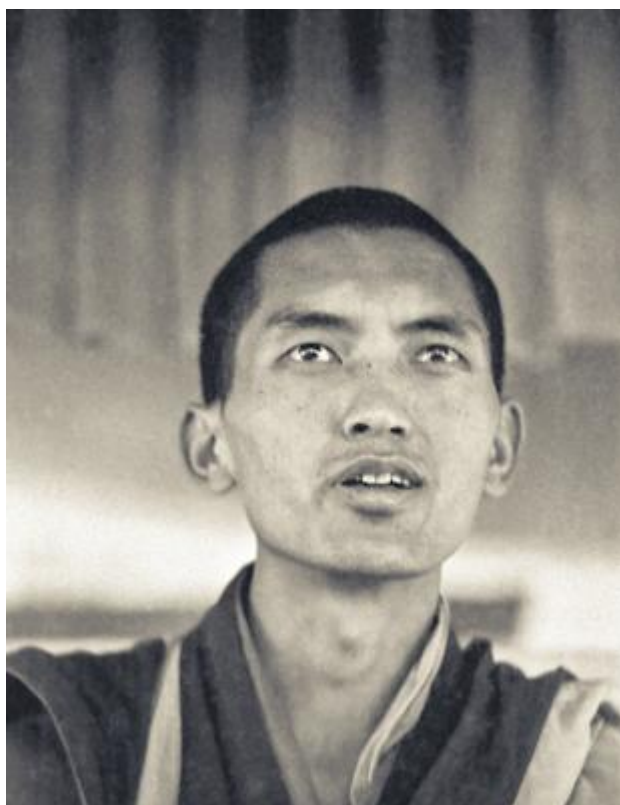


The Purpose of Meditation

An introduction to the practice of meditation, given by Lama Zopa Rinpoche in Indiana, USA, in July 1974. This talk is published in *Wisdom Energy* by Wisdom Publications.



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I would like to say a few words in introduction about the practice of meditation. Many people throughout the world, in the West as well as the East, are very interested in meditating. They are attracted to this practice and express great interest in it. Yet, of all the many people who engage in meditation, only a few really understand its purpose.

Each of us here possesses a physical body made up of bones, flesh, blood and such things. At present we are not able to exert complete control over this body and as a result we always experience problems. There might be a rich man whose wealth is equal to that of the entire world yet despite his enormous fortune, if his mind is tied up in an uncontrolled body, he will live in continual suffering. Rich or poor, none of us escape this problem. Try as we may, we never seem to find an end to our difficulties. If we solve one, another immediately takes its place. The conflicts and suffering involved in maintaining our physical body are the same no matter where we may be. If we have the wisdom to penetrate deeply into the heart of this matter and check the actual way things are, we quickly perceive the universality of this unsatisfactory situation. It also becomes clear that if we did not have such an uncontrolled body, there would be no way for us to experience the sufferings related to it.

The main problem we all have is the suffering of not achieving our various desires. These include the obvious physical necessities of food and clothing as well as such enjoyable things as a good reputation, the sound of pleasant and comforting words and the like. Some forms of suffering, such as the hunger of an extremely impoverished person, are more obvious than others. But in one way or another, we all hunger uncontrollably for things we do not possess.

Take the example of someone who was fortunate enough to be born into a wealthy family. During his lifetime he may never experience material want. He can afford to buy anything that arouses his desire and is free to travel wherever he pleases, experiencing the various delights and excitement offered by different cultures. When he finally reaches the point where there

is nothing left to possess, no place left to visit and no pleasure left to experience, he still suffers from an acute feeling of dissatisfaction. In such a restless, dissatisfied state of mind many people go insane, unable to cope with this intense and pervasive suffering.

Thus even when there is no lack of material comfort there is still suffering. In fact it often happens that possession of material wealth increases dissatisfaction, because it then becomes even more obvious that such possessions have no ability whatsoever to affect or cut through the root of suffering. There is still the continuity of dissatisfaction, confusion, worry and the rest. If an accumulation of external comforts really were able to cut through and eliminate suffering, then at some stage of physical well-being this continuity of suffering would be severed and all dissatisfaction would cease. But as long as our mind is tied up with an uncontrolled body, suffering continues.

For instance, in order to protect our feet from rough ground and sharp thorns, we wear shoes. Yet this does not really eliminate the problem. The shoes themselves often hurt. They can pinch our toes, produce sores and generally cause discomfort. This is not primarily the shoemaker's fault. If our feet were not so long, wide or sensitive in the first place, it would be possible to fashion totally comfortable shoes for them. Thus if we look deeply into the matter we see that the source of this discomfort is not external, but rather lies within our own physical and mental make-up.

