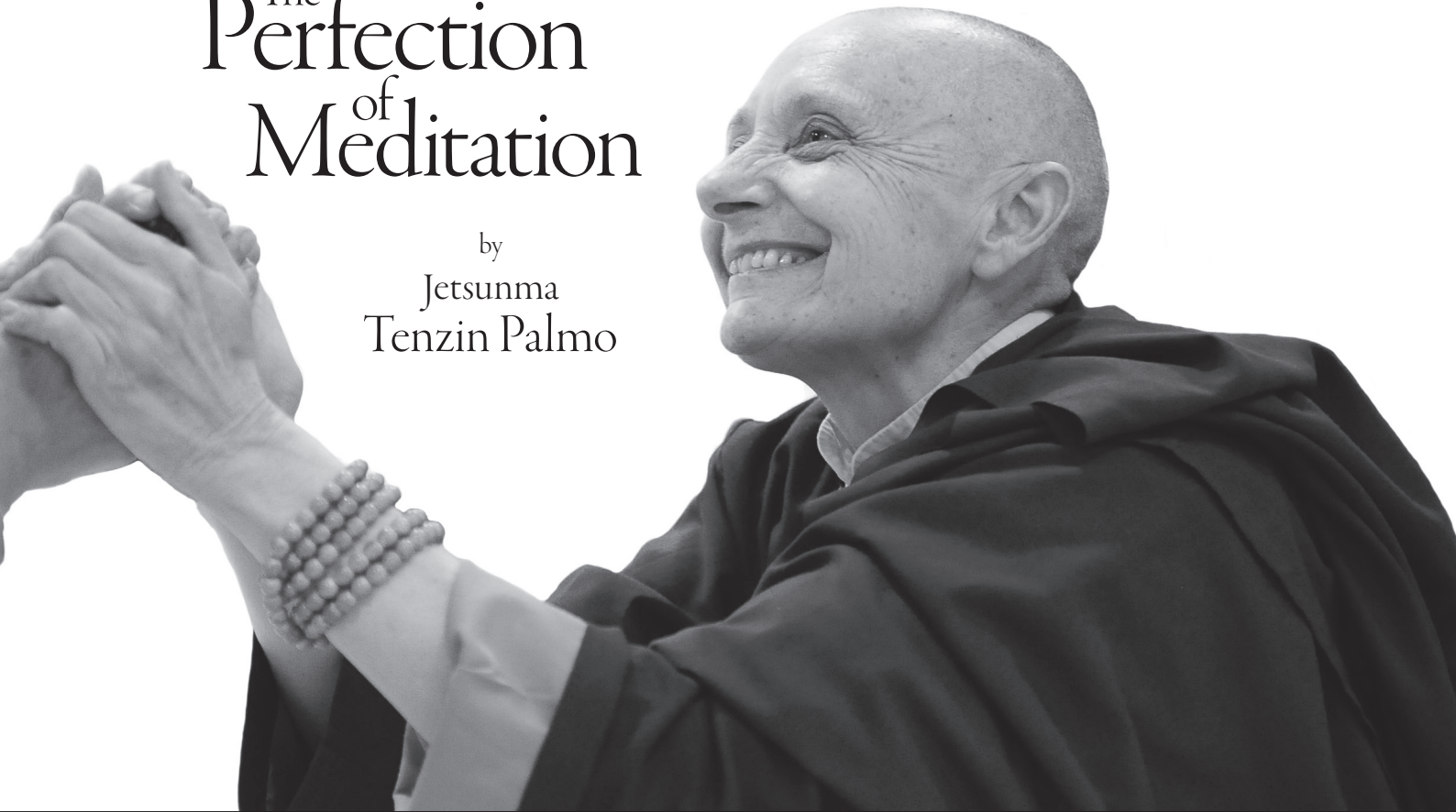


GATSAL

TEACHING

The Perfection of Meditation

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The fifth paramita is the Perfection of Meditation or Dhyana Paramita in Sanskrit. Of course to many people in the world, the word “Buddhist” is almost synonymous with the idea of meditation. On the other hand, in Asia actually few lay Buddhists really meditate. For them, to be a Buddhist means to go to the temple and to make offerings and prayers, especially for long life, good health and for the well-being of your family. Meditation is usually regarded as very difficult and only for professionals.

