



LION'S ROAR

Deep
Dive *into*
Mind



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What's the secret of life? That's a question that seems trite and clichéd. But actually, it's the question we all want the answer to. What's the one thing that makes all the difference?

Our mind.

That's what the Buddha said.

Mind is the ultimate cause of our suffering. Mind is the true source of our happiness. This is Buddhism's central insight and the key to Buddhist meditation. It's what makes Buddhism unique among the world's religious and secular philosophies. Among all the different causes of happiness and unhappiness people talk about, only Buddhism says unequivocally, "Mind!"

Specifically, the Buddha said in "The Mind" chapter of the *Dhammapada*, "A tamed mind brings happiness." Conversely, a wild and untamed mind brings suffering.

Sometimes it feels like our mind is the enemy, full of painful fears, deep traumas, and repetitive thoughts we can't seem to control. But it can also be our greatest friend, the source of love, wisdom, beauty, and all good qualities. According to Buddhism, transforming the mind of suffering into the mind of joy is the secret of life.

Buddhist meditators have been working on this for 2,600 years. They've studied the mind carefully and developed effective techniques to tame and transform it. It starts with making friends with our mind, which is to say, with ourselves. Loving-kindness toward ourselves is the foundation; without it our spiritual practice is always some sort of internal war, pitting one part of us against another.

When we are friends with ourselves, then we can profitably practice the two components of Buddhist meditation: mindfulness and insight. When our mind is tamed and stabilized by mindfulness meditation, then we can look deeply at the true nature of our painful thoughts and emotions. Almost miraculously, that frees us from their grip and reveals the true nature of our mind—wisdom and love.

This doesn't mean our own minds cause all our suffering (just a lot of it). We know full well that others also make us suffer, from childhood traumas and bad relationships all the way to up to fears for humanity's future. But all that too is mind—other people's minds. That's why the great Buddhist thinker Joanna Macy says that the only answer to the global crisis is a great turning, a great awakening of mind.

Because transforming mind is the secret of life. Your life. My life. All life.

—Melvin McLeod | editor-in-chief, Lion's Roar



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How Your Mind Works

What is this thing we call “self”? We assemble it ourselves, according to Buddhist psychology. **Gaylon Ferguson** breaks down the five-step process of ego development.

WILLIAM JAMES, one of the founders of modern psychology, wrote in 1890 that our earliest experience of the world is of “a great blooming, buzzing confusion.” While modern research shows that newborns have more ability to make sense of their experience than James believed, even as adults we remain confused about how our minds work. Yes, we all know that we have minds and psychological experiences, but who are we really? How does mind work to shape our experience of our world, our felt experience of being alive? How might we slow down for a moment to see clearly the dazzlingly rapid unfolding of mind and world?

Buddhist psychology begins by examining our everyday experience of clarity and confusion about our minds and self. The earliest Buddhist maps of our sense of self show five key steps in the process of ego development. The Sanskrit word for these five, the *skandhas*, literally means “aggregates” or “heaps.”

The skandhas are not so much collections of elementary particles of existence as momentary gatherings of mental and physical events. In fact, mind and body—the mental and the physical—are the two main kinds of events. We experience ourselves as embodied beings in a world of other physical forms like trees and cars. We also move in a world of other living beings with their own mental experiences of suffering and ease.

The five skandhas, the “heaps” of our basic being, are (1) form, (2) feeling, (3) perception, (4) concept, and (5) consciousness. Let’s walk together now through these five and examine how, step-by-step, they build our sense of self.

Form

The first skandha is called “form,” meaning both our physical body and the body of the world. How is this part of our experience of mind?

Form is the ground of our being, the fundamental sense that we *are* this body, somewhat separate from this mind. This separation is the primary distinction in our ordinary experience. My body has weight that appears on the bathroom scale in the morning, while my thoughts are of uncertain substance. They

matter, particularly to me, but they are not material. My body and my mind arise together, but in uneasy tension. I cannot simply think my weight up or down.



The body and mind are like two quarreling but conjoined siblings.

As in any dualistic relationship, body and mind may go along harmoniously for a time together, enjoying each other's company and friendship. But body and mind can also fall into deep division, quarrels, and entrenched separations. When all is going well, my body cooperates with what my mind seems to want from it: "Let's have breakfast now, shall we?" But sometimes my body rebels, developing a knee ache just when I wanted to go for a run or falling asleep during an important meeting.

The body and mind are like two quarreling but conjoined siblings. If we are physically tired or hungry, our experience and judgment of others may be correspondingly flavored by fatigue or low blood sugar. A recent study showed that Israeli judges granted parole in sixty-five percent of cases heard immediately after they had eaten and in nearly zero cases heard just before a break period or at the end of the day. So the first insight into the working of our minds is that understanding mental experience requires close attention to the skandha of form as well.

Feeling

The next phase in the emergence of self is called “feeling.” This means our basic sense of liking, disliking, or being indifferent to whatever we perceive.

How do we feel about the forms and beings we are encountering? Do they feel attractive or threatening? Do we feel like moving toward or away from them? These intuitive feelings—not quite full-fledged emotions—are the basis for our subsequent impulses toward or away from whatever we are experiencing. “A warm sweater in winter? Hmm, good, I like this very much.” “Too many layers in the heat of the midday sun? Hmm, bad, I’d like to take some of these off.” Like, dislike, attraction, repulsion, neutrality—around and around we go all day and all night. Daydreams and nightmares are all flavored by feeling.

Feeling is the general background to all our experience, a changing texture of encounter and exchange with our world. This is not denying that there are benevolent and malevolent beings in the world, those who wish us well and those who would cause us harm. As they say, “Even paranoids have real enemies.”

Note that these feelings are *our* mental experience. It’s partly the delight of our own minds we are tasting when we enjoy a delicious apple. The skandha of feeling points to this primarily mental aspect of all our experience. Our own minds accompany our experience of anything and everything. This sounds obvious at first, barely worth mentioning, but it’s one of the key insights of

the contemplative traditions. Our pleasant or unpleasant experiences of whomever or whatever always have an inner aspect. We call this inner aspect “mind.”

Perception

The next stage in the development of the self is called “perception.” These are more specific discernments than the simple, broad-brush evaluations of feeling—thumbs up, thumbs down, or neutral. Here it’s “I like, very much, not only the warmth provided by my new wool sweater but also its light-blue color and smooth texture.” These perceptions of the desirable, handsome qualities of the new sweater are all tinged by biases from the past. We’ve prejudged it as having good qualities based on our prior feelings.

Note that these perceptual judgments are all from my point of view, from the perspective of a gradually solidifying “me.” (A moth’s experience of the sweater would be very different.) We perceive this as “a really good light-blue wool sweater” because, for the moment at least, it seems to be “on my side,” on the side of a central “me.” There is a dawning sense that this sweater fulfills and completes me, so I grasp to hold on to it. It’s as though by holding on tightly to the sweater (substitute whatever fits for you), I am also holding on to a self.

The self-centeredness of this “perceiving” comes home to roost in the psychological payoff: that this sweater makes me good, “good to go,” slightly better than I was without it—and a lot more solid in a fast-changing world.

It's as though the skandha of perception were an old-fashioned central switchboard operator fearfully screening our telephone calls according to one simple criterion: for me or against me? As a result, our experience of the world arrives conveniently packaged into things we perceive are good for us and things that aren't. What's wrong with that?



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The problem is that the switchboard operator acts in anxious haste, barely pausing to ask the name of the caller or the nature of the call. The operator quickly—too quickly—decides to let some calls through as “friends” and to deny access to others as “enemies.” This would be tremendously helpful and efficient if it were accurate.

Unfortunately, it's all too frequently a comic series of painful errors, just a prejudiced guess based on habitual patterns: “Oh, I remember you from the pleasing sound of your voice yesterday, Mr. Smith, you're a very good friend, let me put you through immediately.” Or “No, I don't remember you, Mr. Jones, never heard of you, but your ugly voice reminds me of a crank caller yesterday, so please go away, good-bye!” As we see from this

analogy, perception adds names and labels of “recognition” based on past experience. We also see corresponding impulses developing to actively grasp or push away our experience.

Our hyper-busy perceptual switchboard operator also fails to take into account the crucial fact of change. We have all had the experience of discovering that the person we were uncertain about yesterday turns out to be a close ally and friend tomorrow—and vice versa. This enlivening discovery of the new is what the “downloading” of past perceptions blocks.

Concept

The developmental process of ego hardens further with the fourth skandha: “concept” or “mental formation.”

With concept, we now have a name for the *kind* of person Mr. Smith is—“good, pleasing”—and a series of names—“bad, unpleasant”—for the *kind* of person Mr. Jones represents to us. This is the realm of story lines and ideologies. This is the dualistic aspect of mind that we call “false intellect”—using fixed conceptual categories to identify ourselves and others.

In this realm of distorted insight, we begin cleverly deceiving ourselves based on snap judgments, clouded intuitions, yesterday’s news: “Oh, I see now: I’m this kind of person and you’re *that* kind of person. So we couldn’t possibly be friends. Good-bye!”

At this stage, we have developed sophisticated interpretations of ourselves and our experience, far beyond the basic “yea” and “nay” of feeling. This is the dimension of psychological explanations: “I am this kind of person, because *that* happened before.”

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We leave the spacious, open humility of not-knowing far behind and take shelter in a thicket of concepts.

Again, this is not to deny the power of previous causes and conditions in shaping the beings we have become. But the temptation is to solidify the flowing water of fresh insight into the frozen ice of fixed mental ideas. I repeat to myself over and over again—and to whoever is willing to listen—old stories of who I am, who I was, and who I am becoming (as well as who you are and why you’re that way). We leave the spacious, open humility of not-knowing far behind and take shelter in a thicket of concepts. Ouch!

Consciousness

Finally, we discover the mental experience of the fifth skandha, “consciousness.” The accumulated momentum of the initial mind-body split, the positive or negative felt sense of others, and the labels of ourselves and our world culminates in a vivid display of emotions and thoughts.

This skandha is the familiar stream of consciousness that we experience in everyday life, our mind-stream. Buddhist psychology breaks it down into eight separate consciousnesses. In addition to the familiar sense consciousnesses of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching, Buddhist psychology adds a sixth sense consciousness of “minding.” Just as visual consciousness notices sights and auditory consciousness attends to sounds, this sixth consciousness of mind attends to thoughts and emotions. It also synthesizes and integrates the experience of the other consciousnesses into a coherent whole, like a skillful film editor coordinating image, sound, and discursive commentary.



Far from being single, unitary beings, we arise as a dynamic collection of physical and mental happenings.

Underlying these six sense consciousnesses, we may sometimes glimpse two more consciousnesses: a winding, subconscious stream of conflicting emotions and anxiety (the *klesha*, or “nuisance consciousness”) and even a hazy background awareness (the *alaya*, or “storehouse consciousness”) that we sometimes look back toward and call “I.” These underground currents are great instigators, bubbling up occasionally with old resentments and jealousies, fixated passions, and strongly motivated denials.

The skandha of consciousness completes the development of a deluded ego-sense. We now feel separate, *independent*, and *unitary*—even though there is ample evidence to the contrary.

We are not separate from our environments. If we were, how could we breathe, eat, drink, sustain ourselves? Where did the language we speak and write and read come from? None of us is self-produced and independent, as our mothers and fathers remind us. And far from being single, unitary beings, we arise as a dynamic collection of physical and mental happenings, including breathing, sleeping, dreaming, and waking. We have emotional and physiological, skeletal and psychological aspects to our being, and although these occasionally conflict with each other, they also cooperate and harmonize.

What You Can Learn from the Skandhas

Insight into your own psychological processes—into how your mind works—is not an end in itself. The tradition doesn't offer this teaching as mere intellectual knowledge or information. You are encouraged to use this map to become more and more familiar, through direct experience, with the processes you call “me” and “my mind.”

Developing a harmonious friendship with yourself is a central part of the Buddhist path of awakening. These teachings on the five skandhas invite you into a deeper, more intimate experience of yourself. What do you find when you look into your own experience of body and mind? This isn't about dogma—the point isn't

to confirm that the map is accurate or “correct.” Part of the point is to notice that the map is not the territory and never could be. (Imagine a map of Canada that was the size of Canada: how useless would that be?) You are invited to set forth as explorers of your own inner and outer terrains. *Bon voyage.*

When you engage in this psychological exploration, one of your best companions will be a sense of friendliness toward yourself and others. Friendliness means taking these five mental processes not as signs of an inherent weakness or fundamental inadequacy but as aspects of your basic humanity. Through cultivating friendliness, you can experience the skandhas (as well as whatever else arises along the way) with a real sense of gratefulness and appreciation. Let me be more specific here.

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If you can simply feel your feelings as they arise, without rejecting them or telling yourself stale stories of why you are “right” to feel this way, then feelings emerge as highlights of being human, vivid signs of being alive.

The skandhas point, first, to healing the body–mind split. If you pay caring attention to body and mind as an actual experience, not just a distant “good idea,” then you’ve made a good start. This is traditionally called “mindfulness of body.” It’s a simple

sense of welcoming and including your present physical experience—not exaggerating your body or denigrating it, neither praising nor condemning it. This is mind–body friendliness.

The same goes for the other skandhas as well. If you can simply feel your feelings as they arise, without rejecting them or telling yourself stale stories of why you are “right” to feel this way, then feelings emerge as highlights of being human, vivid signs of being alive. You don’t need to act them out or repress them. This is spacious freedom. Beyond grasping and fixation, you allow your feelings to arise, be present, and go. You appreciate that life bubbles up as colorful emotions, as heartfelt experience. You appreciate being human.

Similarly, your thoughts and ideas can be seen as the liberating play of wisdom. If you notice your thoughts as thoughts, rather than confusing them with reality, then they become friends and allies, companions along the path. Instead of confining your consciousness of sense perceptions in narrow, tight boxes of “for me” or “against me,” you can open into a larger appreciation of seeing and hearing. You can taste the vastness of your world.

On this journey, you see that both clarity and confusion are woven into your everyday experience of mind. The skandhas illuminate a fivefold process of mind grasping and fixating, engaging in a losing battle of ego against the world. Yet the same mental events can be the basis for a cease-fire, an entrance into non-struggle and luminous peace.

Each moment in the unfolding of your experience is an opportunity to welcome yourself, your feelings, your mind, and others in your world. The key to working with mind, to understanding its processes, is found in the innate warmth and friendliness of the mind itself. You don't need a newer, better, super-improved body-mind. The real challenge is making friends with the mind and body you already are. 🌱



Everything's Made of Mind

All that we are and experience is mind, explains Zen teacher **Norman Fischer**. That mind is original enlightenment itself.

