

The importance and history of conceptual meditation practices in different schools of Mongolian - Tibetan Buddhism

The LOJONG (Tib: blo sbyong)

by Zoltán Cser PhD student for Mongolian Studies, Department of Inner Asian Studies, University ELTE, Budapest

Background of conceptual meditation technics

When we talk about meditation in Buddhism we find in the sacred texts, in sutras and commentaries quite a few terms. The terms seems to be coherent, but if we investigate the meanings in many cases we cannot decide whether they are referring to a practice or the state that can be achieved by a practice, so the meditative state of mind. Among the most common terms¹ we find the so called calm abiding (Sanskrit: *śamatha*, Pali: *samatha*, Tibetan: *zhi gnas*) where the term refers to the achieved state, but the practice is one-pointedness². Also when we try to define a term we have to consider in which context the given term is used. For example considering the Sanskrit term *dhyāna*, in the Pali texts (*jhāna*) it is referring the different levels of meditative absorptions³, but in the Mahayana literature it also can refer to practice like *Dhyāna Pāramitā* (or in Chinese *chan* practice). Also not so easy to understand whether a practice is conceptual or non-conceptual like in the case of *vipaśyanā*.

To conceive the different terms first we have to understand what the purpose of meditation is and how meditation is playing role in the main educational models in Buddhism. All the dharmas, the teachings and the methods given by the Buddha are aiming to eliminate, or being as an antidote for the causes of suffering. Usually the causes are ignorance, afflictive emotions and karmas. In another way the causes can be summarized as the *Four Veils*⁴ or *Four Māras* that are obscuration for pure perception, to see the phenomena as they are. So the purpose of meditation is eliminating the main cause, ignorance, delusion by applying pure perception.

There are two main educational models one is the basic taught by the Buddha; morality, meditation and wisdom, the other one is based on the Mahayana literature; view, meditation and behaviour. As we see they are opposite in order, the first is the monastic way, where keeping the rules of a monk leads to the stability in meditation and meditation leads to pure perception. The other is starting with intellectual studies that make understand the relative truth and the ultimate truth. By this one can deal with meditation, where the conceived truth is integrated to one's mind-stream⁵. Finally meditation leads to proper behaviour, proper actions. The first model is used in all branches of Buddhism, but essential in the Theravada system. As we see mostly non-conceptual practices, like *satipaṭṭhāna* or *samatha*, *vipassanā* (Pali) are belonging to this education model. In this system we can find also conceptual practices like meditating on

¹ The most common terms are: shamatha (Tib: zhi gnas, calm abiding), vipaśyanā (Tib: lhag mthong, penetrative insight), dhyāna (T: bsam tan, meditative stability), bhāvanā (Tib: sgom, familiarization), smṛti (pali: sati, Tib: dran pa, alertness, recall, samādhi (t: ting nge 'dzin, meditative absorption)

² Sarah Shaw: *Buddhist meditation, An anthology of texts from the Pali canon*, published by Routledge, Oxon 2006 pp. 18

³ Henepola Gunaratana: *The Critical Analyzes of the Jhānas in Theravada Buddhist Meditation*, The American University, Washington 2016

⁴ veil of karma, that turns mind outward, veil of disturbing emotions, veil of ego clinging, veil of fake vision

⁵ bhāvanā means to be familiarized or familiarization, get used to the technic

death, or loving kindness but they are secondary practices⁶. The second model uses on the other hand conceptual practices first that leads at the end to non-conceptual practices (meditating on emptiness or on suchness). Here conceptual meditations are numerous; contemplation on different topics, like karma and impermanence, *Bodhicitta* and so on.

This question of conceptual and non-conceptual made the Buddhist schools to separate. Just to mention in the Pali literature there is one very famous commentary, the *Visuddhimagga*⁷ in which we can find the different meditational methods according to the sequence of developing on the Path. This text was written around the 5th Century by *Buddhaghosa* but it seems the structure is based on a two centuries older text the *Vimuttimagga*⁸. The Pali version still not found, but the Chinese translation remained. The difference between two texts from our perspective, that in the earlier *Vimuttimagga*⁹ the meditation on the qualities of the Buddha¹⁰ is esteemed as a method leading to *jhāna* but in the *Visuddhimagga* the *Budhanussati*¹¹ is just a secondary practice mainly eliminating proud and enhancing devotion. This period we see that the different ideas about meditation produced a lot of schools but we can summarize as two main currents as mentioned before: one is emphasizing non-conceptual technics and using conceptual meditations as supporting methods (mainly in Theravada traditions) that is based on monkhood and renouncing the world, the other current is starting with conceptual practices and finally uses the non-conceptual methods (mainly in Mahayana schools) this way supporting scholarship and led to the establishment of greatest Universities at that time.

