

THE RAMAKRISHNA MISSION INSTITUTE OF CULTURE

MEDITATION: ACCORDING TO TIBETAN BUDDHIST TRADITION

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At the outset I must express my gratitude to the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture for giving me this great opportunity to give a talk in memory of Mahadeolal Sarogi in this esteemed institution. Ramakrishna Mission is serving the sinking beings all over the world. And its work, mission and teaching are immensely valuable, particularly at this difficult juncture of the 21st century, when everyone is facing the challenge of violence and destruction.

Science and technology have failed to offer any durable solution of the problems that humanity is facing. At this juncture spiritual traditions, in general, and the teachings of Swami Vivekananda, in particular, have immense relevance.

My subject is 'Meditation: According to Tibetan Buddhist Tradition'. The Buddhist tradition, in general, and the tradition of meditation, in particular, which is preserved in Tibet, has a direct relationship with India, particularly Bengal.

Buddhism was introduced in Tibet in the 7th century by âchàrya Shàntarakshita who was the son of this soil, who was born and brought up in Bengal. Very kindly he accepted the invitation of the Tibetan king [Khri-sron-lde-btsan. A. D. 755-97] and established the Bhikshu-Sangha and Buddhism in Tibet. I am particularly grateful to him because he gave very special instructions to the Tibetan people regarding how to study Buddhism. In spite of the opposition from many of his accompanying monks he was allowed to translate the entire Tripitaka and the commentaries into Tibetan language. If you look at the Buddhist countries today, ie Burma, Sri Lanka and Thailand, the three Theravàdin traditions of Buddhism, you will find that the ancient âchàryas of those countries did not allow the translation of the Vinayapitaka, particularly the patimuk sutra. The Bhikshu Sanghas in these countries had to recite the patimuk sutra in Pàli original because they feared that if the sutra is translated there is a chance of its being misinterpreted. So the majority of monks there are well-versed in Pàli language and listening to the patimuk sutra has become a ritual with them.

Be that as it may, it was âchàrya Shàntarakshita who particularly said: You must translate each and every word of the Buddha's teaching into your own language. Unless you have a language in which the entire Buddhist canon can be translated, there will be no chance of establishing Buddhadharma properly.

Therefore hundreds of Indian Pandits had been invited to Tibet and hundreds of Tibetan students had been educated in Sanskrit and other Indian languages. As a result, we are proud that majority of Indian works are available in Tibetan version and thereby a proper understanding of Buddhadharma was possible for the Tibetan people.

Then, coming to meditation, we remember Kamalashila, the direct disciple of âchàrya Shàntarakshita. Incidentally, Kamalashila was also brought up in Bengal. Shàntarakshita, who passed away in Tibet said to his disciples: 'If there is any problem in interpreting the Buddha-vachana [The Word of the Buddha], you can invite my disciple Kamalashila.' And it so happened that there was some confusion due to certain teachings coming from China. Buddhism, it should be remembered, went to China much earlier than Tibet. So some âchàryas from China had misinterpreted a number of sutras. To remove the confusion prevailing at that time, the king again invited âchàrya Kamalashila. Kamalashila went to Tibet and had great debates with scholars and finally they established the mild way of meditation. He wrote three 'Bhàvanàkarma-s. Bhàvanàkarma is what directly deals with meditation.

Meditation is called in Sanskrit bhàvanà and all the three Bhàvanàkarma-s deal entirely with the Buddhist meditative methods. If àchàrya Kamalashila had not visited Tibet, he might not have written this great treatise on Bhàvanàkarma. Out of the three Bhàvanàkarma-s, the second was lost. However, now the entire treatise is available. The people of Bengal must feel proud of it and should read it. Now it is also available in Hindi and English translations.

Shàntarakshita's great treatise was Tattvasangraha in which the entire Indian philosophical traditions are summed up. He has commented in this work very nicely on different contemporary traditions.

Naturally, it became one of the very important texts for learning. So we owe a great deal to these two àchàryas. And, finally, in the 11th century, Buddhism was again much distorted due to certain external and internal factors and at that time Dipankara shrījñàna or Atisha was invited to dispel these misinterpretations and misconceptions about Buddhism and he spent the rest of his life, about 17 years, in Tibet. During his stay in Tibet, he wrote the very famous shàstra 'Bauddhapadapradipam'. It represents the essence of the whole Buddhist teachings. Today the Tibetan people, all the Tibetan Buddhist traditions, begin their study of Buddhism with this small treatise.