THE TEACHINGS ABOUT MIND are perhaps the most precious, profound, and foundational in Buddhism. Without some understanding of the expansive concept of mind described in these teachings, it's hard to appreciate the full context of Buddhist meditation practice and the enlightenment promised as its ultimate goal.

The Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana, an important text in Far East Asian Buddhism, begins by saying that mind—not only mind in the abstract but the actual minds of sentient beings—“includes within itself all states of being of the phenomenal world and the transcendent world.”

In other words, mind isn't just mental. It isn't, as we understand it in the West, exclusively intellectual and psychological. Mind includes all the material world. It also includes the

“transcendent world,” which sounds odd. Isn't it commonplace to think of Buddhism as having, refreshingly, no idea of the transcendent, which sounds like God? We are told that Buddhism is practical and down-to-earth, a human teaching for human beings. It's about calming and understanding the mind in order to put an end to suffering.

This is certainly true, and is the dominant theme of early Buddhism. But in contemplating what mind is, later Mahayana Buddhist pundits teased out huge and astounding implications embedded in the early teachings.

They began by distinguishing two aspects of mind—an absolute aspect and a relative, phenomenal aspect. These, they said, are both identical and not identical. So mind (not only in the abstract, but also my mind, your mind, the mind of all sentient beings) is at the same time both transcendent and not.



Mind equals reality equals impermanence equals eternity.

This means that the transcendence isn't a place or state of being elsewhere or otherwise: it is here and now. Mind and matter, space and time, animate and inanimate, imaginative and real—all are mind. Mind can be both absolute and phenomenal because it is empty of any hard and fast characteristics that could

distinguish one thing from another. It is fluid. It neither exists nor doesn't exist. So, strictly speaking, it isn't impermanent. It is eternal.

In effect, mind equals reality equals impermanence equals eternity. All of which is contained in the workings of my own mind and that of all sentient beings. So this little human life of mine, with all its petty dramas, as well as this seemingly limited and painful world, is in reality the playing out of something ineffably larger and grander. As Vasubhandu, the Indian *Yogachara* (Mind-Only) sage, writes in his famous *Thirty Verses*, reality is simply the transformations of mind.

This is staggering, baffling, and heady. What does it have to do with the inescapable fact that I definitely feel as if I am suffering? My mind may be empty, eternal, transcendent, and vast, but I still experience my life unhappily. What to do?

We could pose the question like this: If my mind is mind, and mind is reality, what is the relationship of my unenlightened mind, the cause of my suffering, to the enlightened mind that puts suffering to an end?

From a psychological and logical point of view, enlightenment and unenlightenment are opposites. I am either enlightened and not suffering, or unenlightened and suffering, and these certainly feel to me like vastly different states. But the teachings on mind assert that enlightenment and unenlightenment are in actuality not different. They are, fundamentally suchness (and the word “fundamentally”—meaning “at bottom,” at their core”—is important

here). “Suchness” is a word coined in the Mahayana to connote the mind’s perfect appearance as phenomena. When we receive phenomena as suchness, we don’t experience what we call suffering—even if we suffer!

What we call suffering, and experience as suffering, isn’t actually suffering. It is confusion, illusion, misperception, like seeing a snake that turns out to be merely a crooked stick. Suchness is the only thing we ever really experience. But since we mistake it for something painful and dangerous, we stand apart from it. We see ourselves as its victim, and so are pushed around by it, although in truth there is nothing that pushes, nothing that can be pushed, and no reason in the first place to feel pushed. Reality is not, as we imagine it to be, difficult and painful. It is always only just as it is: suchness.

But lest we project suchness to be something we can reach for or depend on, something other than what we are and see all the time in front of us, we are reminded that suchness isn’t anything. It is a mere word, and the limit, so to speak, of verbalization. It is a word proposed for the purpose of putting an end to words and concepts whose mesmerizing effect on us is the real source of our initial mistaken perception. Since all things are equally and fundamentally suchness, there is literally nothing to be said. Even calling it suchness.

So my suffering, as real as it seems to me, is delusional. But it’s a powerful delusion! Its very structure is built into mind, and therefore my personal consciousness. Since its shape and location

(these words are metaphorical: mind has no shape or location) is the same as that of enlightenment, to which it is identical, and since both are empty of any grounding reality, my delusion can't be gotten rid of. How can you get rid of something that doesn't exist? Trying to get rid of it will only make matters worse. Besides, to get rid of my delusion is to get rid of my enlightenment, which is my only hope!

In a famous metaphor, Mahayana teachings liken the relationship of delusion to enlightenment to that of a wave and the ocean. The wave is delusion, full of motion and drama. It rises up, crests, breaks, dissipates, and gathers strength to drive again. With my eyes on the wave, I see it as real.



We desire a destination, a state, that will bring us peace. But we don't know how to get there.

But the wave isn't anything. There is no such entity as "wave." There is only water, in motion or not. Wind acts on water to make what we call a wave. If the wind stops, the movement ceases and the water remains quiet. Whether there are waves or no waves, water remains always water, salty and wet. Without wind, the water is quiet and deep. But even when wind activity is strong on the surface, deep below water remains quiet.

Mind is like this. It is deep, pure, and silent. But when the winds of delusion blow, its surface stirs and what we call suffering results. But the waves of my suffering are nothing more or less

than mind. And even as I rage, the depths below remain quiet. Life is the wind. Life is the water. As long as life appears as phenomena there will be the stirrings of delusion. Delusion is in fact the movement, the stirring, of awakening. My ocean mind is inherently pure and serene, always. When I know this, I can navigate the waves with grace.

The Awakening of Faith, the text I referred to above, offers an even better analogy. A man is lost. He is confused about which way is north and which way south. He has a place he is trying to go but because of his confusion he can't get there. He feels disoriented and deeply uncomfortable. He has that sinking feeling of being lost, of not being in the place he wants and ought to be. But then he suddenly realizes there actually is no north or south—that these are just names people give to this way or that way, and that, no matter where he is, he is in fact here, where he has always been and will always be. Immediately, that man no longer has a feeling of being lost.

Likewise we are lost when we don't settle our lives in suchness. Misperceiving the wholeness of our mind, we see confusion and lack, which naturally gives rise to desire. We desire a destination, a state, that will bring us peace. But we don't know how to get there. We feel lost, ungrounded, desperate for road signs.

“Delusion” is the place we are fleeing. “Enlightenment” is the destination we seek. But it is a false destination. The path and all its teachings are like north and south, names for various directions that have some provisional value but in the end only confuse us if we take them as real in a way they are not.

Since people need maps and directions when they feel lost, enlightenment is proposed as a destination some distance from delusion. The teachings are serviceable, if provisional, navigation aids to point us in what we believe to be the right direction. But after we have gone on long enough to have calmed down a bit, we see the truth: there is nowhere to go and no way to get there. We have been there all along. In Mahayana Buddhism this is called original enlightenment, or *tathagatagarbha*—the Womb of Suchness.

This same point is made in a famous parable in the Lotus Sutra, an important text of Chinese Buddhism. People are lost. They hire a caravan leader who takes them to what turns out to be an illusory city, where they find some respite. Somewhat refreshed, they are then told by the caravan leader that this is not and has never really been their destination. The destination is endlessly far ahead. In effect there is no destination; they have always been where they wanted to go. But if the caravan leader had told them this at the outset they would never have believed him.

Now let's get practical. Given all this, what does what we think of as enlightenment actually amount to? Are these teachings proposing, as they seem to be, that we give up practice altogether and somehow suddenly leap out of what we experience as suffering, by some kind of mental magic trick? That we somehow will or think ourselves into enlightenment?

No. The entire culture of practice (including meditation but also study, dharma relationships, ritual, and much more) is necessary. But not in the way we thought it was, not as a way to make things different. Rather, we practice to shift our understanding of our lives. In effect, as *The Awakening of Faith* puts it, "The process of actualization of enlightenment is none other than the process of integrating the identity with the original enlightenment."

Practice, then, is both a sudden (we have flashes of insight) and a gradual (it develops over a lifetime) identity shift. We stop seeing ourselves as the child of our parents, a poor lonely soul in a difficult world, with various conditioned imperfections, drawbacks, desires, and hopes, most of which remain unfulfilled. Instead we have confidence in our original enlightenment, which is and has always been at the center of our lives, despite our limitations and pain. *The Awakening of Faith*: "The state of enlightenment is not something that is to be acquired by practice or to be created. In the end, it is unobtainable, because it has been there from the very beginning."

This teaching about mind reminds me of a conversation I had with my mother toward the end of her life. She was dying. I knew it, everyone in our family knew it, but we didn't talk about it because my mother didn't like to think about it. But once, when we were having bagels and lox at a little deli near where she lived, she said to me, casually, as if it were a matter of mere curiosity, "What do Buddhists think happens after you die?"

"Well," I said to her, "it depends on who you think you are. If you think you are just this body and mind, just these memories and experiences and relationships and thoughts, then death is very bad news. Because when you die you will lose all that. But if you think you are also more than this, something you don't understand but somehow feel and have confidence in, then when you die that something—which was never born and so can't die—never goes away. And that would make it easier and happier to die."

I am not sure my mother got any comfort from those words. As I recall now, she looked more bewildered than comforted. But perhaps what I said did help toward the end, when her consciousness faded and her mind was quiet.

Certainly, the intention of the great Buddhist teachers who over the centuries have detailed these teachings on mind is not only to comfort us. They offer us these teachings on what mind really is to give us a sound basis for a way of practice that can transform our lives, and the world. ❀



Meditating on the Mind Itself

A teaching on the practice of Mahamudra by Kagyu master **Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche** (1955–2012).

According to the Buddhist Mahayana tradition, practitioners need to eradicate certain defilements and obscurations of the mind in order to realize ultimate truth, or ultimate reality, and the most effective way to achieve this is through the practice of meditation. Generally speaking, two types of meditation are engaged in: shamatha, the “meditation of tranquility,” and vipashyana, the “meditation of insight.” Through the practice of shamatha, the meditator learns to quiet the mind so that it becomes more focused, resilient, and aware—and therefore less susceptible to distractions. Vipashyana, on the other hand, is usually conducted as a form of analysis. While the practice of shamatha encourages the mind to be calmer and less disturbed by conceptual thoughts, vipashyana uses these thoughts to gain certain insights, such as the realization that there is no enduring or immutable self.

The way that shamatha is usually presented suggests that as the mind becomes more focused, and as discursive thoughts subside, our mind goes through different levels of concentration and absorption. Then, when we engage in vipashyana after having perfected shamatha meditation, our thinking no longer gives rise to conceptual confusion; instead, it gives rise to various insights.

Buddhist meditation is said to be different from the meditation of other traditions because of this vipashyana practice, since other traditions also have techniques of quieting and focusing the mind. It is through vipashyana meditation that we come to realize there is no such thing as an enduring or permanent self and that physical entities have no enduring or permanent essence.

Mahamudra: A Tantric Approach

Mahamudra practice includes these two techniques of shamatha and vipashyana, but according to the Mahamudra teachings, it is not important to go through the different levels of concentration and absorption in shamatha meditation. Instead, it is sufficient that we stabilize the mind. Even if you have not achieved an ultimate state of concentration and have not managed to obtain any level of absorption, if your mind has become more stable and less susceptible to distractions, you can proceed with the practice of vipashyana.

The Mahamudra practice of vipashyana is actually quite different from the conventional sutric Mahayana approach. In the Mahayana tradition, we normally use the analytical method to

understand the lack of essence in all things and to realize that everything in the physical and mental realms is a product of causes and conditions. Through this vipashyana practice we can gain some conceptual understanding of what emptiness is, and that understanding will lead to a direct experience of emptiness.

However, the Mahamudra teachings say that if you focus your mind on the mind itself, you will realize the nature of the mind, and the nature of everything else. So instead of using reasoning and the analytical method to reduce everything to emptiness, you focus your mind on the mind itself and realize that the nature of the mind is emptiness. Then you realize that everything else has the same nature, which is emptiness.

According to Mahamudra teachers, the sutric Mahayana approach uses external phenomena as the object of vipashyana meditation, whereas the tantric Mahayana approach of Mahamudra uses the mind itself as the object. However, the Mahamudra approach does not analyze the mind to realize that the nature of the mind is emptiness. Instead, the meditator uses contemplation. In this practice, the meditator allows the mind to be in its natural state, so that mind itself reveals its own nature. We do not analyze the nature of mind and we do not need to have a conceptual grasp of the fact that the nature of the mind is empty. If the mind is allowed to be in its natural state and all discursive thoughts subside, the nature of the mind will be revealed as empty of an enduring essence.

In following the meditation instructions of sutric Mahayana, we employ different antidotes for different obstacles in the practice of shamatha. In contrast, according to Mahamudra, we should not become too concerned with the obstacles or with the use of antidotes to quiet the mind. We should have a general sense that all the obstacles that arise in meditation can be divided into two categories: the obstacle of stupor, or drowsiness, and the obstacle of mental agitation.

When the obstacle of stupor arises, the mind is not disturbed by the agitation of discursive thoughts or emotional conflicts, but it lacks clarity. The mind has become dull, and sometimes this is followed by sleepiness and drowsiness. Mental agitation, on the other hand, is easier to detect because the mind has fallen under the influence of discursive thoughts, distractions, and emotional conflicts. Instead of using antidotes to control the mind in these situations, the Mahamudra approach recommends two methods: relaxation and tightening.

If the mind becomes dull, we “tighten” it through the application of mindfulness. We try to regenerate and refuel our mindfulness of the meditation object, whatever it happens to be. And if our mind is agitated, we must be careful to not apply too much mindfulness; we just try to relax the mind a little more. We can “loosen” the mind by letting go of mindfulness or whatever we are using to make the mind more focused.

If our mind becomes dull, we could also straighten the spine, expand the chest, and tighten the body, making our posture a little more rigid. If mental agitation is present, we could soften our posture so that we feel more relaxed and focus the mind on the lower part of the body. In all situations, these two methods of either loosening or tightening are used.

How to Practice Mahamudra

In Mahamudra, beginners to shamatha meditation should use an external object, such as a piece of wood, a pebble, or any physical object in your visual field, and concentrate on that. Whenever the mind becomes distracted, remember to go back to that physical object. After practicing that for a period, you can use your own breath as the object of meditation by applying mindfulness to the incoming and outgoing breath. To help with this process, you can even count your breaths. Counting helps the mind focus on the breath when that is the object of your meditation.

