

The Far-reaching Attitude of Meditative Stabilization and Wisdom (in brief)

– Part 2 of 2 (lightly edited transcript)

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Three types of meditative stabilization

There is another way of dividing meditative stabilizations – according to their strengths or according to the angles that they take.

First, the meditative stabilization of **calm abiding meditation**. That's where we are trying to learn to focus the mind single-pointedly on a virtuous object and get the mind stable and calm so we can concentrate.

Second, the meditative stabilization of **special insight or vipassana**. This is a meditative stabilization in which we are able to analyze the object. This is what you use when you meditate on subtle impermanence, when you meditate on emptiness. It is an analytical mind that has strong concentration, but the analytical part is especially emphasized so that we can understand reality. We need that kind of analytical mind to understand reality.

Third, is the meditative stabilization that **combines both of these** – union of calm abiding and special insight. This is the full definition of special insight, where you have an analytical mind that is able to analyze something like emptiness, and that analysis does not disturb the mind's ability to concentrate.

Sometimes, when you first develop the calm abiding, you may be concentrating on one object, but if you start to analyze within that, your concentration goes. This is because when you analyze, you're thinking about things from different ways and looking at them from different angles. So, it's difficult to stay single-pointed. It may also happen that if you do the analytical meditation, the special insight, you can't stay single-pointedly on it because you are analyzing. So in the beginning, those two don't go so well together. This third type of meditative stabilization is where you actually succeed in putting them together, so that you can remain single-pointed and analyze at the same time.

[Audience:] Why is this not under wisdom?

It's showing the overlap between wisdom and concentration. It's talking about meditative stabilizations here and one of them is where you just do calm abiding. One is where you do analysis and penetrative insight. And another kind of meditative stabilization is you put the two of them together. So, it's just talking about different kinds of meditative minds.

The six far-reaching attitudes aren't completely separate. This is showing that one meditation isn't just in one drawer. If you look at it one way, it can fit in this drawer. If you look at it in another way, it can fit in that drawer. This is especially so with meditative stabilization, the fifth far-reaching attitude. So when we are talking about this far-reaching attitude, it's talking about a meditative mind that you can apply to any of the other subjects of meditation in the *lamrim*. For example, you can apply it to the metta meditation or the meditation on compassion.

[Audience: Inaudible]

It has a certain element of analysis, but analysis doesn't mean sitting and thinking, "A+B=C" and "P isn't Q", like in a philosophy class. But it has the element of close observation. It is not just concentrating on something. Rather, it is a close observation of the way things inter-relate. In what they call the

Vipassana tradition (which is actually the Theravada tradition), when they are doing the vipassana meditation, they aren't analyzing through logical reasoning. But it is still considered analysis in the sense that there is the mind that is noting all these mental events and deducing that all they are, are mental events. And that there is no 'I' that is self-sufficient that is controlling the whole ballgame.

[Audience: Inaudible]

Maybe. It's hard to say. In the West, we think of analytical as being intellectual. When the Tibetans say analytical, they don't mean intellectual. It's a very different sense of the word 'analytical'. And I think that's where we often get stuck. When we think of analytical meditation, we think: "Oh, it's just analyzing things in your head. When I do analytical meditation on death, I'm just contemplating death up in my head." But this is not what it really means. It is analytical in the sense of really investigating things. Maybe we can call it an investigating meditation. Would that help a little bit? The term 'analytical' is a difficult one.

More on wisdom

We mentioned in the last session that there are three types of wisdom: the wisdom understanding emptiness, the wisdom understanding relative existence and the wisdom of helping sentient beings. I want to emphasize that the wisdom understanding emptiness or the ultimate truth is what actually frees us from cyclic existence, but the wisdom understanding relative truths is also very important.

The importance and purpose of cultivating the wisdom understanding relative truths

In ancient times, the wisdom understanding relative truths came from studying poetry, grammar, medicine, astrology, and all the ancient sciences. What it is emphasizing to us, is the necessity of understanding current disciplines in the society.

