

General Instruction for Meditation on the Model of Buddhism

For the First Steps of Mindful Absorption

Drugpa Kuenleg Terma

For a Buddhist, meditation is the indispensable, necessary exercise to liberate oneself finally from all suffering, and at the same time to recognize the world as it really is – in a spiritual sense. The teachings of the Buddha are the contrary of a dogma, they are totally empirical. The Buddha doesn't demand from us to believe in metaphysical claims that we will never be able to check. He demands that we walk on any path by means of which we discover the truth by ourselves and can verify what other spiritually experienced people tell us. The one and only existing method to bring our mind on this path is training it by meditating. Since the Buddha is no dogmatist, according to him everybody should be taught with the method most appropriate to him or her, not the method available by chance, because the teacher and his teacher and that teacher's teacher also practiced this single method. Besides, one should consider that nowadays students in Western countries are no South Asians of the third century B. C. (like the Buddha) and that their mind is much more restless and distracted, and moreover, much more neurotic or even psychotic than the mind of meditators in the past. Therefore, everybody should try to find the method appropriate to them and their mental condition and not one that is dished up to them without consideration if their mind is ready to chew it or not. Besides, I find that a meditation method that has no implications of contents, i.e. which does not presuppose the contents of a certain religious system, is more suitable for the just mentioned considerations than one that is overloaded with such contents.

This instruction on meditation is the method with which the author learned to meditate. It is no instruction deriving from a single spiritual tradition. Most inspiration and the theoretical framework for it, however, come from a single school within the Tibetan tradition of Buddhism, i.e. the methodology of Dzogchen. For those interested in it, I recommend Ngakpa Chogyam's book „Journey

into vastness“, an excellent „handbook of Tibetan meditation-techniques“, especially in the Dzogchen view. We are talking here about the first steps of *mindful absorption*, since the Dzogchen view unifies mindfulness and absorption techniques of mediation, and about the *first steps* because there seem to be higher levels than the ones explained here, but they were not accessible for the author until now. He therefore cannot give any authentic information about their achievement and benefit, or even about their existence. Who wants to read about them, considering himself as advanced as that, must consult other authors.

1. Posture and attitude

Generally, a straight posture is recommended, because then enough tension is in the body and at the same time the spine rests without strain on itself. The straight position corresponds exactly with our attitude, which also rests in the middle between overstrain and limpness. For the eyes, there are four possible adjustments: closed; in an angle of 45 degrees downwards; parallel to the floor oriented towards the distant background; oriented upwards into the sky. All these lines of sight can be useful in different situations. Glancing on the floor is the standard eye posture for Buddhists, the closed eyelids are the standard for Yoga techniques. Watching straight ahead is useful if you want to integrate everything into your meditation, and glancing at the sky is possible, for instance, if the sky serves you as a symbol for the undefined Mind itself. To beginners (level A), I recommend to close the eyes first and to open them only after some practice in order to work with the downwards oriented glance as an advanced beginner (level B). In the following, we will discuss these to level in more detail.

Some teachers of the Dzogchen tradition emphasize that the attitude you should develop during mediation must contain three elements: Firstly, you shall become open and wide like the sky. That means that you should exclude nothing within your range of perception from your experience and can include all into meditation. Secondly, you shall be concentrated, what means that your mind contemplates a clearly defined object (its target) at same time without letting this go. Thirdly, you shall watch yourself and control with a kind of observer consciousness whatever you are doing. It may seem very complicated but it is possible to divide your principal mind into these three states of consciousness and to pursue all three at the same moment, even if your attention wanders from one side to the other from time to time. Other teachers emphasize three different aspects: your mind shall be wide and open like the ocean. Your thoughts

and emotional energies shall become quiet like a desert without wind. And your body during meditation shall remain still and motionless like a mountain.

2. Preparation for the meditation session

Prepare for each meditation session by recalling the before mentioned three principals. Besides that, other preparations for meditation can be useful, too. In very stressed situations, I find it useful just to sit without meditating for about ten minutes, to let oneself be carried along, in order to come down from your daily business. You can instead do Hatha Yoga *asanas* initially like the nine breaths exercise (breathing out trice through the right, trice through the left, and trice through both nostrils). Prayers may also be useful, concentrating the mind while praying for the practice, in order to keep away disturbing influences, and asking that the success of the practice may not only be to your own benefit but also to that of all sentient beings.