Now we come to our subject-'Meditation'. Meditation is an English word which is very commonly used today for everything and everywhere. The advanced and busy people of America and Europe are particularly looking for some kind of meditation. They need things that yield very quick results. They need fast food, fast meditation and everything which is fast. They are trying to meditate while talking on cellphone or working on laptop. So we shall have to invent some modern or ultra-modern or post-modern meditative methods to cope with this demand. I do not know who will do that. But some American people might be able perhaps to do that.

The word 'meditation' is now used as equivalent to the Sanskrit term bhàvanà and dhyàna, two very famous technical words we use for training our mind. Dhyàna or bhàvanà, sometimes they are used as synonyms and sometimes they have different connotations.

The process of training the mind is called bhàvanà or dhyàna. One achieves a certain kind of mental stability as a result of bhàvanà or dhyàna. Then there are so many stages of mind-set which are called samàdhi or samàpatti. I need not go into details because these are all philosophically technical words which refer not to the process of the mind-training, but to the result of processes. When one reaches a certain stage through dhyàna, then we call it samàdhi or samàpatti.

Then it is divided into three lokas or realms-the kàma, the rupa and the arupa. And there are nine different steps of samàdhi or samàpatti. These are very common with majority of the Indian philosophical traditions. As far as the meditative method is concerned, this is especially very common. But the little difference that is there in Buddhism is that samàdhi or meditation is not an independent entity; it is part of the threefold teaching or training (trishikshà)-shila, samàdhi and prajñà. These are interrelated and interdependent. The first stage is shila, and the second stage is samàdhi and the final goal is prajñà (wisdom).

Shila is a prerequisite for samàdhi and samàdhi is a prerequisite for prajñà, for wisdom or realization. Shila trains your physical and vocal conducts in a proper way. The moral conducts which directly deal with physical and vocal actions are regulated through shila, through discipline. Shila means moral discipline and that moral discipline has so many aspects, some relate to lay people and some to the Shramanas or Bhikshus and Bhikshunis. So there are different kinds of shila practice. In short, shila means reframing and correcting physical and oral misconducts.

Although in some other traditions, yama and niyamas are parts of meditation, in the Buddhist tradition these are parts of shila, the first stage of education. And then samàdhi. Samàdhi is not the end or goal, but it is a means to achieve prajñà, the wisdom, which only can dispel the root of ignorance,

which again is the root cause of all miseries. In order to be free from bondage, you have to get rid of ignorance or avidyà, and to get rid of avidyà you must have vidyà or wisdom. Wisdom is the end, and to achieve this purpose you need a stable mind which can stay on one object as long as you wish, and which can also analyse things in the deepest level.

In this connection, Kamalashila gives an example. He says, if some paintings or beautiful objects are put in a dark place and you want to see those objects clearly with the help of a lamp, you need a very illuminating lamp which is not flickering, which is steady and not swayed by wind. There may be a good lamp but the lamp is disturbed by wind, so you are not able to see the details of the paintings.

Similarly, when you wish to see the truth, the suchness, the tattva, you need a clear mind which is unmoving and stable. That state of mind can only be achieved by meditation. Therefore, in the process of learning, we, Buddhists, do not teach meditation as a separate subject. You have to go through the practice of the shila and samàdhi and then finally you have to reach the level of prajnà or wisdom. For this reason, the Buddhist method of meditation is not very appealing to the present-day enthusiasts, although many people are using vipashyanà meditation in order to improve their efficiency and productivity.

That is absolutely not the object of meditation. But use and misuse-it is all in human hands. I know several governments and multinational companies and their secretaries who are encouraging their employees to go to the 'Vipashyanà' camps, not for spiritual advancement, but just to improve their productivity and efficiency and to minimize the labour problems. That is absolutely not the Buddhist way to use meditation.

