

TIBETAN BUDDHIST MEDITATION with OLE NYDAHL, Ph.D.

JEFFREY MISHLOVE, Ph.D.: Hello. I'm Jeffrey Mishlove. Today we're going to explore Tibetan Buddhist meditation -- what is it, and how does it compare and contrast with other forms of meditation, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist? With me is Ole Nydahl, one of the first Westerners ever to be initiated as a Tibetan Buddhist lama. He is a Tibetan Buddhist meditation master of the Kagyu tradition. He also holds a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Copenhagen, and he is the author of several books, including *Entering the Diamond Way* and *Basic Dharma*. Welcome, Ole.

OLE NYDAHL, Ph.D.: Thank you.

MISHLOVE: It's a pleasure to be with you.

NYDAHL: It's the second time; I'm glad about that.

MISHLOVE: In meditating, I notice in the basic instructions for Tibetan meditation it seems, as in most other meditation, that the very first thing is to become aware of the breathing, is it not?

NYDAHL: Well, it's a first step for focusing the mind. Usually our mind is like somebody who's dancing. It's moving all the time, it's following imprints through ears and eyes and so on, through all the senses. So the first thing is to get this person to sit down in order to be able to work with it, and this is what the concentration on the breath is. There are a lot of very good qualities to concentrating on the breath, and that is the fact that first the breath has no color and no form, so there's no chance to have any fixed ideas about it. Secondly, it comes all the time. And thirdly, there's also the fact that our whole inner energy system starts at the nostrils, so for that reason, both for controlling the clarity and the energy of the mind, concentrating on the breath is really good.

MISHLOVE: Specifically, there's a sense in the instructions that you've prepared for your students, to focus right at the tip of the nose where the nostrils are, to feel the air entering and leaving the nostrils.

NYDAHL: Yes.

MISHLOVE: So that's the basic centering point, and I suppose in that sense Tibetan meditation is similar to many, many other styles of meditation.

NYDAHL: Yes, it's the ordinary Shinay or Shunyata meditation. It's known in all Buddhist cultures, and I think in a lot of other meditations in other traditions also.

MISHLOVE: But once we pass through the gateway of the breathing, then there are many differences between the Tibetan style of meditation and other styles. I think it would be very useful if we could sort of go through the whole process as you teach your students in the Kagyu tradition, to explore what that's like.

NYDAHL: The goal and the ways, yes. The first thing is of course to get peace, and that is done through concentrating on the breath coming and going at the tip of the nose. But peace in itself isn't the goal. Peace is the prerequisite, is the basis for putting some strong motivations into the mind. These four motivations, which will call forth from the mind more qualities, more powers than what would just happen by sitting in peace, is to actually activate our ordinary, common, good horse sense -- I mean, seeing our situation as it is. The first thing there is to see that this life right now offers a very special opportunity for not dying just as stupid as one was born, but for really learning something while one is here -- I mean, that all the conditions have come together to give us a life that offers the possibility for growing consciousness, for learning, developing, and moving on.

MISHLOVE: In other words, once I've started to meditate, I'm breathing, I'm in a peaceful state, the next thing I might do perhaps to generate some energy is to tune in to my basic motive for meditating -- to appreciate the fact that I'm very fortunate to be in a tradition where this wisdom and knowledge of meditation is available.

NYDAHL: Perfectly right. I couldn't have said it as well as that. That is exactly the idea -- to activate the motivating power in the mind. First we understand that this chance we have now is unique, is special, is difficult to get again. And after we have that, we think of impermanence. It's not just we are very lucky, but we'd better find we are lucky now and use the chance. And there we understand that the only thing which will not get old, sick and die is our mind, is consciousness, is basic awareness, while the body and the outer world disappear and fall away again, and thoughts and ideas come and go all the time. So this makes us know that we have little time, and concentrate on the ultimate -- I mean, getting to know the mind.

MISHLOVE: It sounds like a strong motivator. It seems to me that what you're saying is that if you want to survive, as we all do, if you really want to survive, one has to develop the mind, because nothing else will survive.

NYDAHL: Yes, that's what I mean. That's exactly what I do mean. I mean, Buddhists talk softly but carry a big stick, right? And I mean we really do. It's all understatement, it's all the old English style. It's not loud advertisement, but whoever really thinks over what I am saying will change their motivation.

MISHLOVE: So then there's other forms of motivation.

