

Naked Mind

By Khenpo Gangshar (in the picture on the left with Trungpa Rinpoche, Tibet ~ 1957)

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In this teaching on the mind instructions of the Dzogchen master Khenpo Gangshar, Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche explains how the veil of thoughts and emotions is lifted when we rest in the nature of mind as it is, without trying to alter it in any way.

A *kusulu* is someone who leads a very simple, uncomplicated life and does things easily and without much effort. Similarly, in the resting meditation of a kusulu, we do not go through a lot of effort to do the meditation. It is not examining anything thoroughly, it is not studying; we just rest simply in equipoise just as it is. This is extremely important.

The reason is that the realization of the nature of the mind is not something we can find by searching for it from afar. It is present within the essence of the mind itself. If we do not alter or change that in any way, that is enough. It is not as if we were lacking something before so we need to make something new through our meditation. It is not as if we are bad and have to go through all sorts of efforts to make ourselves good. Goodness is something we all have. It has always been present within us, but we have just not looked for it or seen it yet, so we have become confused. Therefore all we need to do is to just rest within it without changing it. We see where it stays and rest there, so we are like a kusulu. This means that we rest free and easy



with nothing to do, very simply. We do not need to think that we are making something good or that we need to meditate properly. It is enough just to know what we already have.

Well then, what do we need to do? We just need to recognize the way our mind is as it is and then rest in equipoise within that, as it is. In the instructions on Mahamudra, this is what we call ordinary mind. This is just knowing how our mind is and what its essence is like, and then resting in equipoise within that. Sometimes we call this the natural state, which just means that we do not change it in any way. Both of these terms mean that we do not analyze or examine too much, nor do we alter things at all. We simply rest in the nature of the mind as it is. That is what we call resting meditation. Resting here means we leave it alone. We don't need to do a lot to it or alter it in any way. Just rest in equipoise within its essence, whatever that is like.

Getting Right Down to Meditation

There are two parts to the instructions on the resting meditation of the kusulu. The first part is the instructions on resolving. The Tibetan word translated here as resolving literally means to climb straight over a pass without making switchbacks back and forth—it means to go directly there. Here it means to go right into samadhi meditation. The second part of the instructions is distinguishing mind from awareness. Sometimes we are distracted, and sometimes we are not. When we are distracted, that is mind, and when we are undistracted, that is awareness. When we are not distracted, it is very easy to know the nature of the mind. But when we are distracted, we have many different thoughts that prevent us from knowing the mind-essence. This is the aspect of confusion. “Distinguishing” means telling these two states apart.

For the main practice of the resting meditation of a kusulu, let your mind and body become comfortable, soft, and relaxed. Do not think of anything, and rest naturally. The important point here is that we do not think of anything. Do not think about the past and do not think about the future. Do not think of anything at all. You should not do this by tightening or gripping, but instead by being loose, relaxed, and comfortable. Just let yourself rest naturally within this, without thinking. In the analytic meditation of the pandita, there is an examination of where the mind is, what it is like, what color it is, and so forth. But here there is no such examination: let your mind rest loosely and naturally. Just look at whatever feelings arise.

Resting the Body and Mind

Khenpo Gangshar's instructions on insight meditation begin with four points on posture:

Keep your body straight, refrain from talking, open your mouth slightly, and let the breath flow naturally.

The first instruction is to keep your body straight so that the mind will be clear. The second instruction is to refrain from talking. If we talk while meditating, we will have a lot of thoughts. It will be difficult for our minds to rest and be clear, so we refrain from talking. The third instruction is to open your mouth slightly. Don't close your mouth, but don't let it gape open either. This means to let your body relax. As the great Machig Labdrön said, "Let the four limbs relax." This is important for your meditation. The fourth instruction is to let the breath flow normally. If your breath is moving quickly, let it move quickly. If it is moving slowly, let it move slowly. Do not try to make your long breaths into short

breaths; do not try to make short breaths into long breaths. Do not hold your breath or do anything else to it. However it is, just let it be, which means not to change it in any way. These four points tell us how to let the body rest. This is taught so that we will be able to clearly recognize the nature of the mind.

In addition to these, Khenpo Gangshar also teaches methods for resting the mind:

Don't pursue the past and don't invite the future. Simply rest naturally in the naked ordinary mind of the immediate present without trying to correct it or "re-place" it.

