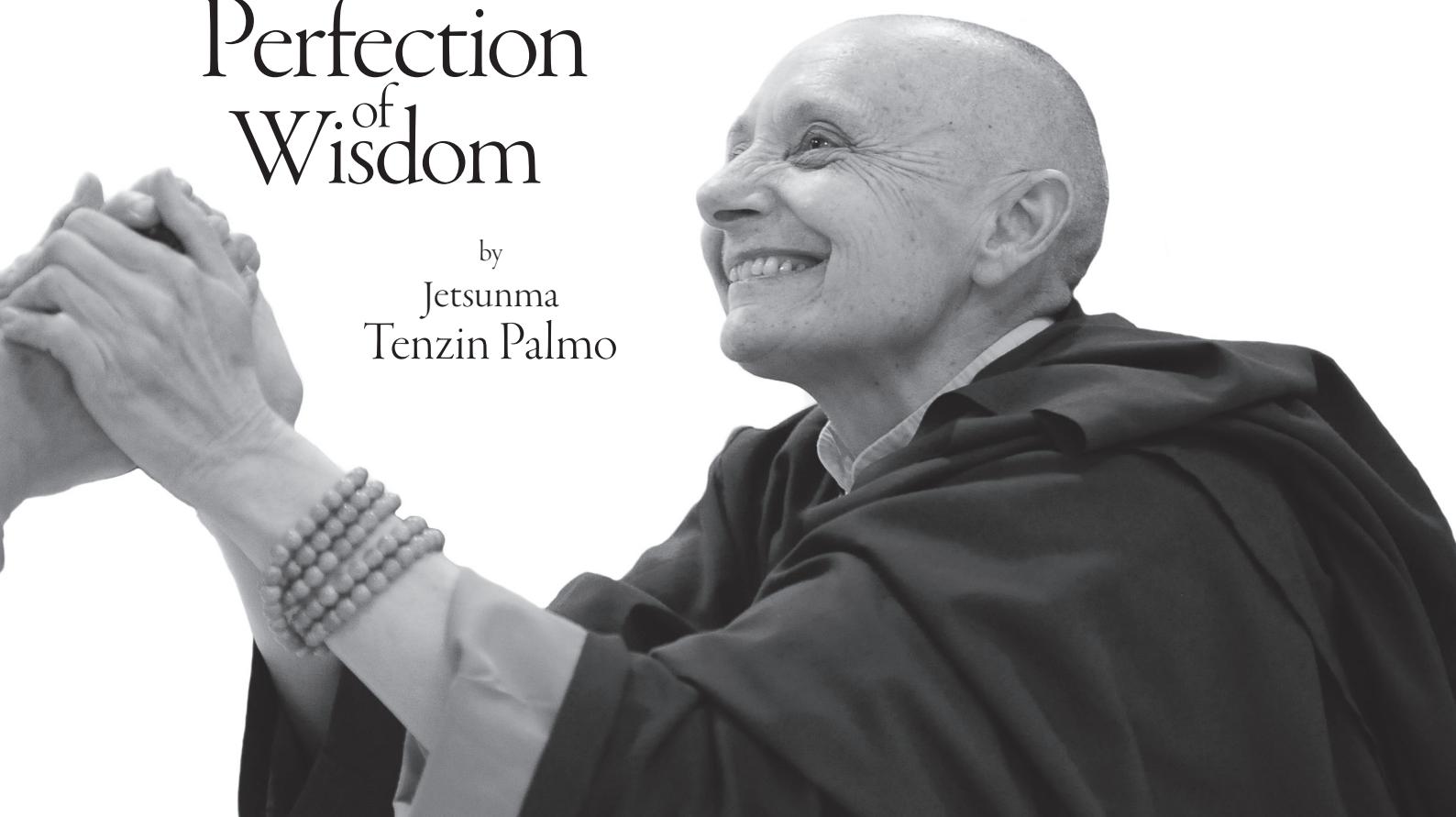


GATSAL TEACHING

Perfection of Wisdom

by
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In general, Buddhist wisdom deals with seeing things as they really are and not how we see things as projected through the distorted lens of our ego. Therefore the most important Dharma practice is to see through the distortions of our ideas about the self. There are two basic approaches in Buddhist wisdom. One is dealing with the so-called reality of external objects and the other way deals with the mind that conceives - although ultimately these two approaches come together.

When I first began to meditate, my teacher was an old yogi and he started by pointing to the table and asking, 'Is this table empty?' Well, I had already read some books on philosophy like a good nun, so I said, 'Oh, yes, the table is empty!' The yogi replied, 'Do you see it as empty?' 'Well, no.' Then he asked, 'Is the mind empty?' So I said a bit more confidently, 'Yes' and he said, 'Do you see it as empty?' 'No.' He continued, 'Which do you think is easier to see - the emptiness of the table or the mind?' And I said, 'Oh, the mind.' So he said, 'Okay, then you belong to us.' Naturally I enquired, 'What if I said the table?' The yogi laughed, 'Oh, then I would have sent you to Sera Monastery down the road!'

Because there are two approaches to this issue of emptiness. One is the scholars' approach where phenomena are analysed intellectually through the study of Madhyamika, so mainly the emphasis is posited on the emptiness of external phenomena. Then of course one also has to meditate on that. But the yogi way is to look at the mind itself which analyses because it is the mind which projects our sense of solidity onto external phenomena.

