



## A Gift of Liberation

### Course Four—Learning to Be Quiet

#### Homework Master, Class One: The Place Molds the Mind

1) During this fourth course of our study of *A Gift of Liberation*, we are continuing our study of the six preliminary practices which come before a meditation session. We are currently learning the first of these six, which is straightening up the place where we intend to meditate. Why is this important enough to be the very first step before our meditation?

[The main lesson of the first of the six preliminary practices—straightening up our room before we meditate—is that our immediate environment molds our mind.

If we have a lot of things lying around the room—clothes scattered here and there, a coffee cup or ten on the table and the rest of the dishes lying undone—then as we walk through that room these objects affect our state of mind: the mind itself becomes disorderly.

And then when we sit down to meditate, we are already at a disadvantage. We have to fight through the “mess” in our mind just to get to the neutral place, the clean and empty and available place, which we need to start from in any good meditation session.

If we just spend a few minutes straightening the room around us, then we are already beginning from this orderly state of mind. And really, it does only take a few minutes to clean up our room—to hesitate to do so because of time is only gross laziness on our part!]

2) The sage named Little Path achieved high realizations after Lord Buddha taught him to sweep up the meditation space while reciting a

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special verse about “cleaning up the dirt.” That is, he understood at some point that the Buddha was telling him to clean up the dirt of his own most negative mental states. Pabongka Rinpoche gives us some suggestions about how to choose the topics for this Straightening Up Meditation. Name some of the possible topics, and describe briefly the process.

[The Rinpoche is careful to point out that we should be straightening up our room whether it really needs it or not: yes, we are engaging in an exercise of putting our immediate environment into an orderly condition so that our mind will be neat when we start our meditation; but we are also supposed to be using the straightening-up as a meditation in itself.

Let’s say that we spot an errant fuzzball in the corner of the room behind the door. We swoop down and scoop it up, but at the same time we keep in mind that this is no ordinary piece of dirt: it represents the opposite of what we are working to develop within ourselves at that particular moment.

Pabongka Rinpoche puts this in the context of a person who is working through an experiential version of the steps on the path themselves. He mentions that—if we happen to be working on the first great step, taking ourselves to a Lama in the proper way—then the fuzzball will represent the times when we have had less than complete faith in our Lama.

And then the Rinpoche takes an example from the very end of the steps: he says that as we sweep up the fuzzball we might think of how it represents cleaning ourselves of the tendency to think that thinks are coming from their own side.

In between there are lots of fuzzballs—as many as there are steps of the path. We might pick up the fuzzball and think of it as throwing away our complacency: the enemy of the step on the path where we try to stay aware of the death that may await us. Or it might be our lack of doing things with a motivation of changing the entire world.]

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3) The second part of the first step—putting our meditation space in good order—is setting up our altar. What is the Tibetan word for “altar,” and how does it reflect some of the objects which we are encouraged to include upon our altar?

[The Tibetan word for “altar” is *ku-sung-tuk ten*. The idea is that all of the parts of our Lama—an Enlightened Being—are there present upon our altar. In a sense, then, they are present before us whenever we meditate. Each of the three syllables of *ku*, *sung*, and *tuk* is represented in a physical object which we put upon the altar.

The word *ten* means “basis,” or “foundation.” In this case, the altar before us as we meditate is considered a “home base” for the high qualities of an Enlightened Being.

The Tibetan word *ku* means *holy body*. It is a reference to the physical actions of an Enlightened Being. Such a being, for example, can appear as a normal person in our own life, and at the same time appear on countless other worlds in the universe, in countless forms upon each world, helping people there as they help us here.

Pabongka Rinpoche says that as a device to maintain an awareness of this quality of our Lama we can in this tradition place on our altar images of two different Enlightened Beings. One of them is Lord Buddha himself, so that we can appreciate where the teachings of this path have come from. The other is Je Tsongkapa, the founder of our own lineage, which is meant to remind us of the kindness of our own Heart Lama.

We could of course simply place on the altar an image of any other Enlightened Being which we are drawn to—say, Tara, for example—to represent Lord Buddha, the source of enlightened teachings. And then we could put a photograph of our own Heart Lama, to represent Je Tsongkapa as well.

The Tibetan word *sung* means *holy speech*. This is a reference to the way in which an Enlightened Being speaks—as they teach in the world.