The instruction here is that external appearances, whatever they may be, do not really hurt us. It all comes down to the mind. Is the mind some hardened, solid lump to which we cannot do anything at all? It is not. The mind is naturally empty of essence, but it is also clear. This is the union of clarity and emptiness, and the union of wisdom and the expanse taught in the path of the sutras. This is present in the nature of the mind itself. But we have not really thought about what this means. We direct our attention outward, follow thoughts about all sorts of things, and get distracted. But all we really need to do is know what is present in the mind.

In order to know that, Khenpo Gangshar says, "Don't pursue the past." Often we remember things that happened in the past and think about them. We think, "Last year I went to that place. I had such and such a conversation. When I did this, it turned out really well. When I did that, it was bad." These and many other thoughts come up, but we should not pursue them when we are meditating. We should just be loose and relaxed and not follow the past.

Khenpo Gangshar also says, "Don't invite the future." Often we

think to ourselves, “Next year I ought to do this. What should I do next month? I have to do that tomorrow. What should I do this evening?” These are all thoughts of the future. Normally we need to think about them, but not when we are meditating, so we should not welcome the future. We should put all thoughts of past or future aside.

In particular during this meditation, “Don’t pursue the past” means do not even think about things that happened just a moment ago. Do not try to remember, “What was I just thinking about? Was I just resting? Was I just stable? Was that clarity? What was it that I was just meditating on?” We should not try to think about or remember what we were just doing in our meditation in that way. Similarly, we normally understand “Don’t invite the future” to mean that we should not think about future plans in general, but in this context it means not even to think about what we will do in the next moment. We do not need to think to ourselves, “Now I need to start being mindful. I need to start being aware now. Now I’m going to start being clear in my meditation.” We do not need to think about anything at all. So we do not think about either the past or the future. We just simply look at the mind as it is right now and rest naturally in the naked, ordinary mind.

When we say “ordinary mind,” that means resting in the immediate present without trying to alter the mind in any way. Ordinary mind is not something bad that we need to make into something good. Nor is it something that is not empty that we need to make empty. That is not how it is. We do not need to take something that is not clear and make it clear. We should not try to change anything in any way. If you alter it, it is not ordinary. If you follow lots of thoughts, that is not what we mean by ordinary mind. Just rest in the nature of the mind as it is, without any thoughts that are virtuous, unvirtuous, or neutral. The way it is now is ordinary mind.

There are two different ways in which we can understand the term “ordinary mind.” One way is to not take control over anything and end up following our afflictions. When a thought of anger arises, we follow it; when greed arises, we lose control of ourselves to it. Similarly, we lose control of ourselves to our pride and jealousy. Although we might think of this as our ordinary state of mind, it is not what we mean here. Here it does not mean losing control of ourselves to our negative emotions. Instead, it means that we do not need to do anything at all to the essence of the mind itself.

We do not need to alter this essence in any way. We do not have to worry about what we are thinking, what is pleasant, or what is painful. We can leave this mind as it is. If we try to alter the mind in any way, thoughts will arise. But if we do not do anything to it and let it rest easily, then it is unaltered. The Kagyu masters of the past called this the ordinary mind, or the natural state. They called it this out of their experience. This ordinary mind itself is the dharma expanse and the essence of the buddhas: it is our buddhanature. This is exactly what the term means; this is what we need to experience and recognize.

Khenpo Gangshar calls this ordinary mind “naked.” If we just have mere understanding, there is a slight gap between our mind and our understanding. When we try to investigate or analyze, it is as if the mind were covered by a sort of membrane. But here there is nothing like that. Saying “naked” means there is no covering or anything in the way. We just rest directly in it as it is without trying to correct it or “re-place” it. We do not think, “Is this right? I need to make it right.” We do not worry, “My meditation is bad; I’ve got to make it good.” Without any hopes or worries, we do not try to correct it or make it right in any way. When Khenpo Gangshar says “re-place,” that means that we do not try one way to settle the mind and then another. We just let it be as it naturally is, resting easily in this

naked, ordinary mind.

