

I did not fully understand, but I got this much: the difference between treating my thoughts as friends and treating them as enemies defined the difference between happiness and suffering. I still did not understand how to make friends with my thoughts. But I began to understand that trying to defeat these thoughts or wipe them out actually maintained the intensity of both the situation and the suffering.

Normally our monkey-mind is in the driver's seat. One thought leads to another and we cannot stop them, and often they drive us crazy. When we cultivate awareness, we no longer fall into the river. Awareness itself allows us to stand at the river's edge without getting sucked into the current. We are liberated from the tyranny of the monkey-mind. Thoughts are still there. They may be quiet or turbulent, focused or wild and scattered. But we have stopped identifying with them. We have become the awareness, not the thoughts. With the recognition of awareness, we can stand back and watch thoughts, and know that we are watching them. We no longer need to get rid of them because they are no longer pushing us around. Identifying with our natural awareness, and not the thoughts, dissolves their destructive power.

### *Using Thoughts as Support for Meditation*

When we start to meditate, the breath or a bell or a flower are the most common objects of support. When our mind wanders, we come back to these supports. But there is another option: using thoughts themselves to support the recognition of awareness. When we stay aware of our thoughts, we do not follow the story line, and we do not get pushed around by the monkey-boss, but instead we simply remain nonreactively watchful of the thoughts passing through the mind.

Let's try doing this. Start with watching your thoughts as if they were a fly buzzing around your head. You keep your eyes open and jerk your head to the left, to the right, up and down, all the time watching monkey-mind quickly zip from one thought to another. Yada, yada, yada, pizza, plans, partner, airplane tickets, watching, watching. Try doing that for a few minutes.

Many people find this exercise quite difficult, even though we are merely continuing what actually goes on in our mind most of the time. But when we put the process under the looking glass, we seem to freeze up. Watching the crazy monkey-mind in an intentional manner tends to break the patterns, making the exercise difficult.

Now let's try a somewhat more formal meditation using our thoughts as the object of support.

## MEDITATION USING THOUGHTS AS SUPPORT FOR AWARENESS

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- ▶ Sit in a relaxed posture with your back straight.
  - ▶ Your eyes can be open or closed.
  - ▶ Take a minute or two to rest in open awareness.
  - ▶ Then allow thoughts to arise. Bring your awareness to the thinking itself. Observe your thoughts with awareness. Don't try to change the thoughts or "try" to make them disappear. Just turn toward your thoughts with awareness. Don't try to analyze, interpret, or judge your thoughts. Simply observe them.
  - ▶ If thoughts disappear naturally, rest in open awareness.
  - ▶ When thoughts return, simply use them as the support for your awareness.
  - ▶ If you get carried away by thoughts, then gently bring the mind back to the process of just staying aware of thoughts.
  - ▶ Try this for five to ten minutes.
  - ▶ Conclude with resting in open awareness.
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For many people, trying to stay aware of thoughts tends to make thoughts disappear. This is fine. Let them go. Don't put energy into holding on to them. In fact, often this inability to hold the thoughts leads to open awareness, so just let that happen. But the effect of this meditation over time is that even when your thoughts remain, they do not carry you away. Awareness channels the power of the monkey-mind in a different direction. As long as you are just watching thoughts and

not getting sucked into the current, this is meditation. You are following your own orders to practice awareness. In this way, you use thoughts to liberate yourself from thoughts.

Thoughts do not stop. But you can stop rushing after them. The recognition of awareness now defines your mind, which reduces ego-fixation and clinging. Anything that helps dissolve a solid sense of self or of an independent “I” works to your benefit. The mind that recognizes awareness is no longer “all about me.”

Placing awareness on awareness itself means that we stop identifying with and rushing toward the mind-movements of our thoughts and emotions. When this happens, we can speak of remaining steady in any circumstance. That includes mental and physical circumstances, inside and outside circumstances. We can remain steady in the midst of a storm or in sunshine, or in the midst of pleasant or unpleasant sensations, wanted or unwanted thoughts, constructive or destructive emotions.

## SETTING THE INTENTION

Whatever practice you do, specifying the motivation is crucial. If you set a round object on a hill, such as a car tire, it will roll downward. Realizing awareness works the same way: once you set your intention, the mind will go in that direction. The target is not the object; awareness is the object. This is why you call the “object” your support. You use it as a tool to access the mind of awareness. Once you use your support to collect the mind, you set your intention, and then allow for a shift from object to awareness.

Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche used to tell me, “Whatever practice you do, the most important aspect is awareness. Awareness has everything. Once you recognize awareness, all the practices become important. If you have not realized awareness, then even if you practice all sorts of wonderful special or advanced methods, it will not really help your realization.”