The wisdom of understanding relative truths is emphasizing that a bodhisattva doesn't isolate himself or herself from what's going on in the world around. A bodhisattva understands karma and how things function, as well as some of the things that are going on in the society, so that they could explain Dharma in terms of what's happening in the society.

Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey used to tell us when we struggled learning Tibetan: "If you can become a Buddha, you can also learn Tibetan." Not that learning Tibetan is central to becoming a Buddha, but what he was emphasizing was that on the bodhisattva path, you try and learn about many different fields that can help your practice and help you explain the Dharma to other people. So I want to emphasize this point.

The four kinds of wisdom in terms of how they are generated

Then I also want to talk about wisdom in general, not necessarily the far-reaching attitude of wisdom. This is an interesting aside about wisdom. Sometimes, we talk about four kinds of wisdom in terms of how they are generated:

- 1) Wisdom that comes because of previous life imprint
- 2) Wisdom from hearing
- 3) Wisdom from reflecting
- 4) Wisdom from meditating

I think these are very helpful to know. The wisdom coming from previous lives is the wisdom that we are born with. This is the ability to investigate, reflect or understand, which comes as a result of what we cultivated in previous lives.

Part of what we are now is a result of previous lives, and part of what we do now is going to affect how much wisdom we have in the future lives. But that's only one of the four kinds of wisdom, so we shouldn't get all hung up thinking that wisdom means IQ, or wisdom means innate ability, because we have the other three kinds of wisdoms that are very important, too.

These three wisdoms arise in the context of this life and your training in the Dharma practice. We have a

certain kind of wisdom from previous lives that we are born with. But then as we listen to teachings, more wisdom comes. Wisdom as you are listening to teachings or as you are studying. In other words, as you are getting the information into you, a certain kind of understanding arises in your mind. It may not be a single-pointed, in-depth absorption of the object of meditation, but it's a certain kind of wisdom that comes from hearing teachings. That's one reason why we are encouraged to hear a lot of teachings, and to read, and things like these, because each time you hear something, some kind of understanding is generated that wasn't generated before.

For example, His Holiness is going to teach in Dharamsala soon. You will find all these Geshe there too who have taught the same text that His Holiness is teaching, but they will be sitting there, listening to His Holiness teaching. Why? Because when you sit and listen to teachings, a certain kind of wisdom arises from the listening process, because you are thinking about things as you are listening. So that's one kind of wisdom that we start out with.

And then from there, after we listen and read and get the information in, we deepen that wisdom by reflecting. We go home with the teachings and we reflect deeply on them, thinking: "Does this make sense? Does that fit with my experience? Does this match everything that is going on in my life?" And you discuss it with other people.

This process of discussing what you have understood and thinking about it some more yourself, is very, very important. Because, sometimes, we hear something and we think we understand it but we actually didn't. If we skip reflecting and go directly from hearing to meditation, and if we didn't understand correctly what we heard, then our meditation is going to get screwed up.

So it's very important to go through this intermediate process of reflecting on what we have heard, thinking about it and discussing it with other people. That's why Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey used to say you learn 25% from your teacher and 75% from thinking about it and discussing it with your friends – really emphasizing how important it is to reflect and discuss with others.

You might notice that sometimes, somebody you work with might ask: "What's the Buddha's teaching on patience?" And you thought you had understood it, but as soon as you start to explain it, your mind gets all twisted up, and it's like, "I don't really get it!"

Actually, it's quite good when that happens because it's showing us what we need to work on. That's the process of developing wisdom through reflection, through discussing it and trying to verbally express what our understanding is, and listen to other people's understanding and commenting on it. They help to refine and deepen our understanding. Then, we go on to meditation.

In our meditation, we're sitting and trying to integrate it with our very being and develop some kind of calm abiding and penetrative insight on the material that we have previously understood. So in one way, it's a gradual process. You hear, then you reflect and you meditate. But we can, in terms of our daily practice, do all three at the same time. So don't think: "Oh, I will just hear when I'm young, reflect when I am middle-aged, and meditate when I'm old aged." When you're young, you cultivate all three, and you do the same when you are middle-aged and when you are in old age.