Recognizing the Experience of Resting

What does it feel like to rest like that? Khenpo Gangshar says,

If you rest like that, your mind-essence is clear and expansive, vivid and naked, without any concerns about thought or recollection, joy, or pain. That is awareness (rigpa).

At this point, there is no concern about what you are thinking, what you remember, what is nice, or what is painful. You will not think, “Ah, that is what it is.” You will not think, “This is empty,” or “This is not empty.” You will not think, “Oh, that’s nice,” or “Oh, that’s not so nice,” or “That’s bad.” There won’t be any thought of pleasure or displeasure in any way at all. This is just the natural essence of the mind. It is not something that makes us jubilantly happy, nor is it something that upsets us or makes us unhappy.

But you will see the mind-essence and it will be clear and expansive, vivid and naked. When we say “clear,” this is like the clear aspect of the mind. When we talk about it being clear or luminous, sometimes we understand that as meaning some sort of a light—a blazingly bright light. But that is not what this means. It means that it can know and understand. It does not stop. We do not turn into some sort of rock. That is not what happens: there is the clear, knowing aspect of the mind. It is also expansive, which means here that the clarity is vast: we can see and know many things. Then the text says “vivid and naked.” “Vivid” means that it is as if we are actually seeing—it is right there and we are really seeing it. There is no doubt whether or not this is it—it is just right there. It is naked: we are not thinking about it with logic or seeing it from far away; it is right here. There is no veil or anything covering it at all. This is

what we rest in; this is the nature of the mind.

We do not try to change anything; we rest directly in equipoise—the kusulu meditates in an uncomplicated way. The reason for resting loosely like this is that our meditation is not something that is mentally constructed and newly made. Instead, it is just the way the mind is, unaltered. Normally we are deluded by many confused appearances, but the meditation of the kusulu should be understood as knowing the nature of the mind as it is, clearly and without mistake.

This is not just something that Khenpo Gangshar says. It is also said in *The Supreme Continuum* and *The Ornament of Clear Realization* by Maitreya, as well as in *The Two Books*, the tantra of the glorious Hevajra. These works all say:

In this there's nothing to remove Nor anything at all to add. By viewing rightness rightly and By seeing rightly—liberation!

There is nothing to remove. We do not need to stop or get rid of anything, thinking, “This is emptiness. This cannot be established as a thing.” The nature of the mind is fine just as it is. Nor is there anything to add to the mind-essence, thinking, “That is missing. This is clarity. This is something I need to gain.” If we just look at the mind-essence rightly and rest in equipoise within this nature of the mind just as it is, not following our thoughts, we will see that it is rightness. We do not need to think, “It is emptiness”—its essence is naturally empty. We do not need to think, “It is clear”—its essence is naturally clear. Resting with this mind, as it is, is “viewing rightness rightly.” When we see that essence as it is, at that moment we will be liberated from our faults and from samsara.

This is why we just rest right in the nature of mind as it is. The

dharma nature is unchanging. When the great meditators of the past meditated on it, they saw that we do not need to alter it in any way. We just need to come to thoroughly know the dharma nature as it is. When we see that, this is the mind that we call clear and expansive, vivid and awake.

When Marpa the Translator met his guru Naropa and developed experience within himself, he said:

For instance, when a mute eats sugar cane, It is an inexpressible experience.

When mute people eat sugar cane, they put the cane in their mouths, they taste it, and they know what it tastes like, but if you ask them what it is like, they cannot tell you. Similarly, Marpa had an experience of realization, but when he felt it, he could not express it in any way—it was an inexpressible experience. Was it something? It was not. Was it nothing? It was not. It was indescribable. This is what Khenpo Gangshar means by saying that there is no concern about what you might be thinking, what you might remember, what is pleasant, or what is painful. Without any thoughts of good or bad or anything like that, the essence of the mind is clear and expansive, vivid and naked. You might wonder if this is a nature that we have to somehow create, but it is not. It is the nature of the mind that has been present within us from the very beginning. But up to this point, we just have not looked for it. We have not seen it because we have not looked for it. If we know how to look for it, we can know what it is like. All we need to do is look for it and see it. That is the essence of the mind.