The Buddhist way of meditation

I would now deal with the Buddhist way of meditation as briefly as possible. It is a very vast subject and it is not in my capacity to sum up very nicely. But I will try. The bhàvanà or dhyàna has basically three different natures. First comes the meditation in order to transform the mind; it is a kind of cultivating the mind. Take for example, meditation on maitribhàvanà or meditation on karunà. When you say I am meditating on maitri (friendship) or karunà (compassion), it does not mean maitri or karunà is an object and I am concentrating on that. It means my mind is converting itself into maitri, my mental attitude is being converted into karuna or loving kindness.

So this is a conversion of mind through meditation. This is one kind of meditation. This method is not analytical but it is concerned with the cultivation of certain virtues. Just try to transform the mind through rationality or through the process of argumentation or through practice (abhyàsa). In this manner, try to transform the mind into a particular positive attitude. That is one kind of meditation.

The second kind of meditation is just to concentrate the mind on one object. You can choose any object, any imaginary thing or material. But it is only on the imaginary thing and on the chosen object that you try to put the entire force of mind without allowing it to go anywhere.

The third kind of meditation is visualization. That comes mostly in the Tantra treatise. You visualize something and then meditate upon it. The object is not a reality but a visualized object. You may visualize yourself as a kàlachakra, then you meditate upon it.

So these are the three basic different natures of Buddhistic meditation that can again be broadly categorized into two types-concentrative and analytical. To analyse a thing you need a very active mind which is rational. So rational analysis of things is one kind of meditation and the other kind is concentration. Only concentration is there, no analysis. It is concentrative meditation and can be called shamatha. Shamatha means fixing the mind on one object. And the analytical mind is called vipashyanà. Vipashyanà means seeing a thing in a very particular way, in a very specialized way. Analysing every bit of a thing through logical mind is called vipashyanà. So the Buddhists' way of meditation can be divided broadly into two-concentrative meditation and analytical meditation.

Now I am coming to the final part: how to do that. This process may be divided into two-preparation and real meditation. And then, how to remove the obstacles in the path.

The preparation for meditation is more important or equally important as that of real meditation. For the beginners particularly, the preparation is very important. This preparation can be divided into two, mental preparation and physical preparation.

The first indispensable requirement of any meditation is the analysis of your intention. Without analysing your intention you may land up in something else, you may miss the goal. Buddhism as a religion is nirvāna-oriented, spirituality-oriented; it is not society oriented. Here no meditation is taught for the benefit of this worldly life. If this life is benefited in any manner, the effect is only secondary. Of course some benefit comes, but meditation cannot be practised for getting peace of mind or getting rid of depression or lessening mental tension or curing some chronic diseases. These can be achieved by taking medicine or going to dance or some such places and programmes.

Meditation is not necessarily meant for achieving such modern objectives. Even attaining one's own salvation is not the proper intention. That is the intention of inferior people. They meditate for their own enlightenment or salvation. The proper intention must be the spiritual development for the sake of all sentient beings. I must get wisdom or prajñā and for that purpose I meditate to save all sentient beings. Having this kind of intention is the first preparation. Without this proper intention, meditation is infructuous. If you do it, it will give certain temporary benefits, but the benefits would not be durable or the process of doing it would not be a kushalakārya-a good job. So to have the proper intention for attaining spiritual development is one of the most important preliminaries.

The physical preparation requires six things. First, you should stay in a place which is conducive to meditation. You cannot meditate everywhere. Secondly, you must reduce your desire and greed. If you meditate out of desire or greed, that is no meditation. Thirdly, you must be content with whatever you have. Fourthly, there should be limited activities. Whatever you do must be helpful and conducive to meditation; otherwise a great number of activities are not good for a meditator. The fifth requirement is good shila or good moral conduct. Lastly, one should stay away from all kinds of thought processes. So these six things are very common preliminaries for a meditator. Some other sutras mention other requirements as well. According to these sutras, the first thing is to control or discipline your sensory organs. Sensory organs should not be allowed to go out wherever they want. The second is to regulate your food, especially the quantity and quality of the food and the time it is taken. The third is to maintain a consistent awareness, a mindfulness and to regulate your sleep, time, quality and place of sleep. These are also very relevant to good meditation.