[Audience: Inaudible]

Well, it's the wisdom like when you first come to Buddhist teachings and you listen and you feel: "I knew that already. I kind of believe in that already, and they are just putting it into words for me." So it's that kind of wisdom. Or, sometimes, many of us can look back on things that we used to think about or wonder about before we met Buddhism, and find that we have actually quite a lot of Buddhist thought, but we never identified it as that.

[Audience: Inaudible]

Right. Some ability to learn from what has happened to us and to put it together in a constructive way. Our wisdom can actually increase in one lifetime because as we hear and reflect and meditate, our wisdom increases.

I'm taking time to explain this because, sometimes, we come into Dharma and we think: "I have a low

IQ. My SAT scores weren't so good. I'm such a dimwit, how can I learn Dharma?" "I went to take my driving license and I flunked it. How can I learn Dharma? I'm not very intelligent." I think it's important for people to recognize that there are many different kinds of intelligence and many different kinds of wisdom and understanding, and that Dharma wisdom and understanding is very different from worldly wisdom and understanding. You can have a person who is extremely smart in worldly ways, but when they come to Dharma, they are totally ignorant.

For example, take a 100% gung-ho, award-winning scientist who understands all the neuro-biology of the brain. As soon as you start talking to them about the mind and about subduing the mind and developing concentration and things like that, they totally fall apart and they say: "I don't understand that. That stuff doesn't exist." They can be somebody who is very smart in a worldly way. Somebody who has an MBA and can make tons of money, or somebody who knows how to make nuclear bombs. Nuclear scientists are very good examples. They are extremely brilliant but when it comes to Dharma and their sense of morality and ethics, they might be very dumb. So we shouldn't associate worldly wisdom with Dharma wisdom. You can have some people who are good in both, but you can have people that are good in one and not good in the other.

[In response to audience:] I've been in a lot of settings with people who are new to Dharma, and I've seen people who are extremely brilliant in worldly ways, just scratch their head at teachings. They just don't get it.

[In response to audience:] It could be a lack of interest. But it's also a thing of karmic obscuration. Understanding Dharma isn't just a matter of intellectual intelligence. It depends a lot on your karma. When we have a lot of negative karma, that creates a veil on the film so the mind just cannot get it.

We can see it even in our mind now. We have a lot of interest, but sometimes we listen to things and we just don't get it. But we have the interest.

[In response to audience:] It's karmic obscuration. Because of negative actions done in previous lives, the mind is fogged up. It's clouded over by the imprints of this karma, and that's why it's so important to do repeated purification everyday.

It's an interesting point because we can see that to develop Dharma understanding, you need some kind of intelligence, but that's not sufficient. We need some kind of concentration, but that's not sufficient. We need some kind of interest, but that's not sufficient either. We need some kind of appreciation and some kind of aspiration, but those aren't sufficient. To actually get ourselves to the point of having a real deep understanding, there are many mental factors that we need to develop. They need to all come together for us to really get it. So this is one thing that I wanted to explain about wisdom.

All the Dharma we study are meant for practice

At the time that Lama Tsong Khapa was alive in Tibet, there were a lot of misconceptions. Some people thought that there were some things about Dharma that you studied, and some things that you practiced, and that they were two different things. We study these texts and we practice other texts. Lama Tsong Khapa, especially here in the wisdom section, is showing that that's not true at all. All the texts, all the different explanations, they are all meant for practice.

His Holiness says this repeatedly. I think he does it because some texts list many categories and contain a lot of logical reasoning, and it's really tempting for our intellectual mind to say that these are just intellectual things – without realizing that the main underlying purpose of doing all that is to gain some experience.

And so sometimes we make this division: "Oh there are intellectual texts and there are practice manuals. I don't want to become intellectual, so I will just focus on these practice manuals. All these other texts are totally useless." Lama Tsong Khapa is really emphasizing here that they all fit together, and we shouldn't make a division in our mind that some things are for intellectual understanding and other things are for practice. They are all for practice. They all help us to understand our life.