Each outgoing and incoming breath should be counted as one. When you can do that with some success, move on to using the mind itself as the object of meditation. Try to be mindful of thoughts and emotions as they arise, without labeling them, without judging them, but simply by observing them. As this process of observation becomes stabilized, mindfulness will transform into awareness. If distraction arises, become aware of that distraction; if dullness or stupor arise, become aware of that; if mental agitation arises, become aware of that.

When you contemplate the mind itself and let the mind be in its natural state, you will experience a sense of clarity as well as mental stability. In the Mahamudra teachings, this is described as the aspect of stability and the aspect of clarity. Both mental clarity and stability must be present. According to the Mahamudra teachings, if you can pursue this practice and make the mind more stable and clear, then even when thoughts and emotions arise, the stability and clarity of your mind will not be disturbed. If you can maintain mental clarity equally whether your mind is calm or agitated, that is the best form of meditation. The ultimate goal of meditation is not to eradicate thoughts and emotions but to maintain that sense of awareness when mind is in movement as well as in a restful state.

Awareness is present whether the mind is in a state of rest or a state of movement; it does not make any difference. The nature of the mind is realized when the mind does not make any distinction in meditation between mental agitation and rest. By not making this distinction, the mind is left in its natural state, and thoughts and emotions become self-liberated.

The Mahamudra teachings also say we should not think of thoughts and emotions (particularly negative ones) as having to be eradicated or removed. If we can realize the nature of these thoughts and emotions, we will understand the nature of mind itself. In the teachings, the relationship between the nature of mind and delusions is compared to a lotus blossoming in mud or grain growing in a field of manure. Just as a lotus blossoms

in mud and farmers use smelly manure to cultivate their fields, we attain wisdom by realizing the nature of the defilements and obscurations, not by getting rid of them. In Tibetan it is said, “Having abandoned the delusions and conceptual confusions of the mind, one cannot speak of wisdom.” According to the Mahamudra understanding, wisdom is not attained through the eradication of defilements but from understanding the nature of the defilements.

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The ultimate goal of meditation is not to eradicate thoughts and emotions but to maintain that sense of awareness when mind is in movement as well as in a restful state.

The Mahamudra teachings use the phrase “ordinary mind,” which means that to realize the nature of the mind, to realize buddhanature, does not involve getting rid of anything that exists within the mind. It comes from realizing the nature of this very mind we already have: the mind that thinks, wills, anticipates, and feels. The problem is not that we have thoughts and emotions; the problem is that we do not understand the nature of these thoughts and emotions. Through the practice of meditation, the mind becomes more stabilized and develops a sense of mental clarity. Then, if awareness is maintained as thoughts and emotions

arise and the mind is left to itself, those thoughts and emotions will reveal the nature of mind, just as a mind undisturbed by thoughts and emotions reveals the nature of mind.

Letting the Mind Be in Its Natural State, Effortlessly

The simple technique of letting the mind be is conducted by either tightening or loosening body and mind. However, even these two methods should not be done with extreme deliberation or effort, which is why another expression in Mahamudra is very helpful: “Letting the mind be in its natural state effortlessly.” This effortlessness comes from not judging, not thinking that the arising of thoughts and emotions has somehow disturbed the mind or upset your meditation. As long as your mind is focused and there is a sense of awareness, no matter what arises in the mind—whether the mind is stable and at rest or in a state of movement—you can realize that everything that occurs in the mind has the same nature as the nature of mind.

Through awareness, we realize that the nature of mind has the dual characteristic of being empty yet luminous. In terms of its emptiness aspect, the nature of the mind is not different from nonmental physical things, such as tables and chairs, because the nature of the table and the chair is emptiness and the nature of the mind is also emptiness. However, in terms of the clarity aspect of the nature of mind, it is different from nonmental physical

things, because the nature of the mind is not just empty—it is luminous at the same time. This luminosity and clarity are what distinguish the nature of the mind from nonmental things.

Ultimately, the nature of the mind is said to have three qualities:

1. The nature of the mind is emptiness.
2. Even though the nature of the mind is emptiness, unlike the emptiness of physical things or entities, it is also luminous.
3. When the mind is stabilized and awareness is maintained even when the mind is busy with thoughts and emotions, bliss will be experienced.

In other words, even if the mind is active, bliss is revealed if the mind does not give rise to agitation or to delusions and obscurations—which are the basic cause of suffering and dissatisfaction. ❁



Naked Mind

In this teaching on the mind instructions of the Dzogchen master **Khenpo Gangshar, Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche** explains how the veil of thoughts and emotions is lifted when we rest in the nature of mind as it is, without trying to alter it in any way.

A KUSULU is someone who leads a very simple, uncomplicated life and does things easily and without much effort. Similarly, in the resting meditation of a kusulu, we do not go through a lot of effort to do the meditation. It is not examining anything thoroughly, it is not studying; we just rest simply in equipoise just as it is. This is extremely important.

The reason is that the realization of the nature of the mind is not something we can find by searching for it from afar. It is present within the essence of the mind itself. If we do not alter or change that in any way, that is enough. It is not as if we were

lacking something before so we need to make something new through our meditation. It is not as if we are bad and have to go through all sorts of efforts to make ourselves good. Goodness is something we all have. It has always been present within us, but we have just not looked for it or seen it yet, so we have become confused. Therefore all we need to do is to just rest within it without changing it. We see where it stays and rest there, so we are like a kusulu. This means that we rest free and easy with nothing to do, very simply. We do not need to think that we are making something good or that we need to meditate properly. It is enough just to know what we already have.

Well then, what do we need to do? We just need to recognize the way our mind is as it is and then rest in equipoise within that, as it is. In the instructions on Mahamudra, this is what we call ordinary mind. This is just knowing how our mind is and what its essence is like, and then resting in equipoise within that. Sometimes we call this the natural state, which just means that we do not change it in any way. Both of these terms mean that we do not analyze or examine too much, nor do we alter things at all. We simply rest in the nature of the mind as it is. That is what we call resting meditation. Resting here means we leave it alone. We don't need to do a lot to it or alter it in any way. Just rest in equipoise within its essence, whatever that is like.

Getting Right Down to Meditation

There are two parts to the instructions on the resting meditation of the kusulu. The first part is the instructions on resolving. The Tibetan word translated here as resolving literally means to climb straight over a pass without making switchbacks back and forth—it means to go directly there. Here it means to go right into samadhi meditation. The second part of the instructions is distinguishing mind from awareness. Sometimes we are distracted, and sometimes we are not. When we are distracted, that is mind, and when we are undistracted, that is awareness. When we are not distracted, it is very easy to know the nature of the mind. But when we are distracted, we have many different thoughts that prevent us from knowing the mind-essence. This is the aspect of confusion. “Distinguishing” means telling these two states apart.

For the main practice of the resting meditation of a kusulu, let your mind and body become comfortable, soft, and relaxed. Do not think of anything, and rest naturally. The important point here is that we do not think of anything. Do not think about the past and do not think about the future. Do not think of anything at all. You should not do this by tightening or gripping, but instead by being loose, relaxed, and comfortable. Just let yourself rest naturally within this, without thinking. In the analytic meditation of the pandita, there is an examination of where the mind is, what it is like, what color it is, and so forth. But here there is no such examination: let your mind rest loosely and naturally. Just look at whatever feelings arise.

Resting the Body and Mind

Khenpo Gangshar's instructions on insight meditation begin with four points on posture:

Keep your body straight, refrain from talking, open your mouth slightly, and let the breath flow naturally.

The first instruction is to keep your body straight so that the mind will be clear. The second instruction is to refrain from talking. If we talk while meditating, we will have a lot of thoughts. It will be difficult for our minds to rest and be clear, so we refrain from talking. The third instruction is to open your mouth slightly. Don't close your mouth, but don't let it gape open either. This means to let your body relax. As the great Machig Labdrön said, "Let the four limbs relax." This is important for your meditation. The fourth instruction is to let the breath flow normally. If your breath is moving quickly, let it move quickly. If it is moving slowly, let it move slowly. Do not try to make your long breaths into short breaths; do not try to make short breaths into long breaths. Do not hold your breath or do anything else to it. However it is, just let it be, which means not to change it in any way. These four points tell us how to let the body rest. This is taught so that we will be able to clearly recognize the nature of the mind.

In addition to these, Khenpo Gangshar also teaches methods for resting the mind:

Don't pursue the past and don't invite the future. Simply rest naturally in the naked ordinary mind of the immediate present without trying to correct it or "re-place" it.

The instruction here is that external appearances, whatever they may be, do not really hurt us. It all comes down to the mind. Is the mind some hardened, solid lump to which we cannot do anything at all? It is not. The mind is naturally empty of essence, but it is also clear. This is the union of clarity and emptiness, and the union of wisdom and the expanse taught in the path of the sutras. This is present in the nature of the mind itself. But we have not really thought about what this means. We direct our attention outward, follow thoughts about all sorts of things, and get distracted. But all we really need to do is know what is present in the mind.

In order to know that, Khenpo Gangshar says, “Don’t pursue the past.” Often we remember things that happened in the past and think about them. We think, “Last year I went to that place. I had such and such a conversation. When I did this, it turned out really well. When I did that, it was bad.” These and many other thoughts come up, but we should not pursue them when we are meditating. We should just be loose and relaxed and not follow the past.

Khenpo Gangshar also says, “Don’t invite the future.” Often we think to ourselves, “Next year I ought to do this. What should I do next month? I have to do that tomorrow. What should I do this evening?” These are all thoughts of the future. Normally we need to think about them, but not when we are meditating, so we should not welcome the future. We should put all thoughts of past or future aside.

In particular during this meditation, “Don’t pursue the past” means do not even think about things that happened just a moment ago. Do not try to remember, “What was I just thinking about? Was I just resting? Was I just stable? Was that clarity? What was it that I was just meditating on?” We should not try to think about or remember what we were just doing in our meditation in that way. Similarly, we normally understand “Don’t invite the future” to mean that we should not think about future plans in general, but in this context it means not even to think about what we will do in the next moment. We do not need to think to ourselves, “Now I need to start being mindful. I need to start being aware now. Now I’m going to start being clear in my meditation.” We do not need to think about anything at all. So we do not think about either the past or the future. We just simply look at the mind as it is right now and rest naturally in the naked, ordinary mind.

When we say “ordinary mind,” that means resting in the immediate present without trying to alter the mind in any way. Ordinary mind is not something bad that we need to make into something good. Nor is it something that is not empty that we need to make empty. That is not how it is. We do not need to take something that is not clear and make it clear. We should not try to change anything in any way. If you alter it, it is not ordinary. If you follow lots of thoughts, that is not what we mean by ordinary

mind. Just rest in the nature of the mind as it is, without any thoughts that are virtuous, unvirtuous, or neutral. The way it is now is ordinary mind.

There are two different ways in which we can understand the term “ordinary mind.” One way is to not take control over anything and end up following our afflictions. When a thought of anger arises, we follow it; when greed arises, we lose control of ourselves to it. Similarly, we lose control of ourselves to our pride and jealousy. Although we might think of this as our ordinary state of mind, it is not what we mean here. Here it does not mean losing control of ourselves to our negative emotions. Instead, it means that we do not need to do anything at all to the essence of the mind itself.

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Just rest in the nature of the mind as it is, without any thoughts that are virtuous, unvirtuous, or neutral. The way it is now is ordinary mind.

We do not need to alter this essence in any way. We do not have to worry about what we are thinking, what is pleasant, or what is painful. We can leave this mind as it is. If we try to alter the mind in any way, thoughts will arise. But if we do not do anything to it and let it rest easily, then it is unaltered. The Kagyu masters of the past called this the ordinary mind, or the natural state. They called it this out of their experience. This ordinary

mind itself is the dharma expanse and the essence of the buddhas: it is our buddhanature. This is exactly what the term means; this is what we need to experience and recognize.

Khenpo Gangshar calls this ordinary mind “naked.” If we just have mere understanding, there is a slight gap between our mind and our understanding. When we try to investigate or analyze, it is as if the mind were covered by a sort of membrane. But here there is nothing like that. Saying “naked” means there is no covering or anything in the way. We just rest directly in it as it is without trying to correct it or “re-place” it. We do not think, “Is this right? I need to make it right.” We do not worry, “My meditation is bad; I’ve got to make it good.” Without any hopes or worries, we do not try to correct it or make it right in any way. When Khenpo Gangshar says “re-place,” that means that we do not try one way to settle the mind and then another. We just let it be as it naturally is, resting easily in this naked, ordinary mind.

Recognizing the Experience of Resting

What does it feel like to rest like that? Khenpo Gangshar says,

If you rest like that, your mind-essence is clear and expansive, vivid and naked, without any concerns about thought or recollection, joy, or pain. That is awareness (rigpa).

At this point, there is no concern about what you are thinking, what you remember, what is nice, or what is painful. You will not think, “Ah, that is what it is.” You will not think, “This is empty,” or “This is not empty.” You will not think, “Oh, that’s nice,” or “Oh,

that's not so nice," or "That's bad." There won't be any thought of pleasure or displeasure in any way at all. This is just the natural essence of the mind. It is not something that makes us jubilantly happy, nor is it something that upsets us or makes us unhappy.

But you will see the mind-essence and it will be clear and expansive, vivid and naked. When we say "clear," this is like the clear aspect of the mind. When we talk about it being clear or luminous, sometimes we understand that as meaning some sort of a light—a blazingly bright light. But that is not what this means. It means that it can know and understand. It does not stop. We do not turn into some sort of rock. That is not what happens: there is the clear, knowing aspect of the mind. It is also expansive, which means here that the clarity is vast: we can see and know many things. Then the text says "vivid and naked." "Vivid" means that it is as if we are actually seeing—it is right there and we are really seeing it. There is no doubt whether or not this is it—it is just right there. It is naked: we are not thinking about it with logic or seeing it from far away; it is right here. There is no veil or anything covering it at all. This is what we rest in; this is the nature of the mind.

We do not try to change anything; we rest directly in equipoise—the kusulu meditates in an uncomplicated way. The reason for resting loosely like this is that our meditation is not something that is mentally constructed and newly made. Instead, it is just the way the mind is, unaltered. Normally we are deluded by many

confused appearances, but the meditation of the kusulu should be understood as knowing the nature of the mind as it is, clearly and without mistake.

