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Meditation~Happy Union of Doing and Being

The Heart-Essence of Buddhist Meditation
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Clinging to one's school and condemning others
Is the certain way to waste one's learning.
Since all dharma teachings are good,
Those who cling to sectarianism
Degrade Buddhism and sever
Themselves from liberation.

—Milarepa, The One Hundred Thousand Songs

The philosopher Simone Weil characterized prayer as pure undivided attention. Here is where all contemplative practices have a common root, a vital heart that can be developed in an almost infinite variety of skillful directions, depending on purpose and perspective. Different techniques of meditation can be classified according to their focus. Some focus on the field of perception itself, and we call those methods mindfulness; others focus on a specific object, and we call those concentrative practices. There are also techniques that shift back and forth between the field and the object.

Meditation, simply defined, is a way of being aware. It is the happy marriage of doing and being. It lifts the fog of our ordinary lives to reveal what is hidden; it loosens the knot of self-centeredness and opens the heart; it moves us beyond mere concepts to allow for a direct experience of reality. Meditation embodies the way of awakening: both the path and its fruition. From one point of view, it is the means to awakening; from another, it is awakening itself.

Meditation masters teach us how to be precisely present and focused on this one breath, the only breath; this moment, the only moment. In the Dzogchen tradition we refer to a "fourth time," the transcendent moment of nowness. In Tibetan this is called *shicha*, a transcendent yet immanent dimension of timeless being that vertically intersects each moment of horizontal linear time—past, present, and future. Whether we're aware of it or not, we are quite naturally present to this moment—where else could we be? Meditation is simply a way of knowing this.

Different Buddhist schools recommend a variety of meditative postures. Some emphasize a still, formal posture, while others are less strict and more focused on internal movements of consciousness. Tibetan traditions, for instance, advise an upright spine, erect but relaxed; hands at rest in the lap, with the belly soft; shoulders relaxed, chin slightly tucked, and the gaze lowered with eyelids half shut; the jaw is slack with the tongue behind the upper teeth; the legs are crossed. A Soto Zen Buddhist saying instructs us to sit with formal body and informal mind.

The common essential point is to remain balanced and alert, so as to pierce the veil of samsaric illusion.

Although most Westerners tend to conceive of Eastern forms of meditation as something done cross-legged with eyes closed, in a quiet, unlit place, the Buddha points with equal emphasis to four postures in which to meditate: sitting, standing, walking, and lying down. The Satipatthana Sutra says: "When you sit, know that you are sitting; when standing, know you are standing. . . ." This pretty much covers all our activities, allowing us to integrate meditative practice into daily life. Learn to sit like a Buddha, stand like a Buddha, walk like a Buddha. Be a Buddha; this is the main point of Buddhist practice.

While many people today practice meditation for physical and mental health, a deeper approach to practice energizes our inner life and opens the door to realization. In Tibetan, the word for meditation is gom, which literally means "familiarization" or "getting used to," and in this sense meditation is a means by which we familiarize ourselves with our mind. The common Pali term for meditation is bhavana, meaning "to cultivate, to develop, to bring into being." So we might then think of meditation as the active cultivation of mind leading to clear awareness, tranquility, and wisdom. This requires conscious effort.

But from another—and at first glance contradictory—perspective, there is nothing to do in meditation but enjoy the view: the magical, mysterious, and lawful unfolding of all that is, all of which is perfect as it is. In other words, we're perfect as we are, and yet there's work to be done. In this we find the union of being and doing: we swoop down with the bigger picture in mind—the view of absolute reality—and at the same

time we climb the spiritual mountain in keeping with our specific aspirations and inclinations, living out relative truth. ***"While my view is as high as the sky, my actions regarding cause and effect [karma] are as meticulous as finely ground barley flour,"*** sang the Lotus Master Padmasambhava, who first brought Buddhism to Tibet in the eighth century. By alternating between active cultivation and effortless awareness, we engage in a delicate dance that balances disciplined intention with simply being. By being both directive and allowing, we gradually learn to fearlessly explore the frontiers and depths of doing and being, and come to realize that whatever is taking place, whatever we may feel and experience, is intimately connected with and inseparable from intrinsic awareness.