It is further of big use to distinguish this introductory phase from the main phase of meditation by changing your hand posture (*mudra*). Thereby, the mind remembers better what its object is. I pray, for instance, with a certain posture of my hands while I accompany coming down before meditation with a limp, casual hand posture. For the following two main phases of meditation (the two beginner's phases section 3 and 4 and the two advanced phases 5 and 6), I also use two different hand posture so I remember easier what is going on at the moment.

It makes sense meditating every day, at the best always at the same time in order to establish a custom like brushing teeth. You can determine the length of your sessions before or let it depend on your temporary needs. If you are starting with meditation, however, I recommend defining the length before, so you do not always think, "Better I stop now, it's enough for today". Set an alarm clock or timer ringing after, for instance, five minutes. Five minutes are sufficient for the first meditations of your life. Increase the time step by step instead of demanding too much of you from the beginning. A well-trained meditator (advanced level in this instruction) should meditate twenty minutes, or better half an hour or one hour at a time. But avoid forcing you and tensing up. Invite your mind to meditation, but do not compel it.

Here I want to inform you how to deal with the following paragraphs: You can start with the first exercise and then, when you have mastered it, dedicate yourself to the second one, while you abandon the first one. In this case, you regard the exercises as if you ascend on stairs from the beginner to the advanced practitioner, leaving behind the last steps. You can, nevertheless, training the forth step, still repeat the last three exercise in your meditation. That makes

more sense, probably, but it is not necessary. In this case you regard the following four sections as the four phases that have to be gone through in each meditation session, doing only the first exercise as a beginner, the first and second exercise as an advanced beginner etc.

3. Beginners A: Concentration on breath with mantra

For beginners, it is most important to be able to stay concentrated with one thing at a time. Purely concentrating on breath, as it is taught by many traditions, seems to difficult to me: breath feels a little boring and therefore not “adhesive” enough for the distracted western mind. Concentration can be enhanced, in my opinion, by introducing more and not less objects of concentration. Such objects are besides the rhythm of the breath, the body, in which breath moves, and above all a mantra as an intellectual activity accompanying breath. The mantra calms thinking because it is thinking itself – but thinking directed towards a certain object. For the beginning phase, I therefore recommend closing the eyes and concentrate inhaling on the stream of breath into the lungs, exhaling on the stream of breath from the lungs towards the outside. If you already feel moving subtle energies at the same time with your breathing, you can follow these energies along the spine until the head and back again until the bottom (but never just upwards). You can also imagine this. However, I do not give a detailed instruction for imagining the subtle main energy channel shushumna and the flow of subtle energy (*prana; chi; lung*) through it, since this imagination might puzzle you. It will not harm you, on the other side, if you do not compel it but just accompany it with your consciousness. But if you compel that imagination it may (in single cases) lead to the most dangerous of all unwanted complications of meditation, a meditator’s disease, called kundalini syndrome within the Indian context. Anyway, it is useful to feel the breath and the body together.

In the next step, watching your breath you add a constantly repeated sentence. It can just consist of your observations. Inhaling I tell myself: „In“; exhaling: „out“. This I repeat with every breath. When I have got some practice with that method, I can use a three-piece mantra like a Indo-Tibetan¹ one: „OM – A – HUM“. Instead, I can also remain with an English mantra: “In – Stop – Out”. This mantra can be used in the rhythm of your breath so that you think (these mantras are thought, not spoken) OM (In) while inhaling, HUM (Out) while exhaling, and A (Stop) in the tiny pause between inhaling and exhaling. That small pause is important, as we will see afterwards. It should be as long as it can

¹ A mantra in Sanskrit, being used mainly in Tibetan Buddhism nowadays.

be hold comfortably and without shortness of breath. But what about the moment between exhaling and inhaling? Should not there be a pause, too? Yes, that is right, and that pause may even be a little longer than the one between inhaling and exhaling, since this is the moment, when the body holds still without any tension. You could think “A” or “Stop” in this pause, too. But it makes much more sense just holding this pause and stopping even the mantra itself, so not think “break” or “stop” but to have a break together with your mantra. We will soon see, why.

4. Beginners B: Concentration on breath with mantra and gap

If the exercise on level A works more or less for you, you can open your eyes, in order get used to integrate the outer world into your meditation. Why should you do this? Because a meditation that is *always only* mastered in insulating oneself against the senses cannot unify you with the cosmos that is on the outside as well. However, it remains controversial, when the gaze on the outer side may be allowed – after you have discovered all that is there in the inner world or from the beginning. The meditation method I favour here does not correspond to the first but to the second idea, emphasizing the integration of the outer world from the beginning. If you, on the other hand, want to follow the Buddhist method of dhyanas (often called shamatha) or the raja yoga way, making deepest mystical experience under exclusion of the outer world, may keep the eyes closed and practice the following exercise (if possible) fully oriented towards the inside.