Don’t worry if your mind wanders. Don’t judge yourself, or get angry, or think you are alone. Everyone’s mind wanders. That’s fine. When

you get entangled with your thoughts, come back to your support—the breath or whatever you have selected. You wander away. You come back. This is how you learn. Coming back to the object—for example, the breath—provides the support you need to steady the mind so that you can recognize awareness. When you use meditation to become aware of the breath, the mind that pays attention to the breath automatically realizes awareness. To put it another way: **using an object as support allows awareness to realize itself.** You do not have to push your mind away from the support. That will happen naturally, but you must allow for it by not fixating on the object and by maintaining the intention to recognize awareness.

Meditation is a mind-activity. Everywhere the mind goes, the opportunity for meditation exists. The idea that meditation is something that we only do sitting on a cushion in a particular way or at a particular time has created a lot of confusion. Yet if we can recognize awareness anywhere, anytime, we may ask why we make such a big deal out of meditation, with our cushions and mats and seven-point posture. The answer is that we have developed a very strong identification with our monkey-mind. In order to shift our identity to our natural awareness, we need aids, supports, and methods. We all need these strategies, but don't confuse them with the true meaning of meditation. We are not training in order to learn about objects. We are training to learn about our mind, because our mind holds the source of all possibilities—good and bad, happy and sad, sane and neurotic. Freedom exists within our very own heart and mind.

The biggest obstacle for my own ngondro students is that they think that ngondro and meditation are two separate practices. They are not. My students are always saying things like, “Actually I prefer meditation practice to doing prostrations or mantra.” Once we start our path of dharma, every practice is an awareness practice. As we progress, every activity is an awareness practice—or at least an opportunity to practice awareness. Every waking moment provides this opportunity.

To remain steady in the midst of chaos or contentment is a reasonable description of our goal. But we need to make a distinction

between process and result. The process of recognizing awareness definitely affects the monkey-mind. Our ordinary mental activity will not be as scattered and reactive as it might have been before. Cultivating the recognition of awareness definitely tends to result in a quieter mind. Yet our approach is to keep recognition of awareness as our target, and then to allow whatever happens to happen. This intention is of utmost importance.

And actually, what tends to happen—when we allow it to—is that our mind settles down. But we do not focus on becoming calm or pursuing a specific result. **If we fixate** on remaining calm, we cannot know this calmness in a lasting way. But if we cultivate a sustained recognition of awareness, we comprehend that **awareness itself is inherently calm**. This is the nature of awareness, no matter how turbulent our mind becomes. The steadfast calm of awareness is always with us. This allows us to discover a sense of peace and stability that is not dependent on the presence or absence of pleasant or unpleasant feelings. Once we get a taste of this, our mind naturally quiets down. In this way, even though being calm is not the target, nonetheless it is the result. With practice, we access the calm awareness within the turbulence of our mind. Once we shift our perspective and stabilize our intention, even painful thoughts and feelings can function as pathways to this recognition. This leads to a tremendous confidence in our ability to work with whatever arises. In the midst of internal or external turmoil, we trust in the flawless reliability of our own awareness.

### *Step by Step*

Dharma practice develops gradually. Let's say that our first experience of seeing the moon is a flat, two-dimensional picture shown to us by a friend. Our friend describes the shape, the color, and the qualities of the moon. These are like the words that describe dharma to beginners. We use concepts to point beyond concepts. Normally when we begin, our understanding of dharma involves words, images, letters, and feelings. We are here, and we point to the dharma over there.

As we practice, our experience transforms our capacity to see the moon, and then we can see the moon reflected in the lake. This moon image is more animated and has more vibrancy than either a flat image or words. Our buddha nature is the moon. And we are using concepts to go beyond concepts.

The next level is direct realization. We see the moon directly—without conceptualization. Now there are no words, no descriptions, no preconceptions. Just naked awareness. We have become what we have been pointing to. There's no separation between here and there, between “me” and dharma. At first we see a sliver of the moon. We have a little realization. This is the beginning of direct realization. We do not become a buddha at this level, but we are free from samsara, free from dukkha. When we see our true nature totally, it's like seeing the full moon. At that moment, we have completed the path of realization, which means: there is nothing more to realize. From then on, we practice dharma to deepen and stabilize our realization.

By using the language of our relative-reality mind, we make helpful distinctions—but words and concepts are only means to instruct us. This division of awareness into three categories—normal awareness, meditative awareness, and pure awareness—offers a tool to aid our understanding of the one, indivisible awareness. There is only one awareness. This is our innate, natural quality of mind. Everyone has this. We speak of the western sky or the eastern sky. But there is only one sky. Awareness is as indivisible as sky.

### *Meditation and Daily Life*

Nowadays people learn meditation for peace, for stress reduction, or for blissing out. These efforts have some positive aspects, especially if one identifies the mind as the source of difficulties and the source of happiness. But often these efforts fall into the category of meditation as an activity that has a beginning and an end: “Now I am meditating, and later I am not meditating.”

The dilemma here is that any positive results of the meditation tend