have expended every ounce of energy you have, you reach a point where you simply take a deep breath and sit down. When you allow yourself to wholly let go and relax in that moment, your

mind becomes completely nonconceptual. You do not have a thought in your head; body and mind start to calm down and loosen up, and yet you are not distracted. There is a sense of being fully present and appreciating that moment. That experience of resting after hard work, along with the relief that accompanies it, is given as an analogy for the bardo of meditation.

The bardo of meditation in Padmasambhava's teaching is connected to the experience of vipashyana. Vipashyana means "clear seeing," or "superior insight," and what is being seen at this point is the nature of mind, that is, the nature of ordinary mind, our naked awareness. Thus, vipashyana refers to the insight that directly realizes this nature of mind. This is sometimes expressed as "insight into emptiness," and this superior realization relates to the emptiness of both self and other, or mind and its phenomena.

The key point in vipashyana meditation is, therefore, awareness. What is awareness? It is simply a state of mind that is not distracted from the present moment. When we bring the mind to rest in its own state, in its own nature, without distraction, then we are in a state of awareness of the present moment. Regardless of our outer circumstances or inner state of mind, if we are present within the very experience of nowness, if we are fully experiencing the moment, then that is nondistraction. That is awareness. That is meditation. Thus, awareness, nondistraction and meditation are one and the same.

Vipashyana meditation in the Vajrayana sense begins with the practice of meditation on emptiness. When we practice from this perspective, the object upon which we focus is the nature of mind itself, its aspect of clear emptiness. However, in order to be able to rest our mind in this way, we must rely on the ground of shamatha, or calm abiding meditation, as discussed in chapter 2. If we are well trained in shamatha, then we can place our mind on any object—a pebble, an image of the Buddha or the sky—and it will rest there unwaveringly. Thus, the mind of shamatha has two aspects: it is not only calm, but also it abides wherever it is placed. Once we have developed this skill, we will also be able to rest our mind in the state of emptiness, in which there is no tangible focal object.

Without shamatha, there is no possibility of developing vipashyana. However, if we do not go on to develop vipashyana, then our shamatha cannot help us very much. While it will calm our mind, it cannot ultimately cut through and eradicate our disturbing emotions. Only the superior insight of vipashyana can do that. In a classic example of the relationship between the two, shamatha is compared to a pond, and vipashyana to the flowers that grow in and beautify the pond.

The great yogi Milarepa said:

Not being attached to the pond of shamatha  
May the flower of vipashyana bloom.

Accordingly, vipashyana, which cuts both suffering and the causes of suffering, is seen as the more essential aspect of meditation.

It is important to understand that the bardo of meditation is where we train our minds to deal with the challenges and opportunities of the transitional experiences of all six bardo states. We are not simply trying to have a good meditation session or to become a calm person. We are not only working to improve our conditions or psychological state in the bardo of this life. The benefit of our training goes far beyond that. If you view your training here as the means to acquire the tools and precious possessions you will carry with you wherever you go—even in your journey beyond this life—then you are hearing the message of Padmasambhava and the lineage. The message is clear: to recognize the nature of your mind is to possess the key to liberation. All the trainings we undertake in the bardo of meditation lead to this point. Because the explanations of the meditations can be detailed and lengthy, it is possible to lose sight of the larger context in which they are presented. It is therefore essential to remind ourselves of the connection between our trainings in vipashyana and our journey through the bardos. Whatever bardo we may be passing through, it is transcended when we wake from our confusion and recognize the nature of mind.