I think that's really important to note, because we have been studying the *lamrim* for a long time, and it's very tempting when you hear certain subjects that are at first difficult, to think: "Oh, these are just for intellectual understanding. They aren't so important." In actual fact, if we deeply understand them, they

make a big imprint on our mind and how we view the world.

Here, under wisdom, it is emphasized that we need to understand things completely. And that it's very important in our practice to develop the ability to discriminate – in a wise way. In one way, we say our discriminating mind makes a lot of problems for us because it says: "I like chocolate ice-cream and I don't like strawberry, and I'm not going to be happy unless I can have chocolate." We certainly need to shut up that kind of discriminating mind.

But there's another kind of discriminating wisdom that's very important to develop. This is the discriminating wisdom that can actually understand what emptiness is. Emptiness isn't like there's nothing in your refrigerator and nothing in your stomach. It's a really precise thing, and we need to be able to discriminate what is emptiness and what is nihilism. We need to discriminate between dependent arising and permanence. We also need to be able to discriminate what are actions that create constructive imprints in our mind and what are actions that create destructive ones. And what's the difference between the two.

Also, it is not just understanding all these things intellectually, but discriminating in terms of applying them to our own mind. We not only understand: "Okay, killing is bad karma and saving lives is good karma." but we also recognize what killing is. What the intention to kill is. What the mind feels like when it kills. To recognize the intention to preserve life or save life.

All these things that we are talking about aren't just external categories. They are things to understand. Learn to discriminate – not just as generalities, but in terms of discriminating our own mind and understanding what's going on in our own mind at any particular time. We need that kind of discriminating bright wisdom or understanding that can see things accurately.

This is so important because so often in the West, we like to talk about space and light and love. In Buddhism, we talk about space and light and love too, but space does not mean being vague and amorphous. That is a very important point. And love means some real, concise kind of understanding and feeling.

[Audience: Inaudible]

You don't get the red dots and white dots, but that doesn't have to be the major emphasis of your practice right now." That's not the major important thing that you need to know. So with that kind of thing, it's like: "I don't really get that. Some other time, when I'm practicing on a different level, that could be important information to know and I might be able to get it then. But right now, I'll just file that and put that on the backburner, but come back to what's essential for me right now." Buddhism isn't taught with the assumption that we are going to understand everything the first time we hear it. Or even the fourth or the tenth time, not to mention different lifetimes of having it explained to us.

[Audience:] Why do we need to learn the whole lamrim? The Buddha taught his first five disciples the Four Noble Truths and they became arhats. Even when the Buddha taught in India, he only taught people what they needed to know.

But he didn't just give one lecture to each person. Some people heard many teachings.

Anyway, they say that that's because the people who were born at the time that the Buddha lived, had incredibly much more good karma than we did. They had practiced so much in their previous lives. They had done so much work in their previous lives and created the positive potential to be born when the actual, historical Buddha was alive. It's like they did all their homework before. So they just needed to get a little bit of teachings from the Buddha and they were able to tap into the whole understanding from before.

Whereas for us, even if we were born at the time of the Buddha and we sat in on one of those teachings, we'd probably still scratch our heads. The way I see our learning the whole *lamrim* and all the different subjects is, we are trying to fill in that whole vast array of understanding. This is also why we make prayers to be born at the time of Maitreya Buddha. If we learn all these teachings now, then when we are Maitreya's disciples, Maitreya gives us one teaching and we will gain the realizations. How we will be at that time depends a lot on what we have done in previous lives – how much good karma we have

accumulated and how much understanding we have.

Even within that, you do find people that come to Dharma reacting differently. You may have two newcomers to Dharma, they hear the same talk, and one will come out saying: "Wow! This makes sense." They really get it. It's like everything is transformed. And the other comes out and says: "Why doesn't he speak better English? I can't understand a word he is saying!" I have seen this happening repeatedly. This is just indicative of what we bring with us from previous lives. Which is why the cultivation that we are doing now is very important. If we cultivate well now, then in future lives, we are going to get it quickly.

[Audience:] What are karmic obscurations?

