

LOOKING INTO THE NATURE OF MIND

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Looking into the true nature of mind requires a base of stable concentration. We begin therefore with a brief description of concentration practice.

Concentration practice can be discussed on many different levels. At the very basic stage, one must try to be in a quiet, comfortable place free from noise and distractions. The sitting posture should be the full lotus position, if possible. If that is too difficult, sit with a straight body and hands in meditation mudra.



Since it is difficult for beginners to concentrate the mind without an object, it's best to use an object of concentration such as a statue of the Buddha, a flower, or some other object. Place this on a stable surface at the level of your eyes, about two feet away—taking care that it doesn't shake or move, as any instability may cause more thoughts to arise.

Then try to bring your breathing, your eyes, and your mind together and place

them on the object, without thinking about its qualities, shape, or color. Just place your mind on it and try to remain there. Of course, thoughts will arise in your mind; whenever something occurs—a light coming on, a sound—thoughts will immediately arise. At that point, instead of following or thinking about that light or sound, immediately bring the concentration back to the object and remain there.

Five Faults to Avoid

There are five faults to avoid when practicing concentration. The first is laziness, or simply not making any effort to concentrate on the object. The second is forgetting the techniques and instructions you received. The third fault is twofold: even if you do remember the instructions, two main obstacles to concentration, “sinking” and “scattering,” occur. Sinking means your mind is very heavy and dull, as if sinking downwards into water or sleep. Scattering means the opposite: unable to remain on the object of concentration, mind scatters into different directions. Sinking and scattering comprise the third fault. The fourth fault is not applying the antidote when you know that mind is going in opposite directions. When you notice the mind sinking or scattering, you must apply the appropriate antidote. The fifth fault is applying the antidote so much that the antidote, itself, becomes a disturbance instead of a help. These are the five faults.

Eight Antidotes to the Five Faults

The first fault, laziness, has four antidotes. The first is having the intention and interest in doing the concentration practice. When we have interest in doing something, we make an effort, which is the second antidote: making both

physical and mental effort. The third antidote is faith: we have faith that we can achieve both temporary and ultimate results through this practice. With faith, whatever practice we do will be strong. The fourth antidote is the physical and mental well-being that results from doing calmness concentration. When we see results from our practice, our interest is sustained. For example, when a businessman sees profits as a result of his activities, of course he will work hard; otherwise, he will not. It's the same when we see a result—even temporary well-being, calmness, and physical relaxation—from meditation. Body and mind are linked together, but mind is the most important. If the mind is strong, then we will feel all right even if we are not physically well; if the mind is not strong, there can be much pain even if we're physically in good shape.

The most important of these four antidotes is effort. If you still do not succeed, then remember the faults of samsara, contemplate the four reminders, and read about dharma. In this way, make an effort to eliminate laziness and bring the mind into concentration. These four antidotes eliminate the first fault, laziness.

The antidote for the second fault, forgetfulness, is “remembering and awareness.” When you receive instructions for concentration practice, follow them and retain them in your mind. This way, whenever you do the practice, you will remember them right away. “Remembering” is the antidote for the second fault.



The antidote for the third fault is “watching.” It is important to see whether your mind is sinking or scattering. Sinking, as we said, is like sleeping: you try to concentrate, but the mind feels dull, heavy, and sleepy. When mind is scattering, you have many thoughts about this and that going in many different directions. It is very important to watch these two tendencies, sinking and scattering, at all times. Watching the mind is the antidote for the third fault.

The antidote for the fourth fault, not applying the antidote, is simply applying the antidote. As soon as you know that mind is going in the wrong direction, make an effort to apply the antidote.

The antidote for the fifth fault, over-applying the antidote thus disturbing the mind and making it agitated, is to apply equanimity. Simply apply equanimity, neither too strong nor too relaxed.

With these eight antidotes, we can eliminate the five faults.

The Stages of Concentration

The first experience of concentration is called the “waterfall.” Many thoughts arise one after another without a gap, just like a waterfall. When so many thoughts arise in our meditation, we may become discouraged. Normally, of course, we have just as many thoughts but we don’t notice them. When we sit down to meditate and concentrate on an object, then we notice the thoughts. So this is actually a good sign, and we should not be discouraged. This experience is called “recognizing thoughts.”

The second stage is the experience of “resting thoughts.” Although thoughts arise, there are some gaps. The thoughts are becoming tired; when they arise, again, there are gaps. This is the second experience. We need to continue to concentrate.

The third is the experience of “tired thoughts.” Thoughts arise when there are external causes, and if there are no external conditions, they do not. This is the third experience.