This is not just something that Khenpo Gangshar says. It is also said in *The Supreme Continuum and The Ornament of Clear Realization* by Maitreya, as well as in *The Two Books*, the tantra of the glorious Hevajra. These works all say:

*In this there's nothing to remove
Nor anything at all to add.
By viewing rightness rightly and
By seeing rightly—liberation!*

There is nothing to remove. We do not need to stop or get rid of anything, thinking, “This is emptiness. This cannot be established as a thing.” The nature of the mind is fine just as it is. Nor is there anything to add to the mind-essence, thinking, “That is missing. This is clarity. This is something I need to gain.” If we just look at the mind-essence rightly and rest in equipoise within this nature of the mind just as it is, not following our thoughts, we will see that it is rightness. We do not need to think, “It is emptiness”—its essence is naturally empty. We do not need to think, “It is clear”—its essence is naturally clear. Resting with this mind, as it is, is “viewing rightness rightly.” When we see that essence as it is, at that moment we will be liberated from our faults and from samsara.

This is why we just rest right in the nature of mind as it is. The dharma nature is unchanging. When the great meditators of the past meditated on it, they saw that we do not need to alter it in any way. We just need to come to thoroughly know the dharma nature as it is. When we see that, this is the mind that we call clear and expansive, vivid and awake.

When Marpa the Translator met his guru Naropa and developed experience within himself, he said:

*For instance, when a mute eats sugar cane,
It is an inexpressible experience.*

When mute people eat sugar cane, they put the cane in their mouths, they taste it, and they know what it tastes like, but if you ask them what it is like, they cannot tell you. Similarly, Marpa had an experience of realization, but when he felt it, he could not express it in any way—it was an inexpressible experience. Was it something? It was not. Was it nothing? It was not. It was indescribable. This is what Khenpo Gangshar means by saying that there is no concern about what you might be thinking, what you might remember, what is pleasant, or what is painful. Without any thoughts of good or bad or anything like that, the essence of the mind is clear and expansive, vivid and naked. You might wonder if this is a nature that we have to somehow create, but it is not. It is the nature of the mind that has been present within us from the very beginning. But up to this point, we just have not looked for it.

We have not seen it because we have not looked for it. If we know how to look for it, we can know what it is like. All we need to do is look for it and see it. That is the essence of the mind.

The Knowing Quality of Mind

There is a distinction between tranquillity and insight meditation. In tranquillity, there is a lot of stability but not much discernment, whereas in insight meditation we do have full knowing. In general, there are three types of intelligence: the intelligence born of listening, that born of contemplation, and that born of meditation. The discernment born of listening and contemplating is directed outward. It is dependent upon inference, so it is a conceptual understanding. It means the clarity of the mind that knows, “That’s right. That’s what it is.” But is this the intelligence present during insight meditation? It is not. The intelligence present in meditation is the intelligence born of meditation. The difference between this and the full knowing born of listening and contemplating is that the latter is conceptual knowing that gets to the point through inference. In the intelligence born of meditation, there are not many thoughts of that kind; it is actually seeing and experiencing. It is a direct experience of the essence of the mind.



The intelligence present in meditation is the intelligence born of meditation.

When we experience our essence, do we experience it as some sort of a thing? That is not the experience we have. Do we experience it as emptiness? We do not experience it as emptiness. It is empty—something that you cannot establish, nothing at all—but at the same time there is clarity. You could call this the aspect of wisdom. It is not just blank nothingness, it is the union of clarity and emptiness. There is clarity, but the essence of this clarity is emptiness. This is what we actually experience. If we were to think about it, we would say, “Oh, that’s what mind is.” Of course that would just be a thought produced by our minds; when we actually experience it, we do not have this thought. Instead, we have a feeling. This is the intelligence born of meditation that comes from directly seeing the nature of mind as it is. When we directly see the nature of mind as it is, it is not just nothingness, blankness, or darkness. Instead, we experience this intelligence and rest evenly within this experience.

Looking Inward

In one of his meditation manuals, Jamgön Kongtrul Rinpoche says that the reason we do not realize the nature of the mind is not because it is too difficult, but because it is too easy. The nature of the mind is something that we have, so we think, “It can’t be that.”

There's nothing we need to do to it; there is nothing complicated about it. Do we not realize it because it is far away? No, it is not—rather, it is too near. It is so close to us that we already have it, but we do not realize this. For this reason we do not need to make up an essence to rest in; we rest within our own nature as it is. This is how we should meditate.

When I was young, I studied philosophy, including the middle way. Middle way texts talk a lot about different types of emptiness such as categorized emptiness, uncategorized emptiness, and so forth. When I asked Khenpo Lodrö Rabsal, “What is this? What does emptiness mean?” he said, “Don’t think so much about the outside. Think a bit about the inside, and that will help.”

“Ah,” I thought. “How can you do that? How can you think about the inside?” I did not understand what he meant. I thought there was probably nothing to think about on the inside.

Then later I met Khenpo Gangshar. Everyone said, “He is a strange lama. There’s something different about him. You get a different feeling from him.”

I wondered what they meant. The first time I saw him, there was no different feeling. I wondered what was going on and what was going to happen. Then he gave a pointing out of sorts. He asked, “Did you recognize anything?” but nothing happened. But as I spent some time in his presence, I had the thought, “Oh, this is it. This is the emptiness that Nagarjuna talked about, isn’t it!”

Before I had thought that emptiness was something far away, but then I came to see that emptiness is really close. This happened because of the blessings of the lama.

At that point I realized what Jamgön Kongtrul Rinpoche had meant by saying it was too near. I realized what he meant by saying it was too easy. The mind is not far away; it is within us. If you fiddle with it and alter it a lot, then it becomes fabricated. That doesn't work. The essence of the mind itself, however it may be, is just the way it is. We need to meditate by looking at it the way it is.

There are many different methods for pointing out the nature of mind through symbols and so forth. Often students gain some sort of feeling during these, but it is not very stable. But these instructions on resolving, or getting straight to meditation, are the best method to point out the nature of mind. You just get right down to the meditation. You put a lot of effort into it. You meditate. You think it over. You think about what the instructions say over and over again. Sometimes the feeling is clear, and sometimes it is unclear. But when it is unclear, you do not give up. Put effort into it and meditate, and then it will become stable. Of all the different ways to point out the nature of your mind, this is the best. ❀



Awakening “the One Who Knows”

The *Buddho* is “the one who knows in accordance with the truth.” **Ajahn Chah** (1918–1992) of the Thai Forest Tradition says this knowing frees us from the deception and suffering of untrained mind.

THERE ARE TWO WAYS to support Buddhism. One is known as *amisapuja*, supporting through material offerings. These are the four supports of food, clothing, shelter and medicine. The act of *amisapuja* supports Buddhism by giving material offerings to the sangha of monks and nuns, enabling them to live in reasonable comfort for the practice of dhamma. This fosters the direct realization of the Buddha’s teaching, in turn bringing continued prosperity to the Buddhist religion.

Buddhism can be likened to a tree. A tree has roots, a trunk, branches, twigs, and leaves. The leaves and branches depend on the roots to absorb nutriment from the soil. The words we speak

are like branches and leaves, which depend on a root—the mind—to absorb nutriment and send it out to them. These limbs in turn carry the fruit as our speech and actions. Whatever state the mind is in, skillful or unskillful, it expresses that quality outwardly through our actions and speech.

Therefore the support of Buddhism through the practical application of the teachings is the most important kind of support. For example, in the ceremony of taking the precepts on observance days, the teacher describes those unskillful actions that should be avoided. But if you simply go through the ceremony of taking the precepts without reflecting on their meaning, progress is difficult. You will be unable to find the true practice. The real support of Buddhism must therefore be done through *patipatti*, the “offering” of practice, cultivating true restraint, concentration and wisdom. Then you will know what Buddhism is all about. If you don’t understand through practice, you’ll never know, even if you learn the whole Tipitaka.

In the time of the Buddha there was a monk known as Tuccho Pothila. This monk was one of the Buddha’s most learned disciples, thoroughly versed in the scriptures and texts. He was so famous that he was revered by people everywhere and had eighteen monasteries under his care. When people heard the name “Tuccho Pothila” they were awestruck, and nobody would dare question anything he taught, so much did they revere his command of the teachings.

One day he went to pay respects to the Buddha. As he was paying his respects, the Buddha said, "Ah, hello, Venerable Empty Scripture!" Just like that! They conversed for a while until it was time to go, and then, as he was taking leave of the Buddha, the Buddha said, "Oh, leaving now, Venerable Empty Scripture?"

That was what the Buddha said. On arriving, "Oh, hello, Venerable Empty Scripture." When it was time to go, "Ah, leaving now, Venerable Empty Scripture?" That was the teaching the Buddha gave. Tuccho Pothila was puzzled, "Why did the Buddha say that? What did he mean?" He thought and thought, turning over everything he had learned, until eventually he realized, "It's true ! 'Venerable Empty Scripture'—that's me, a monk who studies but doesn't practice." When he looked into his heart he saw that really he was no different from lay people. Whatever they aspired to, he also aspired to; whatever they enjoyed, he also enjoyed. There was no real *samana* within him, no truly profound quality capable of firmly establishing him in the Noble Way and providing true peace.

So he decided to practice. But there was nowhere for him to go to. All the teachers around were his own students. No one would dare accept him. Usually when people meet their teacher they become timid and deferential, and so no one would dare to become his teacher.

Finally he went to see a certain young novice who was enlightened and asked to practice under him. The novice said, "Yes, sure you can practice with me, but only if you're sincere. If you're not sincere then I won't accept you." Tuccho Pothila pledged himself as a student of the novice.

The novice then told him to put on all his robes. Now there happened to be a muddy bog nearby. When Tuccho Pothila had carefully put on all his robes—expensive ones they were, too—the novice said, "Okay, now run down into that bog. If I don't tell you to stop, don't stop. If I don't tell you to come out, don't come out. Okay...run!"

Tuccho Pothila, neatly robed, plunged into the bog. The novice didn't tell him to stop until he was completely covered in mud. Finally the novice said, "You can stop now." So he stopped. "Okay, come on up!" And he came out.

Clearly Tuccho Pothila had given up his pride. He was ready to accept the teaching. If he hadn't been ready to learn, he wouldn't have run into the bog like that, being such a famous teacher. The young novice, seeing this, knew that Tuccho Pothila was sincerely determined to practice. So he gave him a teaching. He taught him to observe sense objects, using the simile of a man catching a lizard hiding in a termite mound. If the mound has six holes in it, how can he catch the lizard? He must seal off five of the holes and leave just one open. Then he simply has to wait and watch, guarding that one hole. When the lizard comes out he can catch it.

Observing the mind is like this. Closing off the eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body, we leave only the mind. To “close off” the senses means to restrain and compose them. Meditation is like catching the lizard. We use sati to note the breath. Sati is the quality of mindfulness, as in asking yourself, “What am I doing?” *Sampajanna* is the awareness that “now I am doing such and such.” We observe the in and out breathing with sati and sampajanna.



Closing off the eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body, we leave only the mind.

This quality of mindfulness is something that arises from practice. It’s not something that can be learned from books. Know the feelings that arise. The mind may be fairly inactive for a while and then a feeling arises. Sati works in conjunction with these feelings, recollecting them. There is sati—the mindfulness that “I will speak,” “I will go,” “I will sit,” and so on—and then there is sampajanna—the awareness that “now I am walking,” “I am lying down,” “I am experiencing such and such a mood.” With these two things, sati and sampajanna, we can know our minds in the present moment. We will know how the mind reacts to sense impressions.

That which is aware of sense objects is called “mind.” Sense objects wander into the mind. A sound, for instance, enters through the ear and travels inward to the mind, which acknowledges that it is the sound of a bird, a car, or whatever. Now this mind that acknowledges the sound is still quite basic. It’s just the average mind. Perhaps annoyance arises within this one who

acknowledges. We must further train “the one who acknowledges” to become “the one who knows in accordance with the truth”—known as *Buddho*. If we don’t clearly know in accordance with the truth, then we get annoyed by the sounds of people, cars, machinery, and so on. The ordinary, untrained mind acknowledges the sound with annoyance. It knows in accordance with its preferences, not in accordance with the truth. We must further train it to know with vision and insight, or *nanadassana*, the power of the refined mind, so that it knows the sound as simply sound. If we don’t cling to a sound, there is no annoyance. The sound arises and we simply note it. This is called truly knowing the arising of sense objects. If we develop the *Buddho*, clearly realizing the sound as sound, then it doesn’t annoy us. It arises according to conditions; it is not a being, an individual, a self, an “us” or “them.” It’s just sound. The mind lets go.

This clear and penetrating knowing is called *Buddho*. With it we can let the sound simply be sound. It doesn’t disturb us unless we disturb it by thinking, “I don’t want to hear that sound, it’s annoying.” Suffering arises because of this attitude. Right here is the cause of suffering: we don’t know the truth of this matter; we haven’t developed the *Buddho*. We are not yet clear, not yet awake, not yet aware. Such is the raw, untrained mind, a mind that is not yet truly useful.

We must develop the mind, just as we develop the body. To develop the body we must exercise it, jogging in the morning and evening and so on. Soon the body becomes more agile, stronger;

the respiratory and nervous systems become more efficient. Exercising the mind is different. Instead of moving it around, we bring it to a halt, bring it to rest.

For instance, when practicing meditation we take an object such as the in- and out-breaths as our foundation. This becomes the focus of our attention and reflection. We note the breathing, which means that we follow the breathing with awareness, noting its rhythm, its coming and going, and let go of all else. As a result of staying on one object of awareness, our mind becomes refreshed. If we let the mind wander to this or that, however, it cannot unify itself or come to a place of rest.

To say the mind "stops" means that it feels as if it's stopped: it doesn't go running here and there. It's like having a sharp knife. If we use the knife to cut at things indiscriminately, such as stones, bricks and grass, our knife will quickly become blunt. We should use it for cutting only the things it was meant for. Similarly, if we let the mind wander after thoughts and feelings that have no value or use, the mind becomes tired and weak. If the mind has no energy, wisdom will not arise, because a mind without energy is a mind without samadhi.

If the mind hasn't stopped you can't clearly see the sense objects for what they are. The knowledge that the mind is the mind, and sense objects are merely sense objects, is the root from which Buddhism has grown and developed. This is the heart of Buddhism. When we look at ourselves and the way we behave, we are just like little children. A child doesn't know anything. To an

adult observing the behavior of a child, the way it plays and jumps around, its actions don't seem to have much purpose. If our mind is untrained, it is like a child. We speak without awareness and act without wisdom. We may fall into ruin or cause untold harm and not even know it.

