

Shine and Vipassana

Taken from 'The Happy Twins: Dzogchen and Mahamudra'¹

Autumn Retreat in the Eifel, 2019

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Shine practice

We will begin simply by sitting in a comfortable position letting our spine support our weight, so that the weight of the head is running down the spinal column. The shoulders are relaxed and open. The mouth is slightly open, but breathing is mostly through the nose. The tongue is on the hard upper palate. The right hand is resting on the left hand in the lap. Our gaze is down the line of our nose. Our eyes are slightly open, but we are not staring at anything in particular.

As we breathe in and out, we are aware of sensation at the end of the nostrils and that becomes the focus of our attention. Whenever we find our mind wandering off and we get caught up in other thoughts, then very gently we bring our attention back to that sensation.

It is important to be kind to ourselves - not blaming of ourselves, not indulging ourselves and getting lost, not being judgmental and strict... Very tenderly move away from whatever focus and then gently

¹ Two texts were studied on this retreat. The Mirror of Luminous Revelation (from Nuden Dorje Drophan Lingpa) and The Mahamudra Middle Way of the Ganges (from Tilopa)

move back. The more gently we move our attention back, the less disturbance we evoke. Tenderness is the mood of all the practices we do.

The world is full of harshness and if we want to be able to open up some new possibilities in the world, we have to be able to live with tenderness. Tenderness as strength, not opposition as strength, not dominance as strength, but tenderness as the deep strength that says, 'It's okay. Life goes on. It's fine. We are here. It doesn't matter too much. Don't make a big deal of it.' In that way, whatever movement into lostness occurs you are back again, and this is the main thing.

Again and again, we just come back to simply being in the practice.

On one level this is a very simple practice, and it is practised in all the buddhist traditions. It is a very important practice because our attention is the line of how we give life to anything. Our life energy - our prana or chi - runs along the line of our attention. When we get distracted, something is arising in the mind, like a sensation, a thought or a feeling which has already been invested with some kind of significance for us. It is usually something quite familiar or interesting and so it can easily hook our attention. When our attention goes into this transient arising it is energised and filled with life. Energy is going with attention.

The breath is neutral and boring and has no excitement or emotional hook to it. Therefore, for the attention to cling on to the breath there has to be a settling of that attention on to the breath, but usually something more interesting or habitually seductive comes along and carries us away. You can notice the operation of karma in this. Karma is our propensity or tendency - the way in which our energy moves in particular patterns of significance. We live in this world where some things are very important for us and other things are less important. Our energy flows very easily towards what we like and flows away from what we don't like. However, if it is captured by hatred and aggression it flows towards what we don't like.

By bringing the attention back to the breath, again and again, you get the chance to free yourself from the seductive power of these familiar constructions. These familiar constructions are what we call our ego-self - the patterning of our choices - our likes and dislikes. This is what we are made up of. We find ourselves thinking about something and it's a reassurance or confirmation that this is me and that familiarity lets us go on a little journey. But nothing of deep value is generated by it. We are not solving any universal problems. What we are doing is massaging a little bit of energy into the factors which maintain the continuity of our sense of self. When we separate our attention from that seductive pull and offer it to something quite neutral, we become less vulnerable to seduction, less pulled in, and less carried away. That is the beginning of choice. We then have the basis for being able to think about what we really want to attend to.

Why do we do shine practice?

Before we are ready to do dzogchen and mahamudra practice we need to be able to focus. Shine is described as a preparatory practice because it helps train us to focus. On a relative level, we can focus our attention and energy on many things. Some may seem more meaningful than others: gardening, football, fishing... There are many things you can do that require exquisite attention. We recently had the world snooker championships. Some people have played hundreds of thousands of games of snooker in their life, and they are able to do these amazing shots. Years of practice has gone into being able to pot a ball. You can make lots of money and get status and reputation. You can travel to various tournaments around the world and have a whole life playing snooker professionally. You become somebody through this skill. That is a quality of attention.

You can give attention to all manner of things, but the problem is that after a while you get arthritis in your elbow and you can't play snooker anymore. Or if you play football you might get a twisted kneecap and if the operation doesn't go well you have to stop playing football. Most of the things we put our attention into have a temporary lifespan and then we have to put our attention into something else. With the rise of artificial intelligence we know that many jobs are going to vanish and people will have to learn to use their attention somewhere else.