This is merely one example of the suffering experienced because of our physical body. From the time we are born until the time we must die, we expend a tremendous amount of energy trying to protect this body of ours

from suffering. In fact, most people spend all their time caring for their body in precisely this fruitless, self-defeating manner.

But the purpose of meditation is not merely to take care of the physical body. We should not think of using meditation in this way. It should have a higher, more valuable purpose. To use meditation as yet another external method to benefit our body is senseless. This would involve wasting a technique of true, ultimate value on a vain attempt to gain relief that is at best temporary. Meditation would then be like the aspirin we take to be rid of a headache. The pain may go away, but that does not mean we are cured. After some time it will return because the method of treatment was unrelated to the real cause of the difficulty and thus any relief gained will necessarily be short-lived. As temporary pleasure and alleviation of pain are available through many external means, there is no need to use either meditation or any other spiritual practice for such a purpose. We should not squander the power of meditation on such limited aims.

Meditation is primarily concerned with caring for the mind. Although our body and mind are intimately related and interconnected, they are quite different types of phenomena. Our body is an object we can see with our eyes, but not so the mind. The members of a particular family may share many similar physical traits, but each child will instinctively have a different personality, mental attitude, set of interests and the like. Though they attend the same schools, their intelligence and learning will differ not only from each other's but from their parents' and grandparents' as well. Such differences of mind cannot be adequately explained in physical terms.

It should also be noted that there are children who have accurate memories of previous lives. They can tell where they were born, how they lived and so forth, and can recognize people and objects from these previous lives. Such accounts are verifiable and provide intriguing evidence for any investigator prepared to study this matter with an unbiased mind.

In any event, the underlying reason for different mental aptitudes among members of the same family, and for certain children's memory of previous lifetimes, is the fact that mind is beginningless. Past lives do exist. While we cannot go into a subtle analysis here of what does and what does not provide the continuity between one life and the next, the important thing to keep in mind is this: just as our mind has continued from a past life into the present, so will it pass on from the present into the future. The circumstances of our present life result from actions, both mental and physical, performed in these previous lives. Similarly, our present actions will determine the circumstances of our future lives. Thus the responsibility lies in our own hands for shaping the remainder of this life and those to come. It is very important to recognize this if we are to find effective means for cutting through both mental and physical suffering permanently.

Each of us has been born as a human being. As such we have the potential to give meaning and purpose to our life. But to take full advantage of it, we must go beyond what the lower animals can do. By utilizing such a human rebirth properly and gaining control over our mind, we can sever the root of all suffering completely. Within the space of one or more lives we can escape from the compulsive cycle of death and rebirth. As it is, we have to be reborn again and again without any choice or control, experiencing all the sufferings of an uncontrolled physical body. But with the proper application

this involuntary cycle can be broken. We can escape from all suffering and dissatisfaction permanently.

But to escape from the circle of death and rebirth ourselves is not enough. This is still not an appropriate way of using our human capabilities to the utmost. We are not the only ones who experience suffering and dissatisfaction; all other living beings share in the same predicament. And most other beings lack the wisdom—the Dharma eye of wisdom—to find the correct path to the cessation of their suffering. All creatures on earth, without exception, spend their whole life, day and night, searching for a way to overcome suffering and experience pleasure and happiness. But because their minds are clouded in ignorance, this search is in vain. Instead of leading to the intended goal, it brings them only further frustration and pain. They try to remove the cause of their suffering but instead only remove themselves further and further from nirvana, the true cessation of suffering.

All living beings suffer and desire release in the same way we do. If we realize this, it becomes apparent that it is selfish to work solely towards our own liberation, our own experience of nirvana. Rather we must strive to free all others as well. But in order to enlighten others as to the correct paths leading to a true cessation of suffering, we ourselves must first become fully enlightened beings. In other words, we must achieve buddhahood in order to help liberate others.

The situation can be explained like this. Suppose we want to bring a friend to a beautiful park so that she can enjoy it. If we are blind there is no way for us to lead her there no matter how much we may so desire. It is necessary for us to have good vision and to be well-acquainted with the road

leading to the park before we can even think of bringing her there. In the same way, we must have a complete experience of full enlightenment before we can discern the best paths whereby all beings, with their varying mental aptitudes and temperaments, can be led to their own liberation from suffering.

Thus when we talk about the true purpose of meditation we are talking about the attainment of enlightenment, an attainment that enables us to fulfill not only our own aims but also those of all others. This is the entire purpose of and the only reason for engaging in meditation. All the great yogis and meditation masters of the past have practiced the Dharma with just this purpose in mind. Likewise, when we meditate—and in Buddha's teachings there are literally hundreds of different meditations to choose from depending on our level of realization—we should do so with this same motivation.