So we should train this mind. The Buddha taught us to train the mind, to teach it. Even if we support Buddhism with the four requisites, our support is still superficial; it reaches only the bark or sapwood of the tree. The real support, the heartwood of Buddhism, comes through the practice and from nowhere else: from training our actions, speech and thoughts according to the teachings. This is much more fruitful. If we are straight and honest, possessed of restraint and wisdom, our practice will bring prosperity. There will be no cause for spite and hostility. This is what our religion teaches us.

If we take the precepts simply out of tradition, then even though our teacher imparts the truth, our practice will be deficient. We may study the teachings and be able to repeat them, but if we really want to understand them we have to practice. Failure to practice may well be an obstacle to our penetrating to the heart of Buddhism for countless lifetimes to come.

Therefore the practice is like the key to a trunk. If we have the right key in hand, the key of meditation, no matter how tightly the lock is closed, when we take the key and turn it, the lock falls open. If we have no key we can't open the lock. We will never know what is in the trunk.

Actually, there are two kinds of knowledge. One who knows the dhamma doesn't simply speak from memory; he or she speaks the truth. Worldly people usually speak from memory; and what's more, they usually speak with conceit. For example, suppose there are two people who haven't seen each other for a long time. One day they happen to meet on the train. "Oh! What a surprise," says one. "I was just thinking of looking you up!" Actually it's not true. Really, they hadn't thought of each other at all, but they say so out of excitement. And so it becomes a lie. Yes, it's lying out of heedlessness. This is lying without knowing it. It's a subtle form of defilement, and it happens very often.

So with regard to the mind, Tuccho Pothila followed the instructions of the novice: breathing in, breathing out, mindfully aware of each breath, until he saw the liar within him, the lying of his own mind. He saw the defilements as they came up, just like the lizard coming out of the termite mound. He saw them and perceived their true nature as soon as they arose. He noticed how one minute the mind would concoct one thing, the next moment something else.

Thinking is a *sankhata dhamma*, something that is created or concocted from supporting conditions. It's not *asankhata dhamma*, the unconditioned. The well-trained mind, one with perfect awareness, does not concoct mental states. This kind of mind penetrates to the Noble Truths and transcends any need to depend on externals. To know the Noble Truths is to know the truth. The proliferating mind tries to avoid this truth, saying,

“That’s good” or “This is beautiful”; but if there is Buddho in the mind, it can no longer deceive us, because we know the mind as it is. The mind can no longer create deluded mental states, because there is the clear awareness that all mental states are unstable, imperfect and a source of suffering to one who clings to them.

“ The well-trained mind, one with perfect awareness, does not concoct mental states. This kind of mind penetrates to the Noble Truths and transcends any need to depend on externals. To know the Noble Truths is to know the truth.

Wherever he went, the “one who knows” was constantly in Tuccho Pothila’s mind. He observed the various creations and proliferations of the mind with understanding. He saw how the mind lied in so many ways. He grasped the essence of the practice: “This lying mind is the one to watch—this is the mind that leads us into extremes of happiness and suffering and causes us to endlessly spin around in the cycle of samsara, with its pleasure and pain, good and evil.” Tuccho Pothila realized the truth, and grasped the essence of the practice, just like a man grasping the tail of the lizard.

It’s the same for us all. Only this mind is important. That’s why we train the mind. Now, what are we going to train it with? By having continuous sati and sampajanna we will be able to

know the mind. This "one who knows" is a step beyond the mind; it is that which knows the state of the mind. That which knows the mind as simply mind is the "one who knows." The "one who knows" is above the mind, and that is how it is able to look after the mind, to teach the mind to know what is right and what is wrong. In the end everything comes back to this proliferating mind. If the mind is caught up in its proliferations, there is no awareness and the practice is fruitless.

So we must train this mind to hear the dhamma, to cultivate the Buddhho, the clear and radiant awareness, that which exists above and beyond the ordinary mind and knows all that goes on within it. This is why we meditate on the word Buddhho, so that we can know the mind beyond the mind. Just observe all the mind's movements, whether good or bad, until the "one who knows" realizes that the mind is simply mind, not a self or a person. This is called *cittanupassana*, contemplation of mind. Seeing in this way we will understand that the mind is transient, imperfect and ownerless.

We can summarize thus: the mind is that which acknowledges sense objects, which are distinct from the mind; the "one who knows" knows both the mind and the sense objects for what they are. We must use sati to constantly cleanse the mind. Everybody has sati. Even a cat has it when it's going to catch a mouse; a dog has it when it barks at someone. This is a form of sati, but it's not sati according to the dhamma. Everybody has sati; but there are different levels of it, just as there are different levels of looking at

things. For example, when I tell people to contemplate the body, some say, “What is there to contemplate in the body? Anybody can see it—hair, nails, teeth and skin we can see already. So what?”

This is how people are. They can see the body all right, but their seeing is faulty; they don’t see with the Buddho, the “one who knows,” the awakened one. They only see the body in the ordinary way; they see it visually. Simply to see the body is not enough. If we only see the body there is trouble. You must see the body within the body; then things become much clearer. Just seeing the body, you get fooled by it, charmed by its appearance. Not seeing transience, imperfection and ownerlessness, *kam-achanda* (sense desire) arises. You become fascinated by forms, sounds, odors, flavors and feelings. Seeing in this way is to see with the mundane eye of the flesh, causing you to love and hate, and discriminate into pleasing and unpleasing.

The Buddha taught us that we must see with the “mind’s eye.” See the body within the body. If you really look into the body... ugh! It’s so repulsive. There are today’s things and yesterday’s things all mixed up in there; you can’t tell what’s what. Seeing in this way is much clearer than seeing with the physical eye, with this crazy eye that looks only at things it wants to see. Contemplate with the eye of the mind, with the wisdom eye.

This is the practice that can uproot clinging to the five *khandhas*—form, feeling, perception, mental formations and sense consciousness. To uproot attachment is to uproot suffering, because attaching to the five *khandhas* is the cause of suffering. If

suffering arises it is here, at the attachment to the five khandhas. It's not that the five khandhas are in themselves suffering, but the clinging to them as being one's own—that's suffering.

If you clearly see the truth of these things through meditation practice, then suffering becomes unwound, like a screw or a bolt. When a bolt is unscrewed, it withdraws. The mind unwinds in the same way, letting go, withdrawing from the obsession with good and evil, possessions, praise and status, happiness and suffering.

If we don't know the truth of these things it's like tightening the screw all the time. It gets tighter and tighter until it's crushing you and you suffer over everything. When you know how things are, you loosen the screw. In dhamma language we call this the arising of *nibbida*, disenchantment. You become weary of things and lay down the fascination with them. If you unwind in this way you will find peace.

People have only one problem—the problem of clinging. Just because of this one thing people will kill each other. All problems, be they individual, family or social, arise from this one root. Nobody wins; they kill each other but in the end no one gets anything. Gain and loss, praise and criticism, status and loss of status, happiness and suffering—these are the worldly dhammas. These dhammas engulf worldly beings; they are troublemakers. If you don't reflect on their true nature, you will suffer. People even commit murder for the sake of wealth, status or power. Why? Because they take them too seriously. They get appointed to some position and it goes to their heads, like the man who became

headman of the village. After his appointment he became drunk with power. If any of his old friends came to see him he'd say, "Don't come around so often. Things aren't the same anymore."

The Buddha taught us to understand the nature of possessions, status, praise and happiness. Take these things as they come but let them be. Don't let them go to your head. If you don't really understand these things, you'll be fooled by your power, by your children and relatives...by everything! If you understand them clearly, you know they're all impermanent conditions. If you cling to them they become defiled.

When people are first born there are simply *nama* (nonmaterial or mental phenomena) and *rupa* (material or physical objects), that's all. We add on the business of "Mr. Jones," "Miss Smith," or whatever later on. This is done according to convention. Still later there are the appendages of "Colonel," "Doctor," and so on. If we don't really understand these things we think they are real and carry them around with us. We carry possessions, status, name and rank around. If you have power, you can call all the tunes. "Take this one and execute him. Take that one and throw him in jail." Rank gives power. This word "rank" here is where clinging takes hold. As soon as people get rank they start giving orders; right or wrong, they just act on their moods. So they go on making the same old mistakes, deviating further and further from the true path. One who understands the dhamma won't behave like this. If possessions and status come your way, let them simply be

possessions and status. Don't let them become your identity. Just use them to fulfill your obligations and leave it at that. You remain unchanged.

This is how the Buddha wanted us to understand things. No matter what you receive, the mind adds nothing on to it. They appoint you a city councilor: "Okay, so I'm a city councilor...but I'm not." They appoint you head of a committee: "Sure I'm head, but I'm not." Whatever they make of you: "Yes I am, but I'm not." In the end, what are we anyway? We all just die in the end. No matter what they make you, in the end it's all the same. What can you say? If you can see things in this way you will have a solid abiding and true contentment. Nothing is changed.

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In the end, what are we anyway? We all just die in the end. No matter what they make you, in the end it's all the same.

This is to be not fooled by things. Whatever comes your way, it's just conditions. There's nothing that can entice a mind like this to create or proliferate, to seduce it into greed, aversion or delusion.

Now this is to be a true supporter of Buddhism. Whether you are among those who are being supported (the Sangha) or those who are supporting (the laity), please consider this thoroughly. Cultivate the *sila-dhamma* within you. This is the surest way to support Buddhism. To support Buddhism with the offerings of

food, shelter and medicine is good also, but such offerings only reach the sapwood of Buddhism. A tree has bark, sapwood and heartwood, and these three parts are interdependent. The heartwood relies on the bark and the sapwood; the sapwood relies on the bark and the heartwood. They all exist interdependently, just like the teachings of *sila*, *samadhi* and *panna*—moral discipline, concentration and wisdom. Moral discipline establishes your speech and actions in rectitude. Concentration firmly fixes the mind. Wisdom thoroughly understands the nature of all conditions. Study this, practice this, and you will understand Buddhism in the most profound way.

If you don't realize these things you will be fooled by possessions, fooled by rank, fooled by anything you come into contact with. We must consider our lives and bring them in line with the teaching. We should reflect that all beings in the world are part of one whole. We are like them, they are like us. They have happiness and suffering just like we do. It's all much the same. If we reflect in this way, peace and understanding will arise. This is the foundation of Buddhism. 🌸

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Meditation Only Goes So Far

If you want to connect with the open, spacious quality of mind, says **Lama Willa Miller**, at some point you have to stop trying to meditate.

ONE HOT SUMMER evening several years ago, I found myself listening to a teaching in a meditation hall in upstate New York, an activity that had become far too rare at that point in my life. A hush came over the crowd as the diminutive teacher entered the room and took his seat. “Do you want to know the secret to meditation?” he asked.

Vigorous nods answered his question. Who doesn’t like to be in on a secret?

“Okay,” he said, “but first we need to prepare to meditate. Get comfortable on your cushion. Straighten your back. Lower your gaze. Relax your shoulders. Take a few slow, deep breaths...” He demonstrated.

There was a shuffle around the room as people shifted, pushed cushions into place, straightened up, sighed deeply. After a minute or so, the fidgeting settled.

“Okay, now—” The teacher paused for effect. “Listen closely. I am going to share a secret with you.” A palpable sense of anticipation settled over the room.

“Are you sure you’re ready?” He was teasing us a little. Glancing up, I could see that he was smiling, enjoying our expectation.

“All right. The secret to meditation is—”

He paused again to heighten our anticipation.

“Don’t meditate.”

He drew out the word “don’t” slowly.

After pausing again to let the instruction sink in, he added, “Instead, just be present, as you are, right here, right now. No grasping. Nothing more needs to be done.”

I’m not sure what others in the room experienced, but for me there was a sudden shift. I felt myself falling into a space of being acutely, vividly, and simply aware.

Dropping the Meditation Project

The instruction to not meditate may sound a bit scandalous in the Buddhist context we inhabit, but it is in fact nothing new. The hermeneutic of nonmeditation has roots as far back as the tenth century and the Indian master Tilopa, the founder of the Kagyu tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. He sings about non-meditation in his *dohas* (spiritual songs) and other instruction manuals.

“Meditate alone in the forest and mountain retreats. Remain in the state of non-meditation,” he teaches in the Mahamudra instruction to Naropa.

How can one meditate and not meditate at the same time? While it sounds like a paradox, it begins to make sense when you consider that non-meditation is a kind of meditation—but in this practice we leave behind complicated notions of what we are doing on the cushion. In non-meditation practice, there is no call to become extraordinary, no urge to change what is. Instead there is permission to accept your experience of the moment and drop the project of meditation.

Mahamudra, or “the great seal”—along with Dzogchen, “the great perfection”—is one of the simplest forms of meditation in the Tibetan tradition. In its most essential form, it is the art of just being. It is also one of the most difficult practices to successfully cultivate precisely because it is so simple.

We are naturally complex creatures, prone to taking a simple moment of experience—a sensory experience, a thought, or a feeling—and spinning a web of concepts around it. It is a real challenge, for example, to simply observe a thought without getting involved in its orbit. We tend to follow, resist, or judge our thoughts. Pretty soon, what started as a simple thought becomes a complex network of concepts and ideas accompanied by a swirling eddy of emotion and reactivity.

The same goes for our relationship to meditation. It is challenging for us to take a simple instruction such as “meditate on the breath every day” and just do it. Instead, we get involved in a vortex of thinking about the practice, framing the practice, resisting the practice, and comparing and judging our practice against a perceived ideal. Sometimes we even create a new identity around meditation practice. Whereas before we called ourselves a nurse, a teacher, a barista, or a jogger, now we are—in addition—a mediator, with all the self-concepts that accompany that label.

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In non-meditation, our projections, beliefs, and opinions are held lightly, and the vibrant space around and within them becomes the refuge.

Meditation, in other words, is not only a practice; it is also a conceptual construct that carries weight in our life. That construct may have surprisingly little to do with the practice itself, yet we bring it with us as a subtle companion when we sit on the cushion.

The practice of non-meditation hastens recognition of this kind of conceptual baggage. It helps us see that concepts about what we are doing can sometimes inhibit the actual practice. When we drop the very thing we think we should be doing, suddenly the weight of everything we’ve been carrying becomes apparent. Ideas, we discover, can be heavy.

The instruction “Don’t meditate” invites us to shine a light around and through the construct of meditation. As we explore non-meditation as a way of being, we might even suspend our meditation practice for a while and cease to live by its rules. Meditation is a doorway to freedom, but it will always be a doorway, not the destination. When we drop the project of meditation and suspend allegiance to a construct, we can rest in our immediate experience, just as it is, free from the filter of interpretation. This is important, because immediate experience holds the key to our freedom.