The fourth experience is called “ocean with waves.” The ocean is usually very steady, but occasionally there are waves. Similarly, the mind is very calm and remains clearly on the object of concentration, but occasionally one or two thoughts arise like waves on the ocean.

The fifth stage is called “ocean without waves.” When you are used to concentration practice, you can concentrate very steadily on an object, like an ocean without waves. Even when external causes for distraction arise, your thoughts do not go there; they remain steadily and single-pointedly on the object. Instead of looking into the external object, concentrate inwardly on the clarity of the mind. Through inner concentration without an outside object, we can eliminate thoughts and remain steadily and single-pointedly in the clarity of the mind. This is a brief description of how to do concentration practice.

On the basis of a mind that is stable and without thoughts, we can build insight meditation, [meditation on the true nature of mind.]

The True Nature of Mind: Clarity, Emptiness and Inseparability

Mind has three aspects: clarity is one aspect, emptiness is another. The inseparability of these two combined is the true nature of mind. This may seem like a contradiction: clarity implies that something exists, while emptiness seems like a void. They may seem to contradict each other, but they do not. Clarity and emptiness are as inseparable as fire and heat. You cannot separate fire from heat; fire itself is heat. In the same way, clarity and emptiness are inseparable. This is the true nature of mind. The first step in insight meditation is to recognize the clarity. [To do this, we must look further at what we mean by that.]

According to the Buddha's teachings, there is no self. We cling to the present aggregates of physical form and mental factors—mind, feelings, and so forth—as a self, as an "I." But where is that I? If there is an "I," it must be found in one's name, or body, or mind. But the name is empty; the name has been given to us, and any name can be given to anybody or anything. So this empty name is not the "I."



When we examine the body, it's a combination of flesh, bones, skin, and so on. We can search the body from head to toe for an "I," but we will not find it anywhere. When we say "my body," it means the body is different from "me." Just as when we say "my house"—my head, my heart, my hands, my feet—the house is not me, it's "mine." Similarly, it's my body, but where is the "I"? We

cannot find the real owner, the “I,” anywhere; it must be somewhere else. The “I” is not the body, and the same is true of the mind.

The mind changes every moment. The past mind is already gone, the future mind has yet to arise, the present mind changes moment to moment. Furthermore, just as we say “my house,” we say “my mind.” The mind is not “I,” it is something else. Again, we cannot find the “I”; it is not the name, the body, or the mind.

Moreover we cannot find the “I” outside of ourselves. It is not created by anyone else. All things, including the things outside of ourselves, appear due to our very strong propensities. In fact, there are no objects outside of us. None of the things that we see, hear, or taste are real—nor is our life, nor all of the experiences we go through real. Due to our very strong propensities, they simply appear like dreams.

In our dreams, we see many things: when we see nice things we feel very happy, just as in real life; when we see very frightening things, we may still feel frightened when we wake up. Similarly, everything is like a dream and nothing exists externally. There are no objects like forms, sounds, tastes, and so forth, [because] there is no subject. If there is a mind, where is it? Is it inside the body, outside the body, or in between? Which part of the body has the mind? If there is a mind, it must have a shape. What is the shape of the mind—round, square? If it exists, it has to have a color. Is your mind white, yellow, green, blue, or some other color? We cannot find any color or shape.

There is just clarity and the continuity of mind—in the sense that we are not dead, not unconscious; we're alive and awake. The clarity of the mind-stream continues, just as we continue from infancy to adulthood, until the end of this life. It continued from the previous life, through this life, and it will continue through the next life. The continuity of clarity is one aspect, or characteristic, of mind. All things have distinguishing characteristics. A flower, for example, characteristically has leaves and a certain color and shape. Because of these, it's called a flower—and it's different from other things, such as microphones or tables, which do not have leaves and so on. Similarly, the special characteristic of mind is clarity and the continuity of clarity. You cannot say that mind does not exist, because there is a mind: it is the mind that does everything—both right and wrong.

The second point to consider is this: where is this clarity? Where does it arise from, where does it abide, and where does it go? It never arises, it has no cause, and it does not abide anywhere. Clarity is emptiness. As before, if clarity were to abide somewhere, it would have to abide in the body, outside the body, or in between; but it does not. It would have a particular shape and color, but it does not. The special characteristic of mind is clarity; the nature of mind is emptiness. They are inseparable: clarity itself is emptiness, emptiness itself is clarity. When you search for mind you cannot find it anywhere; you cannot find its shape or color. So mind is emptiness; yet there is a mind. We cannot say there is no mind. If there's no mind, who or what does all these things and experiences happiness and suffering? The clarity and emptiness of mind are inseparable.