"Not doing, not constructing, not fabricating, not altering or manipulating your mind, while remaining undistracted: this is my vital pithy instruction, the heart-essence of meditation." So taught my own Dzogchen master Nyoshul Khenpo Rinpoche. ***"Beyond action and inaction, the sublime dharma is accomplished."***

Meditation is not about getting away from it all, numbing out, or stopping thoughts. Without trying to be rid of pesky thoughts and feelings, we learn how to practice being aware of them in the fleeting immediacy of the very moment in which they present themselves. We can cultivate awareness of any object: sounds, smells, physical sensations, perceptions, and so forth. Everything is grist for the mill—even those things we find terribly unpleasant. As the Tibetan Dragon Master Gyalwang Drukpa says, "Everything must be meditated!"

Like the archer straightening his arrow and perfecting his aim, the practitioner of meditation straightens out the mind while aiming his or her attentional energy at its object. Learning to drop what we're doing, however momentarily, and to genuinely pay attention in the present moment, without attachment or bias, helps us become clear, just as a snow globe becomes clear when we stop shaking it and its flakes settle.

This settling process of concentrated attention has four stages: first, the letting go of distracting inner objects—such as feelings, thoughts, attractions, and aversions—and all outer objects; second, the attainment of serene one-pointedness of focus; third, the refinement of this state of concentration into a subtler and purer awareness. The fourth and final stage is the attainment of a state of simple wakefulness and equanimity conducive to clear vision and profound comprehension, an awareness beyond subject and object.

Let's take an example: In breath-awareness meditation—the technique known as mindfulness of breathing (anapanasati in Pali)—we first observe the breath by intently following the tiny movements and physical sensations associated with each in- and out-breath. When we are distracted, we bring the wandering mind back to the object of attention. (In this case it is the breath, but whatever the particular practice—metta, visualization, and so forth—the principle is the same.) Then, gradually relaxing into the object, we notice the gentle tide of thoughts and feelings subside as we fine-tune our focus. Later, as our awareness deepens, we abandon any dualistic notion of inner and outer as we become the breath itself. This calls to mind the haiku master Basho's saying that in order to write about a tree, he would watch the tree until he became the tree. We observe the object of meditation until we become the object of meditation. In this way, as it is said in Zen, we come to know the object, ourselves, and all things intimately. In the beginning, concentration is key. Concentrative meditations (Sanskrit shamatha) are said to be the useful means but not the end. The stability of mind established by shamatha becomes the foundation for insight meditation, or vipassana, in which the critical faculties of mind discern the nature of samsara: impermanent, without self, and ultimately unsatisfactory.

There are many techniques for developing concentration and insight, but the point is to not be caught up in and overly influenced by the ever-running narratives and desires of the mind. All center on the vital principles of nonjudgmental openness and relaxation with applied and discerning awareness. As practice matures, effortless, innate wakefulness is balanced by the discipline of mindfulness. What we call "mindfulness meditation" can be broadly defined as any conscious activity that keeps the cling-free attention anchored in the present moment, allowing us to see clearly what is happening, to distinguish what is wholesome from what is unwholesome, and to perceive the interdependent working of things. In the Satipatthana Sutra the Buddha identified four basic foundations of mindfulness: the **body**, **feelings** (in the sense that all sense impressions feel pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral), **mind states** and mental objects, and **universal laws** (dharmas). Paying careful attention to these aspects of ourselves brings self-knowledge and wisdom.

Mindfulness is the tool we use to bring the mind back home, to the present moment, to what is, just as it

is, and to who and what we actually are. Through mindfulness we learn how not to be so distracted by thoughts, feelings, memories—our running inner narrative. That's why buddhas are called jinas, "conquerors": they have conquered their afflictive states of hatred, greed, and delusion, all of which obscure and diminish our innate Buddha-nature.

Mindful awareness frees us from habitual patterns, opening up a space between stimulus and response, allowing us to consciously choose how to respond to things rather than blindly react. With the discernment of mindfulness we no longer fall prey to karmic habits and unwholesome conditioning. As the pioneering Zen master Shunryu Suzuki said, "We pay attention with respect and interest, not in order to manipulate but to understand what is true. And seeing what is true, the heart becomes free."

This is not just Buddhist double-talk. In the Diamond Sutra the Buddha says of his enlightenment that he has obtained nothing that wasn't in him all along, there for the finding. And the Hevajra Tantra teaches, "We are all buddhas by nature; it is only adventitious obscurations which temporarily veil it from us."

There are various Buddhist schools with different approaches and practices, but committed meditation practice is, in short, the way we apply the Buddha's final words: "Work out your own salvation with diligence."