However, the Buddhist path genuinely is a path of learning how to deal skilfully with our mind. Everything which we know from the outside, is received to us through our senses and is then recognized and analysed by our consciousness. We will deal with this more when we come to the aspect of wisdom which is the sixth paramita. But the point is that we can not know anything, either seemingly received from the outside or within, if we are not conscious. Therefore we live in a world of thoughts. We are constantly thinking. Our thinking process goes on endlessly. Even in sleep, through our dreams, we are constantly thinking, thinking, thinking. It’s as if we are submerged in an ocean of thoughts being thrown up and down on the waves of samsara. So clearly since we are drowning helplessly, we have need of a boat. It seems to me extraordinary how in the West little attention is paid to dealing skilfully with our inner universe of the mind. Because even our response to external circumstances depends on our mind.

Even though we travel round and round the world or we can

fly to the moon, wherever we go we take our mind with us. We can never escape from our own mind. So therefore it makes sense to have a mind that is a good travelling companion. I am sure most of you know that Buddhist meditation is on two levels:

The first is shamatha or calm abiding. This is the meditation to make the mind more settled, more peaceful and one-pointed.

Then the second level is vipashyana, which means insight, seeing things as they really are.

So the first part, the shamatha meditation which means allowing our mind to become quiet and peaceful, is very important because while our minds are turbulent and just racing along, we cannot see anything clearly. In the Mahamudra system of the Kagyupa tradition, the first level is called tsechik, which means one-pointedness and then the vipashyana is called tödrel, which means beyond complications and so it’s sometimes translated as simplicity.

So first we need to get the mind quietened down. One can think of it like a turbulent lake, which is full of waves and churning up all the mud and very difficult to see below the surface. When there is a lot of turbulence, first of all the surface is very broken up and then all the mud is churned and so looking at the surface of this agitated lake, all we see are the surface waves breaking. So this is like our mind. If our mind is boiling with many thoughts, feelings and emotions, then if we try to look at it, it’s hard to see beyond the surface turbulence.

Once the waves have calmed down, then the surface of the

lake becomes like a mirror reflecting the outer landscape quite accurately. At the same time, the mud sinks to the bottom of the lake and therefore the water becomes more transparent and we can see down through the lake. We can see the weeds, we can see the fish swimming, it all becomes much more clear to a deep depth. Likewise, when the mind calms down, when the thoughts are quietened, then we are able to see much more clearly what is actually going on around us without the distortion of our normal judgements, prejudices and emotions. At the same time, if we look into the mind we are able to access much deeper levels of our consciousness. One Lama said to me: "When we have good shamatha meditation, when our minds are settled and one-pointed, then the rest of the Dharma is in the palm of our hands." Which makes sense because as our minds become more clear and focused, we are able to enter deeply into whatever subject we are looking at. When we are agitated and disturbed, our distracted minds only stay on the surface of things and also our attention span is very short.

Now the first point when we are practising formally is to try to sit properly. The most important posture is to keep the back straight but relaxed not tense. Of course traditionally one sits with legs crossed but don't worry if you need to sit on a chair. Keep your feet on the ground and just make sure that you are sitting upright and not slumping. It's not our body that gets enlightened, it's our mind.

One time when I was in California I was speaking at various Zen Centres. Now in Zen Centres, they sit very correctly and pay a lot of attention to how they sit. Well, it happened that in three of these Centres, the Zen masters, the Roshis, had injured themselves. One of them had slipped and broken her hip; one had twisted his ankle; and another had also hurt himself in some way. So all three of these Zen masters had to sit in chairs. This was a whole new thing in their lives because otherwise they were very serious about sitting on cushions correctly - and then suddenly they were in chairs and they discovered it made no difference!

So the point is that for those of you who have aging limbs and for whom sitting is constantly uncomfortable, then sit in a chair. The coming Buddha Maitreya is seated in a chair! Sitting with his legs down. So it seems the next Buddha is going to belong to a society where people don't sit cross-legged any more. And he becomes a Buddha anyway. So I wouldn't worry.