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This speech is said to have 60 high qualities, but the highest one of all is that when an Enlightened Being teaches, they teach in the Sanskrit language—while each of their listeners hears the teachings in their own individual language.

To represent this extraordinary way of granting enlightened wisdom, Pabongka Rinpoche suggests that we place the *Brief Sutra on the Perfection of Wisdom* upon our altar. Another brief sutra of this genre is in fact our own *Diamond Cutter Sutra*.

Finally, the word *tuk* means *holy mind*. This refers to the quality of an Enlightened Being's thinking. Perhaps the most important feature here is that a Buddha is capable of keeping their mind in the direct perception of emptiness, or ultimate reality, while at the same time maintaining perceptions of the normal world around them: what is known as deceptive reality.

As a representation of this quality of an Enlightened Being, Pabongka Rinpoche mentions placing on our altar a small image of any Enlightened Being; and tradition also often mentions using a small stupa, or offering shrine. The Rinpoche also speaks in glowing terms of using a bell and dorje, which represent the emptiness-understanding and the ultimate love of an Enlightened One.]

4) When we reach the path of seeing, and see emptiness directly for the first time, we also gain an appreciation for images of holy beings. Explain.

[When we come out of the direct perception of emptiness, our mind moves from viewing ultimate reality to viewing "normal" reality. We then begin to have "breakthrough" realizations which are not the direct perception of emptiness, but are in fact triggered by the intense good karma of this experience. Altogether, these realizations are known as the "perception of the Four Truths for a being who has seen emptiness."

One of these realizations concerns images of beings who in the past have become enlightened. Before we see emptiness directly, we have a

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certain feeling about these holy images: they seem attractive to us, we are drawn to the feelings of peace and wisdom which emanate from them.

After we see emptiness though, we have a totally different experience of these paintings and statues. For the first time in our life, we have directly confirmed the existence of an Enlightened Being—up until this point, we are only acting out of belief in reports which we have heard, and teachings said to have originated with these beings.

We then know directly that the Beings represented in these images really do exist—that the images themselves are priceless reflections of the inner state of total enlightenment. Someone, at some point, laid eyes upon an Enlightened Being, and recognized them for who they were.

They painted or drew or sculpted this being. And then another person one or two generations later copied this image, perhaps not even realizing that the Being represented was the Real Thing. And then others with even less awareness of the real nature of this Being continued copying the image, until the copy was made during our own times.

That is, when I look at a painting of a Holy Being, I am actually then watching someone that really did exist, and really did know all things, and whose body necessarily reflected this fact.]

5) Pabongka Rinpoche explains how—at two special levels in our spiritual career—we will encounter the actual bodies of Enlightened Beings. Name these two, and explain how we see what we see.

[The first of the two levels which the Rinpoche mentions is known in Tibetan as *chu-gyun gyi ting-ngen-dzin*. *Chu-gyun* means *the flow of the Dharma*, while *ting-ngen-dzin* refers to a state of deep meditation.

What this refers to most often in scripture is a special ability to recall any teachings which we have been given: things that we heard in a class

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years ago (and, it is said, even lifetimes ago) float up into our conscious thoughts constantly throughout the day.

We might be cleaning up after dinner, washing the dishes, and then suddenly we recall how a fuzball—or a recalcitrant spaghetti sauce stain on the dish that we're working on—was described in the teachings as representing the particular negativity that we are trying to rid ourselves of this week. And so we immediately, spontaneously, see the spaghetti sauce stain as the habit of a lack of faith that we are working on.

The point is that—at this juncture in our spiritual career—we are able to have spontaneous recall, or an automatic flow, of every Dharma teaching we have received.

It is said that this particular experience comes during the advanced stages of the path of accumulation. This is the first of the five “paths” or levels of realization through which every spiritual practitioner passes. It is known as the path of “accumulation” because we are accumulating enough good karma to have the direct perception of emptiness on the third of the paths: the path of seeing.

The path of accumulation would typically be marked by increasing encounters with special people who could serve as our personal spiritual teacher.]

*Coffee shop assignment:* Please meet with at least one other person—or better, a group of people—whom you didn't know well before this teaching; do your homework together and discuss together any questions you have. Please write here where, when, and with whom you did your homework:

*Meditation assignment:* 15 minutes early in the day, and 15 minutes later in the day, practicing cleaning up the room you are currently in before meditation, and then sitting down for a meditation of your choice. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations.