

Buddhist Scriptures

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PENGUIN BOOKS

SERENITY AND DISCERNMENT

Throughout the history of Buddhism in India, expositions of meditation typically grouped practices under two headings: those with the goal of deep concentration and those with the goal of insight into the nature of reality. Although certain practices (such as the 'foundations of mindfulness' set out in Chapter 37) claimed to achieve the two goals through a single process, most expositions considered concentration and insight separately.

The practice of concentration involves the selection of an object of concentration, either material or immaterial, that is then used as the focus of sustained attention. A wide variety of such objects are prescribed, including mindfulness on the breath, on the foulness of the human body and on love (in the sense of the wish that others be happy). The process of developing concentration is described in great detail, with various pitfalls, and their antidotes, enumerated. As the mind gains in strength, concentration on the object increases and distraction decreases, until a state called serenity (śamatha) is attained. This is regarded as the minimal level of concentration required for the achievement of enlightenment, but it is only the first of many states of ever-deepening mental focus. One may proceed to levels called the concentrations (dhyāna, translated as 'contemplations' below).

This practice of concentration is not regarded as an innovation of the Buddha. Various renunciates at the time of the Buddha were said to be adept in the practice; the Buddha himself learned it during his years of yogic training from the teachers Ālāra Kālāma and Udrāka Rāmaputra (see Chapter 14). Thus,

non-Buddhists may also attain these states. What the Buddha understood was that these states, although sublime, are still located within saṃsāra and are not to be mistaken for liberation, as his first teachers had done.

In order to be liberated from rebirth, one must have not only concentration, but also wisdom. Here wisdom does not refer to accumulated knowledge, but to a specific insight into the nature of reality. Three types of wisdom are enumerated. The wisdom arisen from hearing is an understanding derived from study. The wisdom arisen from thinking is a deeper understanding in which the knowledge gained through study is brought into the practice of meditation. The wisdom arisen from meditation refers specifically to insight into the nature of reality by a mind concentrated at the level of serenity or above. It is this wisdom that is able to destroy the seeds of future rebirth. This third type of wisdom is called 'insight' or 'discernment' (vipaśyanā).

The practices of serenity and discernment are the subject of the passage below, drawn from a work called *Bhāvanākrama* (Stages of Meditation) by the great eighth-century Indian scholar Kamalaśīla. He is best known for his participation in the famous debate over sudden versus gradual enlightenment that took place in Tibet at the very end of the eighth century. The 'debate' (scholars are uncertain whether a face-to-face confrontation occurred), known variously as the Council of Lhasa and the *Samye* (Bsam yas) Debate, pitted the Indian monk (representing the 'gradual' position) against a Chinese monk of the Chan school, Heshang Moheyan (representing the 'sudden' position). Most sources agree that Kamalaśīla was declared the winner, although he was assassinated shortly thereafter.

In the passage below, Kamalaśīla employs the often technical vocabulary of late Indian scholasticism to describe first the practice of serenity and second the practice of discernment. Although there are various differences in presentation, discussion of the practice of concentration in general, and serenity in particular, remains fairly consistent across the centuries and schools of Indian Buddhism. There is far greater variation in discussions of discernment because there was wide disagreement concerning exactly what the nature of reality might be.

Here, Kamalaśīla evinces the position of what is referred to as the *Yogācāra-Mādhyamika* (or, more precisely, *Yogācāra-Svātantrika-Mādhyamika*) school. The initial analysis of external objects reveals that, like things seen in a dream, they are not real. If there are no real objects of perception, there can be no real perceiver. Therefore, the duality of object and subject, of perceived and perceiver, is shown to be a fiction. This would be identified as the *Yogācāra* or *Cittamātra* ('mind only') element of Kamalaśīla's view. He goes on to declare that even this non-duality is not ultimately real, demonstrating his allegiance to the *Mādhyamika* or Middle Way school of Nāgārjuna, who declared that nothing is ultimately real, including ultimate reality.

The yogin should first perfect serenity in order to stabilize the mind. Because the mind is unstable like water, it can be stabilized with the dyke of serenity. An uncollected mind cannot know things as they truly are. For the Blessed One has said that the collected mind discerns things as they are.

Serenity is obtained more swiftly when one is indifferent to desire for gain, loss, etc., when one is firm in the practice of good conduct, when morality is equally pure in fortune and misfortune, and when one has gathered up energy. That is why in texts such as the *Samdhinirmocana* the perfect virtues, generosity and the rest, are described in terms of a gradual ascent.

Then, once one is thus established in the equipment required for the practice of serenity, which consists in moral behaviour, generosity, patient acceptance and fortitude, one should perfect concentration as follows. One goes to a place conducive to reflection, there pays obeisance to all buddhas and *bodhisattvas*, confesses his sins and rejoices in the merit of all living beings. Then he focuses his mind on compassion with the intention of saving the whole world. Then he sits with body erect in a comfortable posture, with legs crossed.