With the open gaze we remain totally relaxed on whatever is manifesting, i.e., the floor. But we are not interested in the floor, but are still totally interested in the breath, its rhythm in the body and our mantra. Of their four elements (IN/OM – STOP/A – OUT/HUM - ...) we concentrate totally on the fourth part, i.e., the NOTHING. This moment, when the body is simply letting go, we use in order to let go the mind as well. In this phase, we proceed from meditation on breath to meditation on the mind itself. Now we are mostly interested for the short moment between the breaths; and like the body pauses and our mantra pauses, so we look if we can let pause our permanently babbling thoughts as well. Perhaps that seems impossible at the beginning and we are totally frustrated; but that is not necessary, since we will succeed some time in resting for a little moment in this breathing space without any thought. That moment is the one interesting for us. This small gap between thoughts now deserves our full attention, but we still do not do anything but recognizing these naturally appearing gaps, enjoying and welcoming them.

5. Advanced practitioners A: Meditation with thought space

In the next step, I recommend taking this small gap between thoughts as an occasion to calm all thought activity. Of course, now you could as well start with any other meditation exercise, as other systems of meditation teach you, or just remain at the breath, as it is the costum in many Zen traditions. Nevertheless, I recommend primarily calming your thought activity further, so that the small gap of thoughtlessness expands more and more, and the permanent, annoying automatism of thought production finally tears off and gives space for a deep, peaceful stillness. To come to this may seem quiet difficult, but there are – as it is with all human faculties – tricks that make it easier to get to the aim. A visual person could imagine how you dive into the gap between each breath and become totally quiet, and repeat that with each breath. You could as well (even if it sounds like a contradiction to the above said) instead of being quiet start the gap with the order “still!” and then wait until your thoughts follow this order. I find another trick very helpful: I watch my thoughts like a permanent flow of words, passing before me, and then let them become softer; or I interrupt them again and again by not finishing the thought, telling it, “you are not important enough for me right now, come back again later”. By this I get a kind of consciously provoked inner stuttering, making no sense any more, so I at some moment can easily give the order: “And now be still!”. Perhaps you reach a sudden quietness inside you, then, which is important to expand further and to preserve until another thought takes you with it, which you calm, let die down, or cut off with the same method as before, until you can again tell yourself: “be still!”. If you do not become desperate but practice this further you will sometime be able to calm your thoughts easily and to dive into a comfortable quietness.

At this moment you should become aware that there are three different instances of our mind becoming visible in meditation: there is the watching mind experiencing a thought, for example; there is the thinking mind, being totally trapped in the thought; and there is the controller mind, being able to tell us that this thought should not be here right now. Do not get sore if the controller makes his job and interferes: “There is a thought – be more mindful”. This controller makes only his job. When the main mind is quiet, it will not interrupt any longer, and this voice will die down, too.

It may be helpful to address the bad conscious that possibly comes up during the practice of thought calming by saying: “I do not need to do anything, I may do NOTHING right now”. Besides, you should make clear that there are no problems to solve any more. In order to dispel all inner storytelling, you can suggest yourself: “For the next half hour I am a person without past or future. Nothing that has happened or will happen concerns me in any way”.

Nevertheless, there are still things that can happen. Even without thoughts, feelings and images can still emerge in you – and they can sometimes be as unpleasant that you want to break off your meditation. The general advice of meditation teachers in such cases is, continue! I want to support that advice, but you should be careful if you by feelings or images get into a will-less and senseless trance, since past traumata are surging. In this case – a so-called dissociative state – meditation has been cancelled by your subconscious. You are not meditating any more, you have slipped down into you unconscious. If this happens to you repeatedly, you should first do psychotherapy and at the same time work only with completely outwards oriented mindfulness meditation, but not with any other techniques. It is the same when you slide into even more dangerous states, if you get very strong and uncontrollable visions and auditions (hearing messages) and cannot dissociate yourself from it, cannot test it correctly, but you fall for it like on a drug trip, enthusiastic about it, or like on a horror trip, being scared by it. Then you may develop a psychosis, a very earnest psychological disease, and should stop meditating immediately and do everything that brings you into contact with the “usual” reality (meet normal people etc.). Here, it should be mentioned very clearly for everybody else, too, what distinguishes meditation from trance, dissociation, dreaming, and psychosis: That is a quiet, but at the same time totally clear, more than conscious state of mind that does not contain a trace of dullness or confusion. Everything that feels dull is a form of trance that does not lead to the intended aim. In Mahayana Buddhism, it is said that the dull states of meditation lead to rebirth in a very pleasant bodiless realm, a kind of heaven, but that you then miss the aim of enlightenment, i.e. Buddhahood, because this heaven is only a form of existence beside others but not the ultimate enlightenment (nirvana).

