

A Brief Introduction to Tibetan Buddhist Meditation

“Know what you are doing and why.” Gehlek Rimpoche, *Odyssey to Freedom*

Week One – *What is meditation and why do we meditate?*

What is meditation?

The most general term for meditation in Tibetan is GOM, which is related to the word for getting used to something.

So as a working definition, we can say that meditation means ‘*familiarizing our heart/mind with something positive*,’ where ‘something positive’ means a state of being or an object that contributes to long-term stable happiness for ourselves and others.

Why do we meditate?

Many people start to meditate to gain the ability to relax, to become less stressed, to lower their blood pressure or to be able to concentrate better.

A further goal is getting to know ourselves better, making friends with ourselves.

The classic Buddhist goal is to use meditation to become a fully enlightened being – maybe a long shot for us!

In this tradition, meditation can help us become better human beings, calmer, happier and especially kinder and more loving, wiser, and more capable people.

How to start: Watch your mind – not like watching TV!

Check out the state of your mind. Is it peaceful or agitated, positive, negative or neutral? While external objects and circumstances can contribute to our happiness, it is our minds that have the greatest influence.

Use a breathing practice or other technique to shift the mind to a neutral or positive state.

Four techniques

1. Counting breaths. Can do simply or as a four step method
2. Breathing in positive energy, breathing out all worries, concerns, irritations
3. Nine-round breathing to clear out stale air and energy
4. Focusing on sound

How long to do these practices? As a preliminary to further meditation, do them until your mind is a bit settled. As relaxation and calming exercise, 5-10 minutes once or twice a day is helpful. You can also take mini-breaks at work or in any stressful situation and just focus your mind on your breath for a few minutes. Even three deep conscious breaths can help.

Preparation for meditation and posture will be covered in detail in the second week.

The two main kinds of meditation in the Tibetan tradition: Just as there are many types of exercise, there are many types of meditation. The two main types are

1. Concentrated or stabilizing meditation. This means concentrating upon something without interruption. The object could be the breath, a state of mind such as a feeling or concept, or a visualized image.

Concentrated meditation is not easy, and should be done in short sessions. We will be talking primarily about concentrated meditation for the first two weeks.

2. Analytic or discursive meditation. This means creatively investigating an object or topic using information we have heard or read as well as our own thoughts, feelings and memories. When you get a direct understanding of the object of your meditation, use concentrated meditation to make it a part of you.

We will be doing the metta or friendliness meditation and some work with visualization and mantra in the last two weeks – these are analytic meditations.

Two important activities

Before any activity: *Setting motivation* – thinking about what you want to do and why you want to do it

After any activity: *Dedicating* – reviewing what you have done, acknowledging the positive energy created and dedicating it to a larger purpose

Suggested homework for beginners – two ten minute sessions of breathing practice a day

A Loving-Kindness Practice – use as a dedication or any time you need it (Do not skip the first stanza!)

May I be filled with loving-kindness.
May I be well.
May I be peaceful and at ease.
May I be happy.

May you be filled with loving-kindness.
May you be well.
May you be peaceful and at ease.
May you be happy.

May everyone be filled with loving-kindness.
May everyone be well.
May everyone be peaceful and at ease.
May everyone be happy.

Buddhism in a nutshell

Avoid what is harmful;
Practice what is skillful;
Cleanse your own mind of shadows:
This is the path of Dharma.

A simple dedication

Through the positive energy we have created, may all of us become kinder and more loving, wiser and more capable human beings.

Through the power of the good actions we have done, may we soon attain the totally enlightened state

So that we may liberate all beings everywhere from every kind of suffering.

Due to all the merits of the three times, accumulated by myself and others, may any being just by seeing, hearing, remembering, touching and talking to me be freed in that very second from all their sufferings and abide in the peerless happiness of full enlightenment forever.

Make it practical, down to earth, and relevant to your life!

“The key to making the methods of Dharma effective is always trying to see how the teachings fit in with your everyday life.” Lama Yeshe

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Week Two – *Setting, physical posture, and beginning stabilizing or concentrated meditation*

Making a place to meditate

Ideally, when we are good at it, meditation can be done anywhere, while we are walking, standing in line at the grocery store or engaged in other daily activities. For beginners, and that means most of us, it is helpful to have a special place set aside where we can go to sit and quiet our busy minds so that we can turn to something positive. This can be a corner of a room, or a chair, or you can simply make your bed and sit on it. If you like to have an altar, there will be more about setting up a Buddhist altar covered in the *Odyssey to Freedom* course.

Physical posture

“Sit on the ground, if the ground’s not there, sit on a chair.” Allen Ginsberg, *Do the Meditation Rock*

There are many types of cushions, chairs, etc. Try them and find what works for you.

Two most important things – 1. Keep your back flexibly straight. 2. Don’t sit in a painful position.

Also, breathe through the nose, unless you have a bad cold!

The classic 7-Point Vairochana posture – this helps the mind become stable.

1. Legs crossed in vajra style or a comfortable position depending on one’s flexibility.
2. Hands in lap, right hand on left palm, thumbs touching.
3. Backbone straight but flexible, so that energy can flow freely.
4. Eyes mostly shut (or shut) gazing unfocused downwards and outwards.
5. Shoulders level and relaxed, chest open.
6. Head balanced evenly on the spine, not tilted back. Pull chin in slightly.
7. Mouth and jaw relaxed and natural, lips closed gently. Tongue just touches the palate behind upper teeth.

8. (quiet breathing through the nose – sometimes listed as 8th step)

Hatha yoga or stretching can be helpful in making it possible to sit comfortably for longer periods, by loosening up the hip joints, and making the back stronger and more flexible.

Nine round breathing Clearing out stale air and energy. Do gently, as many times as needed.

Sit with back straight and relaxed. Block the right nostril with the right index finger and inhale slowly and gently through the left nostril. As you begin to exhale, move the right index finger to the left nostril so that you breathe out through the right nostril. Imagine that you are breathing out all anger, hatred and irritation. Do this 3 times.

Now block the left nostril with the left index finger and inhale through the right nostril, then switch the left index finger to the right nostril and exhale through the left nostril. Imagine you are breathing out all greed and obsession. Do this 3 times.

Now place your hands in your lap and breathe in through both nostrils. Breathe out through both nostrils, or you can imagine your breath coming out between your eyebrows as you exhale all confusions and delusions. Do this 3 times.

Concentrated meditation on points of light in the body. White light at crown or red light at navel.

Learning, thinking and meditating

By first learning about a Dharma topic, for instance impermanence or compassion, then thinking about all aspects of it and how it relates to our life, then meditating deeply on it, we make it a part of ourselves so that we can then actualize it. This is how we gain wisdom, how we develop spiritually.

May all beings have happiness.

May they be free from suffering.

May they find the joy that has never known suffering.

May they be free from attachment and hatred.