

NOTES ON “HOW TO SEE YOURSELF AS YOU REALLY ARE”

Chapter 8 – Focusing Your Mind

The type of meditation discussed in Chapters 8 and 9 is sometimes called “stabilization” or “placement” meditation. The goal with these meditations is not to realize emptiness, but to keep the mind on a single, subtle object without distraction or laxity. The stability of mind we gain through these meditations is automatically transferred over to our emptiness meditations, thereby making them deeper and more powerful.

Stabilizing meditations are not uncommon among meditative traditions. You may already be familiar with much of what is discussed in this chapter!

The first section of this chapter explains why focus is important in many areas of life. For anything in life to be accomplished, we need the mind to attend sufficiently to the matter. This is focus. Emptiness meditation needs to incorporate both focus and analysis, so that we can stay on track with the subtleties of the meditations.

A focused mind is compared to a lamp that does not flicker, and which is also bright. When the mind is focused, it stays on the object of observation without distraction and without laxity. These are the two main ways of the mind not being focused. Chapter 8 talks more about distraction, and Chapter 9 talks more about laxity. (Laxity occurs when the mind feels heavy, sunken, or weighted down, and the object is unclear. Drowsiness is one kind of laxity).

A distracted mind goes from one object to another, even when a person officially wants it to stay on one object (like a student trying to do homework...).

Laziness

The Dalai Lama characterizes laziness as various ways of “being unenthusiastic about meditation.” In other words, meditation is considered to be very important! Counteracting laziness so as to be able to meditate allows us to develop a joy in meditation and a “bliss of mental and physical flexibility.”

Conditions for Practice

Meditation is a more subtle state than many states of mind in daily life. In order that meditation not to be cut short by the consequences of other activities and states of mind, the Dalai Lama recommends that we adjust the external factors of our lives towards moderation. This will steer our lives towards the conditions that are fruitful for meditation. He basically recommends a moderate lifestyle, where we aren't beaten about by busyness, commotion, strong desires or aversions. This is where vows or intentions towards morality in thought and action come into play. Our minds and lives are thereby put in a state that is more amenable to meditation.

Here is my own experience with these kinds of recommendations. If you perhaps have a busy job and can't leave it in order to adjust your whole life to one of ease and quietness, try at least to nurture some part of the day or week where your external and internal conditions are optimal for meditation. For example, after a busy day at work, come home, change your clothes and go for a walk in the park or in nature. Open your heart, send love to everyone and everything. And then begin a meditation session.

Posture

If you already have a meditation practice, you can use the posture that works for you now. If you don't have a practice, then try the seated posture that the Dalai Lama recommends. At least give it a try. The position is similar to that used in Zen.

A Special Breathing Practice

This is a series of 9 inhalations and exhalations that you can do on the cushion before starting the meditation. It pacifies and normalizes the subtle energies in the body and mind. It lightens and clarifies the mind in a way similar to hyperventilation (in Western terms). There is an entire esoteric literature on these subtle energies, and it isn't necessary to learn about them in order to benefit by this practice. Just give it a try, and see if it works.

3 times: In through the **right** nostril, **out** through the **left** nostril.

3 times: In through the **left** nostril, **out** through the **right** nostril.

3 times: In through the **both** nostrils, **out** through the **both** nostrils.

During these breaths, concentrate just on the breath, or on counting the breath. Don't try to visualize anything in particular. After these breaths, wish all beings well, in a way similar to the wishes in the *metta* meditation.

The Object

What do we meditate on during this stabilizing meditation? What should the object be? It should be something subtle and not a physical object. It can be some quality that serves as a healing antidote to habitual afflictive states of mind we have. It can be emptiness. And it can be an inspiring religious figure.

Here I'll summarize the various recommendations with a table. You can perhaps come up with other examples. Choose one that resonates with you.

Condition, or Habitual Afflictive Mind-State	Suggested Calm-Abiding Object
If you habitually feel bothered by sexual lust	The unsexy parts of your body, from the hairs on your head, to toenails, bones, bodily fluids and waste products.
If you habitually feel bothered by hatred	Metta, love.
If you habitually feel bothered by confusion	Dependent arising.
If you habitually feel bothered by pride	How much you don't know, even about your own body.
If you habitually feel bothered by excessive thoughts, a chattering mind	The breath.
If your life is more or less peaceful, with no very troubling afflictive emotion, and if you have repeatedly been able to realize the emptiness of the self in a powerful way through inference.	The emptiness of the self.
For anyone.	A religious figure or being. Not just a painting or image of the being, but as real as you can make it. It could be the Buddha, or a bodhisattva. It could be from another religious tradition as well. Ideally, it will be a figure that is inspiring, and one which fills your mind with positive, virtuous qualities. This marvelous presence will be able to help you during times of distress, sickness and pain.