Non-Meditation Practice

The first time I heard the term “non-meditation” was in 1987, in a packed room near Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, when Kalu Rinpoche introduced the “Three Gates to Liberation,” three key instructions on how to practice Mahamudra. They are not instructions for what to do but rather for what not to do. The practice, he told us, was this:

Do not fabricate
Do not meditate
Do not be distracted

In essence, Rinpoche explained, authentic practice is discovered when we let go and stop trying so hard. He taught that the heart of these three is nonmeditation, which involves the discovery of non-volitional space—a place where we drop striving and trust the fullness of what is already present.

When practicing non-meditation, we are not trying to accomplish a task or tether our mind to something, such as the breath. But we are not giving up either. So what are we doing? The short answer is that we are not doing—we are being. The initial task of non-meditation is to find a home in the present moment and let go of holding on to anything whatsoever. If there is a mantra of non-meditation, perhaps it is let go, let go, let go. We let go of intentions, schemes, expectations, projects, and grasping.

When we practice letting go again and again in this way, a spacious quality of mind that is naturally open and free emerges from the background of our consciousness into the foreground of our experience. If we can stay with the freshness of what is unfolding, aspects of our being conditioned by grasping and reactivity are gradually able to release.

Honing the skill of becoming a consummate nondoer does not mean becoming passive. It also does not mean our cognitive constructions—about meditation or anything else—vanish. Being, we discover, is not the antithesis of doing. Doing exists in the womb of being. So the practice of non-meditation is not so much an escape from constructions as it is a practice of noticing there is a great deal more to our experience than the constructions alone.

In non-meditation, our projections, beliefs, and opinions are held lightly, and the vibrant space around and within them becomes the refuge. In everyday life, we focus on the content of the mind's activity. In non-meditation, we focus on the energy of the mind's activity. From that vantage point, thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and so on are just pure dynamic energy, neither good nor bad, neither right nor wrong. When we notice this, we ease up on ourselves. We become more aware of the relativity of our thoughts and are able to disentangle ourselves from them, which enables us to be less reactive to whatever is happening, inside or out. We trust the energy of thought more than its content and can therefore have a sense of humor about the antics of our own mind.

Natural Awareness Is Already Present

One of the assumptions I long carried with me as a meditator was that I am not good enough as I am. As a result, for many years I operated under the notion that meditation would fix me and make me a better, more peaceful person. Many of us carry this notion deep down; we tend to come to the spiritual path wanting to make our lives and ourselves better.

In other words, when we embark on a project of meditation, we do so with a belief that it will lead us to a future state of peace. In Mahamudra practice, however, the goal is not a future peace. While the aspiration to attain inner peace or to be free from

suffering may seem perfectly natural, there is a subtle kind of violence—and also a deep misunderstanding—in the notion that we are not sufficient as we are.

A basic tenet of Buddhism is that our innermost being is already aware, clear, and unwavering. Not in the future, but right now. In some traditions, this fully wise, awake aspect is called buddhanature. In Mahamudra practice, it is called natural awareness. Natural awareness is not a state; it is fundamental to who we are. We meditate in order to witness this clarity, spaciousness, and compassion as our innermost being.

When we first sit on the cushion, we may have trouble believing there is anything of that nature in a chaotic mind full of churning thoughts and feelings. But as we sit more and more, eventually we discover that a very subtle, quiet awareness is watching the chaos. Natural awareness is not thrown off by the chaos of the relative mind. It remains grounded in every moment of experience, not separate from what it sees; it is a selfless, non-dual watcher. It is completely ordinary and present in the now.

To experience this quiet watcher, we practice carefully observing the fundamental ground of present experience, the home and essence of the watcher. To the degree that meditation supports this reflexive gaze, it supports the recognition of natural awareness. But to the degree that meditation is future- or goal-oriented, it takes us away from natural awareness.

Right Here in This Wild Mind

In order to stay with a process of subtle self-observation, a commitment to tolerance is necessary. We have to become okay with our mind just as it is. Awakening is not found anywhere other than within this wild mind—not in the future nor in the past. So we need to find some friendliness toward everything arising in the mind. We cannot explore the truth of the mind while judging or reacting to it.

Non-meditation involves letting everything—the messiness and chaos—be there, creating a holding environment for the mind’s gymnastics without suppressing, fixing, judging, or getting carried away by them. The practice of non-meditation is a practice of deeply accepting the truth of our present experience. This requires a great deal of patience and love.

This love and friendliness is well worth cultivating because as it turns out, the messiness itself is not a problem in need of fixing. Our messiness harbors the essence of natural awareness. We tend to believe that chaos is not fundamental to who we are, but in fact our chaos cannot be separated out from its ground and distilled into something more “pure.” Natural awareness saturates it. So the practice is not to escape, suppress, or fix our mind but to see natural awareness within our wild mind.

If our practice is to simply notice natural awareness, a quality of mind that is already present right here and now within every moment, then it is counterproductive to try to make something special happen—even to bring about a meditation state (*jhana*) or

meditative stability. Those practices, so prevalent in Buddhism, draw us toward thinking about a before and an after, pursuing special states of being.

Natural awareness has no before and after; it is already awake. It is already happening. It cannot happen later. There is no special event, other than noticing with increasing depth and intensity what is happening right now. Sometimes natural awareness is also called “ordinary awareness,” emphasizing that it is nothing exotic or special. It is ever-present and ordinary, a constant reality. And yet to witness something this subtle directly is extraordinary and the essence of awakening.

So there is nothing to be cultivated in Mahamudra except this subtle turn of attention to what is already there, to something that we already are. Adding something onto our already present awareness, something that is labeled “meditation,” becomes a distraction.

Always a Fresh Experience

The Tibetan word for meditation is *gom*, which essentially means “to get used to something by repeating it.” When we meditate, we return to a technique again and again. This familiar return can be comfortable, but it can become repetitive or even boring, resulting in resistance to the practice itself. What can we do about this boredom and resistance?

Just as meditation carries the implication of repetition, the term “non-meditation” carries the implication that every time we sit we are not repeating the same thing again and again. We are observing something totally new in every moment. Every time you sit down, there is an encouragement to consider this meditation session as your very first. Simply by reframing our practice as non-repetition, we can acquaint ourselves with the uniqueness of each meditation session.

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The aspiration to attain inner peace may seem perfectly natural, but there is a subtle kind of violence and deep misunderstanding in the notion that we are not sufficient as we are.

In Mahamudra meditation, the present moment of awareness becomes our meditation “object.” Instead of doing something, we practice dropping effort and just resting in the here and now. If we are really in the present moment, a sense of adventure will often spontaneously arise, because anything can happen. There is an unpredictable unfolding of experience—feelings, perceptions, sounds, thoughts—as we ride the wave of now.

The past cannot be found anywhere. The future is also a fiction. This moment is indeed the only moment that has ever happened. In the practice of non-meditation, when you sit down it is the first and only time you have ever practiced. In the Mahamudra

tradition, we find the term *soma*, which means “fresh,” and it refers to the truth of the newness of our present experience. If we can find freshness in our sitting practice, it remains dynamic, adventurous, and joyful. We can reclaim that sense of discovery and excitement that we began with as practitioners.

What About Meditation?

With all this talk of non-meditation, you might wonder if there is room for a practice of meditation in this alternate universe. The answer is most definitely yes. If we can step out of the construct of meditation, enter the present moment of experience with deep acceptance, and dwell in the territory of natural awareness, that is excellent. But can we stay there? Most of us cannot remain in the open ocean for long without needing a life raft. Shamatha and vipassana practices serve as a life raft, allowing us to develop focus and relaxation that we can bring to open awareness.

In Mahamudra, distraction does not mean straying from focus on an object. Distraction means straying from the relaxed, non-conceptual freshness of our present experience. When we get enmeshed in the past or future, we are distracted. When we grasp, we are distracted. Being undistracted in Mahamudra practice is a very subtle skill, much harder to master than the non-distraction of conventional shamatha. Fortunately, shamatha can strengthen the muscle of mindfulness, focus, and relaxation,

helping us recognize what it means to be distracted and what it means to be focused before we work on the subtle art of staying grounded in wakeful presence.

What this means in daily practice is that focused shamatha is frequently used within a session as a kind of “tune-up” for the mind’s attention. After focusing on the breath for a while, we then open up to a panoramic awareness of our present experience. From there, with more powerful attention, we can begin to explore the subtleties of innate natural awareness. In this way, on the heels of focused meditation, we can often stay in non-meditation with more focus and stability, and for a longer duration.

In Mahamudra training, this alternation continues for a long time. Therefore, while nonmeditation is classified as the main practice in the Mahamudra tradition, meditation is an important supportive practice. We might say that meditation and non-meditation need each other.

Non-Meditation as Fruition

This mutual reliance of meditation and non-meditation is reflected in descriptions of the fruition of Mahamudra practice, which is often expressed as a gradual refinement of consciousness unfolding as four stages of development called “the four yogas of Mahamudra.” The four yogas are essentially four phases that a yogi progressively goes through when engaging in long-term practice. These stages are one-pointedness, simplicity, equal taste, and non-meditation.

One-pointedness is a state of focus in which the mind can stay with something without wavering for a long period of time. Simplicity is a state in which the mind's tendency to complicate things begins to dissolve naturally. At the stage of equal taste, the highs and lows of meditation, and of life generally, lose their volatility. Non-meditation is a level at which a yogi no longer needs to engage in meditation at all. The state of non-grasping and open relaxation is the yogi's baseline.

In the fruitional schema of Mahamudra, it becomes apparent that there is a difference between the practice of nonmeditation and its full blossoming. Fully blossoming non-meditation seems to be a developmental achievement, requiring time and a great deal of commitment over the long term. To really experience this blossoming, the mind needs to learn how to focus (one-pointedness) and release the tendency to grasp at the content of the mind (simplicity). The practitioner also needs to develop stable equanimity toward all experiences (equal taste). When the meditator has mastered those skills to the point where it changes their ongoing conscious experience, there is a possibility for authentic non-meditation to blossom.

A Paradigm Shift

Lately I have been tempted to answer the question “Do you meditate?” with the answer “Yes and no.”

Do I sit? Yes. Do I watch my breath? Yes. Do I meditate? I hesitate to answer this question in the affirmative anymore because it is only a part of the picture.

This feels sacrilegious. How improper to be a dharma teacher who does not meditate! But this is the truth. I cannot answer “Yes” in good faith, because what the asker means by “meditation” is quite possibly not my main practice. I like to think of practice in other terms, as a kind of homecoming—a way of being present, of being in my body, of being in sacred relationship.

If we can find freshness in our sitting practice, we can reclaim that sense of discovery we began with as practitioners.

At a retreat I attended recently, Tsoknyi Rinpoche shared an old Mahamudra saying: “Sentient beings are not enlightened because they don’t meditate. Yogis are not enlightened because they do.” In other words, we need meditation to develop concentration, focus, calm, and simplicity. We need it to become more awake. But we do not need it forever. Eventually we must let go of technique and commit to the freedom it represents. Otherwise, like the yogis in the saying, we may interfere with our own enlightenment.

In a similar vein, in the *Alagaddupama Sutta*, the Buddha famously compares the dharma to a raft. You need the raft of dharma, he says, to get to the other shore of enlightenment.

But once there, it makes no sense to carry the boat on dry land. Applying the same logic, meditation stabilizes states of concentration, relaxation, and ease in our mind. But once there, it may not serve to carry techniques beyond their useful life.

But how do we know when it's time to let go? The answer, the masters say, is found in innate natural awareness. Natural awareness, when we glimpse it, requires a paradigm shift: we must relinquish control and trust in natural awareness to drive the practice, rather than the other way around. At that point, while we may indeed continue to sail the waters and even—Buddha willing—reach the other shore, we will discover that we have always been standing on the same old ground. ❀



Without Center or Limit

Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche (1920–1996) on the primordial union of emptiness and awareness, the space-like nature of mind.

MIND IS NOT A THING that has physical form, sound, smell, taste or texture. Mind is empty. Space is also empty. No matter where you go in space, there is no limit, no boundary, no edge. If you were to travel in a space ship in a single direction for a hundred billion years, you would not reach the end of space. It's the same with the other directions—you can travel forever, and you'll still never reach a place where space ends.

Now, how can something without limits have a center? It can't, can it? That is why it is taught that space has no center and no edge. The Buddha used space to point at how mind is. He said that mind is empty like space: that just as space has no limits in any direction, mind has no center or edge. As a matter of fact, wherever there is space, mind is present. And Buddha taught that

throughout space, wherever space reaches, there are sentient beings. And wherever there are sentient beings there are disturbing emotions and the creation of karma. And wherever there is the creation of disturbing emotion and karma, there is also buddha nature. The awakened mind of the buddhas is all-pervasive.



The indivisible unity of being empty and cognizant is our original ground that is never lost.

As sentient beings, we think, we remember, we plan—and the attention thus exerted moves towards an object and sticks to it. This mental movement is called thinking or conceptual mind. We have many different expressions in Tibetan to describe the functioning of this basic attitude of mind, of this extroverted consciousness unaware of its own nature. This ignorant mind grabs hold of objects, forms concepts about them, and gets involved and caught up in the concepts it has created. This is the nature of samsara, and it has been continuing through beginningless lifetimes up to the present moment.

All these involvements are merely fabricated creations; they are not the natural state. They are based on the concepts of subject and object, perceiver and perceived. This dualistic structure, together with the disturbing emotions and the karma that is produced through them, are the forces that drive us from one samsaric experience to another. Yet all the while, there is still the basic nature, which is not made out of anything whatsoever. It is

totally unconstructed and empty, and at the same time it is aware: it has the quality of being able to cognize. This indivisible unity of being empty and cognizant is our original ground that is never lost.

What we are missing is the recognition that our natural state is the indivisible unity of emptiness and cognizance. We miss that recognition because our mind is always searching somewhere else. We do not acknowledge our actual cognizant presence, and instead are always preoccupied by looking elsewhere, outside of ourselves. And we perpetuate this process continuously. Shantideva said, “Unless you know the secret key point, whatever you do will miss the mark.” The secret key point of mind is that its nature is a self-existing, original wakefulness. To identify the key point we need to receive the pointing-out instruction, in which the master tells and shows us that: “The nature of your mind is the buddha mind itself.” Right now we are like the dim-witted person who lost himself in downtown Kathmandu, who runs around wailing, “I’ve lost myself. Where am I?” The pointing-out instruction is just like telling him, “You are you!” Through beginningless samsara, sentient beings have never found themselves until somebody says, “You are right here.” This is a metaphor for introducing the secret key point of mind.

