

The following excerpt is from Chagdud Rinpoche's "Gates to Buddhist Practice," the first book of "The Living Dharma Series: The Oral Teachings of Chagdud Tulku," to be published by Padma Publishing.

To understand how delusion arises, practice watching your mind. Begin by simply letting it relax. Without thinking of the past or the future, without feeling hope or fear about this thing or that, let it rest comfortably, open and natural. In this space of the mind, there is no problem, no suffering. Then something catches your attention--an image, a sound, a smell. Your mind splits into inner and outer, self and other, subject and object. In simply perceiving the object, there is still no problem. But when you zero in on it, you notice that it's big or small, white or black, square or circular; and then you make a judgment--for example, whether it's pretty or ugly. Having made that judgment, you react to it: you decide you like it or don't like it. That's when the problem starts, because "I like it" leads to "I want it." We want to possess what we perceive to be desirable. Similarly, "I don't like it" leads to "I don't want it." If we like something, want it, and can't have it, we suffer. If we don't want it, but can't keep it away, again we suffer. Our suffering seems to occur because of the object of our desire or aversion, but that's not really so--it happens because the mind splits into object-subject duality and becomes involved in wanting or not wanting something.

We often think the only way to create happiness is to try to control the outer circumstances of our lives, to try to fix what seems wrong or to get rid of everything that bothers us. But the real problem lies in our reaction to those circumstances. What we have to change is the mind and the way it experiences reality.

For it is our emotions that propel us through extremes, from elation to depression, from good experiences to bad, from happiness to sadness--a constant swinging back and forth. Emotionality is the by-product of hope and fear, attachment and aversion. We have hope because we are attached to something we want. We have fear because we are averse to something we don't want. As we follow our emotions, reacting to our experiences, we create karma - perpetual motion that inevitably determines our future. We need to stop the extreme swings of the emotional pendulum so that we can find a place of centeredness.

When we first begin to transform the emotions, we apply the principle of iron cutting iron or diamond cutting diamond. We use thought to change thought. A negative thought such as anger is antidoted by a virtuous thought such as compassion, while desire can be antidoted by the contemplation of impermanence.

In the case of attachment, begin by determining what it is you're attached to. For example, you might, after much effort, succeed in becoming famous, thinking this will make you happy. Then your fame triggers jealousy in someone, who tries to shoot you. What you worked so hard to create is the cause of your own suffering. Or you might work very hard to become wealthy, thinking this will bring happiness, only to lose all your money. The loss of wealth in itself is not the source of suffering, only attachment to having it.

We can lessen attachment by contemplating impermanence. It is certain that whatever we're attached to will either change or be lost. A person may die or go away, a friend may become an enemy, a thief may steal our money. Even our body, to which we're most attached, will be gone one day. Knowing this not only helps to reduce our attachment, but gives us a greater appreciation of what we have while we have it. For example, there is nothing wrong with money, but if we're attached to it, we'll suffer when we lose it. Instead, we can appreciate it while it lasts,

enjoy it and enjoy sharing it with others, and at the same time know it's impermanent. Then when we lose it, the emotional pendulum won't make as wide a swing toward sadness.

Imagine two people buy the same kind of watch on the same day at the same shop. The first person thinks, "This is a very nice watch. It will be helpful to me, but it may not last long." The second person thinks, "This is the best watch I've ever had. No matter what happens, I can't lose it or let it break." If both people lose their watch, the one who is attached will be much more upset than the other.

If we are fooled by life and invest great value in one thing or another, we may find ourselves fighting for what we want and against any opposition. We may think that what we're fighting for is lasting, true, and real, but it's not. It's impermanent, it's not true, it's not lasting, and ultimately, it's not even real.

Our life can be compared to an afternoon at a shopping center. We walk through the shops, led by our desires, taking things off the shelves and tossing them in our baskets. We wander around, looking at everything, wanting and longing. We see a person or two, maybe smile and continue on, never to see them again.

That's what life is like. Driven by desire, we don't appreciate the preciousness of what we have. We need to realize that the time we have to be with our loved ones, our friends, our family, our co-workers is very brief. Even if we lived to a hundred and fifty, that would be very little time to enjoy and utilize our human opportunity.

