

Finding Freedom through Meditation

Word by word transcript of teachings given by the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje.

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPRUERQ09qo>



I would like to begin by wishing everyone good morning. And in particular I would like to extend the greeting of welcome to all of you who are newly joining our gathering due to having wrong timing on your schedule for the weekend. So welcome to everyone.

As for today's schedule of events, the morning session will be devoted to some remarks that I will share about meditation. And then in the afternoon we will have Manjushri empowerment. Generally speaking there are many different aspects or manifestations of the deity Manjushri, but from among all of these I thought it would be good, if this afternoon we could proceed through the empowerment of the form of Manjushri that is known as the Lion of Speech. And I think that this aspect of Manjushri would be particularly fitting because it's a form of Manjushri that I have had a connection with since I was a small child.

HH Karmapa in English: "...moment to moment focus, but I'm not doing that much formal meditation. That's why I don't have any meditation experience. And it's very difficult to talk about meditation today. Maybe they know I'm not doing so well, that's why maybe difficult. They set this program to test me!"

Translator: So in terms of this morning's talk, which is to be centered around the topic of meditation, ideally speaking, if we are going to have someone to give teachings about meditation, then you would want that person to have some amount of experience doing meditation practice. But in my case I really don't have any special experience doing meditation practice to speak of. All kinds of journalists are always asking me: "What is the first thing you do each morning when you wake up?" And I think in most cases they are asking it as a kind of a leading question, because they have some type of expectation that my response is

going to be that the first thing I do every morning when I wake up is to meditate. Because, as is well known, as has been asked from him many times, His Holiness Dalai Lama practices meditation every morning after he wakes up. So in my part I feel somewhat embarrassed when journalists ask me this question. It's difficult to say that I don't do any meditation practice; I can't really say that, because I do engage in some contemplation and mindfulness practice and so forth, but at the same time I feel that it's difficult to say that I am genuinely doing the practice of meditation in a formal ongoing way.

The main practice that I try to maintain is having mindfulness and awareness in all of my activities, whether it be moving about, sitting, lying down or what have you. I think I do manage to maintain that practice: the practice of having moment to moment focus in my mind. But apart from that I really don't have much special formal meditation experience. And therefore I think it's going to be very difficult for me to teach about meditation today. And I think that perhaps the organizers of this program knew this, and therefore they made meditation the topic of the program, in order to test me.

As all of you know, these days in the world there is a growing interest in the topic of meditation and in the topic of mindfulness. And we can see evidence of this strong and new interest very clearly, if we look at the statistics from Google. The statistics from Google show us that searches connected to topics such as meditation are very numerous; there is a very high number of searches that have been conducted by people wanting to know more about the topic of meditation. But then, if you look at the statistics connected to searches about the term Buddhism, you see that the numbers drop off very sharply, so that there is a great many more people who are searching for information about meditation than there are those who are searching information about Buddhism. And I think what this shows us is that there is less interest in the topic of Buddhism per se, in comparison with meditation, because Buddhism has been given a label of being a religion. Because of that label I think it affects to degree to which many people are interested in the subject. But since topics such as meditation, mindfulness and so forth do not have the label of religion associated with them, we see a great surge of interest.

From a certain perspective this situation is good news. It's a situation that we should all welcome and that we should all pay attention to. It is very positive that more and more people are developing an interest or a curiosity about meditation, and therefore we should welcome and assist this curiosity by paying even more attention that we did before to the topic of meditation, studying about meditation even more than we did before, so that we can support this surging interest. But from another perspective there are elements of this trend that are worrisome. And I say that because what I see in some cases is what looks like it could be a trending toward meditation being used for commercial purposes, a trending toward meditation becoming a commercial commodity. So, that aspect of this trend is concerning, because it would be a shame, if meditation were to be completely separated from the traditions in which the practices were developed, from the traditions in which it was developed and from its original value. If we allow these traditions and the original value of meditation to decline or to fall away, then that would be a shame.

I think the practice of yoga has gone through similar phases. Originally in India the practice of yoga was strictly a spiritual practice and from within spiritual practices it was actually considered mostly as a very secret practice, a practice that was very closely guarded, and not taught widely. All of its practitioners very seriously devoted to spiritual pursuits through practice of yoga. But in our contemporary world we see that in some cases the practice of yoga is more or less presented as a commercial commodity. And so, that is an area of concern with regard to meditation. In actuality the practice of meditation is very personal, and so, if

we were to allow meditation to be used just for commercial purposes, then I think that would cause meditation to lose its original value. It's important for us to maintain and continue to appreciate the original values of meditation, and to stay connected to the source or the origins from which the practice of meditation arose.