If it weren’t for the buddhas’ teachings, all sentient beings would be totally lost, because they need to be pointed towards that basic ground which is always present, but never acknowledged. That is the purpose of the pointing-out instruction,

literally, the “instruction bringing you face-to-face with your own essence.” This instruction is given impressive great names like *Mahamudra*, the Great Middle Way (*Madhyamika*), or the Great Perfection (*Dzogchen*). All of these teachings point towards the same basic nature. They are the exact opposite of the conceptual thinking that holds a subject and object—the dualistic frame of mind that is unaware of its own nature.



Our mind is spacious, wide-open and empty, yet it still feels pleasure and pain.

It doesn't have to be this way. We can know our own nature. We can realize it by applying the pith instructions of *Mahamudra*, the Great Middle Way, and the Great Perfection. Even though our nature is primordially enlightened, we are oblivious to that fact. Therefore we need to become reenlightened. First we need to recognize; next, train in that recognition; and finally, attain stability. Once we are reenlightened, we no longer need to wander in *samsara*.

The buddha nature is the very identity within which the body, speech, mind, qualities and activities of all buddhas are complete. The unchanging quality is called the vajra body, the unceasing quality is called the vajra speech, and the undeluded quality is called vajra mind. The indivisible unity of the three is exactly what is meant by buddha nature. It is out of the expression of these that the body, speech and mind of all beings appear. In fact, the body,

speech and mind of any sentient being have the same origin as the body, speech and mind of the awakened ones. Body, speech and mind cannot come from earth, or stone, or matter.

Not recognizing in our own experience the unchanging quality of this buddha nature, we entered into the encasement of a physical body of flesh and blood. Our speech became wrapped within the movement of breath to become voice and words. It appears and disappears. Consciousness began to hold a perceiver as separate from the perceived. In other words, it became a fixation on duality, a stop-and-start process that arises and ceases in each moment. Thoughts come continuously, one after the other, like an endless string. This endless string of thought has continued from beginningless time and just goes on and on. That is how the normal state of mind is. If we don't now recognize our own nature in this lifetime, we fail to capture our natural seat of unchanging, self-existing wakefulness. Instead, we chase after one perishing thought after the other, like chasing after each new bead on the string. This is how samsara becomes endless. While we are governed by this involvement in thought, we are truly helpless.

Who can stop samsara for us? There is nobody but ourselves. Even if all the sentient beings of the six realms were lined up and you cried, "Please, help me, so I can stop being overpowered by my own thinking!"—even then, not a single one of them could help. How sad that we are controlled by this involvement in thought, day and night, life after life! We could try to blow up a nuclear bomb to stop samsara, but it still wouldn't help. Nuclear

bombs can destroy cities, even countries, but they cannot stop the mind from thinking. Unless we become free of conceptual thinking, there is absolutely no way to end samsara and truly awaken to enlightenment.

Great peace is when the conceptual thinking subsides, calms down. There is a way for that to happen. Thoughts are actually an expression of the buddha nature. They are expressions of our natural face. If we truly recognize buddha nature, in that very same moment, any thought will vanish by itself, leaving no trace. This is what brings an end to samsara. There is a supreme method to do this. Once we know that method, there is nothing superior we need to know. This way is already at hand in ourselves. It is not something that we need to get from someone else—it is not something we need to buy, bribe, or search for and finally achieve. Such effort is not necessary at all. Once you recognize your own natural face, you have already transcended the six realms of samsara.

What is the method? It is what one asks for when requesting a master to give instructions on how to recognize mind essence and train in it. Our mind essence is incredibly precious. It is the natural inheritance we possess right now. Receiving teachings on how to recognize the essence of mind and correctly apply them is called “the Buddha being placed in the palm of your own hand.” That analogy means that at the moment of being introduced and recognizing, you don’t have to seek for the awakened state somewhere else. Line up all the money, all the wealth in the whole world in one big heap and put it on one side. On the other side put

the recognition of buddha nature, the nature of your own mind. What is most valuable? If you are going to somehow compare the two, I can promise you that recognizing mind essence, the “amazing buddha within,” is more valuable, a billion times more valuable.

What is of true value? We need to think about this for ourselves. When we do business and make a profit, we rejoice. If we have a loss, we fall into despair. Let’s compare our business capital to our buddha nature, which is like a wish-fulfilling jewel. If we don’t use this wish-fulfilling jewel, endless samsara lies before us. Isn’t it just incredibly stupid to throw away our fortune—and troublesome as well? We need to think about this. I am not reciting this from memory. It is not a lie either. This is the real, crucial point. If we didn’t have a buddha nature, nobody could blame us.

But we do have buddha nature, a buddha nature that is the identity of the three *kayas* [bodies] of all buddhas. However, as Jamgon Kongtrul said:

*Although my mind is the Buddha, I don’t recognize it.
Although my thinking is dharmakaya, I don’t realize it.
Although nonfabrication is the innate, I fail to sustain it.
Although naturalness is the basic state, I am not convinced.
Guru, think of me. Quickly, look upon me with compassion!
Bless me so that natural awareness is liberated into itself.*

In this world, nothing is more essential than mind, except for one thing: the nature of this mind, buddha nature. All sentient beings have this nature, without a single exception. This buddha nature is

present in everyone, from the primordial buddha Samantabhadra down to the tiniest insect, even the smallest entities you can only see through a microscope. In all of these, the buddha nature is identical. There is no difference in size or quality—not at all. Buddha nature never differs in terms of quality or quantity. It is not like Samantabhadra has a large buddha nature and a small insect has a small one, or that the Buddha has a superior buddha nature and a fly an inferior one; there is no difference at all.

We need to distinguish between mind and mind essence. The mind essence of sentient beings and the awakened mind of the buddhas is the same. Buddhahood means to be totally stable in the state before dualistic thought occurs. A sentient being like ourselves, not realizing our essence, gets caught up in our own thinking and becomes bewildered. Still, the essence of our mind and the very essence of all awakened buddhas is primordially the same. Sentient beings and buddhas have an identical source, the buddha nature. Buddhas became awakened because of realizing their essence. Sentient beings became confused because of not realizing their essence. Thus there is one basis or ground, and two different paths.

Mind is that which thinks and remembers and plans all these different thoughts that we have. It is the thinking that perpetuates samsara. Samsara will go on endlessly unless the thinking stops. Thought in Tibetan is called *namtok*. *Nam* means the object, what is thought of. *Tok* means to make ideas and concepts about those objects. *Namtok* is something that mind churns out incessantly,

day and night. A buddha is someone who recognizes the essence itself, and is awakened through that. A sentient being is someone who doesn't, and who is confused by his or her own thinking. Someone who has failed to recognize the essence of mind is called a sentient being. Realizing the nature itself and becoming stable in that realization is called a buddha.



True virtue, real goodness, is created through recognizing our buddha nature, our natural state. Recognize your mind, and in the absence of any concrete thing, rest loosely.

In short, the nature of this mind is empty in essence; it is like space. Because it has no form, no smell, no taste, sound or texture, it is completely empty. It always was, primordially. In being empty, mind seems like space. But there is a difference: space is not conscious; it doesn't feel pleasure or pain. Our mind is spacious, wide-open and empty, yet it still feels pleasure and pain. It is sometimes called the “ever-knowing, ever-conscious mind.” Whatever is present is known by mind.

When this mind is put to work, it can invent any possible thing, even nuclear bombs. Mind creates all these amazing gadgets—voice recorders, airplanes that can fly through the sky. These inventions don't think, but they were created by the

thinking mind. Sentient beings create the samsara that we have right now. The creation of samsara will not ultimately help us in any way.

Mind is invisible and intangible. That is why people don't know it. That is why they wonder, "Have I really recognized this nature of mind?" If it were a concrete thing, scientists would have figured it out a long time ago. But it isn't, so scientists don't necessarily know what mind is. If they did, all scientists would be enlightened! But have you ever heard of scientists becoming enlightened through science? Sure, they know a lot of other things. They can make telephones that let you instantly talk to anybody anywhere in the world. And they can make machinery that flies hundreds of people together through the sky. They can drive trains directly through mountains. All this is possible. If mind is put to work, it is an inexhaustible treasure; but that still doesn't mean enlightenment. When the mind is put to use for something and gets caught up in it, this does not lead to enlightenment. We need to know the essential nature of mind.

What is the way to dissolve thoughts, to totally clear them up and let them vanish? The Buddha had the technique on how to clear up thinking. That's what the pointing-out instruction from a qualified master is for. When you go to school, you have to repeat the ABC's back to the teacher so that he can be aware of whether you know the alphabet or not. Until one knows, one needs to be taught, to be shown. Until one fully knows mind essence, one needs a teacher. It's as simple as that.

True virtue, real goodness, is created through recognizing our buddha nature, our natural state. Recognize your mind, and in the absence of any concrete thing, rest loosely. After a while we again get caught up in thoughts. But, by recognizing again and again, we grow more and more used to the natural state. It's like learning something by heart—after a while, you don't need to think about it. Through this process, our thought involvement grows weaker and weaker. The gap between thoughts begins to last longer and longer. At a certain point, for half an hour there will be a stretch of no conceptual thought whatsoever, without having to suppress the thinking.

The essence of mind that is primordially empty and rootless is unlike holding the idea of emptiness in mind, and it is not the same as the sustained attempt to feel empty. Neither of these helps much. By growing used to this natural, original emptiness again and again, we become accustomed to it. Then there will be a stretch throughout the whole day from morning to evening, which is only empty awareness untainted by notions of perceived objects or the perceiving mind. This corresponds to having attained the bodhisattva levels, the *bhumis*. When there is never a break throughout day and night, that is called buddhahood, true and complete enlightenment.

From the perspective of mind essence, the interruptions of thoughts are like clouds in the sky. The empty essence itself is like the space of the sky. Our cognizance is like sunshine. The sky itself never changes whether it's sunny or cloudy. Similarly,

when you realize the awakened state of the buddhas, all cloud-like thoughts have vanished. But the qualities of wisdom, meaning original wakefulness, are fully developed, fully present, even now when thoughts are present. We need to train in slowly growing more and more used to the recognition of mind essence. This will dissolve our negative karma and disturbing emotions. In this recognition it is impossible to be tainted by karma and emotions, just like you cannot paint mid-air.

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Mind Is Buddha

A simple three-word koan. Or just a one-word koan: buddhanature. So deceptively simple, so easy to leave in the realm of concept, yet it penetrates to the very heart of the matter. Here's **Geoffrey Shugen Arnold, Sensei**, on Case 30 of the Gateless Gate, "Mazu's 'Mind is buddha.'"

The Main Case

Damei once asked Master Mazu, "What is buddha?" Mazu answered, "Mind is buddha."

Wumen's Commentary

If you can at once grasp "it," you are wearing buddha clothes, eating buddha food, speaking buddha words, and living buddha life; you are a buddha yourself. Though this may be so, Damei has misled a number of people and let them trust a scale with a stuck pointer. Don't you know that you have to rinse out your mouth for three days if you have uttered the word "buddha"? If you are a real Zen person, you will stop your ears and rush away when you hear, "Mind is buddha."

Wumen's Poem

*A fine day under the blue sky!
Don't foolishly look here and there.
If you still ask "What is buddha?"
It is like pleading your innocence
while clutching stolen goods.*

From the moment we first engage the dharma, we encounter the truth of our buddhanature. This is the fundamental teaching of Zen, our essential reality. Knowing this is our nature, shouldn't we then recognize our obligation and assume responsibility to realize it directly? We often think of obligation as a burden, but to realize our true nature is to alleviate the profound weight of our confusion, anger and fear.

Buddhanature is not something that we possess nor is it something we can be. It is the nature of things, just as they are. To realize buddhanature, to live in accord with this awakening, is the truth that alleviates suffering in the world. Having encountered this dharma that offers us a path of complete liberation, knowing that there is another way that leads us out of our self-created darkness, shouldn't we then take on the obligation to bring it to life, to make it real? We should; it's the obligation expressed in our bodhisattva vows. It is the wonderful burden we carry, a burden that only increases as we awaken to the true nature of things.

Damei asked, “What is buddha?” Damei was a disciple of Master Mazu. It is said that Mazu had over eighty enlightened disciples, making him one of the great teachers in the early Zen tradition. “Mind is buddha” became one of his hallmark teachings. The story of Mazu meeting his own teacher, Nanyue, is well known. Mazu was living in a small mountain temple, doing zazen day and night. Nanyue was teaching in another temple on the same mountain, and he heard about this diligent monk. He decided to pay him a visit. When he saw Mazu, he asked, “Reverend sir, what are you doing here?” Mazu replied, “I’m doing zazen.” Nanyue pursued his questioning, “What are you trying to accomplish by doing zazen?” “I’m trying to become a buddha,” answered Mazu. Nanyue then picked up a brick and quietly began to polish it. Mazu, noticing this, asked, “What are you doing?” Nanyue said, “I’m polishing this brick.” “For what?” asked Mazu. Nanyue said, “I want to make a mirror out of it.” Mazu replied, “You can’t make a mirror out of a brick by polishing it.” Nanyue countered, “Can you become a buddha by doing zazen?” Mazu inquired, “Well then, what should I do?” Nanyue said, “It’s like putting a cart to an ox. If the cart doesn’t move, what should you do? Should you beat the cart or do you beat the ox?” Mazu said, “I don’t understand.” Nanyue then explained, “You practice zazen and try to become a buddha by sitting. If you want to learn how to do zazen, know that Zen is not in sitting nor in lying down. If you want to become a buddha by sitting, know that buddha has no fixed form. Never

discriminate in living in the dharma of nonattachment. If you try to become a buddha by sitting, you're killing the buddha. If you're attached to the form of sitting, you can never attain buddhahood."

Mazu was trying to do what all Buddhist practitioners try to do—become a buddha. But what does that actually mean? How do you become a buddha? Should we try to become calm and serene, wise and compassionate? These are just ideas, and trying to live according to an idea doesn't lead to reality. Why is it not possible to become a buddha?

