

*This booklet is part of the series on
The Basic Teachings of Buddhism*

*A Guide to
Shamatha Meditation*

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Note

The technical terms have been italicized the first time to alert the reader that they may be found in the Glossary.

Tibetan words are given as they are pronounced, not spelled in Tibetan.

Chapter 1

Why We Practice Meditation

The essence of the teachings of the Buddha is practice. When we say practice, we mean the practice of meditation, which can consist of either the meditation known as *tranquillity meditation* (Skt. *shamatha*) or *insight meditation* (Skt. *vipashyana*). But in either case, it must be implemented in actual practice. The reason we practice meditation is to attain happiness both the short term and the long term. When we speak of happiness, we usually mean physical pleasure and mental pleasure. But in order to enjoy either type of pleasant experience, our mind must be at peace because as long as our mind is unhappy and without any kind of tranquillity or peace, then no matter how much physical pleasure we experience, it will not take the form of true happiness. On the other hand, even if we lack even the most basic physical requirements of comfort, if our mind is at peace we will be happy anyway.

We practice meditation, therefore, in part in order to obtain the short-term benefit of a state of mental happiness and peace. The reason meditation helps with this is that, normally, we have a great deal of thought, or many different kinds of thoughts running through our mind. Some of these thoughts are very pleasant and some of them are unpleasant, agitating, and worrisome. Now, if we examine the thoughts that are in our mind from time to time, we will see that the pleasant thoughts are comparatively few and the unpleasant thoughts are many. This means that as long as our mind is ruled or controlled by the thoughts that pass through it, we will be quite unhappy. To gain control over this process, we have to begin with the meditation practice of tranquillity meditation, which produces a basic state of contentment and peace within the mind of the practitioner.

An example of how meditation can make us happy is the great Tibetan yogi Jetsun *Milarepa*, who lived in conditions of the utmost austerity. He lived in utter solitude in caves and isolated mountains. His clothes were rags and his food was poor and scanty. In fact, for a number of years he lived on nettle soup alone and, as a result, he became thin, almost emaciated. If we were to consider his external

circumstances alone, the isolation and poverty in which he lived, we would think that he must have been miserable. Yet, from reading his many *spiritual songs*, we see that his mind was fundamentally at peace and his experience was one of constant unfolding delight. His spiritual songs are songs that express the utmost state of rapture. He saw every place that he went to, no matter how isolated and austere, as beautiful and he experienced his life of utmost austerity as extremely pleasant.

The short-term benefits of meditation are more than merely peace of mind, because our physical health also depends to a great extent upon our state of mind. Therefore, if we cultivate this state of mental contentment and peace, we will tend not to become ill, and will tend to heal more easily if we do become ill. The reason for this is that one of the primary conditions which brings about physical illness is mental agitation which produces an agitation or disturbance of the *subtle channels*¹ and energies within our body. Agitation in the subtle channels generates new illnesses and also prevents the healing of old illnesses. This agitation of the channels and *subtle winds* or energies also obstructs the benefit that can be derived from medical treatment. If we practice meditation, then our mind settles down and the channels and the energies moving through the channels return to their rightful functioning. As a result of this we tend not to become ill and are able to heal any illnesses we already have. For example, Milarepa living in caves wearing just a cotton cloth and eating just teaspoons of barley flour each day throughout the early part of his life did not harm his health, because he managed to have a very long life, and was extremely vigorous and youthful to the end of it. With the proper practice of meditation, the mental peace and contentment that is generated calms down or corrects the functioning of the channels and energies, allowing for the healing and the prevention of sickness.

The ultimate or long-term benefit of the practice of meditation is to become free of all suffering, which means to no longer experience the suffering of birth, aging, sickness, and death. This attainment of freedom is called, in all Buddhist traditions, Buddhahood and in the *Vajrayana*, the *supreme attainment*. The root or basic cause of this attainment is the practice of meditation.

Again, generally we have a lot of thoughts running through our mind, some of which are beneficial such as thoughts of love, compassion, rejoicing in the happiness of others and many others which are negative thoughts such as attachment, aversion, jealousy, competitiveness, and so on. Normally, because we have such strong

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habits that have been accumulating within us from beginningless time, there are comparatively few positive thoughts and comparatively many negative thoughts. It is only by removing these habits of negativity that we can free ourselves from suffering.

