

Meditation Guide

The Tibetan word for meditation is *gom* which means 'to become familiar'. We meditate in order to make ourselves more familiar with positive mental states, which are based on wisdom and compassion, and which lead to the increase of happiness and reduction of suffering for both oneself and others.

There are many different kinds of meditation practiced within Tibetan Buddhism. Broadly speaking however meditation can be divided into two types.

First there is stabilising meditation. This kind of practice can initially help to reduce discursive thoughts and stress. In the long run it helps to develop mental clarity and a special kind of concentration called calm abiding, (Sanskrit: *shamata*), (Tibetan: *shine*). This enables the practitioner to focus their attention on any object of their choosing for as long as they wish whilst experiencing mental clarity and peace. Developing this is an essential part of the path and it is recommended that you start any meditation practice with this.

Secondly there are analytical, or insight, meditations, where we are deliberately working with our thoughts and feelings in a positive way, gradually reducing those that cause us problems, whilst nurturing and developing those that are positive and that will eventually lead to wisdom and a reduction of suffering for oneself and others. This includes a wide range of meditations on subjects such as impermanence, emptiness/selflessness, appreciating our precious human life, developing love, compassion and so on. It is a common misunderstanding that meditation is always about freeing our minds from all thoughts and conceptuality. That does apply to stabilising meditation but it is only one part of the path. Our thoughts and feelings play an important role in the way we experience reality and interact with the world at large. We can work positively with these in order to transform our mind, both for our own benefit and to put us in a better position to benefit others.

What follows are some guidelines on how to practice different types of meditation.

Posture

Before we engage with any meditation practice the first thing is to find a nice comfortable posture so we can sit comfortably for a period of time. It is important however that the purpose is to be comfortable, rather than to remain motionless. If you feel you need to stretch during the meditation that is fine. Just do it slowly and mindfully, keeping your mind on the practice.

Most people prefer to meditate on a cushion but it is also fine to sit in a chair if you find that more comfortable. If you do use a chair many people, depending on their body shape, find it helpful to put their feet on a cushion. This can help to keep the back straight, which is particularly important. Also try not to lean back. If your back is straight you should be naturally stable without having to rely too much on the back of the chair.

If you sit on the floor it is helpful to use a cushion so that your bottom is raised a little, and ideally is higher than your knees. This again will help to keep your back straight. Everything should be nice and relaxed without forcing anything.

We will now go through the main features of the 'Seven Point Posture', which is particularly recommended for meditation: -

Legs

Whether sitting on a cushion or a chair the same basic principles apply here. Ensure that your legs and bottom feel nice and comfortable, that you have a good firm base, and that you are not cutting off the circulation anywhere.

Arms

Ensure that your arms are comfortable and relaxed. The elbows should be a few inches away from the body to allow air to circulate. Traditionally it is recommended to place the hands in one's lap, palms upwards, one on top of the other (with the right on top) and with the tips of the thumbs touching to form a triangle. It is also OK to place the hands on the knees if you find that more comfortable.

The shoulders should also be relaxed. We often have a tendency to hunch our shoulders so it can be helpful to push them back very gently, again without forcing anything, and then relax back into the posture

Back

It is particularly important to have a straight back, again without forcing anything. Otherwise our muscles will be constantly straining, which will lead to back pain. Also, from a vajrayana point of view this affects the way that subtle winds, or energies, move around the subtle body.

One way is to imagine that your vertebrae are stacked up, one on top of the other, starting at the base of the spine, like a vertical stack of coins. It can also be helpful to stretch the spine very gently. Just imagine that someone is pulling very gently on a piece of string fixed to the top of your head stretching your back very gently, and then relax back into the posture.

Jaw

Ensure that your jaw is nice and relaxed and you are not holding on to any tension there. The teeth should just come together without clenching them.

Tongue

Place the tip of the tongue on the roof (top) of the mouth just behind the front two top teeth. This helps to prevent saliva from building up in the mouth, which can be distracting.

Eyes

Ideally the eyes should be half open/half closed with the lids just coming together so that a bit of light is coming through. However if you find this distracting initially it is OK to close them.