With this end in view, one should first fix his thought on the object that he proposes to consider, which should be such that it may serve as a summary of all things. Furthermore, this

summary-object should then be considered under one of two categories, either as material or immaterial. It is advisable that the beginner first take as objective support this summary-object only, so as to avoid the defect of distraction.

But, once he has mastered the mental processes of attention, then he will refine his contemplation by means of distinctions such as aggregates, bases, etc., and he may even choose a broader objective-support. Thus it is said in texts such as the *Samdhirinimocana* that the objective support of *yogins* can be of many kinds according to the division of emptiness into eighteen aspects, etc. Also in this respect, for the sake of attracting different kinds of living beings, the Blessed One has explained in texts such as the *Abhidharma* the various divisions of the real object into material, immaterial, etc., in summarized forms, in intermediate forms, and in extended forms. Therefore, the real object should be considered in a summarized form, as aggregate, base, etc., in order to avoid falling into the extremes of affirmation and negation. Thereupon, once one has chosen the object that is to epitomize all things, one should continuously direct his mind to that object alone.

But, when the mind is pulled away to externals by other objects like those that induce passion, disgust and the like, then, once the distraction is noted, one should counteract it. For instance, if the distraction is pleasurable, one should bring to mind a mental image of the impure and unpleasant, or a similar meditation object. In this way he should bring back his mind to the main object whenever necessary.

But the various gradual methods of cultivating the image of the unpleasant and other similar techniques will not be explained here, for fear that we may overextend ourselves.

Now, if, on the other hand, the meditator notes that the mind finds no delight in the object of meditation, then he should cultivate the mind by finding delight in a review of the virtues of concentration, or counteract displeasure directly by contemplating the defects of distraction.

Then, again, if the mind is dull and the object is not clearly apprehended because lethargy or torpor dominate the mind, then he should suppress this dullness by attentively bringing to

mind the virtues of a buddha or other objects that may be a motive for rejoicing, or by developing images of light. Thus he will get to apprehend the object ever more firmly.

Then, again, if at another time he notes that the mind is excited by the memory of past moments of pleasure or laughter, then he should suppress this excitement by attentively bringing to mind with intensity the notions of impermanence, sorrow and the like. Thereupon, he should return to applying effort in following the object without any predisposition of the mind.

Then, when he perceives that the mind, because it has become free from dullness and excitedness, is proceeding in equilibrium, moved only by its own taste, then it is in perfect equanimity, because exertion has cooled down.

If one applies effort as the mind is moving with equilibrium, then the mind will be distracted. But, when the mind moves effortlessly as it wishes on the object, then one should know that serenity has been perfected.

And this is the one universal characteristic of serenity. For the essence of serenity is only one-pointedness of mind; but its object is in no way predetermined. And the path of serenity has been explained by the Blessed One in texts such as the *Noble Perfect Wisdom*.

When serenity is described with nine words: 'there the mind stabilizes, establishes, holds back, reconciles, tames, calms, brings to rest, is tied to one point, is collected', the meaning is this: 'stabilizes', it is bound to the object; 'establishes', it acts constantly upon the object; 'holds back', it sees through distraction and avoids it; 'reconciles', after avoiding distraction it is again fixed to the object; 'tames', it produces delight in the object; 'calms', it brings to rest displeasure by means of the vision of the defects of distraction; 'brings to rest', it brings to rest stiffness and torpor when they arise; 'tied to one point', it applies effort towards following the object effortlessly; 'is collected', the mind in equilibrium is in equanimity and gathered in itself. The meaning of these words has been explained by the ancient master Maitreya.

In brief, states of concentration may suffer from some of the following defects: (1) indolence, (2) neglect of the object, (3-4)

dullness and excitedness, (5) lack of exertion, and (6) too much exertion. One should develop eight counter-agents that bring about the abandonment of these defects, to wit: (1) faith, (2) will, (3) effort, (4) ease, (5) mindfulness, (6) clear awareness, (7) reflection, and (8) equanimity.

Of these, the first four are the counter-agents of indolence. For, in fact, the *yogin's* earnest desire for the benefits of concentration is produced by means of one of these four, namely, faith, which is defined as total confidence. Moved by this earnest desire, he will gather up energy; with the strength of this energy he attains to pliancy of mind and body. Then, with body and mind made pliant, he arrests indolence. Thus should he develop faith and the others in order to abandon indolence.

The counter-agent to neglect of the object is mindfulness. The counter-agent to dullness and excitedness is clear awareness. Because, by means of clear awareness there is a correct perception of dullness and excitedness. But, at the time of bringing to rest dullness and excitedness, the defect may be lack of exertion. Then, as its counter-agent one should develop reflection. With the calming of dullness and excitedness, however, the mind may follow a stiff tranquillity; in that case, the defect is too much exertion. Equanimity should be developed as its counter-agent.