Attention gives identity. When you become distracted in meditation and you put your energy into the thought that is carrying you away, you are maintaining your identity. When you manage to sit for a while just on the breath, you have no identity. It is just peaceful and calm, but no sense of self is being constructed out of that. A thought may arise, 'Oh, this is going okay', and now you are distracted in that thought. If you don't go into that thought, it is just simple and clear - you become no-one.

Shine is a very useful practice to do whenever you have a chance. It is not a preliminary practice in the sense of being non-essential. Shine is more like the foundation of all meditation, just as a building needs to have good foundations. If you can't focus your attention without being distracted it is very difficult to enquire into how the mind is because you then just get pulled into the content of the mind.

As a practice we start by separating the mind itself and the content of the mind in order to see that the content of the mind is always changing, whereas the mind itself doesn't change. The goal is to awaken to the non-duality of these two - that the movement and the stillness are inseparable. In order to do that we have to not be pulled into the movement. The ego is always moving but awareness is not moving, so whenever you get distracted, you have moved.

Zen texts say that 'When the mind moves the ten thousand things arrive.' It is the movement of the mind through identification with thought, feeling, memory and planning which gives rise to this world of things. When the mind is peaceful, that is not there. You have clarity and you start to see the luminosity of the ground.

Practise this shine again and again whenever you have time.

Vipassana Meditation: seeing and scanning

In the Tibetan language vipassana is translated as *lhaktong* [Tib. lHag mThong] which means best seeing or seeing well, in other words, seeing without interpreting.

When we look around us, we see things and people and we have associations. We see a composite image of who that person is and there is some kind of recognition. That is the arising of some content of our mental capacity mixing with what we see and form into, 'Oh, it's you.' The more we know the person the more richness of texture and nuance is in the 'Oh, it's you.' 'I see you' is actually not true. We don't see you. We see shape and colour and we imagine 'you'. 'You' is coming from me. What I see is shape and colour. *Lhaktong* means seeing with the minimal addition of the factors of interpretation which we usually apply.

We will practise doing that following the basic theravada approach, which is to scan our body. We begin by bringing our focussed attention to the base of the nostrils and stabilising that a little. We then take that attention up to the top of our head and slowly scan down through the body, down to the soles of our feet, and then back up again. Whenever we notice something, just note it. You don't need to attach any concept to it at all. You just note what is showing.

When you find yourself adding some conceptual identification or interpretation you move from a basic sensation, which could be hot or cold, or stabbing, or pleasurable..., into 'Oh, that's nice', or 'My muscles are tense, I need a massage.' Once you have got into 'I have a pain in my shoulder and I need a massage', you are very far away from what you noted. You have elaborated and so lost the basic sensation - the actual phenomenon as it presented itself in its naked immediacy. You have wrapped it in self-referential conceptualisation which merely confirms the narrative of yourself. You are using the world as a resource to feed your sense of self.

We don't want to go in that direction because we are already experts at doing that. Instead, we simply want to note: hot, cold, burning, stabbing, whatever it would be, and if possible without any cognition in the recognition. For example, imagine you are walking outside and suddenly become aware of a big bird moving across the sky. You don't even need to know what it's called; you just see the shape and the glide. There is nothing much to do with it as it has just gone but you are registering what is there: the basic impression without the elaboration.

So, carry on scanning your body, following the same instruction as before. If you find yourself going off on some mental riff, then as soon as you recognise that simply go back to the scanning. Don't think about where your thoughts went, or why that happened, or that you have made a mistake. Don't do any further elaboration because more elaboration won't remove the first elaboration. You are just continuing the process. It doesn't need correction. Simply return to the scanning.

In doing that we get a sense of the body as something dynamic. The body is a showing, and in this style of vipassana we are seeing what is shown. We are not interpreting but we are getting close to the raw unmediated freshness of how what we call our body is presenting itself. From that you can take it out into other factors.