Therefore I feel that it is very important for us to examine our motivation for engaging in meditation, before we set about meditating. So before we even start meditating it's important for us to take a close look and ask: what is our motivation for doing this, what purpose are we trying to serve through our meditation practice? What goal are we trying to accomplish. Analyzing our own motivation in this way we should try to develop as much clarity about that as we can, even before we begin meditating.

The reason why examining our motivation is important is because connecting with a clear positive motivation creates a certain environment in our mind and the environment of our mind is very, very influential in terms of how our meditation progresses or what happens, what quality our meditation comes out as. Sometimes we get so focused on the technique of meditation, that we lose this bigger picture of what type of mental environment we have created for ourselves. We spend so much time worrying about whether or not we are doing the technique of meditation correctly, but when we really look carefully at the situation, I feel that the mental environment that we create or in other words, the basic attitude that we bring to the practice of meditation, is even more important than the degree of accuracy with which we perform the techniques of meditation.

We can look at a story from the history of Buddhism to illustrate a key point of our meditation in a way that I think would be helpful. The 3rd Karmapa from among the successive Karmapa incarnations was a master named Karmapa Rangjung Dorje, and he is very well known in history as having been a great master of the practice of meditation, to the extent that even many of his students were reputed to have achieved higher accomplishments in meditation. So there is a story from the life of Karmapa Rangjung Dorje, the 3rd Karmapa, in which a person approaches him and asks him a question saying: "I heard that there is a spiritual instruction that allows one to achieve liberation without practicing meditation. Does this instruction exist, and if so, would you please give it to me?" The 3rd Karmapa Rangjung Dorje responded by saying: "Yes, such an instruction exists, but if I were to give it to you, I'm not sure that it would help you, because I'm not so certain that you would be able to understand this instruction and be able to practice it correctly. I'm not so sure that you wouldn't instead practice some type of contrived method rather than the actual intent of the instruction, and therefore, even though it exists, I don't think it would help you if I were to give it to you."

HHK: "Actually they are not much like meditation techniques, more like you need to sort of know how to let it go, your mind."

Joking with the translator: "I think better you teach and I can translate into Tibetan!"

Translator: So, Your Holiness, please correct me if I'm not translating it correctly. Actually, at the end of the day, there really isn't that much in terms of meditation instruction for us to do.

HHK: "Meditation technique."

Translator: Right. There really isn't that much in terms of technique in meditation for us to do. Really the main point in meditation is learning how to relax our mind, and in some sense learning how to just let it go. That's really the essential point of meditation.

In the practice of shamatha or calm-abiding meditation the main instruction is to allow our minds to grasp one-pointedly on an object of focus. So what we do in the practice of calm-abiding meditation is that we gather all of the energy of our mind and direct it in a focused way. A metaphor to illustrate this practice of gathering the energy of the mind and directing it in a focused way is like pouring water through a pipe. These days, in our modern world, and especially in cities people's minds are very distracted toward outer objects, and the conditions or triggers for them becoming distracted are many.

There are all kinds of material things and mundane concerns that distract us and take our attention away, and due to this we are encouraged in the practice of calm-abiding meditation to gather our attention inwardly. Rather than allowing our mind to be distracted toward outer objects we are instructed to gather our attention inwards and to allow our mind's thoughts or allow the thinking mind to settle at ease in a state of calmness or peace. So we do need to bring effort into this practice of one-pointedly focusing our minds, but we do so in a relaxed way. So, this one-pointed focus – as well as being relaxed at ease, are very important for the practice of meditation.

Specifically the practice of calm-abiding meditation can be done in relationship to our breathing. To say a few words about that, generally speaking the practice of meditation usually involves an object of focus, an object that we specifically employ to help our minds to become more settled and to help our attention to become more directed. Sometimes this object of focus can be external, such as placing a certain physical object before our eyes, and then directing our attention one-pointedly toward that. And sometimes the object of focus can be internal; it can be an image that we conjure with our imagination that having conjured it we then direct our attention one-pointedly towards it as a method of settling our mind and so forth.

So there are many techniques of meditation in terms of what types of focal objects can be used. But the breath, when used as a focal object of meditation, has special advantages, because one does not need to search for the breath from somewhere else. The breath is something that is always present within us. So one doesn't need to go and look for an object of meditation. One doesn't need to conjure an object of focus, but one can simply direct one's attention to one's breath. Relating to breath in this way therefore is a very simple and convenient way of using a focal object in meditation.

HHK: "100 % appreciation, focus appreciation, taste."

When we use the breath as our focal support in meditation one way of describing the way we relate to it is to say that we focus our attention on the breath 100 %. We focus our attention on the breath one-pointedly. Another way of expressing that is to say that we have full appreciation of our breathing, that we taste our breath completely.

HHK: "Full attention."