Head

The head should be tilted forward slightly with your gaze directed to the floor a few feet in front of you.

Once you have established the posture it is good to spend a few minutes going back over different parts of your body to see if you are holding on to any tension anywhere. If you do notice any tension, one way is to breath in deeply and imagine that you are then breathing out into that part of the body just letting that tension naturally dissipate away.

Becoming comfortable and physically relaxed is important before we start any meditation practice.

Motivation and Dedication

Before we engage in any activity we should set a very positive motivation and this very much applies to meditation. From a Mahayana Buddhist point of view the best motivation we can have is 'Bodhicitta' i.e. the altruistic intention to attain enlightenment in order to be of maximum benefit for all sentient beings.

At the very least it is good to think that we are doing these practices not only to benefit ourselves but also to put us in a better position to truly benefit others.

It is also good at the end of the meditation session to dedicate any benefit that has been created towards the long-term benefit and enlightenment of all sentient beings.

Meditation 1 – Mindfulness of Breathing

This meditation comes within the first category as described above i.e. 'stabilising meditation' where we aim to keep our mind focused on a particular object for a period of time. There are many objects, which can be used in this way such as a visualised image, a mantra, or the mind itself.

However initially the breath is particularly recommended. It can really help to ground us in the present moment. There is also an intimate connection between our breathing and our states of mind.

Having achieved a comfortable and relaxed posture, and setting your motivation, turn your attention to the natural rhythms of your breathing. Notice the subtle sensations of the breath as your diaphragm moves down, the air enters your body at the nostrils, goes down filling your lungs. Again notice as your diaphragm moves back up, expelling the air, which again leaves the body at the nostrils. Just let yourself breath naturally and concentrate on this for a few minutes becoming more aware of all the subtle sensations involved.

Now turn your attention particularly to that point at the nostrils where the air enters and leaves the body. Again notice the subtle sensations caused by the air entering and leaving at that point. Now keep your attention focused at that point. When discursive thoughts and distractions arise in your mind try not to worry about it but, as soon as you notice, place your attention back at that point at the nostrils and let those distractive thoughts dissipate away.

It is very important that we don't judge or put pressure on ourselves. When we do this kind of practice it is very natural to become distracted. That is why we are doing the

practice! If we keep working on this we will be more able to place our attention on an object of our choosing for a period of time, but this can only happen gradually if we persist with the practice. It is important that this is all done in a relaxed way without forcing anything too much.

Sometimes, particularly before we start this practice, it can be helpful to remind ourselves why we are doing it, and of the potential benefits. Think how wonderful it would be to have a mind that is clear and calm, and which we are able to keep focused on an object of our choosing for as long as we wish. All our activities would become more effective as we would be able to concentrate all our energies on a given activity.

It is probably best to keep sessions short initially. Perhaps try 10 minutes at first. Then have a short break and then do another session if you have the time. When establishing a regular meditation practice it is always best to start small at first. This makes it easier to keep up initially. It is very much recommended to try to do this every day if you can, even if it's just for 5 minutes. That establishes a regular habit, which we can then build on gradually over time. If you try to take on too much at first this can be difficult to keep up.

It is also good to try and think of the time we put aside to meditate as one of the nice bits of our day. It is great that we have found this time, even if it's just a few minutes, to work on calming our mind and developing concentration. Inevitably we will find this easier some days than others but the more we can take joy in our practice the more likely we are to keep it up.

Finally, we shouldn't think of meditating on the breath as being just a beginner's practice. If we keep working on this it becomes more and more subtle and can take us all the way in the development of calm abiding. Before we engage with any other mediation it is recommended that we do at least a few minutes of meditating on the breath.

Meditation 2 – Appreciating Our Precious Human Life

This meditation comes within the second category of meditation as described above i.e. analytical/insight meditation. This practice can be a very effective antidote to depression. We can often get very down on ourselves and concentrate on our own faults and shortcomings. This practice reminds us of the good qualities we already have which can be developed further, and of our potential for enlightenment. It also reminds us of the advantageous position we are currently in to work on developing ourselves spiritually, both to help ourselves and to put us in a better position to benefit others.