As you begin to practice, start to meet people and watch your own mind, you will get a better sense of what karmic obscuration means. For example, you can sit there, have lots of interest in the Dharma, and it really makes sense to you, but when you try to meditate, your mind is just totally blocked. Your mind feels like a piece of lead. Or your mind is running around to every single object in samsara, and doesn't want to stay on anything to do with the Dharma at all. Or your mind gets annoyed and complains: "This place is too cold." "He doesn't speak English." This is what karmic obscuration is and this is why purification practice is so important.

[Audience:] How do you incorporate purification in everyday practice?

Excellent question. I like questions like this – practice questions. We went through the four opponent powers. Remember them? What are they? Regret, refuge and bodhicitta, determination not to repeat it, and remedial action. We try and go through those four at the end of the day when we do our review. Or we can go through them in the middle of the day, or whatever time is good. For the remedial action you could do the Vajrasattva mantra for those of you who do that, or you could do the prostrations to the thirty-five Buddhas which I've also taught. Or you could just do the visualization of the Buddha in front with the light coming in and purifying.

You could incorporate all four opponent powers in these practices. For example, with the prostrations to the thirty-five Buddhas, you take refuge at the beginning. And then you recite the Buddhas' names, which is the remedial action. As you're reciting the confession prayer, you're generating regret for all the negative actions you have committed and you are also determined to avoid them in the future. So, this practice incorporates all four opponent powers. And if you look at the Vajrasattva practice, it does too. If you do the Shakyamuni Buddha meditation and really think about the actions and generate regret and determination, then that includes all the opponent powers too. You could also include the four opponent powers in the Lama Tsong Khapa guru yoga, Tara practice, and other similar practices.

Sometimes when you do your meditation practice, things really click and you get a lot of things. Other times when you do your practice, the mind is real tough! This is a signal that we need to rebalance and do more practice on the purification side. Whenever the mind gets tough, stubborn, rebellious, resistant, tired, then it's good to shift to doing more purification and more creation of positive potential.

[Audience:] There are so many practices. How do I select which to practice?

I think you can pick one that you have a stronger affinity for, and concentrate on that one. But it's good to know the other ones as well, because they do help. But you can make one the principal one.

[Audience: Inaudible]

It is hard to say. It's good to remember that if you do the prostrations to the thirty-five Buddhas and you have a nightmare, the practice didn't cause the nightmare. The negative karma caused the nightmare. This is real important to remember. It could be that there is some deeper purification there. It could be that you just need some time to develop familiarity with something. And it could also be that from previous lives, you have a stronger affinity with one than the other. That's okay because we all have some practices that we have a strong affinity with and others that we don't have such strong affinity with. That's why the Buddha appeared in many different forms.

I just want to make sure that people are clear about this. We talked about meditative stabilization, which is the ability to be single-pointed on a virtuous object. And then we talked about the different ways of dividing it. There was one way of dividing it where we had (1) calm abiding, (2) special insight, and then (3) the union of the two. The thing to note is, the way categories are made in the Buddhist teachings, not everything that is found listed under that category necessarily fits the exact definition of that category. I think that's what is happening in this one. So you have (1) calm abiding, which definitely is single-pointed on a virtuous object. You have (2) penetrative insight that is on a virtuous object, which is not necessarily a mind of calm abiding. They call it special insight, but really, to be truly special insight, it needs to have the calm abiding with it. So this one is a similitude of calm abiding. And then the third one is where you have the two together.

Also, to realize that even though here, we are talking about special insight under meditative stabilization, when we meditate on wisdom, we are trying to develop special insight there. But meditative stabilization and wisdom overlap, and meditative stabilization and patience overlap, and meditative stabilization overlaps with all the other points in the *lamrim*, because the more concentrated and clearer our mind gets, then the clearer the other things become to us.

This teaching is based on the *Lamrim* or *The Gradual Path to Enlightenment*. Please refer to the following web-page for its outline and other transcripts or to listen to the audio recording of these talks: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/GradualPathToEnlightenment/outline.html>