NYDAHL: Oh, there's a third one -- that we can do something, that we weren't just put here, but that we are actually in a situation created by actions before, and that the things we do, think, and say now will create our future -- I mean, that we are grown-up beings; we have the controls in our hands, we decide.

MISHLOVE: We are responsible for our reality.

NYDAHL: Yes, yes -- karma, cause and effect, there are many words for it. And the last one is then why to do it, and there actually are two very good reasons. The first one is that enlightenment is a greater joy than anything we know today. Those who think that enlightenment is just like being the smart kid in class or something like that, is wrong. It's like having two fingers in the socket and pulling all the energy of Marin County through one's body. It's very, very intensive and powerful and very, very, very joyful. It's not just an intellectual state of being very wise; it's a state of totally being alive, not being separate or apart from anything. And when we see how much energy people put into just having a little bit of happiness here and now, which passes and disappears, then this idea of getting absolute happiness, stronger than anything we know today and which cannot be lost and disappear again, is also, as you just said, a powerful motivating factor. And after the thing which we can call the carrot in front of the nose of the lazy, habitual horse of our mind, then there's also a whip behind it, and this whip is that if we don't do it, if we don't get values that are really nice, sterling, lasting things, then when old age, sickness, and death come, we'll be grasping for things that can't hold us, and we will suffer. And understanding that this is not just suffering for ourselves, a problem for ourselves, but that actually we are unable to help others in similar situations if we don't work with our mind. This is the first motivation.

MISHLOVE: Well, so right away we're getting at, I think, one of the basic differences between the Tibetan style of meditation and others, which is working with the concept of motivation, which strikes me as being an emotion, a driving force, a longing, a desire. Oftentimes one thinks of other schools of meditation as saying, "We will now remove all desires." You're suggesting something quite different -- a real focusing of desire, as one of the basic initial stages of the meditation.

NYDAHL: Yes. We have to wish to go somewhere in order to go. Meditation is not easy, and if we just want to meditate because it feels good and gives a nice buzz and is cheaper than buying hash, if we just want to do that it will not help us. I mean, we have to have real motivation. It has to come from the core and center of our life. Otherwise the stretch will be too far. Enlightenment is not just like falling in love in spring. It's a big thing. It's a very, very big thing, and if we don't start out with a full tank of gas, we won't arrive.

MISHLOVE: Other schools of Buddhist meditation, such as Vipassana or Zen, focus on, I think, what they call self-awareness -- observing the body, becoming aware of all of the details of the posture, and so on. This does not seem to be so essential in the Tibetan style.

NYDAHL: We do that later, but we don't do it of our present physical body. Later, in what's called Vajrayana, or Diamond Way Shinay, or Vajrayana Shunyata, we meditate on ourselves as being actually the pure radiant energy, transparent light form, of the Buddha, with all the inner channels passing through, with all the wheels of energy at the five different centers in the body. And concentrating like that we are totally aware, but then everything happening is not identified with an ordinary level of awareness, but with Buddha awareness, enlightened awareness.

MISHLOVE: Which is, I guess, different than some of the other Buddhist schools, which emphasize ordinary awareness rather than the non-ordinary.

NYDAHL: Yes, yes. Because the ordinary awareness of an ordinary body is usually tied up with a lot of problems -- with hopes and fears, with attachment and aversion, with likes and dislikes and so on, with a lot of habits also; while if we get to the point of seeing ourselves as a transparent form of energy and light, well, everything is perfect, and there are no strings attached, no past, nothing to hinder us. For that reason we do it.

MISHLOVE: OK. Without getting too far ahead of ourselves here, let's take it step by step, because as I understand it --

NYDAHL: That comes later, yes.

MISHLOVE: Now we've relaxed, we've focused on our breathing, we've focused on our basic motivations for meditating. And then the next stage, as I understand it, involves something which is discussed, I think, in all forms of Buddhism -- the notion of taking refuge. Let's talk about what taking refuge means.

NYDAHL: Well, taking refuge follows naturally from what I just said, because when we see after this that we are not right now capable of holding our lives, that we are not capable of just deciding, "I will feel good, I won't feel bad; I will experience this, not that; I will do this, not that" -- when we see how little control we actually have, then we want to learn from those who can help us. We want to get to this state of real power and ability to help others, by learning from somebody who has learned it already. And this taking refuge means actually opening up to and taking in this level of enlightened awareness. And what we take refuge in first is what we call Buddha, and Buddha means the awakened state; it means that state where there is no sleep and confusion or problems anymore. The Tibetans call it Sangye -- Sang meaning purified like a mirror with no dust, and ye meaning fully spread out, fully made aware, like a radiant mirror, not like a black hole, but like something which is radiant and aware.