Based on very clear concentration, we try to meditate on clarity, emptiness, and the two combined. In reality, there is no meditator, no meditation, and no method of meditation. This is beyond our present mental concepts. Everything we see or do is at the level of relative [truth]. Our mind itself is at the relative level. The relative level of mind cannot comprehend the absolute, which is beyond all extremes such as existence and non-existence.

Ordinary people do not bother with such examination of trying to find out what life is, why we are here and why we have to go through this kind of life. They just take it as it is. More intelligent people—of buddhist and non-buddhist philosophies, cultures, and religions—try to find the real meaning of this life. They ask themselves, “Why are we here and how did everything come to appear this way?” And they all draw different conclusions: there is a creator, or everything is mind and mental projections, and so on.

Lord Buddha himself prophesied that after his *mahaparinirvana*, a monk called “Naga” would be able to explain the true philosophy and true wisdom of his teachings. As Lord Buddha prophesized, Nagarjuna came along and explained the philosophy of *madhyamika*, which is different from the other buddhist philosophical schools. Of the many philosophical schools, Madhyamika is the highest one. Nagarjuna’s philosophy describes all things in terms of two categories, relative truth and absolute truth. On the level of relative truth, there is life and a person who enjoys the results [of that life]. But on the absolute level—in distinction from other schools—he draws no conclusions. Applying the very sharp reasoning of his wisdom to examine this life and all its appearances, [he concludes that] true reality is beyond description and beyond extremes. We

cannot say it exists, nor can we say it does not exist—nor can we say that both or neither is the case. Existence and non-existence are only valid at the relative, not the absolute, level.

At the relative level, Nagarjuna accepts interdependent origination: everything arises interdependently due to causes and conditions. Not a single thing exists independently; each and every thing relies on its own causes and conditions without which, it would not appear. The relative level, therefore, is the level of interdependent origination; the absolute level is emptiness. We are not however talking about nihilism; emptiness and void are just words. When we say void or emptiness, it means “beyond all description.” It is completely beyond the dualistic net that we are presently caught in.

How to Meditate on the True Nature of Mind

How do we meditate on this? We can't go straight into it. At first our understanding will be intellectual. It's easy to say, “it's beyond all extremes and thought”—but how do we actually experience this? Wisdom is arrived at through contemplation, until eventually we realize ultimate truth. Realizing that, we are completely free from all karmic propensities and so on. As ordinary persons, however, we must go through this step by step.

The first step is to establish all outside phenomena as mind. As I've said from the beginning, everything is mind: mind creates all good and bad things, all happiness and suffering. All outer appearances are mind. There are many quotations—from the sutras and great masters who have attained inner realization—that express how our entire lives and all our experiences are our

own mind. And there are many examples of how to apply and practice this at every moment.

One such important example is the dream. When we're dreaming, it is just as real as this life. In dreams, we may meet friends and see colors and shapes that can have affect on our mind. If it's a happy dream, our mind is very happy and we enjoy the dream. What is the difference between that kind of dream and our present life? There is no difference. In dreams, we are experiencing something; in this present life, we are also experiencing something. There is no actual difference between "real life" and dreams. The only difference is that we have fewer very strong propensities in dreams than we have in this present life. But in reality, it is all the same. In this way, we establish all life as mind.



The second step is to establish that mental appearances are like a magic show. When magicians put on a show, they use many different ingredients and mantras to create various things. When we see these creations, they are as real as the things of this life. In the same way, when certain causes and conditions come together, mental appearances arise. If any cause or condition is missing, they will not appear. In the same way, all of life—all that we see, hear, taste, and feel—is determined by mind. If our mind is happy, we are happy, even if we're poor and in very bad conditions. If our mind is not happy, we are not happy even in the

best facilities and environment. These experiences are determined by mind. A house, for example, could be a happy place for one person and a very unhappy place for another. If external things truly existed, they would be the same for everybody: if this house were truly a happy place, it would be happy for everybody! Each of us, however, has a different experience. So the second step is to establish all mental appearances as a magic show.

The third step establishes that everything is devoid of self-nature. All things are interdependent and appear due to causes and conditions. Consider this example: babies laugh when they see a reason to laugh; they may not be able to describe it, but they experience it. Reality, however, is beyond existence or non-existence.

In conclusion, the true nature of mind has three aspects: clarity, emptiness, and the inseparable combination of clarity and emptiness. Many different examples and analogies can be given. We must apply these in our lives and proceed, step by step, to arouse wisdom. Through the accumulation of merit and wisdom, we achieve ultimate enlightenment.