Firstly, after setting a positive motivation for the practice, remind yourself of the good qualities that you already possess such as loving kindness, patience, tolerance, wisdom to some extent, skilful action and so on. Try and think of specific examples in your day where you have done positive things and helped others even in very small ways. It could be friends, family members or total strangers. Try to take some joy in these positive qualities that you already have and think how there is no reason at all why we can't develop these things further.

Next reflect that at the deepest level of your being your mind is essentially pure and that you have the potential to become enlightened. From a Buddhist point of view, every sentient being has this potential, or 'Buddha Nature'. Actualising this is just a question of gradually reducing delusions, and other afflictive mental states, and gradually nurturing and developing positive states such as love, compassion and wisdom.

However, even though all sentient beings have this potential, not everyone is in the best situation to work on developing it. Imagine what it would be like being born as an animal for instance.

Wild animals have to deal with finding food, avoiding danger, being hunted, extremes of heat and cold and so forth. Domestic animals are often bred and killed for their meat. Some domestic animals, such as pets, have it relatively good but still have limited mental capacity and don't really have the opportunity to work on developing themselves positively.

Try to feel a sense of joy that you have a human life with a mind that is capable of self-awareness and the capacity to develop and improve.

Now imagine what it would be like to have a mental or physical disability, which would make spiritual practice impossible or very difficult. Some people do not have the mental capacity to work on their spiritual development. Others are in extreme physical pain, which again could make practice very difficult.

Again try to feel a sense of joy that you have a relatively healthy body and mind.

Now imagine what it would be like to live in a war zone, or somewhere that is subject to abject poverty. All your time and energy would be taken up with survival and you would have no time to devote to spiritual practice, or self-improvement.

Also imagine what it would be like to live somewhere very remote without access to any spiritual teachings. It would be very difficult to make any progress without help, guidance or support from anyone.

There are also people who find spiritual practice very difficult due to prohibition or persecution by their government. Some experience a total lack of religious freedom. Others find practice very difficult due to restrictions by their family or community.

Again rejoice in the fact that you live in a country with religious freedom and that you have a relatively supportive family. Also appreciate any supportive friends or other members of your community who enable you to practice.

Some people have a relatively healthy body and mind, have freedom to practice and the other advantages, but have no inclination to develop themselves spiritually. They prefer to concentrate on the pursuit of temporal happiness. There are also people who don't understand or appreciate even the value of living ethically.

This is very much a personal choice but again rejoice in the fact that you do appreciate the benefits of living ethically and developing qualities such as wisdom, compassion and loving-kindness.

Now go back over the positive qualities and circumstances that you have at present. If we look at all sentient beings throughout time this is actually incredibly rare and precious.

You have a human life, a relatively healthy body and intelligent mind. You live in a relatively affluent country, with time to devote to personal development. You have religious freedom, access to teachers and teachings, relatively supportive family and friends, and the inclination to practice and work on developing yourself positively.

Of course life isn't always easy. We all experience problems but we always have the opportunity to work on our mind, to gradually reduce afflictive mental states that cause problems for oneself and others, and to increase positive qualities such as love, compassion and wisdom.

Finally, reflect on how we can best use this precious human life, with all its endowments, and make the most of this incredible opportunity. Of course we all need a certain amount of temporal happiness in our lives and we are encouraged to take joy in things. This is very important.

We also have the chance to engage in acts of kindness towards others. This can be through work, through voluntary work, or just through daily interactions with friends, family, or other people we come into contact with. It is good to appreciate the value of this kind of activity, which is very important practice, both to ourselves as well as others.

The best way however that we can use this precious opportunity is to work on progressing towards ultimate enlightenment which, as well as overcoming our own problems and difficulties, will put us in the best possible position to benefit others.

Now make a resolution to appreciate our human life with all its precious opportunities and to use this opportunity to develop ourselves positively. Whilst being realistic and gentle with ourselves, we work on developing qualities like wisdom, compassion, patience, and skilful means whilst at the same time reducing afflictive mental states such as anger, jealousy, greed and self-centredness, which cause problems for ourselves as well as others.