6. Advanced practitioners B: Meditation on inner light

We begin the meditation on inner light not before the others steps because it usually affords preparatory exercise, but if you want and can, you can as well start with it and add or integrate all other steps afterwards. As soon as the mind has become quiet (but on the hand in order to calm down the mind, too) it is very useful to dive into the ocean of Inner Light that we all carry within us. We see it most easily when it appears in front of our sensual eyes. For this aim, you can either close your eyes or better – because of the above mentioned reasons – keep them open. Your gaze rests in an angle of 45 degrees on the floor, firstly. Then, you halve the distance between the eyes and the floor. Alternatively, you can put one hand stretched out in front of your eyes, then stare fixedly at it, take

it away, and still stare at the point where your hand has been before. Your eyes now stay defocused, they do not watch the floor any more, which remains blurred in the background, but a spot in the air that must be really transparent (where nothing else must be). This spot you watch completely relaxed (if you watch it tense, headaches and blurred vision may stay after the practice). If you have difficulties at the beginning watching that spot or only with a remaining blurred vision afterwards, may loosen their gaze, adjust it unsharp without being fixated on it, so that it rests relaxed without any object within the space. In fact, the empty space is exactly the object of the eyes as well as the object of the mind that we strive for now.

Then we just wait. Normally, sometime light phenomena occur that can take different forms. Different spiritual traditions give different meanings to these phenomena (the Zen considers them all as pure illusions, Sufism considers the coloured spots as different parts of the soul, in Thogal-Dzogchen they are seen as certain signs of progress in meditation), but for us they are just objects of fixation for the mind. So, the instruction reads thus: Watch whatever presents itself to you as an optical game, and stay concentrated as long as possible on one of the light objects. Your mind must stay completely clear and awake, not dull and dreaming. Banish all thoughts, as described above, and dive into the pure perception.

In the last step, you can either try to stay concentrated on a certain spot of light as long as possible without blinking your inner eyes. Or you defocus your gaze further and stop watching singular phenomena. Instead, you watch the whole panorama, the whole field of vision at once, which now could have become a complete picture of light, full of colours or even uniformly filled with one colour (mostly a certain colour). Watch this ocean without allowing a single movement of your mind, stay, however, always awake and attentive! If you observe this state as if you would watch an inner sky, you have got deeply into meditation already. Do not be afraid of loosening your control now and just enjoy being there, being simply, without needing anything to happen, without the need to consider or achieve, settle or do something. Just enjoy the pure, naked being that you can feel now, and let go more and more.

7. Transfer into everyday life

Finally, I discuss an issue that I consider important as well, i.e. the integration of meditation into your whole life. For this aim, there is a Buddhist meditation technique very highly developed and in the meantime well established in the west, called mindfulness. Nevertheless, I would like to add to issues, correspon-

ding to the integrative meditation method I have outlined here: firstly, stillness of thoughts as described above. Producing stillness of thoughts in everyday life is possible without drifting away internally. It is just about practicing the above described method in such a way that it is applicable everywhere, even while driving your car, without loosing just a little bit of your attention (and, as said before, without getting into trance!), but on the contrary: becoming brighter and more vigil. Secondly, it can be very helpful focussing on the highest point of the head, or better said, to go up there energetically, in order to watch everything from one level higher than usually (usual is the level of the eyes). This practice of observing all things from the crown chakra, so to say, leads at least to one thing: remembrance that we are spiritual beings on a trip through the material world and not material beings on a meditative trip into other worlds. That can be very helpful for dissociating yourself from banalities of the everyday life and for staying with yourself (at least it can do this).

When you meditate, it is not decisive to observe just a single method, taught by a master crossing your way accidentally. Meditation is nothing but training the mind (comparable to the training of a pianist), in order to overcome with it the limits of the outer, material side of the universe. I do not claim that the method I have compiled here is the only correct way to meditate, but on the other hand, nobody may insist that it was wrong only because it does not correspond to his or her tradition. The only criterion is, if it works for you or not. That at least is what the Buddha wanted: human beings educating and evolving their mind according to the principle of choosing the method best working for them as individuals. If the method presented here you do not find helpful, try another one. If you meditate in the here described way (or another one being more adequate for you) wonders can happen in your life, that is for sure. May all beings evolve beyond themselves and may this instruction be helpful for this aim!