Thus spiritual practices are very necessary. We are not compelled to meditate by some outside agent, by other people, or by God. Rather, just as we are responsible for our own suffering, so are we solely responsible for our own cure. We have created the situation in which we find ourselves, and it is up to us to create the circumstances for our release. Therefore, as suffering permeates our life, we have to do something in addition to our regular daily routine. This "something" is spiritual practice or, in other words, meditation. If we do not turn inwards and train our mind, but instead expend all our energy on arranging and rearranging the external aspects of our existence, then our suffering will continue. Our suffering has had no beginning, and if we do not adopt an effective spiritual practice, neither will it have an end.

Generally speaking, it is difficult to practice the Dharma in an environment of great material abundance. This is because there are many distractions to interfere with our meditation. However, the actual root of these distractions is not in the environment itself. It is not in the machines of industry, our food, or anything like that. It is within our own mind. It has been a pleasant surprise for me during this, my first visit to the West, to see that along with material progress there is substantial interest here in Dharma practice and in meditation of various types. Many people are sincerely searching for the higher meaning of human life, trying to transcend the everyday, animal concerns of their existence. In this respect I think it is very wise that people are trying to combine a spiritual with a practical way of life, one that provides deep mental as well as physical comfort. For such people life will certainly not be an empty promise.

Food prepared from many different ingredients can be truly delicious. In the same way, if we have a job or some such daily activity and also try to work as much as possible on perfecting a spiritual path and following the Dharma, our life can become very rich. The benefits we experience by combining these two approaches to life are far-reaching.

There is a great difference between the mind, feelings and experiences of someone who adds an understanding of Dharma to his or her daily life and one who does not. The former meets with far less confusion and experiences far less suffering when encountering difficulties in the material world. He has a controlled mind and a meaningful framework within which he can handle his problems skillfully. This will apply not only to his everyday experiences but especially to those encountered when he dies.

If we have never engaged in any spiritual practice, have never trained our mind through the discipline of meditation, then the experiences surrounding our death can be very frightening indeed. For the most advanced Dharma practitioner, however, death is like a pleasant journey back home. It is almost like going to a beautiful park for a picnic. And even for someone who has not achieved the highest realizations afforded by meditation, death can be a comfortable, not horrible, experience. Such a person can face his death—something we must all eventually do—with his mind at ease. He is not overwhelmed by fear or worry about what he will experience, or about the loved ones, possessions or body he will leave behind. In this life we have already experienced birth and are now in the process of growing old. The one thing we all have left to look forward to is our death. Thus if our spiritual practice can help us face the inevitable with peace of mind, then our meditations have been very useful, although there are much higher purposes to which our practices can be put.

To summarize, it is not the external appearance of our meditation that is important. Whether we sit with our arms folded this way and our legs crossed that way is of little consequence. But it is extremely important to check and see if whatever meditation we do is an actual remedy for our suffering. Does it effectively eliminate the delusions obscuring our mind? Does it combat our ignorance, hatred and greed! If it does reduce these negativities of mind, then it is a perfect meditation, truly practical and greatly worthwhile. If on the other hand it merely serves to generate and increase our negativities, such as pride, then it is only another cause of suffering. In such a case, even though we may say we are meditating, we are not actually following a spiritual path or practicing Dharma at all.

Dharma is a guide away from suffering, away from problems. If our practice does not guide us in this direction then something is wrong and we must investigate what it might be. In fact, the fundamental practice of all true yogis is to discover which of their actions bring suffering and which happiness. They then work to avoid the former and follow the latter as much as possible. This is the essential practice of Dharma.

One final word. All of us who are beginning our practice of Dharma, starting to meditate and gain control of our mind need to rely on proper sources of information. We should read books of sound authority and, when doubts arise, we should consult teachers who have mastered their study and practice. This is very important. If we are guided by books written without a proper understanding, there is the great danger that our life will be spent following an incorrect path. Even more important is choosing the correct teacher, guru or lama. He or she must have correct realizations and must actually live the practice of the Dharma.

Our practice of meditation, of mental cultivation, should not be passive. We shall not be able to break the bonds of suffering by blindly accepting what someone, even a great master, tells us to do. Rather we should use our innate intelligence to check and see if a suggested course of action is effective. If we have good reason to believe that a teaching is valid and will be helpful, then by all means we should follow it. As with medicine, once we have found some that can reasonably be expected to cure us, we should take it. Otherwise, if we swallow anything that happens to come into our hands, we run the great risk of aggravating rather than curing our illness.

This is my final suggestion for those beginners who have an interest in studying Dharma and meditating. Spiritual pursuits can be very worthwhile. Yet even if you cannot practice Dharma, a mere understanding of it can enrich your life and give it meaning. I think that is all. Thank you very much.

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