Finally dedicate any benefit that has come as a result of this meditation to the long-term benefit of all living beings.

Meditation 3 – Meditation on Love

Love, or loving kindness, is the sincere wish for the happiness and welfare of a sentient being. Love is different to 'attachment', which is self-centred and involves an excessive reliance on the person or object to give us happiness.

Love and attachment tend to get very mixed in our minds. Identifying attachment, and gradually reducing it, creates more space for genuine love to flower and develop. Love is impartial, based on equanimity, and does not depend on the way people are treating us or making us feel.

With the practice that follows we start by feeling love towards people that we naturally feel close to and we gradually extend this to include beings who we feel negatively towards. If we are honest with ourselves, this isn't easy and we need to work on this gradually and realistically.

This is however very important practice. Just having a sincere wish for another's happiness can be very powerful practice and, in daily situations, this can be an effective antidote to self-centredness, attachment, aversion, anger, jealousy and other mental afflictions.

Firstly get yourself comfortable, set a positive motivation, and meditate on the breath to calm down your mind. We will start the practice by feeling love for ourselves. This is very important. We need to love ourselves in order to love others. This means accepting ourselves with all our current shortcomings whilst at the same time acknowledging that you have the potential to overcome these and develop positively. Imagine love radiating from your heart as a warm radiant energy. If you find it helpful you can imagine this as blissful light. This radiant energy totally fills your body and mind and you wish yourself every happiness and positive quality.

Now imagine sitting in front of you a person who you naturally think of very positively and feel kindly towards. It could be a friend, family member or any person you naturally feel warmly towards. Now really try to connect with the way you naturally feel towards this person. Imagine love as a warm radiant energy going out from your heart totally filling this person's body and mind wishing them every happiness, positive quality, and freedom from all their problems and difficulties. Again if you find it helpful you can imagine this as beautiful pure light emanating from your heart.

You can now imagine other beings in front of you who you naturally feel warmly towards and again repeat the same process wishing them every happiness and freedom from their sufferings.

Now imagine a person you find difficult. This is more effective if we think of an actual person in our daily lives. Again notice the way you spontaneously feel towards this person. Remind yourself that just like yourself this person wishes to be happy but, due to ignorance and the other afflictions, isn't necessarily doing the right things to achieve this. Try to get a feeling that this person, as a fellow suffering living being deserves happiness, and your love.

Now again imagine love as that warm, radiant energy going out from your heart (again you can imagine light if you find it helpful) totally filling this person's body and mind, sincerely wishing them every happiness and positive quality i.e. love, compassion wisdom and so on. Don't worry if this seems very contrived at first. As with all our practices we have to keep working on this gradually and realistically. If we keep applying this to people in our daily lives over time we will start to notice the difference. Over time we can also appreciate how this benefits our own mind and happiness as well as putting us in a better position to help others.

Now you can imagine others beings you have difficulty with and again apply the same process. We also start to imagine beings who we don't have particularly strong feelings towards either way, which probably includes the vast majority of living beings. Again we imagine loving kindness as that warm radiant energy going out to

all these beings, filling their bodies and minds, sincerely wishing them every happiness and positive quality.

You can expand this out as widely as you can imagine. Potentially love has no limit. You don't need to worry about it running out. You can imagine it going out to all the living beings on Earth, and way beyond that if your imagination allows. Try and feel a sense of connection with this myriad of sentient beings who all, as long as they are unenlightened, just like you aspire to achieve happiness but are currently bound to the cycle of samsara. Again imagine love as that radiant energy going out, filling these beings' bodies and minds and giving them every happiness and quality of enlightenment.

Finally dedicate any benefit from the practice towards the long-term welfare of all sentient beings.

Meditation 4 – Clarity and Emptiness of the Mind

Mind is defined as 'Clarity and Awareness'. From a Buddhist point of view mind is non-material (but there is an intimate connection between mind and physiological states). At its deepest level our mind is essentially pure and that basic 'clarity' is always present, underlying all cognitive experience.

This meditation can help us to become more aware of that essential clarity and can help to reduce our very concrete projections of things and events, particularly when we are experiencing problems and difficulties.