And we engage in this practice continually. We place our attention on the breath and we try to be as fully attentive to it as we can in an uninterrupted way. As much as we can we try to fully appreciate each breath one after the other in an uninterrupted manner.

HHK in English: "Don't worry, you just relax."

If we find that we cannot keep our attention on the breath or fully appreciate the breath in an uninterrupted way, don't worry. We should simply relax. Being relaxed while we try to follow this meditation instruction is very important.

We can explore the meaning of the instruction to relax as well. Some people interpret the instruction to relax as an intentional action, so they are engaging in some act of intentionally relaxing, but I think that this approach is not quite what is meant by the instruction to relax.

HHK: "Don't try to relax. Trying is not relax."

Rather the real meaning of relaxing is that we should not try to relax, because when we are trying, we are not relaxing.

In the guiding instructions of the meditation traditions called Mahamudra and Dzogchen, the Great Perfection, we hear instructions that encourage us to rest our mind directly within the movements of the mind, to rest our attention directly within the recollection of the mind, the thinking mind, to rest our attention directly within the perceptions of the mind, the perceiving mind. Instructions such as these are teaching us how to relax in meditation, because sometimes what happens to us in meditation is that if we can't first focus, if we are not at first able to focus on the object that we have established as our focal object, then we worry about that and we try to wrestle with our mind to get it to focus again.

But from the Mahamudra and Dzogchen perspective the instruction is: if we find we are not able to focus on the focal object, then we simply rest our mind within that very state of not being able to focus. If we find that we are able to focus on the focal object, then we rest our mind in that very state of being able to focus. But what we do not do is enter into a state of worry if we find that we are not initially able to focus. So we don't need to panic and try to get our mind to focus again, if we discover that our mind has lost focus. If we can be relaxed with our mind in this way, then even when different objects appear before our mind, objects different from the initial focal object, we will still be able to remain within a state of mindfulness and our basic awareness and attentiveness of mind will continue uninterrupted.

Another misunderstanding that we can sometimes bring into our meditation is that we consider our mind...

HHK: "It's more like target for a sniper, focus. Not like that."

So, another mistaken approach that we sometimes bring into meditation is that we treat our mind basically as if it was something heavy and we really, we try to put it squarely on top of our breath, as if the breath was then going to be pressed down or anchored by the mind in some way that has been placed on top of it. So that's not a beneficial approach to the meditation on the breath. Some people have told me that when they practice meditation on the breath their breathing stops and it's very uncomfortable, so they have to

stop meditating. So it seems to me that the people who have this problem might be taking too heavy of an approach with their attention of mind. They are taking this approach where they are treating mind as if it was a heavy object, and they are trying to press down their breath with it.

So we don't need to treat our mind or our attention as if it was something heavy that was pressing down on the breath. Rather we should treat our mind as something fluid, like flowing air that is moving together with the breath. So, when we breathe out, and our exhalation is leaving our nostrils, we simply think that "Ah, the breath is going out!" and we let our mind flow together with the breath. So we don't need tense concentration, we don't need stiffness in our quality of attention. We can let our mind be light like air and flow gently together with the breath.

Some people treat the practice of meditation almost as if their mind was like a sniper looking through a slot to very intensely observe the target that is out in distance. But our meditation practice should not be like that. Rather we should allow our mind to be light and flowing.

Furthermore, the way that we breathe when we meditate should simply be our natural way of breathing. It's just the same as the way we always breathe normally. We don't need to make any special effort to make our breath be a certain way. Just breathe the way that you normally breathe. Also many people do a practice of meditation on the breath that involves counting the breath. So, sometimes we count sets of exhalation and inhalation, or sometimes we count how many inhalations we have had or how many exhalations we have had and so forth. I think for the time being it might be better to emphasize not counting the breath and simply relaxing together with the breath. Relaxing together with a gentle focus on the breath itself, because sometimes trying to have the quality of focusing and the activity of counting can make things a little bit too busy. So perhaps it's best for the time being to just do the practice of relaxing together with the breath without counting.

And then in terms of the way we can structure our sessions of meditation there is a common instruction from the teachings that says, we should do short sessions many times. That is a very good practice to adopt: doing short periods of meditation again and again repeatedly. However, if we really practice meditation in a very complete way and accomplish the qualities of calm-abiding or shamatha as they are explained in the traditional texts, this is not so simple. I don't think those qualities can be achieved just due a light and casual relationship with meditation practice. Properly speaking the practice of calm-abiding with qualities of calm-abiding are achieved in many cases through months of intensive retreat practice.

