



What is meditation?

Think of the old jingle, “the knee bone’s connected to the thigh bone; the thigh bone’s connected to the hip bone . . .” A meditation works similarly, tracing and connecting some of the traits and capacities of the compassionate mind. Just as there are many psalms in the Bible or many sonnets in Shakespeare, there are many beloved Tibetan meditations for deepening and strengthening one’s compassion and wisdom. Some meditations are textual (you read and contemplate them) and others are visual (you visualize, or literally paint, them in all their significant details). Such meditation is mind-training as one memorizes, repeats, explores, and fully internalizes its model of Mind: each is a way of making actively connected within oneself all the facets and subtleties of understanding how one can think more richly and serve others more effectively. By making such a practice an automatic mental habit, one thereby transforms oneself, further realizing one’s potential.

Lo (Upper Mustang, the famous “forbidden kingdom” near the Tibetan border).

Amchi Tsampa Ngawang is also an accomplished lama of the Tibetan Nyingma Buddhist tradition. Several times, he has done extended solitary retreats (including the classic three-year three-month long retreat), during which time the meditator memorizes detailed practices, something like volume-length long prose-poems whose benefit for the practitioner is a super-clarifying of his or her own intentions—a profound deepening of his sense of duty toward and respect for his patients.

Dr. Ngawang has completed many complicated meditations: Machig Labdron, Vajra Yogini, Dorje Phagmo, Dorje Dromo, Prajnaparamita, Vajrapani, Kurukulla, Yamantaka, Hayagriva, Vajradhara, Vajrasattva, Padmasambhava, Amitabha, Demchog, Kalachakra, Mahakala, Japa Merin, Jhampala Khubera, Tsering Chaina, Ekajhati, Kundree Dorje Namjun, Terma Nammo, Ghajem Dhetso, the forty-two different peaceful bardo deities, the fifty-eight different wrathful deities, the twenty-one forms of Tara Devi, the eight different types of protector gods, the complete Nyingma and Kagyu practices, Chod, Dzogchen, and Jinsa (mud and sand mandala) practices.

Interestingly, Dr. Ngawang has also practiced *tong-nee dawa*—emptiness of mind—a single exercise mistakenly equated with all meditations and sometimes misunderstood as a slack, dazed, sedated state. Clearing the mind is valuable, to say the least, but these demanding visualizations perform a variety of potent functions. “How do these meditations actually work?” a student asked one day in class. “Consider the effect the mind can have on the body,” Dr. Ngawang responded. “One night you sleep well, the next night you cannot sleep for worrying about something. Same bed, same pillow, but different mind. The same meal can be delicious and satisfying when you are well, but without taste if you are saddened by some great loss. Same meal, but different mind. It is this same kind of effect upon the body that meditation can have. When you raise your earth energy, water energy, fire energy, wind energy, you increase your body’s powers. When you keep your mind clear of delusion, craving, anxiety, and anger, you also keep your body clear of the ill effects of these poisons.” Tibetan medicine is especially attentive to maintaining the harmonious balance in the body that is the key to good health, and it is not difficult for even the most rationalist of westerners to see how these meditations can have enormous effectiveness in increasing