The first part of the meditation comes within the category of 'Stabilising Meditation'. We can take the mind as the object in different ways. Here we are aiming to concentrate on that basic 'clarity'.

The second part however is an 'Analytical/Insight Meditation' on the mind's 'emptiness'. Emptiness does not mean that things do not exist. It means they do not exist inherently, intrinsically, or independently of causes and conditions. Things exist interdependently, and mind is as much a part of the empty and interdependent nature of reality as anything else.

It is recommended that initially you concentrate on the first part. When your concentration has developed a bit as you meditate on the clarity you can then move on to include the second part.

In order to develop wisdom eventually we need to combine stabilising and insight meditation to attain the 'Union of Calm Abiding and Special Insight'. The two parts of this meditation can help us to appreciate how we can work on this gradually as we progress with our practice.

Also, with regard to the first part, it is recommended that we do this practice side by side with 'Mindfulness of Breathing' (see Meditation 1). The mind's clarity can be a difficult object to get at first. If you find that your mind is starting to wander, just go back to meditating on the breath for a while. Once you have calmed down your mind again return to the mind's clarity.

Part 1 – The Clarity of the Mind

Firstly set your motivation and then spend at least a few minutes meditating on your breathing as previously described.

Now turn your attention to your mind, in which all our experiences are reflected like reflections in a mirror.

Just as physical objects (trees, cars, mountains and so on) arise within space, all our thoughts and feelings arise within the ‘space’ of the mind.

The mind is like a clear blue sky. Thoughts and feelings come and go like clouds, ultimately lacking any real substance, dissolving back into the ‘sky’ of the mind.

Meditate on this for a while. As thoughts and distractions arise, neither follow nor forcibly reject them. Just let them dissolve back into the ‘space’ of the mind.

Now imagine that you are lying on your back looking up at a clear blue sky, vast and unobstructed. Imagine that this vast, unobstructed space comes down totally enveloping you and your surroundings. Hold that experience for a while. Just **be** the clear blue sky.

The mind is like the ‘sun’, luminous and radiant, illuminating everything around it. Again hold this experience for a while. Just **be** the luminous sun.

Ideally the mind should be clear and alert. The analogies/visualisations here are just to help. The actual object is that basic ‘clarity’ that underlies all conscious experience. Try not to think. As thoughts and distractions come and go, don’t worry about it. As soon as you notice, just let those thoughts dissolve back into the space of the mind, and return your attention to the mind’s clarity.

Part 2 – The Emptiness of the Mind

After meditating on ‘the clarity of the mind’ as described above we will now reflect on the mind’s emptiness.

Firstly mind needs an object. Awareness needs something to be aware of. Here the object is clarity/ no thought. The mind and its object are interdependent. Neither exists on it’s own totally independently. If we search for mind existing separately on it’s own, independently of everything else, it cannot be found.

Also we can think of the mind as being like a river, or stream, continuously changing, and flowing through time, without beginning or end. Each moment of mind is fresh, leading to the next moment, which in turn leads to the next moment, and so on. This is what we call ‘the mind-stream’. Rest in this experience for a while. Just be the river of the mind, flowing through time.

Like all phenomena that come into being each moment due to specific causes and conditions, mind is subject to ‘subtle impermanence’ and is continuously changing. Therefore if we search for a ‘moment of mind’ it cannot actually be found. However minutely we break down the ‘mind-stream’, each moment will have a beginning,

middle and an end, continuously changing. If we then analyse the middle of that moment this will also have a beginning, middle and end and so on, ad infinitum.

However, even though no mind can be found as existing inherently, intrinsically, or separately on its own, we are clearly still 'aware'. Mind, like everything else, exists relatively and interdependently within the flow of cause and effect. This is what we call conventional (or relative) truth.

Finally reflect on how mind is as much a part of the interdependent nature of reality as anything else. We are all part of this interdependent flow of cause and effect where nothing exists on its own, independently of everything else.

Finally dedicate any benefit that has been created though doing this practice towards the ultimate enlightenment and long-term benefit of all sentient beings.