

## Mind Like Clear Pool

### Mind Like a Clear Pool

-Sogyal Rinpoche (founder and spiritual director of Rigpa, an international network of Buddhist groups and centers.)

The great strength of the Buddha-dharma is its practice. It is incredible what this wonderful practice can bring about. When I hear the teachings of the Buddha transmitted through the great masters, and when I experience their truth in my own heart through the little practice that I know, then I feel their tremendous blessing. What is extraordinary is that you can actually experience the truth of these teachings. It is not something that is just based on belief or faith; it is something you can taste and realize for yourself, here and now.

The great Zen master Suzuki Roshi said:

Our purpose is just to keep this practice forever. This practice started from beginningless time, and it will continue into an endless future. Strictly speaking, for a human being there is no other practice than this practice. There is no other way of life than this way of life.

From the basic teachings up to the highest, each teaching is like a jewel. Whatever path you follow, there is such a richness to each of them. Whether it be the Theravada, Mahayana, Zen, Vajrayana, Mahamudra, or Dzogchen, you just need to practice that one alone, and practice it fully and authentically. And the more you study and practice, the more you will understand the profundity of these teachings. As Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche often used to say: "The more and more you listen, the more and more you hear; the more and more you hear, the deeper and deeper your understanding becomes."

Last year, His Holiness the Dalai lama spoke to a gathering of Buddhist teachers in the West. He said, "It's important to know what Buddhism is. Buddhism is a mental training to eliminate the afflictive emotions. So it is only when our physical, verbal, and mental effort has this motivation that it is Buddhism." He advised: "First, study what Buddha said, and then experiment and gain experience. From that will arise a conviction that the Buddha's teachings do actually benefit you. At the same time, you realize that your mind cannot penetrate the deeper nature of reality by itself. From that will come an appreciation of the teaching of Buddha; out of that will come a sense of devotion."

Now, when Buddha himself was asked to summarize his teaching, he said:

Commit not a single unwholesome action,  
Cultivate a wealth of virtue,  
To tame this mind of ours.  
This is the teaching of all the buddhas.

To "commit not a single unwholesome action" means to abandon as much as possible all the unwholesome, harmful, and negative actions, which are the cause of suffering for both ourselves and the world.

To "cultivate a wealth of virtue" is to develop the positive, beneficial, and wholesome actions that are the cause of happiness, again for both ourselves and the world. As the great master Shantideva said:

Whatever joy there is in this world  
All comes from desiring others to be happy,  
And whatever suffering there is in this world  
All comes from wanting pleasure for myself.

Most important of all, however, is "to tame this mind of ours." In fact, the great teachers, like the Dzogchen master Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, often used to say that this one line captures the very essence, the very heart, of the teachings of the Buddha. Because if we can realize the true nature of our own mind, then this is the whole point of both the teaching and our entire existence.

For the mind is the root of everything. In the Tibetan teachings, it is called kun je gyalpo, "the king who is responsible for everything," or in modern translation, "the universal ordering principle." Mind is the creator of happiness and the creator of suffering, the creator of what we call samsara and the creator of what we call nirvana. As Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche used to say, "Samsara is mind turned outwardly, lost in its projections; nirvana is mind turned inwardly, recognizing its nature."

And as the great master Padmasambhava, who brought the teachings of the Buddha to Tibet, said, "Do not investigate the roots of things; investigate the root of mind!" That is why I find these words of Buddha so inspiring:

We are what we think.  
All that we are arises with our thoughts.  
With our thoughts we make the world.  
Speak or act with an impure mind.  
And trouble will follow you...  
Speak or act with a pure mind.  
And happiness will follow you.

If only we were to remember this, keep it in our hearts, and keep our heart and mind pure, then happiness would really follow. The whole of Buddha's teaching, then, is directed toward taming this mind, and keeping our heart and mind pure.

---

Taming the mind begins with the practice of meditation, where we allow all our turbulent thoughts and emotions to settle quietly in a state of natural peace. As Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche put it so wonderfully:

Rest in natural great peace this exhausted mind,  
Beaten helpless by karma and neurotic thoughts  
Like the relentless fury of the pounding waves  
In the infinite ocean of samsara.  
Rest in natural great peace.

How do thoughts and emotions settle? If you leave a glass of muddy water quite still, without moving it, the dirt will settle to the bottom, and the clarity of the water will shine through. In the same way, in meditation we allow our thoughts and emotions to settle naturally and in a state of natural ease.

The first practice on the Buddhist path of meditation is shamatha, “calm abiding” or “tranquility meditation.” Here we begin by focusing, lightly and mindfully, on the breath. The problem with us is that our mind is always distracted. When it’s distracted, mind creates endless thoughts. There is nothing that it will not think or do. Whatever thoughts arise, we let them sweep us away into a spiral of stories and illusions, which we take so seriously that we end up not only believing but becoming as well.