MISHLOVE: It sounds like what we're referring to here is the most basic, essential level of consciousness that permeates everything.

NYDAHL: It's the state of enlightenment. It is beyond personal. It is all knowing. It's a space, energy, inside and outside, being inseparable.

MISHLOVE: And if I say that I take refuge in this state, in the Buddha, what do I mean? What does taking refuge, what does that action involve?

NYDAHL: It means you look in a mirror and see the beauty of your own face. This is basically what it means. Truth inside and outside cannot be different. In that case it would not be absolute. I mean, whoever thinks there's a truth outside that's different from inside is just making the truth outside untrue, because it is not everything, it's not all-pervading, it's not all things. So for that reason we actually just look in a mirror, and first we see the Buddha outside; then we understand we can only see this perfection outside because we have the seed of it inside all the time. And finally we stop separating inside and outside, and the same truth is everywhere. So this is really taking refuge in the Buddha.

MISHLOVE: So if I could reinterpret what you're saying, perhaps, in my own language, it might mean something like, "I will identify my ego, my little self, with the Buddha, with the large state."

NYDAHL: I'd rather say I would identify my awareness, which is much bigger than and totally beyond my ego and my self, with the total true space of the universe. The ego is seen to be that which keeps us from seeing the oneness. This is actually what it is. So first we take refuge in the Buddha, and then after that in the teachings, in the methods bringing us there. And we need that. I mean, maybe we want to go to a nice country like Denmark, for instance, a good place to visit. But we need a map; we need a way to go there. In the same way, after we've decided that Buddhahood is what we like, we need methods so that we can recognize that. We need methods, inner, outer, and secret methods, which can make us the Buddha himself -- I mean, which can take us to that state. That's the second level; that's called Chos in Tibetan, or Dharma. And finally we need friends. And we do need friends. Those people who think they can sit alone and realize things by themselves somewhere, usually either they get stiff, they get superstitious, or they get no results. I mean, we do need groups. We do need groups to enforce ourselves to add like diamond paper, whatever it's called, to scrape us into shape.

MISHLOVE: Sandpaper.

NYDAHL: Sandpaper. Like sandpaper, that's right. We need something to scrape us --

MISHLOVE: To take off the rough edges.

NYDAHL: Yes, yes.

MISHLOVE: So these are called the three refuges.

NYDAHL: Yes, that is the outer refuges -- that is Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. And there are probably a billion people who have that refuge by today. Whoever thinks Buddhism is a sect is off; there are a billion people in that sect, and its two thousand five hundred years old, right?

MISHLOVE: It's a very venerable tradition.

NYDAHL: It's a very fine old company, really it is. But actually, among this billion people there are some with very good results, unusually good results. That's not because the people are more intelligent than others. It's not because they're more virtuous. They're not; half of them are horse thieves, you know, or whatever. But they have very good results. And that's the people of the Himalayan plateau, of the Tibetan, Mongolian area -- Tibetan, especially Bhutanese today. The real capital of Tibetan Buddhism today is Bhutan. It's a gem. It was a jewel. I was invited up there with my wife Hannah and thirty-five friends, here last summer, by the king and by somebody called Lopon Cheecho. We were ten days all over the place and visited all the holy places. They have at the most two thousand tourists a year, and they're guided around to only go to places where it doesn't matter.

MISHLOVE: Bhutan and Tibet before were theocratic states. The religion and the state were rather merged, and they were able to preserve their traditions in a very pure form for generations.

NYDAHL: Yes. I'd say it wasn't the centering of the power that made it. Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts very badly, you know, as they say, nearly everywhere. It wasn't just the fact that it was a theocracy, because everybody who got close to power, if they weren't enlightened, like his holiness the Dalai Lama, would get dirty hands. I mean, everybody did. So it's the same everywhere. He doesn't, but everybody else does who touches too far into all the compromises and things like that. The special thing was that there was so little control, so little state control, and that people could actually live in their own way -- that people could go off and stay for long times on mountains and meditate, and that people knew how important it was. For instance, when people were forty years old, their children would put them on a pension. The children were twenty, twenty-five years old; they would put them on a pension and take care of feeding the family while the parents would go and meditate.