Modern physics shows us that indeed this table is empty, that actually everything is reduced to the protons and neutrons and they are basically space and energy, so we can never find the thing in itself. Philosophically this is approached by saying that nothing exists from its own side and that everything exists in conjunction with causes and conditions. Because we tend to solidify and reify everything, then this analysis can show that however much we may reduce and reduce the object, there is nothing which can be pointed to as the thing in itself. It's inherent existence is just a convenient conceptual label. So the fact that nothing exists from its own side, lacks inherent existence, and depends on a combination of causes and conditions, is in Buddhist parlance called 'emptiness'.

In Buddhist meditation we are trying to get back to our original nature also called Buddha nature, nature of the mind, Dharmakaya and so on. But these are just names. One time I saw a documentary on meditation during which a Russian Orthodox priest said that the first thing that he was taught as a novice was that anything that he might think about God - He is not that! In other words, ultimate reality really is ultimate and is beyond our conceptual mind. Our ordinary thinking mind is by its very nature dualistic. That means that the conceptual mind thinks 'I' and automatically 'others' (who are not I). It naturally thinks good-bad, high-low, big-small. This is the nature, the very functioning of our dualistic conceptual mind. It also thinks within time. The dualistic conceptual mind is trapped in past and future. It has a very hard time staying in the present. We are usually not even conscious of this because we are so busy thinking, but to stay actually in the present moment without commenting is very difficult for the mind.

So normally we are governed by this conceptual mind which solidifies into our perception of something which we call 'a self'. And we believe in this self. It's who we are. So we do everything we can to placate this self - to make it happy and to try to avoid any suffering. However the ego itself is not concerned with happiness or suffering, the ego is actually happy to be miserable because that still makes it seem like something really existing. We notice that people who are really unhappy are usually totally centred on themselves and their suffering. People who are psychologically disturbed in any way are normally totally focused toward themselves. Perhaps this is one reason why psychiatrists and therapists flourish, because they are paid to just sit and listen while the patients endlessly talk about themselves and their miserable childhoods.

Insight meditation deals directly with looking straight at this sense of 'me' nestling at the centre of our thoughts and asking 'who am I?' Once the mind has quietened down through shamatha meditation, the thoughts are now moving more slowly and our attention is more single pointed. Then we turn that searchlight of focused attention back onto itself and we look at the stream of thoughts, because everything we can know only through mind. But the mind itself we don't know, we never look, we never question.

It is like someone sitting on the banks of the river watching the water flow by. Normally we are in the river being swept along. Where the stream of thought goes, there we go. But now we are still and we are just observing. So we just sit there relaxed and looking on without judgement or preference.

Then we can start to analyse. It's like we have a big question mark in our mind. What is a thought? What is an emotion? Where does it come from? Where does it go? What does it feel like? What does it look like? Who is thinking? When the mind is very busy or when the mind is quiet with no thoughts and the awareness which knows the difference, are these the same or are they different? Are the

thoughts the same as the awareness of the thoughts?

So we begin to look into the mind. One could also generate a strong feeling such as recalling a time when we felt angry and then try to recreate in ourselves that sense of the frustration and anger that we felt. Then look at it. What is that feeling? How does it feel? Where did it come from? What is it? Where did it go? Don't just think about it but really look with this questioning awareness. We live in our mind so our only way to be free is to fully understand the mind. This is accomplished not through the intellect but through direct experience. Meditation isn't something just passive, feeling nice and peaceful. The body may be immobile but the mind is for the first time waking up and using all its energy to really look into itself. We have to realise the empty nature of these thoughts and feelings. It's not enough just saying, 'Oh yes, thoughts are empty'. As long as we haven't experienced that they are empty, they are not empty for us.

As the thoughts decrease and our awareness becomes more profound and clear, there sometimes appears like a gap between the previous thought and the next thought. Before they are linked together, there is just a momentary opening. Because our awareness is so one-pointed, at that moment we might perceive the nature of the mind. But then usually, we think: "Oh well, yes!" and then we're thinking again.

Imagine that we are in a cinema and there's the screen and a movie is being shown. This film which we are watching is full of movement and sound and light and we are totally absorbed in it. (In fact, we're playing the starring part at the same time.) So if it's a good movie one is completely involved in it. If it's sad, then we're crying and if it's a comedy, we're laughing and if it's an action movie, then our hearts are pumping. If it's a well-made movie, then while we're watching it, we're immersed and enchanted. But if we look backwards, what is actually happening is that there's a projector and running in front of the projector are transparent individual frames of film moving very, very fast. The projector shines light through these fast moving frames and the whole drama is thus projected out in front of us.

This analogy definitely has some affinities with what is happening in our minds. Fundamentally there is what is called the clear light nature of the mind. The nature of the mind is naturally primordially unborn pure awareness. The fact that you can read this page is because you are aware, because you are conscious. But normally we are not conscious of being conscious because we're too busy, absorbed in thinking. This endless film show is being played in our mind - moment to moment mind states - and that is projected out in front of us as our external reality. Now as long as we are fascinated by the movie in front of us, then we believe it and we become deeply involved in what appears to be happening. But if we look back and realise it's just a mind-show that we are projecting, then even though we can still enjoy it, we are not going to be totally devastated if it's a tragedy or completely engulfed if it's a romance. We know it's just a movie.