The midday and midnight are not time for meditation. The night should be divided into three portions and the first and last portion are for meditation-the middle portion is for sleep. If there are twelve hours in the night, the first four hours and the last four hours (ie the morning four hours) are good for meditation and during the middle four hours you must have deep sleep to regulate your physical body. So these kinds of preliminaries are necessary.

Then, there are the third kind of preliminaries such as how you sit, how you keep your body postures and the āsanās. I need not go into details because every meditator knows all these things. It would be just enough to say that in Buddhist meditation whatever is easy for your body, that can be a meditative posture. But the best one is to sit like 'Virochana Buddha', that is, sitting cross-legged and holding the spine straight and folding your hands. These are the preliminaries.

Basic meditation

Thereafter comes the basic meditation and, for that, first you have to search the object on which you are going to concentrate. There are hundreds of different objects mentioned by different traditions and different treatise. The colour, the size, the distance, all these need to be decided after great deal of

examination. Each individual has different likes and dislikes. So a beginner should take at least a month to decide his object of meditation. Of course, an old meditator cannot change the object or need not change the object. But for the beginner, the proper choice of an object plays a big role, for it will help him / her to get concentration more easily. The object can be a lamp, or it can be a statue or anything but the really important thing is the size and the colour. These two are very very crucial in making appropriate choice. But once it is chosen appropriately, the aspirant should stick to that even if there are some inconveniences.

I am talking about the concentrative meditation first and the analytic later on. This order can be reversed, but usually in the Tibetan tradition, we begin with shamatha and after achieving shamatha we move on to vipashyanà.. There you should concentrate on the object of your choice with clarity and forcefully without any hindrance. Suppose, you are concentrating on 'OM'. Here, the concentration on each portion of the word must be complete and very clear, and it should not be disturbed by any other thought in between. Of course, such concentration is very difficult, but it can be achieved by practice. Thus after some time you begin to achieve a little bit of concentration on your object of meditation.

Even then, at times the mind slips away from the object. It is to be avoided by bringing back the mind on the object again and again with the help of two watching minds (two watchdogs, as it were,) which are called smriti and samprajnàna. Here smriti does not mean memory, it means the alertness which can recognize the hindrance as it comes or which is about to come. And samprajnàna means the awareness. Yes, it has come and I must guard against this or I must take the challenge of avoiding this hindrance. Therefore these two minds are the most important instruments of achieving meditation.

If you practise like this, after a few years or so, you get quite used in concentrating your mind on an object. Then, the most dangerous second hindrance comes in. It comes when your mind tries to sink into that state. That is, concentration appears to be there, but there is no forcefulness and clarity. Many meditators mistake it as samàdhi and later on find very difficult to remedy it. Once you are habituated to stay in that state, sometimes you find it convenient and good. So the mind must be watchful and this sort of thing can be avoided with the help of smriti and samprajnàna, mindfulness and awareness. These two instruments have to be used and thereby you can increase the concentration as well as its forcefulness.

Once you achieve the ability to concentrate on one object as long as you wish, then you switch on to analytical meditation. Analytical meditation can be on any subject-shunyatà, anityatà, nairàtma or àtma-whatever your tradition offers you to meditate upon because the mind is already trained to concentrate and to analyse. In this manner, we must create a spiritual or religious mind. That is the real object of meditation.

So I have given a very rough sketch of the ancient Indian Buddhist tradition of meditation which prevailed in Tibet through àchàrya Shàntarakshita, Kamalashila and Dipankara shrijnàna-all three great àchàryas from your place and you must claim it as your ancestral property. You should own this and you should take care of this. I conclude by referring to a few words from Jiddu Krishnamurty who happens to be a very close friend of mine for a long time. Of course, it does not go very parallel with Buddhism but it has its own meaning, and for modern educated people his words are very appealing. He says that a meditative mind is silent. It is not the silence which thought can conceive of. It is not the silence of a still evening. It is the silence when perceptions have entirely ceased. This meditative mind is the religious mind, a mind that is not touched by the religion of the church or temples. The religious mind is the explosion of love. It is this love that knows no separation. To it, far is near; it is not for one or the many but rather that state of love in which all divisions cease. Like beauty, it cannot be measured by words. From this silence alone the meditative mind acts.

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Holiness Dalai Lama. This article is based on the transcribed and somewhat edited version of his lecture delivered at the Institute on 9 January 2006.