One of the key things that this meditation points to is that the idea or concept that we have of our body, and the immediate actuality of the body as it shows itself, are not the same. We have a sense of how our body is and who we are - that is to say, we tell ourselves what our body is and who we are in our embodiment - but when we start to scan through the body many different sensations are arising. Tensions are there which seem meaningful, however by the next time when you come back to scan that area they have dissolved.

This is the strangeness and unpredictability of phenomena: if you try to make sense of it you lose it. You can only be with it by not cooking it and leaving it as it is. But if you leave it as it is there is nothing to do, which is an interesting idea. I am merely observing how my body is. My body is showing. *Lhaktong*, or clear seeing, is seeing what shows.

Once you begin to get an idea of your body you go into an abstraction away from the phenomenon. This abstraction gives power to the ego in allowing you to build up a story, a narrative line, such as talking about your body in terms of having been to see the doctor because of your sore shoulder, or whatever it might be. There is something to elaborate, but the basic phenomenon in itself cannot be elaborated.

On the basis of the arising of that fleeting sensation we apply a sign or a name. On the basis of the sign or name we add more interpretation. The sign or the name is the noun, the nominative. Something is there and it is nameable, and with that name we make up a story. But what was there? It is uncatchable. It is insistent because something exists as an experience. We weren't asleep or dreaming, but what it was, was not a what. The 'what' is our idea of it.

The reason we do this practice again and again is to become familiar with the possibility of being present and not being overwhelmed by the strange. The strange in itself is an immediacy like on a summer's evening watching a little firefly moving around. We see this light. What does it mean? Goodness knows. We look at a butterfly and we wonder where it's going and what it's trying to do? When we scan through sensations in the body it is like that; something unimaginable. But of course we can imagine, however what we imagine is not what it is but what we imagine it is. And then we start to see samsara is the product of the creativity of the mind.

The basis in mahamudra and in dzogchen is staying with the simplicity of the manifest. It doesn't mean that you can't have thoughts and experiences, but you need to see their function as a kind of playfulness. They are a tonal quality. They are a melody that can run across experience. However, if you take your interpretation to be the one and only definition of the truth of things, yes, it is the truth of what you

imagine, but it is not the truth of the thing in itself. Samsara is imagination, whereas the door to liberation is phenomena in all its freshness.

The thing in itself is appearance and emptiness - sound and emptiness - ungraspable. What you grasp is an idea. You cannot grasp a thing. You may try. When you go outside there are different kinds of trees; close your eyes and slowly and gently move your fingertips over the bark of the tree. All kinds of sensations are arising. What is it? You are there and this strangeness is occurring. You open your eyes, you look at the tree, and you try to work out what kind of tree it is? Then you start telling the tree what it is. Now you are on familiar territory and you know what you are doing, but you no longer see the tree. The tree gave itself to you in its invitation to experience before conceptualisation. That is the gift of nature to us.

When you walk in the forest near where we are in the Eifel some parts of the road will be muddy and sticky because it's been raining. How you walk will depend on whatever shoes you are wearing. You will find yourself now in dialogue with the unfolding of what is around you. Because there are no straight lines in nature it is much more difficult to put into a little box or compartment. When you look at a tree it is very strange, with branches going off in all different directions. We don't manufacture things like that. We build houses with straight walls and doors that close to keep the draughts out. We build definable shapes but the rich craziness of a tree is so wonderful because it takes you out of yourself.

This is part of what we can do when we appreciate nature. Nature helps to rescue us from the prison of our own bland and over definitive conceptualisation. We don't know what's going on. We may know the Latin names for everything we encounter in nature, but we only need to look at the angle of one little blade of grass and our body responds because it is so amazing and full of this beauty.

Beauty is important for everybody, but it is particularly important for us as meditators because beauty stops us thinking. Beauty allows us to take in more of what is there; we don't have to judge it, because it is just gorgeous. We see a bright and cheerful little flower somehow managing to be there despite all this pounding rain. There are not many thoughts in our mind because there is nothing to do with the flower except be with it, appreciate it, and receive it - which is very similar to what we are doing when we are scanning through the body.

*Let us now dedicate the merit of what we have been doing for the sake of peace between
the warring communities in Europe, in Asia and all over the world.*

*Wherever there is war and confusion due to people being over-identified with conceptual identity,
may they find the space to dissolve concept in ever-welcoming space.*