MISHLOVE: And in these cultures, as I recall, perhaps as many as a third of all the people join the monasteries.

NYDAHL: How healthy and unhealthy that was, I also don't know. I don't believe very much in celibacy, to say one thing, I really don't.

MISHLOVE: What it must have enabled them to do was to preserve this tradition, with great experimentation as well.

NYDAHL: Sure it did, sure it did. I mean, it did, but once you make too much of an organization it stiffens again. Like the really big monasteries, they all became quite stiff, they actually did, because there are too many people in administration and so on. They didn't have computers like we have; they had all this trouble, you know. So it wasn't the big monasteries that made it either. It was the small groups of yogis, it was the small groups of people, with or without monastic vows, who would go to certain places and really work. That was the renewing factor. You know, like Apple comes in and does a lot of things, and IBM is enormously big but doesn't do as much, because they are already big. That is what it was like also in Tibet. It was the small streams, it was the small schools. It wasn't the big institutions. They ossified, and they do everywhere. All over the world they ossify.

MISHLOVE: Well, getting back to meditation, after one goes through the stages that we discussed -- quieting down, doing the breathing, becoming full of motivation, taking refuge and going through that process --

NYDAHL: We needed three more refuges. We needed three more. That was the outer refuge, that I said exists in all Buddhist culture, but in Tibetan Buddhism there is a very important thing for really working with the methods, and that is not the so-called three jewels, Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, but the three roots. And the three roots, they are called Lama, Yidam, Cheuchong. Lama is the transmission of, let's say, blessing or good feeling or confidence -- I mean, that we are touched by something which is capable of opening us and thawing out the frozen and the insecure places. This is called Lama. This is an aspect of meeting and getting confidence.

MISHLOVE: And it refers to the Lamas with whom one studies.

NYDAHL: Yes, and also to the lineage Lama, actually to the one who holds the transmission, because no Lama, be it any of my colleagues or myself, are anything in ourselves. We are like the transmission. Our Lama is called the Karmapa. This Karmapa, he is holding the lineage, and you can compare him to the electricity works, and us to the plugs, right? I mean, he produces it, and as much as we can open, we can transmit like that. So the Lama actually means the blessing of the lineage. We may become good friends and so on, but it may also be that you don't like me at all. But anyway, if you're open to things I say, and so on, you will at some time or other have a feeling of confidence, a good inner state. And then after that there's a thing called Yidam, which are the different methods, like meditation -- maybe we'll do one later, we'll explain one, or something like that -- meditation where we concentrate like on the three lights.

MISHLOVE: This is the interesting part to me. After this taking refuge in the Lama, then it starts to get very interesting. I guess I would use the word Tantric here, in the sense that now what we're dealing with are very elaborate visualizations -- energies, lights, sounds, mantras, whirling patterns. Meditation becomes like a dance at this point, much different than sitting quietly.

NYDAHL: Sure, sure. Right. That's it. It does, it does. And that is the Yidam aspect that I just shortly mentioned. That is Yi means mind, dam means point. It's the point where our minds are bonded to enlightenment, where we get something to meditate on which is a mirror of our own mind, which is showing us our enlightened nature. And when we do that, then actually within, say, ten, fifteen years of our lives, we scratch up everything from our subconscious from limitless time. We can scratch everything up and purify it out, and for that we then need the Protectors. They're called Mahakala or Bernachen in our lineage, and they're very powerful protective forces which keep the lid on and make things come into our subconscious in such a way that we can always understand what it is, and have an aha! experience.

MISHLOVE: These are, as I understand it, if one were to look at Tibetan tankas, the religious paintings of Tibet, we would see demonic looking entities. I say looking, because I understand they are the protectors of the dharma.

NYDAHL: And they are actually wonderfully compassionate. They are like our mother, if she throws a stone or looks angry in order to keep a dog from biting us. She doesn't mind the dog, but she has to do that to keep it from harming us. This is the same way, and they all have a wisdom eye in their forehead, and this wisdom eye means that they are really all-knowing; their mind is great peace and compassion, but they manifest like this for our sake.

MISHLOVE: I suppose at this stage of the meditation practice, it's as if one were entering into the reality which is portrayed in the Tibetan tankas.