When we abandon ourselves mindlessly to distraction and too much thinking, when we lose ourselves in thought and invite mental problems and anguish, the antidote is mindfulness. The discipline of the practice of shamatha is to keep bringing your mind back to the breath. If you’re distracted, then suddenly, the instant you remember, you simply bring your mind back to the breath. Nothing else is necessary. Even to ask, “How on earth did I get so distracted?” is just another distraction. The simplicity of mindfulness, of continuously bringing your mind back to the breath, gradually calms it down, and the mind will settle, in the mind.

What is very important, as the masters always advise us, is not to fixate while practicing the concentration of calm abiding. That is why they recommend you to place only 25 percent of your attention on mindfulness of the breath. But then, as you may have noticed, mindfulness alone is not enough. While you are supposed to be watching the breath, after a few minutes you may find yourself playing in a football game, starring in your own film, or becoming enlightened! So another 25 percent should be devoted to a continuous and watchful awareness, one that oversees and checks whether you are being mindful of the breath. The remaining 50 percent of your attention is left abiding, spaciously.

Sometimes simply being spacious, on its own, is enough to calm our mind down. In shamatha practice, when we blend spaciousness with the focus of mindfulness, gradually the mind will settle. As the mind settles, something extraordinary

takes place: all the fragmented aspects of ourselves come home, and we become whole. Negativity and aggression, pain, suffering, and frustration are actually defused. In this moment, we experience a feeling of peace, space, and freedom, and out of this settling comes a profound stillness.

As we perfect this practice, and become one with the breath, after a while even the breath itself as the focus of our meditation dissolves, and we find ourselves resting in nowness. This is the one-pointedness that is the fruition and the goal of shamatha—remaining in nowness and stillness.

Remaining in the nowness of shamatha alone will not cause us to evolve, nor can it lead to enlightenment and liberation. There is a danger that nowness will become a subtle object, and the mind that rests in nowness a subtle subject. As long as you remain in the domain of subject-and-object duality, grasper and grasped, the mind is still within the ordinary conceptual world of samsara.

Through the practice of calm abiding, then, our mind has settled into a state of peace and found stability. Just as the picture in a camera will sharpen as you focus it, so the one-pointedness of shamatha allows an increasing clarity of mind to arise. As obscurations are gradually removed, and ego and its grasping tendency begin to dissolve, the “clear seeing,” or “insight,” of vipashyana, begins to dawn. At this point we no longer need the anchor of remaining in nowness, and we can progress, moving on beyond our self, even, into that openness which is the wisdom that realizes egolessness. This is what will uproot delusion and liberate us from samsara.

As this “clear seeing” progressively deepens, it leads us to an experience of the intrinsic nature of reality, the nature of our mind. For when the cloudlike thoughts and emotions fade away, the skylike nature of our true being is revealed and, shining from it, our Buddha-nature, or bodhicitta, like the sun. And just as both light and warmth blaze from the sun, wisdom and loving compassion radiate out from the mind’s innermost nature. Grasping at a false self has dissolved, and we simply rest, inasmuch as we can, in the nature of mind, this most natural state that is without any reference or concept, hope or fear, yet with a quiet but soaring confidence—the deepest form of well-being imaginable.

When we connect with the purity of our inherent nature, our Buddha-nature, what is revealed is our fundamental goodness—the good heart. Kindness, compassion, and love simply exude. And the more you integrate the practice mindfully into your life, the more you will find that not only are you in touch with yourself but completely in touch with others also. You feel a sense of real oneness with them. There is no barrier standing any longer between you and them, nor even between you and yourself. You begin to understand others, you begin to see them as equal to you in every way, and when someone is suffering, your heart will go out to them.

---

---

Sometimes we do feel in touch with ourselves, with others, with the universe, and we really have the opportunity to experience a deep inner peace. As Ajahn Chah said:

Your mind will become still in any surroundings, like a clear forest pool. All kinds of wonderful rare animals will come to drink at the pool, and you will clearly see the nature of all things. You will see many strange and wonderful things come and go, but you will be still.

Anyone who has had the good fortune to experience a little of this inner peace should resolve, there and then, to maintain it, not only for his or her own sake, but for the sake of the world. When you are in this state, what is extraordinary is that even though you may not do much, your very being can benefit others, even unintentionally, as long as you maintain that goodness and purity of mind and heart and being.

When you apply the teachings deeply in your life, you can begin to transform not only yourself but also the world around you. Things may look the same, but your motivation and your whole being are different. So your whole interaction with the world will be different. You may be able to make a tremendous contribution, through your actions, your words, or your very being. To practice like this is to become useful, and because you actually have the fruit of the practice within you, you can make a world of difference—even if it is only to one human being.

---