There are several reasons that led to spread of the Mahayana system in the northern part of Asia (interesting that the non-conceptual meditation traditions spread in the south) and the popularity of conceptual practices. After the Buddha's passing into nirvana refuge became an important practice, to remember the Buddha as a source of teaching. Also this system can integrate the worldly education and showing the way from the world of suffering to dharma and enlightenment. Generating Bodhicitta, the principle to help others on the path and philosophical training made this system also very wide spread. While in the Theravada school the meditations are focusing on samsaric (world of suffering, relative existence) phenomena like breathing, or sensory perception, in the Mahayana system the practitioner meditates on the enlightened qualities (for example in the rituals, pujas they invite Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and trying to communicate with them).

Origin of Mindtraining

Lojong is a Tibetan term that can be translated as Mindtraining. *Palden Atisha*¹² (b. 982 AD East Bengal, died in 1052 Tibet) took this method into Tibet He had three main teachers:

⁶Venerable Dhammasami: *Mindfulness Meditation Made Easy*. Penang, Inward Path Publciation.Malaysia.1999. pp 79-84

⁷ The Path of Purification *Visuddhimagga* translated from Pali by Bhikkhu Ñānamoli, First edition: by Mr. Ananda Semage, Colombo 1956

⁸ The Path of Freedom (*Vimuttimagga*) By the Arahant Upatissa Translated from the Chinese by Rev. N.R.M. Ehara, Soma Thera, and Kheminda Thera Buddhist Publication Society Kandy • Sri Lanka 1977

⁹ *Vimuttimagga and Vusuddhimagga, a comparative study* by P.V. Bapat, Poona 1937

¹⁰ On remembering the Buddha (*Budhanussati*): *Vimuttimagga and Vusuddhimagga, a comparative study* by P.V. Bapat, Poona 1937 pp. 62

¹¹ Venerable Dhammasami: *Mindfulness Meditation Made Easy*. Penang, Inward Path Publication. Malaysia. 1999. pp 36-49

¹² *Atisha and Buddhism in Tibet*, Compiled and translated by Doboom Tullm and Glenn H. Mullin, TIBET HOUSE, New Delhi Tibet House, 1983 pp. 1-15

Dharmarakshita, Kusali (Maitriyogi), Dharmakirti (Tib: gser gling pa). He spent 12 years in Sumatra and received two kind of Generating Bodhicitta system, one coming from *Asanga*, the other from *Nagarjuna*. His main teacher was Serlingpa who has several works can be found in the *Tengyur*, the Tibetan Canon of Buddhist commentaries. In Tibet Atisha basically taught two main meditation training system, one is the exoteric Graduated Path (Tib: *lam rim*), the other is the esoteric so called Mindtraining or Lojong. Different texts are forming the scriptural base for Lojong for example *Akashagarbha Sutra, Vimalakirti Sutra, Flower Ornament Scripture*¹³, *Akshayamati Sutra* or from the commentary literature Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland*¹⁴, Maitreya's *Ornament of Mahayana Sutras*¹⁵, *Asanaga's Levels of the Bodhisattva*¹⁶, Santideva's *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*¹⁷. These texts are giving the structure for series of meditation practices, giving meditation choreographies, step by step build up practices.

Question of the term

Lojong is comprising of two words, *blo* and *sbyongs*. *Blo* is mind (*mati* or *buddhi* in Sanskrit) and *sbyongs* is practice, purification or dispelling (*bhāvanā* in Sanskrit), but this term is not existing in the Sanskrit scriptures. Lojong is a Tibetan genre; the earliest known texts that explicitly carry the term are Langri Thangpa's *Eight verses on Mind Training*¹⁸ and Chekawa's *Seven-Point Mind Training*¹⁹, both of which appeared about a century after Atisha. Later also Lojong collections appeared, for example *Mind Training: The Great Collection* compiled by *Shönu Gyalchok* (ca. fourteenth-fifteenth centuries) and *Könchok Gyaltzen* (1388-1469) where we can find 43 Lojong texts from all schools of Tibetan Buddhism.²⁰

Method of Lojong and its way to the North

Lojong is a conceptual meditation practice where the practitioner should create different visions, or remembering particular events in life or reciting words of wisdom and so on. The aim is training the mind and create antidote to self-cherishment or transforming selfish thoughts into altruistic, so develop Bodhicitta. The way of practice - creating vision, reciting words, contemplating on the meaning. In the practice through the given technic one should develop feelings, and being one-pointed on the feeling. The more time one can focus on a feeling (altruistic or renunciation and so on) more creating antidote of self-cherishing attitude, developing understanding, wisdom. This is the result of Lojong practice²¹.