So, if one really devotes oneself to that type of a retreat environment and continually exercises oneself in the practice of calm-abiding, then one can truly accomplish the qualities of the mind that is abiding in a state of peace. But a part from that, just doing a little of practice on a daily basis is not really going to take us that far. Of course it will be beneficial, it will have some benefit. It will help us to calm our minds down, it will help us to increase our minds' ability to focus, but it's not going to bring us all the way to the place where we have achieved the qualities of calm-abiding meditation that are taught in the traditional texts. Furthermore, these days even doing retreats is more challenging, because the traditional texts always say that one should go to an isolated place or a remote place in order to practice meditation. But these days cell phone connections even go to the remote places. So I think it's very tricky for us in this present day.

HHK: "And also it's very important from the very beginning to do properly."

Another important point is that it's important for us to do our best to practice meditation correctly from the very beginning of our relationship with meditation. If we can put energy into practicing correctly from the very beginning, from the very outset, then I think there is hope that our meditation will progress well. But if we get into bad habits around our meditation, then I think that really plants a seed of energy in our meditation that somewhat taints our practice, somewhat pollutes our practice in a way that it's difficult to remove that negative influence later.

Especially one of the most challenging things about meditation and working with the abilities to focus our mind is that it can be quite boring. It's not so exciting, it's not so entertaining, and these days of course we have so many cravings for excitement and entertainment. Our minds are like small children. Small children can give attention to something for a short amount of time, but then they very quickly run off to something else.

So, it's very important for us to be aware of this tendency of our mind and try to head that tendency off when we begin to meditate, and set a very clear intention that we are going to persevere, that we are going to be patient and persevere through the stages that might feel boring, and continue our practice of the meditation instructions. If we can practice in that way, our meditation can progress in a positive way. But if we get into bad habits of meditation and allow ourselves to give in to our distractions and cravings while we are meditating in the early stages of our path, then it's going to be very difficult to get rid of those negative habits later on. And so, that's going to make it difficult for our meditation to progress well. So instead we should actually make ourselves excited about meditation. Rather than just following the habits of wanting to be entertained or wanting to be made excited by something else we should try to develop a full-hearted enthusiasm and delight toward the practice of meditation.

These days we are very much invested in the five sense consciousnesses, the perceptions of visible forms, sounds, smells, tastes and objects of touch. Our minds are continually distracted toward the five sensory objects, and enjoying the pleasures that those types of objects might provide us. But meditation on the other hand, is mainly centered around the sixth type of consciousness, the mental consciousness, and the type of pleasure that one enjoys in the context of meditation is the pleasure of meditative focus. In the current era there is such an emphasis on external development, and this external development is mainly connected to just the five sense consciousnesses, whereas the practice of meditation and the pleasure of the meditative concentration is connected to the sixth consciousness. But there is not a lot of support in our temporary society that encourages us to relate with the sixth consciousness and to enjoy the pleasure of meditative concentration. And from that perspective...

HHK: "Example..."

So our current society doesn't seem to strongly support cultivating and relating with the sixth consciousness, the mental consciousness, in a way that we can further our enjoyment of the comfort or pleasure of meditative stability. Therefore it's a bit of a challenging environment to live in with regard to meditation. For example, I could speak about the environment that I grew up with as a child. In my home area there was not a great deal of outer development. And in terms of sources of comfort there were outer sources of comfort, but not very many and not very wide in variety. In a word, you could say that we were poor. But in another sense you could say that the lifestyle we lived, the way we related to our environment

and to our notion of enjoyment, I think it's very similar to the indigenous people of North America, the way they for centuries related to their environment and their notions of enjoyments, their understanding of enjoyment.

So, we did have things to enjoy and outer objects that we turned to for pleasure and so forth, but not in the same way that these types of things exist today. Not in such vast abundance and such staggering variety. Instead we basically used the same types of things that our ancestors used for enjoyment for hundreds of years. There weren't really many new products and there certainly weren't new products coming out all of the time in order to generate more excitement and serve as sources for further entertainment. Whatever our parents and grandparents wore, that was the types of clothes that we wore. Whatever our parents and grandparents ate, that was the types of food that we ate. But our minds were happy.

I think it's difficult to say that the comfort and happiness that we enjoyed was the bliss of meditative concentration, but at the same time perhaps it wasn't too far off. Our minds on the inside were very content; we didn't have many worries on our mind. But then if we look at our contemporary world and its staggering outer advancements, it seems to be that misery has increased in proportion to outer developments. So we have more and more economic, industrial, technological advancement and development, but it seems that just to that degree we also have more and more advancement of our own misery and lack of contentment. So this is just an example.

So I think we should conclude at this point and I think this is the best I can offer in terms of an explanation of the practice of meditation. I don't think it's a fully authentic guiding instruction for the practice of meditation but we can have that pretext that I have given an instruction on meditation and you have received an instruction on meditation and we can call it a morning. And then in terms of this afternoon session we will proceed with the empowerment of Manjushri.

Dedication prayers.