NYDAHL: Yes, this is coming now. This is like the refuge we took now; then after the refuge we come into the building-up phase. And these forms that I'm telling about, which would later on, in the meditation -- first we take refuge in them now; we just open up to them. Then after that we do the building-up phase of the meditation, the accumulating, the creative phase of the meditation. And that's where they then really come. The first time during the refuge, we just meet them, we open up to them, we understand that they are not separate from the Buddha nature and from our own true inner essence; we meet them like that. Then after this refuge, which we can do with the idea of just helping ourselves, or with the idea of developing quickly so we can help all beings, which is of course the best motivation -- after that then we come into what you just talked about, into the building-up meditation, into the first creative phase of meditation.

MISHLOVE: Which involves in a way entering into relationship with these beings or these entities, these deities.

NYDAHL: Yes, sure, sure. This is where we do that. And there's something very, very important to understand there -- that the real meaning of this is to know that space and truth cannot be separated. There are people who sit down and they cannot see a single picture, no matter what they meditate on. And these people may have problems and think they're spiritually blind, but they're not, because in dreams they can see everything. It just means their minds don't consider pictures very important; they're on the level of abstraction in their minds. They're not on the level of pictures. So whether one can see or not, whether one can visualize one's childhood home or not, one can remember the taste when one's mother had made pancakes, and the smell when one came in as a kid from school, and one can remember a lot of things, right? And in the same way, whether one can clearly see the different Buddha aspects or not, then knowing that space and truth cannot be separate, one knows that whenever one even thinks of them, they condense out of space, they actually appear, they come from all sides, they really come. So this is the building-up phase -- this becoming aware that now it's really there, it's really happening there.

MISHLOVE: Is there a sense that, in order to in effect reach up to these heavenly realms, these divine realms, that one enters into another state of consciousness?

NYDAHL: Oh yes, one definitely does.

MISHLOVE: It's not really a question of just mechanically following the instructions. There must be something else, an inner quality, inner transformation.

NYDAHL: Well, there is, of course. Just opening up to it takes a certain kind of mind -- to do that instead of going and seeing a film about somebody killing each other, or something like that, or getting rich. In order to even want to do it, there is a kind of openness; of course there is.

MISHLOVE: And it comes with practice, I gather.

NYDAH: Yes, but devotion is actually also the feeling of knowing how rich we really are -- I mean, knowing that this is possible, all this can happen in my mind; my mind has this unlimited potential, that I can actually do this, it has this power. So this is what one does. One lets a form of energy and light appear, either as a picture or as an awareness, as an abstraction or whatever. And after one has done that, one really understands that it's there whenever one thinks of it, and then one starts doing the different mantras, the vibrations which activate it. One uses the things which make it come alive. And after that, there's all this contained inside the building-up phase, the phase of concentration --

MISHLOVE: When you say building up, are we referring to building up a structure within the mind itself?

NYDAHL: Yes, building up an awareness, yes, yes. But always understanding that space inside and outside are not different, that the moment we concentrate on the Buddha outside, the same awareness appears inside.

MISHLOVE: So in effect maybe what one builds up in these practices is like a map of the higher realities.

NYDAHL: Yes, sure, sure, that's a very good way to say it.

MISHLOVE: And each of the Tibetan tankas, and there are hundreds of them, are describing different portions of that map.

NYDAHL: Yes, different aspects of full enlightenment, sure they do. Sure, I mean, they're pure forms. Usually we see impure forms, forms that are colored by karma, by wishes, by hopes, by fears, by likes and dislikes, and so on. This is what awareness itself is. When awareness plays with itself, when enlightenment expresses itself, then it manifests as these pure forms of energy and light.

MISHLOVE: We're almost out of time, but I'd like to mention that one of the most interesting maps I saw in your description is the image of the Karmapa Lama transmitting the three lights.

NYDAHL: Yes, that is a wonderful thing.

MISHLOVE: The light from the forehead to the forehead, the white light; the red light from the throat to the throat; the blue light from the heart to the heart. You mention in your instructions that this is something that one can do even momentarily, if you have thirty seconds left.

NYDAHL: Sure, sure. Even, with the speed on your highways, you can even do it while driving, because you drive so slowly here.

MISHLOVE: Ole Nydahl, tak for i aften [thanks for tonight].

NYDAHL: Tak selv, tak selv [the same to you].

MISHLOVE: Thank you very much for being with me.

NYDAHL: Yes, I was very glad to see you again.