So the important thing is a straight back, sitting stable, head slightly down, you can feel a slight pull at the back of the neck. We sit like a Buddha statue. The hands together touching the thumbs or else lightly placed on the knees. In the Tibetan and Zen traditions, the eyes are left slightly open and then just following the line of the nose. But if that is difficult, then you can gently close the eyes. The tongue is curled behind the upper teeth or on the palate. Place weight of the body - the centre of gravity - down in the abdomen rather than up in the shoulders. And relax.

Then bring the focus of attention to one point. It doesn't really matter what you are focusing on, the important thing is that it should be something on which the mind can settle. However in all Buddhist traditions the most prevalent object of meditation is the attention to the breath. The breath is a very good object because we are always breathing. If we are conscious of the breath as it comes in and goes out, then we are in the present, because we cannot breathe in the past or the future. We can only breathe now. Also the breath has a very intimate connection with our mind. When we are excited, when we are fearful, when we are peaceful or angry, the breath reflects the nature of our thoughts. So as we bring our attention to our breathing in and breathing out, then naturally of itself the breath begins to get quieter and deeper. The mind begins to get more quiet also. They are mutually supportive. So we breathe

in and then we breathe out. We breathe in, we breathe out and we know it. That's all. Normally we breathe in and out, in and out, and we are not conscious of breathing. Now we simply do the same thing and we are aware of it. It's very simple. You just sit there, relaxed. Keep the mind very spacious, but at the same time very focused.

Meantime, of course, the mind is carrying on chattering away in the background as usual. That's fine. No problem. But we do not give attention to the thoughts. We ignore the thoughts. The problem is not the thoughts, the problem is that we identify with and get carried away by our thoughts.

Now to help us become focused on our breath, sometimes it's helpful to count. So in the beginning, we can aim to count to five. So we breathe in, then we breathe out, and think one. We breathe in, we breathe out, and think two. Until we get to five. Then we start again. Usually at the beginning most people, by the second or third round, find that they only get to two or three and they're carried away by the thoughts. When we become conscious that we are not conscious, then we just start back again at one. We keep going, working on it, not getting upset, not getting angry with ourselves, not feeling frustrated, but just keeping on practising again and again - like a learner pianist practising the scales - until it becomes natural and the mind settles down. When counting to five repeatedly is very easy and the attention rests on the counting and the breath, then we can increase to ten. Traditionally, the Tibetans say that when we can focus effortlessly on twenty-one breaths without being distracted, then we are ready for the next stage.

So the first phase is to develop the ability to disassociate from the background thoughts and to bring the forefront of the mind to the attention on the breath. But before we go on, I should mention here also that this is a very good practice also during the day because one can immediately bring one's attention to the breath without anyone knowing that one is actually doing a practice at this time. While we're driving; while we're sitting at work waiting for the computer to change; while we're out walking; any time we can bring the attention back into the present by being conscious of the breath as it comes in and out.

Obviously we don't have to suddenly sit straight in vajra-position in the middle of the office! We can just be sitting how we are sitting, but we are aware. Especially if we find ourselves feeling irritated or stressed, then breathe in, breathe out. It's a very skilful way to relax and bring us into the present moment again.

So the mind has quietened down and the attention has become more focused. Now we take the searchlight of that attention which had been focused on the breath and we turn it inside to watch and observe the stream of the thoughts. So the first part of observing the mind is simply that we look. We are sitting and our attention now is on the stream of thoughts and feelings as they flow through the mind. The point is that normally we are carried along by those thoughts and feelings. It's as if we're right the midst of a river being swept along. So now we separate ourselves from this thinking mind. One of the interesting things about the mind is that we can step back from our thinking process and observe it. So as I said, this phase, which is still within the shamatha or the calm abiding, is simply to observe without judgement the flow of our thoughts.

So to do this, we need to remain alert, but at the same time very relaxed. When we watch the mind, we should just be settled. Alert but non-interfering and we allow the thoughts to come and go at their own pace without trying to restrict them or limit them, just watching. As our ability to observe becomes more clear and focused but still relaxed, the stream of thoughts likewise naturally begins to quieten and slow down. There is nothing to do except to relax and observe.