How to Know the Mind According to *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*

A practical introduction to the teachings attributed to Padmasambhava

The central teaching of The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation is that **knowing the mind means recognizing the nature of awareness itself**, rather than merely studying your thoughts, memories, emotions, and desires.

The text belongs to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of *Dzogchen*, which emphasizes recognizing the mind's fundamental nature directly.

1. Understand the difference between thoughts and awareness

Consider these three experiences:

- You think, "I must finish my work."
- You feel anger toward another person.
- You experience a desire for something pleasurable.

All three are experiences appearing in the mind. But the book invites you to investigate something more fundamental:

What is it that knows these thoughts, feelings, and desires?

In ordinary life, we concentrate on the contents of consciousness. In this teaching, we turn our attention toward the knowing quality of consciousness itself.

For example, when anger appears, instead of immediately saying "I am angry," recognize: "Anger is present, and it is being known."

This is the beginning of investigating the mind.

2. Five principles for knowing the mind

Principle	Practical meaning
1. Awareness	Notice thoughts, sensations, and emotions as they arise.
2. Impermanence	Observe that mental experiences continually change.
3. Non-grasping	Avoid automatically pursuing pleasant thoughts or resisting unpleasant ones.
4. Non-identification	Recognize that a thought is not necessarily your identity or a command.
5. Direct recognition	Investigate the awareness in which all these experiences are known.

The fifth principle is especially important. The book is not simply teaching relaxation or positive thinking. It points toward recognizing the nature of mind beyond habitual conceptual judgments.

3. A 15-minute exercise to begin knowing your mind

This is a beginner-friendly exercise inspired by the book, not a substitute for the traditional Dzogchen instruction of a qualified teacher.

Daily mind-observation practice of 5 completed

[Reset practice]

4. What does the book mean by the true nature of mind?

The text describes mind as not being a solid, independently existing object. It emphasizes clarity, emptiness, and the inseparability of awareness and emptiness.

Thoughts and emotions are like changing clouds; open awareness is compared to the sky.

The analogy is not a claim that awareness is a permanent soul.

A central distinction is that **emptiness does not mean unconsciousness or nothingness**.

In Buddhist philosophy, it points to the absence of fixed, independent existence.

The text's expression *self-liberation* refers to recognizing mental experiences without grasping at them, so they need not perpetuate confusion and suffering.

5. Apply the teaching to everyday life

Suppose you experience an unwanted desire while using the internet.

An ordinary reaction might be: "I have this desire, therefore I must act on it."

The practice of knowing the mind suggests another approach:

1. Recognize: "A desire has arisen."
2. Observe the sensations and thoughts associated with it.
3. Notice that the desire changes in intensity.
4. Avoid identifying yourself with the desire.
5. Choose your next action according to your values.

This application combines Buddhist observation with practical self-regulation. It does not mean desires must disappear or that experiencing them is a moral failure.

6. Seven questions for investigating your mind

Use one question each day for a week.

Seven-day contemplation Choose a day

DAY

Contemplate gently for 3–5 minutes. You do not need to arrive at a verbal answer.

7. What is the ultimate goal?

According to the text, the ultimate aim is not merely to develop better concentration, control thoughts, or experience temporary peace. It is the recognition of the mind's nature, traditionally understood as a path to liberation from ignorance and suffering.

The book's principal practice section is titled *The Yoga of Knowing the Mind, the Seeing of Reality, Called Self-Liberation*, beginning on page 194 of the 2000 Oxford edition.

For deeper practice, traditional Dzogchen teachings place importance on guidance from a qualified teacher. Start with short, grounded sessions rather than prolonged meditation or attempts to force unusual states. If meditation causes agitation, sleeplessness, or a sense of unreality, stop and return to ordinary activities.

The most useful question to carry into daily life is:

A thought has appeared in my mind. Can I know it clearly without becoming entangled in it?

That question can begin a lifelong investigation of consciousness, freedom, and wisdom.