Many years back, well before beginning my formal Zen training, I studied to be a musician. It was something I wanted deeply, what I wanted my whole life to be. I worked hard at it, practicing every day for hours. Yet in the midst of this all-out effort, I had a feeling that somehow I wasn't a musician. I wanted music to be my whole life and, although I was filling my life with music, it was not filling me. Something was missing. At one point, I was preparing for a recital performance with another musician, and we were working on some pieces together with one of my music teachers, whom I deeply respected. We played through one of the pieces and after we finished, he sat quietly, then said, "No, this is not working. Play it again." We started playing and he stopped us and said, "No! You're doing this all wrong. It's too controlled. It has to be spirited, wild! Play it so it's right on the edge of flying out of control." We started playing again and he kept calling out, "Faster! Wilder! Faster!" until the whole thing started to disintegrate and he cried out, "Yes! Yes! That's it!"

I walked away from that experience having felt something come alive. There was a hint of something that I had been looking for that arose out of my forgetting the scales, the exercises and all of the discipline that I was so necessarily and diligently developing, discipline that had become an obstacle to the music filling me completely. All of my efforts and striving to become a “musician” were preventing me from letting go and just experiencing the music directly.

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Should we try to become calm and serene, wise and compassionate? These are just ideas, and trying to live according to an idea doesn't lead to reality. Why is it not possible to become a buddha?

Nanyue said, “If you want to become a buddha by sitting, know that buddha has no fixed form.” We cannot become something that has no fixed form. That's our buddhanature. It has no fixed form. Don't attach to the form of sitting. But this doesn't mean that we shouldn't practice zazen. If we attach to the form, we can never attain buddhahood. If we don't sit deeply, it is also most unlikely that we'll realize our true nature. Clearly, neither extreme is the true path. To see zazen or the dharma as a fixed object is a danger of a 2,500-year-old tradition. We can understand zazen as

a method, a technique, or an exercise that offers a solution or an answer, like a formula to a problem. It's not that there is no resolution, but it's not what we think it is. It has no fixed form.

Damei came to Mazu one day and asked, "What is buddha?" Naturally, he was not asking about the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni. He was not interested in a specific person assuming a certain form. He was asking about the fundamental truth. This practice can't be fixed because everything in this great universe is formless. Everything is impermanence itself. Life doesn't have a fixed form; a moment doesn't have a fixed form. If our freedom depends on something static—a special state of mind or the absence of thought—then it has no true power, no ability to respond in a formless world. Damei was asking about what is true, what is real at all times, in all conditions, in all situations.

Mazu said, "Mind is buddha." Mind alone—all-pervading and without edges—is the truth. Bodhidharma taught: "Everything that appears in the three realms comes from mind. Hence the buddhas of the past and the future teach mind to mind without bothering about definitions." A student then asked, "If they don't define it, what do they mean by mind?" Bodhidharma answered, "You ask. That's your mind. I answer. That's my mind. If I had no mind, how could I answer? If you had no mind, how could you ask? That which asks is your mind. Through endless kalpas without beginning, whatever you do, wherever you are, that's your real mind,

that's your real buddha." To say "This mind is the Buddha" is saying the same thing. Beyond this mind, you will never find another buddha. To search for enlightenment or nirvana beyond this mind is impossible. The reality of your own self-nature, the absence of cause and effect, is what's meant by mind. Your mind is nirvana. You might think you can find a buddha or enlightenment somewhere beyond the mind, but such a place doesn't exist.

"You ask. That's your mind." What does that mean? We ask questions all the time; we offer answers. How is this mind? How is this buddha? Bodhidharma also stated that buddha means "miraculous awareness." The universe asks; the universe itself responds. This is miraculous awareness. Mind is buddha. This is the mind of the universe. It is the one great body that fills heaven and earth. Where is the self to be found?

This is why the search for enlightenment or nirvana beyond this mind is impossible. There is nothing outside of it. That's one of the most difficult things for us to realize, because we look outside without even knowing. As we are seeking outside ourselves for the answers, this turning away is so habitual and deeply conditioned that we don't see it. From the moment we encounter the dharma, the moment we begin doing zazen, we are instructed not to look outside ourselves. We know this is true, we believe in it, but we don't do it. We continually seek and reach outside, searching for that which is beyond our awareness. We may think we can

find a buddha or enlightenment somewhere beyond this mind, we might think we can find serenity, clarity and meaning beyond this mind, but such a place does not exist. Everything that appears is this mind. But if it encompasses everything, how can it be seen? That which is seen is mind. That which is seeing is mind. Seeing itself is mind. So how can it be seen? Well, it can't, and thus it must be realized.

Mind is buddha. This is not our brain; it's not in our head. This is one reason why it's so important to put our awareness in the hara and get out of our heads. While Mazu's "Mind is buddha" was one of his signature teachings, it was not original with him. Another old master said, "To see into one's nature is to be awakened to the buddha mind. Cast all thoughts and consciousness away and see that mind is buddha. The one who realizes that their true mind is buddha is the one who has attained buddhahood. One neither practices good nor commits evil; one has no attachments to the mind. Your eyes see things, but you don't become attached to them. Your tongue tastes, but you don't become attached. This mind that does not become attached to each and every thing is buddha mind. This is why Master Mazu said, "Mind is buddha." Being attached is what prevents us from seeing. It is what clouds miraculous awareness.

To be free of the discriminating mind is to manifest awareness that is miraculously simple and unadorned. This is the koan of zazen, of *shikantaza*. Don't do anything. Don't be passive either.

Being passive is still doing. This is also the heart of every koan. A traditional case koan creates a sense that you're doing something. You have a question that you drop down into your hara and inquire into deeply. You keep your mind still and stable within that question so it doesn't turn or agitate the mind. But there's still the sense that you're doing something.

I remember wondering about this in my own koan study: Isn't this somehow creating a state of mind, working with something that's outside of myself? Can it be trusted to reveal the truth? It took a lot of work to see the error in my way of understanding the nature of a koan. When the thinking mind ceases and the self falls away, there is no koan and nothing to create. That is when the koan is realized.

In the commentary, Wumen wrote, "If you can at once grasp 'it,' you are wearing buddha clothes, eating buddha food, speaking buddha words, living buddha life. You are a buddha yourself." Here's the real point of difficulty with this koan. It seems so obvious, "Oh, I'm a buddha." But when it's just an idea, do we notice that nothing has changed? We're not actually wearing buddha clothes, eating buddha food, speaking buddha words, living buddha life. All we're doing is carrying around the thought, "I'm a buddha." We just increased our confusion. What is it to really wear buddha clothes? What is it to see "Mind is buddha?" That's why Wumen said, "Damei has misled a number of people and let them

trust a scale with a stuck pointer.” There is no fixed form. But as soon as Mazu said, “Mind is buddha,” it became static, like a slogan. It’s a great slogan, isn’t it? Short and punchy. Yet right there the scale sticks, which is a nice image. The scale gives a weight, but it’s a fixed weight. Regardless of what you place on the scale, the reading is the same, not reflecting the truth anymore. It’s showing something, but what it’s showing is false. So, to even say, “Mind is buddha” creates a problem.

*A fine day under the blue sky!
Don't foolishly look here and there.
If you still ask, "What is buddha?"
It is like pleading your innocence
while clutching stolen goods.*

Don't foolishly look here and there. Why is this so difficult? Does it, in fact, come back to our lack of trust in our own buddha-nature or lack of faith in our ability to realize it? Being confident in our ability does not require being arrogant. If it's arrogant, it's something other than confidence. This is simply about recognizing what's true. When you get stuck in your own practice, rather than creating a pit of self-pity and woe, have faith in yourself. Why shouldn't you? Being free of attachments, living a life that is joyful, is your endowment and birthright.

*If you still ask "What is buddha?"
It is like pleading your innocence
while clutching stolen goods.*

This is why realizing ourselves is an obligation. But whose obligation is it? It can't come from the outside. It has to arise from within. So, please, having received the gift of this time and place, meet your obligation. If you still have doubts about your responsibility, consider the costs of confusion, delusion, jealousy, anger in this world of ours. Take the posture of the buddha on your meditation cushion and understand that there is one who knows. "Mind is buddha" is awakening to that truth. It's no one else's affair. 🌸



You Are the Great Perfection

Rest in your true nature without effort or distraction—**Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche** teaches the renowned practice of Dzogchen.

YOU ARE ALREADY PERFECT. You are already a buddha. In fact, there's no difference between your true nature, right now as you sit reading this, and the true nature of the buddha, or any enlightened being for that matter.

That's the view of Dzogchen, a Tibetan word that means "Great Perfection." Dzogchen is treasured above all other practices in the Nyingma school of Vajrayana Buddhism because it helps us connect directly with our own enlightened nature.

Your essence, and the essence of every living creature, is pure, whole, and complete. There's nothing missing, and that's why we call it the Great Perfection. YOU are the Great Perfection. Don't forget that. Dzogchen is talking about you. This Great Perfection is you right now, right here in this moment, not some fully developed you after you do a lot more meditation.

In Dzogchen, we call this enlightened nature *rigpa*, or pure awareness. Unlike some approaches in which buddhanature is taught in a more theoretical way, and you need to study and meditate for a long time to figure out what it is, Dzogchen is experiential. You get introduced to pure awareness directly, right on the spot.

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This Great Perfection is you right now, right here in this moment, not some fully developed you after you do a lot more meditation.

A traditional way to describe Dzogchen is in terms of the ground, the path, and the fruition.

The Great Perfection is our true nature, whether we realize it or not. That's the *ground* of Dzogchen. It's the reality of our experience and who we are.

But that doesn't help if we don't experience it for ourselves. The way to do that is by having this pure awareness introduced to us, and then getting familiar with it until it becomes stable and enduring. That process is the *path*.

Then, once we're familiar with our own true nature, once we've realized it fully and integrated it into every aspect of our lives, we will fully manifest the enlightened qualities that were there all along. That's the *fruition*.

The Ground of Dzogchen

It might be a little unclear what this “true nature” really is, so let me explain a bit more about the ground.

When we use all these fancy terms like “buddhanature” and “pure awareness,” what are we actually talking about? Well, there are three main qualities to look for here. We refer to these as the “empty essence,” “luminous nature,” and “all-pervasive compassion.” That’s the ground, your true nature.

“Empty essence” means that the true nature of mind, the essence of pure awareness, transcends all our ideas, concepts, and beliefs. It is utterly beyond all our suffering and problems. It is completely free. The term for this is “innate purity”—the essence of who we are was, is, and always will be perfect. It’s completely pure, and nothing can change that.

This empty essence is ungraspable, beyond our ordinary way of seeing things, but it’s not nothing. There is also a luminous, knowing presence. This is what we call the “luminous nature.” Sometimes it’s called “self-clarity,” because this clarity is spontaneous and natural. It’s just there, all the time. Even when we’re asleep, distracted, or completely neurotic. It’s there.

The empty essence and clear nature are one and the same. They’re inseparable. This inseparability is the third quality of the ground, which we call “all-pervasive compassion.” This open, spacious clarity manifests as all our thoughts, feelings, and

perceptions, just like the sun radiates light. These experiences, in fact all of our experiences, are none other than the manifestations or play of pure awareness.

The Path of Dzogchen

But what good does just knowing this do us? Not much. That's why we need a path. We need to translate this from nice words and ideas to an actual experience.

The Dzogchen path is really quite simple. That's not to say it's easy, but it is simple.

The only thing we need to do is to recognize this pure inner nature. We need to experience it for ourselves. That's it. If we want to make it a little more complicated, we could say that first we need to have pure awareness introduced to us, and then we become familiar with it.

So, how does that happen?

This is where a teacher becomes important. There's a lot going on in our minds. We have all sorts of memories and reactions, emotions and expectations. In short, we have monkey mind.

Seeing the subtle quality of empty clarity in the midst of all this mental activity isn't easy. If it were, we would have recognized rigpa a long time ago! But a skilled teacher who has recognized pure awareness in him or herself, and who holds an authentic lineage, can point it out to us. They can help us find our way through all the complexities of the mind to see this simple, ever present reality.

You might think that because you are already perfect, because this awakened nature is fully present as the very nature of your mind, then you don't need to meditate or practice. Nothing could be further from the truth. The trick is *how* you practice. You still need to meditate, but meditate effortlessly. You still need to practice, but practice naturalness.

Rather than practicing with the notion that there's some level to achieve beyond where you are right now, the main practice is learning to trust that this original purity is always present, especially when it feels like it isn't. Every step you take on the path should reinforce your trust that pure awareness is right here, right now. Until your recognition is unshakeable, you still need to do formal practice.

The Fruition of Dzogchen

As I said, the core of the path is simply recognizing the nature of mind and coming back to that recognition again and again, until it's as familiar as an old friend. If you do that, there will come a time when you've experienced this pure awareness so thoroughly and completely that you never lose touch with it. When you're meditating, you're meditating in pure awareness. When you're eating, you're eating in pure awareness. Even when you're sleeping, you're still resting in the recognition of pure awareness.

That's what we call "full realization," the fruition of the path. At this point, all the qualities of the ground, your true enlightened nature, become manifest. These were there all along, but because

you didn't know they were, it was almost as though they didn't exist. But now you know them. You know them thoroughly and completely. Perfect wisdom, boundless compassion, the spontaneous capacity to benefit others—all of these manifest.

This fruition is simply the full expression of your true nature. It's as though you go out and travel the whole world, looking and searching high and low for some peace of mind. But in the end, you come home and realize that everything you were looking for was right where you started. That's the Great Perfection.

Practice: Dzogchen

The trickiest part of Dzogchen practice is that it is not something we can do. The whole point is that we are learning to recognize what is already there, while our “doing” impulse is based on the assumption that who and what we are in the present moment needs improvement. So how do we put this into practice?

Dzogchen meditation involves three important qualities: effortlessness, presence, and naturalness. In traditional terms, these three are called non-meditation, non-distraction, and non-fabrication.

To connect with effortlessness, we shift from a mode of “doing” to one of “being.” We let go of the impulse to fiddle with the knobs of experience and give ourselves permission to simply be. We rest in effortless awareness.

But while we rest in effortless awareness, we are not lost or distracted. We are fully present, alert and aware. This presence is the second quality. It's not something we need to make happen. It's already here, with us all the time. When we drop the effort and simply rest, we're giving ourselves the opportunity to recognize the open clarity of awareness, to *be* this open clarity.

Nothing can diminish this effortless awareness. All our thoughts, emotions, perceptions, and impulses arise from this knowing presence, and dissolve back into it. For this reason, we do not need to create any special state of mind to experience the mind's innate purity. We don't need to block our thoughts and emotions or control the movements of our attention. Just be as you are.

This is the third quality—naturalness. We let everything unfold without trying to correct, alter, or improve anything.

As we grow more comfortable with resting in awareness, these qualities of effortlessness, presence, and naturalness will emerge, and we will slowly come to see that this spacious awareness is who we truly are. 🌸