We cannot simply remove these *disturbing emotions* (Skt. *kleshas*) by saying to ourselves, “I will not create any more negative emotions,” because we do not have the necessary freedom of mind or control over the disturbing emotions to do so. In order to relinquish these, we need to actually attain this freedom, which begins, according to the common path, with the cultivation of tranquillity meditation. Now, when we begin to practice the basic meditation of tranquillity meditation, we may find that our mind won’t stay still for a moment. But this condition is not permanent and will change as we practice. Eventually we will be able to place our mind at rest at will, at which point we have successfully alleviated the manifest disturbance of these disturbing emotions. After developing tranquillity meditation we can then apply the second technique—insight meditation—which consists of learning to recognize and directly experience the nature of our own mind. This nature is referred to as *emptiness*.² When we recognize this nature and rest in it, then all of the disturbing emotions that arise dissolve into this emptiness and are no longer afflictions. Therefore, the freedom, which is called Buddhahood, depends upon the eradication of these mental afflictions, and that depends upon the practice of meditation. The practice of tranquillity and insight meditation is the general path which is common to both the paths of *sutra* and *tantra*.

So both short-term and ultimate happiness depends on the cultivation of meditation, which from the common point of view of the sutras—the point of view held in common by all traditions of Buddhism—is tranquillity and insight.

Compassion in Meditation

Meditation, however, also depends in part upon the generation of loving-kindness and compassion. This is true of any meditation, but it is especially true of Vajrayana meditation. The reason is that the specific Vajrayana practices—the visualization of deities or meditation upon Mahamudra and so on—depend upon the presence of a pure motivation on the part of the practitioner from the very start. If this genuine motivation is not present, not much benefit will really occur. For that reason, Vajrayana practitioners

always try to develop the motivation which is known as the awakened mind or *bodhichitta*.

If you look at the liturgies used in Vajrayana practice, you'll see that the long and extensive Vajrayana liturgies always begin with meditation upon bodhichitta. Even the shortest liturgies always begin with a meditation upon bodhichitta, loving-kindness, and compassion. The point is that compassion and bodhichitta are necessary for all meditation, but especially for Vajrayana practice.

The only real meaning that we can give to our being born as human beings on this planet is that we have helped our friends and all the beings on this planet as much as we could. And if we devote any significant part of our lives to hurting and harming others, then to the extent that we actually do so, our lives have been meaningless. So if we understand that the only real point of a human life is to help others to improve the world, then we must understand that the basis of not harming but benefiting others is having the intention not to harm others and the intention to benefit others.

Now, the main causal condition of having such a stable intention and motivation is the actual cultivation of love and compassion for others. This means that when we find ourselves full of spite and viciousness we have to recognize it and let go of it. Even though we may be free of negative thoughts and have the wish to improve things, we may be thinking of helping or benefiting ourselves. When that's the case, then we have to recollect that the root of that type of mentality, which is quite petty and limited and tight, is desiring victory for ourselves even at the expense of the suffering and loss experienced by others. Then we have to gradually expand our sympathy for others, and therefore this cultivation of bodhichitta or altruism in general as a motivation is an essential way of making your life meaningful.

The importance of love and compassion is not an idea that is particular to Buddhism. Everyone throughout the world talks about the importance of love and compassion. There's no one who says love and compassion are bad and we should try and get rid of them. However, there is an uncommon element in the approach which is taken by Buddhism. In general, when we think of compassion, we think of a natural or spontaneous empathy which we experience when we perceive the suffering of someone else. Generally we think of compassion as being a state of pain, of sadness, because we see the suffering of someone else and we see what's causing that suffering and we know we can't do anything to

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remove the cause of that suffering and therefore the suffering itself. So, whereas before we generated compassion, one person was miserable, after we generated compassion, two people were miserable.

However, the approach of the Buddhist tradition towards compassion is a little bit different, because it's founded on the recognition that, whether or not we can benefit that being, we can generate the foundation for their ultimate benefit. And the confidence in that recognition removes the frustration or the misery which otherwise somehow afflicts ordinary compassion. So, when compassion is cultivated in that way, it is experienced as delightful rather than miserable.

The Four Immeasurables

The way that we cultivate compassion is called immeasurable compassion. To be precise, there are four aspects of compassion, and these are known as the four immeasurables. Normally, when we think of something that's called immeasurable, we mean immeasurably vast. Here, the primary connotation of the term is not "vastness" but "impartiality." Immeasurable compassion is compassion that is not going to help one person at the expense of hurting another. It is a compassion that is felt equally for all beings. The basis of the generation of such an impartial compassion is the recognition of the fact that all beings without exception really want and don't want the same things. All beings, without exception, want to be happy and want to avoid suffering. There is no being anywhere who really wants to suffer. And if you understand that, and to the extent that you understand that, you will have the intense wish that all beings be free from suffering. And there is no being anywhere who does not want to be happy; and if you understand that, and to the extent that you understand that, you will have the intense wish that all beings actually achieve the happiness that they wish to achieve. Now, because the experience of happiness and freedom from suffering depend upon the generation of the causes of these, then the actual form your aspiration takes is that all beings possess not only happiness but the causes of happiness, that they not only be free of suffering but of the causes of suffering.