When concentration is accompanied by these eight factors of relinquishment, it becomes extremely pliant. It produces faculties such as the supernormal psychic powers, etc. Thus it has been said in the *Sūtra*: 'One who makes the right effort in meditation produces the four bases of supernormal psychic powers.'

And this one-pointedness of mind, as it becomes ever more pliant and as it is joined to objects and conditions ever more excellent, receives different names, such as contemplations, formless attainments, liberations, etc. For, in fact, when collectedness is accompanied by a feeling of equanimity, with consideration and discursive examination, then it is called preliminary contemplation. And when it is withdrawn from the thirst of desire, and is accompanied by rapture, bliss and inner calm, then it is called the first contemplation. But, again, when this first contemplation is deprived only of consideration it is

called intermediary contemplation. When it is without both consideration and discursive consideration, withdrawn from the thirst for the level of the first contemplation, still accompanied by rapture, bliss and inner calm, then it is called the second contemplation; accompanied by bliss, equanimity, mindfulness and clear awareness, then it is called the third contemplation. When it is withdrawn from the thirst for the level of the third contemplation, and is neither sorrowful nor blissful, accompanied by equanimity and mindfulness, then it is called the fourth contemplation.

In the same way one should construe the divisions into objects, modes, etc., with regard to the formless attainments, liberations, stations of mastery, etc. Once he has thus established the mind upon its object, he should sift the object through discernment. Because, once the light of knowledge appears, one can relinquish altogether the seed of delusion. For otherwise, by means of concentration only – as among the heretics – there would be no relinquishment of the afflictions. As it has been said in the *Sūtra*:

Even if one cultivates this concentration, if he does not bring to an end apperceptions of self, the afflictions will be aroused again, as was the case with Udrāka Rāmaputra's cultivation of concentration.

In this connection, the gradual process of developing discernment has been briefly described in the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* as follows:

When one ascends to the condition of mind-only,
 one does not construct any external object.
 Once he is firm in the object of suchness,
 he will go beyond mind-only.
 Having gone beyond mind-only,
 he will go beyond into non-representation.
 The *yogin* who is firm in non-representation
 sees the Great Vehicle.

Once he has purified the serene effortless course
by means of his vows,
He sees, by means of non-representation, the
supreme knowledge that has no self-hood.

The meaning of this passage is as follows. First, the *yogin* should examine discursively all material *dharmas* which others imagine to exist as external objects. He reflects: 'Are they different from consciousness itself, or are they only the very consciousness manifesting itself, as in a dream?' In this process of analysis he considers them atomically, as if they were external to consciousness. When the *yogin* examines the atoms in their parts he does not discover external objects any more. When he cannot discover any object, it occurs to him: 'All this is mind only, there is no external object whatsoever.' This is why the passage says: 'When he ascends to the condition of mind-only, he does not construct any external object.' The meaning is that he should give up all imaginative differentiations of material *dharmas*. He should consider them in terms of their non-apprehensibility though they are objects endowed with signs of apprehensibility.

Once he has put an end to material *dharmas*, he should in the same way put an end to immaterial ones. He should also consider mind-only thus: 'If there is no perceived object, then there can be no perceiver either, because of the dependence of the perceiver on the perceived. Therefore, if mind lacks altogether perceived and perceiver, mind can only be non-dual.' 'Once he is firm in the object of suchness', which is defined as the non-dual, 'he will go beyond the image of a perceiver.' The meaning is that he will be firm in that knowledge of non-duality which is the same as the non-representation of the dual.

In the same way, having gone beyond mind-only, he will also go beyond this knowledge which is the non-representation of the dual. Since there is no birth for entities either from themselves or from another cause, he will examine discursively thus: 'The reality of this knowledge is likewise without foundation, because it cannot be independent from the falsity of the perceived and the perceiver which it rejects.' The meaning is that here too he should give up all obstinate mooring in the idea of

a real thing as applied to the knowledge of non-duality, that he should be firm in a knowledge which is the non-representation of this very knowledge of non-duality. When he achieves this, he becomes firm in the full practice of the absence of intrinsic reality in all *dharmas*. He who is established in this, since he has penetrated into ultimate reality, has entered into the concentration without imaginative differentiations. Thus, when the *yogin* is firm in the knowledge which is the non-representation of the knowledge of non-duality, since he is established in ultimate reality, he perceives the Great Vehicle.

Translated by L. O. Gómez, from the edition of Kamalaśīla's first *Bhāvanākrama*, in G. Tucci's *Minor Buddhist Texts, Part II* (Rome: Is. M. E. O., 1958), pp. 205-11.