As we saw from the quite early Lojong collection text that all schools of Tibetan Buddhism integrated these conceptual meditation series. In the Nyigma tradition for example the *Chetsün nyingthig* (Seven Lojong), or we can mention Longchenpa's or Patrul Rinpoche's Lojongs, in

¹³ *Avatamsaka sutra*

¹⁴ *Ratnāvali*

¹⁵ *Mahāyānasutrālamkara*

¹⁶ *Bodhisattvabhūmi*

¹⁷ *Bodhisattvacharyāvatara*

¹⁸ *Tib: Blo sbyong tshig brgyad ma*

¹⁹ *Tib: Blo sbyong don bdun ma*

²⁰ *Tib: theg pa chen po'i blo sbyong gyatsa* published in: *Mind training: the great collection I* compiled by Shonu Gyalchok and Konchok Gyaltzen ; translated and edited by Thupten Jinpa. The Institute of Tibetan Classics, Wisdom Publication, Boston 2006

²¹ *Mind training: the great collection I* compiled by Shonu Gyalchok and Konchok Gyaltzen ; translated and edited by Thupten Jinpa. The Institute of Tibetan Classics, Wisdom Publication, Boston 2006 pp. 1-17

Sakya tradition the famous *Parting from Four Attachment*, or Sakya Pandita's *Treasury of Elegant Sayings*, in Kagyu tradition Gampopa's *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, or Gampopa's *Four Dharma* but Lojong became as a main practice in the Gelug tradition. Serlingpa's method gives the base for all school's preliminary practices, the Four Common (precious human body, impermanence, karma, faults of samsara) and the Four Uncommon preliminaries (refuge and bodhicitta, purification, mandala offering, guruyoga)²².

Lojongs were also integrating wise sayings (like in Udanavarga), many came from Indian sources, like in the case of Sakya Pandita's *Treasury of Elegant Sayings*, but also we can find proverbs, folk tales among the different points of Lojongs.

In the fourteenth century Tsongkhapa Lozang Dragpa, who held all the three Kadampa lineages founded Ganden monastery from which the new tradition, "Gandenpa" takes its name. The Gandenpa was later changed into Gelugpa tradition. Tsongkhapa blended both lineage methods of Mind training in His enormous work the *Lam rim chen mo*, that became the core teaching in gelug system. The whole Lam rim is series of Lojongs. In the second dissemination of Buddhism in Mongolia Tsonkapa's teaching became widespread and formed the main feature of Mongolian Buddhism.

Summary

If we look at the map of Buddhism, going more to the north the importance of conceptual meditation is growing and growing. Lojong is a Tibetan genre that came from Atisa's mind training teachings and became a particularly dominant element of pedagogy, training in northern monastic system and practice in all lineage, particularly in the Gelug school. Lojong is a conceptual meditation dealing with emotions, generate them, giving possibility to train the enlightened qualities, which is the base for later tantric practices where visualization is essential. Lojong should be very important today because can give proper understanding and generate altruism and these factors could lead to more peaceful world.

Bibliography

Shonu Gyalchok and Konchok Gyaltzen: *Mind training: the great collection*, (compilation) translated and edited by Thupten Jinpa. The Institute of Tibetan Classics, Wisdom Publication, Boston 2006 pp. 1-17

The Path of Freedom (Vimuttimaggā) by the Arahant Upatissa Translated from the Chinese by Rev. N.R.M. Ehara, Soma Thera, and Kheminda Thera Buddhist Publication Society Kandy • Sri Lanka 1977

The Path of Purification Visuddhimaggā translated from Pali by Bhikkhu Ñānamoli, First edition: by Mr. Ananda Semage, Colombo 1956

Bapat P.V.: *Vimuttimaggā and Vusuddhimaggā, a comparative study*, Poona 1937

Ven. Dhammasami: *Mindfulness Meditation Made Easy*. Penang, Inward Path Publciation, Malaysia.1997 pp. 79-84

Doboom Tulku and Glenn H. Mullin: *Atisha and Budhism in Tibet*, Compiled and translated by, TIBET HOUSE, New Delhi Tibet House, 1983 pp. 1-15

Gunaratana, Henepola: *The Critical Analyzes of the Jhanas in Theravada Buddhist Meditation*, The American University, Washington 2016

Shaw, Sarah: *Buddhist meditation, an anthology of texts from the Pali canon*, published by Routledge, Oxon 2006 pp. 18

²² Tib: sngon 'gro