The Knowing Quality of Mind

There is a distinction between tranquillity and insight meditation. In tranquillity, there is a lot of stability but not much discernment, whereas in insight meditation we do have full knowing. In general, there are three types of intelligence: the intelligence born of listening, that born of contemplation, and that born of meditation. The discernment born of listening and contemplating is directed outward. It is dependent upon inference, so it is a conceptual understanding. It means the clarity of the mind that knows, “That’s right. That’s what it is.” But is this the intelligence present during insight meditation? It is not. The intelligence present in meditation is the intelligence born of meditation. The difference between this and the full knowing born of listening and contemplating is that the latter is conceptual knowing that gets to the point through inference. In the intelligence born of meditation, there are not many thoughts of that kind; it is actually seeing and experiencing. It is a direct experience of the essence of the mind.

When we experience our essence, do we experience it as some sort of a thing? That is not the experience we have. Do we experience it as emptiness? We do not experience it as emptiness. It is empty—something that you cannot establish, nothing at all—but at the same time there is clarity. You could call this the aspect of wisdom. It is not just blank nothingness, it is the union of clarity and emptiness. There is clarity, but the essence of this clarity is emptiness. This is what we actually experience. If we were to think about it, we would say, “Oh, that’s what mind is.” Of course that would just be a thought produced by our minds; when we actually experience it, we do not have this thought. Instead, we have a feeling. This is the intelligence born of meditation that comes from directly seeing the nature of mind as it is. When we directly see the nature of mind as it is, it is not just nothingness, blankness, or darkness. Instead, we experience this intelligence and rest evenly within this experience.

Looking Inward

In one of his meditation manuals, Jamgön Kongtrul Rinpoche says that the reason we do not realize the nature of the mind is not because it is too difficult, but because it is too easy. The nature of the mind is something that we have, so we think, “It can’t be that.” There’s nothing we need to do to it; there is nothing complicated about it. Do we not realize it because it is far away? No, it is not—rather, it is too near. It is so close to us that we already have it, but we do not realize this. For this reason we do not need to make up an essence to rest in; we rest within our own nature as it is. This is how we should meditate.

When I was young, I studied philosophy, including the middle way. Middle way texts talk a lot about different types of emptiness such as categorized emptiness, uncategorized emptiness, and so forth. When I asked Khenpo Lodrö Rabsal, “What is this? What does emptiness mean?” he said, “Don’t think so much about the outside. Think a bit about the inside, and that will help.”

“Ah,” I thought. “How can you do that? How can you think about the inside?” I did not understand what he meant. I thought there was probably nothing to think about on the inside.

Then later I met Khenpo Gangshar. Everyone said, “He is a strange lama. There’s something different about him. You get a different feeling from him.”

I wondered what they meant. The first time I saw him, there was no different feeling. I wondered what was going on and what was going to happen. Then he gave a pointing out of sorts. He asked, “Did you recognize anything?” but nothing happened. But as I spent some

time in his presence, I had the thought, “Oh, this is it. This is the emptiness that Nagarjuna talked about, isn’t it!” Before I had thought that emptiness was something far away, but then I came to see that emptiness is really close. This happened because of the blessings of the lama.

At that point I realized what Jamgön Kongtrul Rinpoche had meant by saying it was too near. I realized what he meant by saying it was too easy. The mind is not far away; it is within us. If you fiddle with it and alter it a lot, then it becomes fabricated. That doesn’t work. The essence of the mind itself, however it may be, is just the way it is. We need to meditate by looking at it the way it is.

There are many different methods for pointing out the nature of mind through symbols and so forth. Often students gain some sort of feeling during these, but it is not very stable. But these instructions on resolving, or getting straight to meditation, are the best method to point out the nature of mind. You just get right down to the meditation. You put a lot of effort into it. You meditate. You think it over. You think about what the instructions say over and over again. Sometimes the feeling is clear, and sometimes it is unclear. But when it is unclear, you do not give up. Put effort into it and meditate, and then it will become stable. Of all the different ways to point out the nature of your mind, this is the best.

Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche is a meditation master in the Kagyu tradition of Tibetan Buddhism who has trained many prominent lineage figures, including the Seventeenth Karmapa. He has monasteries in India and Nepal, a retreat facility in Crestone, Colorado, and centers in California and Maine, and is building a large. This teaching is adapted from his book, *Vivid Awareness: The Mind Instructions of Khenpo Gangshar*, translated and edited by

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