Young people think their lives will last a long time; old people think life will end soon. But we can't assume these things. Our life comes with a built-in expiration date. There are many strong and healthy people who die young, while many of the old and sick and feeble live on and on. Not knowing when we'll die, we need to develop an appreciation for and acceptance of what we have, while we have it, rather than continuing to find fault with our experience and seeking, incessantly, to fulfill our desires.

If we find ourselves worrying whether our nose is too big or too small, we should think, "What if I had no head--now that would be a problem!" As long as we have life, we should rejoice. If everything doesn't go exactly as we'd like, we can accept it. If we contemplate impermanence deeply, patience and compassion will arise. We will hold less to the apparent truth of our experience, and the mind will become more flexible. Realizing that one day this body will be buried or burned, we will rejoice in every moment we have rather than make ourselves or others unhappy.

Now we are afflicted by "me-my-mine-itis," a condition caused by ignorance. Our self-centeredness and self-important thinking have become very strong habits. In order to change them, we need to refocus. Instead of concerning ourselves with "I" all the time, we must redirect our attention to "you" or "them" or "others." Reducing self-importance lessens the attachment that stems from it. When we focus outside ourselves, ultimately we realize the equality of ourselves and all other beings. Everybody wants happiness; nobody wants to suffer. Our attachment to our own happiness expands to an attachment to the happiness of all.

Until now our desires have tended to be very short term and superficial. If we are going to wish for something, let it be nothing less than complete enlightenment for all sentient beings. That's something worthy of desire. Continually reminding ourselves of what is truly worth wanting is an important element in developing pure practice.

Desire and attachment won't change overnight, but desire becomes less ordinary as we redirect our worldly yearning toward the aspiration to become enlightened for the benefit of others. At the same time, we don't abandon the ordinary objects of our desires--relationships, wealth, fame--but our attachment to them lessens as we contemplate their impermanence. Not rejecting them, rejoicing in our fortune when they arise, yet recognizing that they won't last, we begin to build qualities of spiritual maturity. As our attachment slowly decreases, harmful actions that would normally result from attachment are reduced. We create less negative karma, more fortunate karma, and the mind's positive qualities gradually increase.

Later, after we've done more meditation practice, we can try an approach that's different from contemplation, different from using thought to change thought: revealing the deeper nature, or wisdom principle, of the emotions as they arise.

If you are in the midst of a desire attack--something has captured your mind and you must have it--you won't get rid of the desire by trying to suppress it. Instead, you can begin to see through desire by examining what it is. When it arises in the mind, ask yourself, "Where does it come from? Where does it dwell? Can it be described? Does it have any color, shape, or form? When it disappears, where does it go?"

This is an interesting situation. You can say that desire exists, but if you search for the experience, you can't quite grasp it. On the other hand, if you say it doesn't exist, you're denying the obvious fact that you are feeling desire. You can't say that it exists, nor can you say that it does not exist. You can't say that it's "both" or "neither," that it both does exist and does not exist, or that it neither exists nor does not not exist. This is the meaning of the true nature of desire beyond extremes.

It's our failure to understand the simplicity of the natural state that gets us into trouble. No conceptual structure will describe the true nature of an emotion. We experience it the way we do because we don't understand its essential nature. Once we do, the emotion tends to dissolve.

Then we're not repressing the emotion, but neither are we encouraging it. We are simply looking clearly at what is taking place. If we set a cloudy glass of water aside for a while, it will settle by itself and become clear. Instead of judging the experience of desire, we look directly at its nature, what is known as "liberating it in its own ground." Then it simply dissolves.

Each negative emotion, or mental poison, has an inherent perfection that we don't recognize because we are so accustomed to its appearance as emotion. Just as poison can be taken medicinally to effect a cure, each poison of the mind, worked with properly, can be transformed to its wisdom nature and thus enhance our spiritual practice.

If while in the throes of desire, you simply relax, without moving your attention, that space of the mind is called discriminating wisdom. You don't abandon desire--instead you reveal its wisdom nature.