The causes of suffering are fundamentally the presence of mental afflictions—ignorance, attachment, aversion, jealousy, arrogance, and so on and it is through the existence of these that

we come to suffer. The recognition that we can completely transcend these causes of suffering by practicing meditation means the situation is not hopeless. Boundless love and compassion generate a boundless joy based on the confidence that we can actually help beings free themselves..

Boundless love is the aspiration that beings possess happiness and the causes of happiness. This immeasurable compassion is the aspiration for beings to be free of suffering and the causes of suffering. The actual confidence and delight you take in the confidence that you can actually bring these about is boundless joy. Now, because all of these are boundless or immeasurable or impartial, then they all have a quality, which is equanimity. Which is to say that if these are cultivated properly, you don't have love for one being and not for another, or less for another; you don't have compassion for one being but none for another, and so on. Normally, when we experience these qualities, they are partial. To eradicate the fixation that causes us to experience compassion only for some and not for others, we must train in cultivating equanimity for beings through recognizing that they all wish for the same thing and wish to avoid the same thing, and through doing so you can greatly increase or enhance your loving-kindness and compassion.

Questions

Question: Rinpoche, you said one person may not be able to directly affect or remove short-term unhappiness or suffering of another person, but that we can learn to generate the basis of another's happiness, ultimate happiness. So could you say some more, please, about how one person can generate the basis of ultimate happiness for another person?

Rinpoche: The direct basis of establishing another being in a state of freedom or happiness, long-term or ultimate happiness, is being able to show them how to get rid of their mental afflictions and to teach them how to recognize and therefore abandon causes of suffering. And, through doing so in that way, then you can establish them gradually in ultimate happiness. But even in cases where you can't, for whatever reason, do that, by having the intention to benefit that being, then when you yourselves become fully free, then you will be able to actually help them and gradually free and protect them as well.

Question: Rinpoche, can you say a little more about the practice of letting go when the mind is agitated, as used in Mahamudra and Dzogchen? I experience my mind when I sit as being agitated. And there's the practice of letting go. And I'm wondering if you can just say more about that in a practical way?

Rinpoche: In general, the main approach that is taken in the Mahamudra and Dzogchen traditions is applied when you are looking at the nature of your mind. Now, disturbing emotions are thoughts, and thoughts are the natural display of the mind. Thoughts may be pleasant, neutral, or unpleasant, they may be positive or negative, but in any case, whatever type of thought arises, you deal with it in exactly the same way. You simply look directly at it.

Now, looking at the thought, or looking into the thought, or looking at the nature of the thought, is quite different from analyzing it. You don't attempt to analyze the contents of the thought, nor do you attempt to think about the thought. You just simply look directly at it. And when you look directly at a thought, you don't find anything. Now, you may think that you don't find anything because you don't know how to look or you don't know where to look, but, in fact, that's not the reason. The reason, according to the Buddha, is that thoughts are empty. And this is the basic meaning of all the various teachings on emptiness he gave, such as the sixteen emptinesses and so on.

Now, to use anger as an example of this, if you become angry and then you look directly at the anger—which doesn't mean analyze the contents of the thoughts of anger, but you look directly at that specific thought of anger—then you won't find anything. And, in that moment of not finding anything, the poisonous quality of the anger will somehow vanish or dissolve. Your mind will relax, and you will, at least to some extent, be free of the anger.

Kagyü Lineage Prayer

Great Vajradhara,⁴ Tilopa, Naropa
Marpa, Milarepa, and Lord of the Dharma Gampopa,
knower of the three times, the omniscient Karmapa,
Holders of the four great and eight lesser lineages.

Drikung, Taklung, Tsalpa, Glorious Drukpa, and so on,
masters of the profound path of Mahamudra,
unequaled protectors of beings, the Dakpo Kagyü,
Kagyü Lamas, I supplicate you.
Grant your blessing that I follow your example and hold your
tradition.

Detachment is the foot of meditation, as is taught.
To this meditator who is not attached to food and wealth.
who cuts the ties to this life,
grant your blessing so that I have no attachment to honor or gain.

Devotion is the head of meditation, as is taught.
The lama opens the gate to the treasury of oral instruction.
To the meditator who always supplicates you,
Grant your blessing so that genuine devotion is born within.

Non-distraction is the body of meditation, as is taught.
Whatever arises is fresh, the nature of realization.
To the meditator who rests simply in naturalness,
grant your blessing that meditation is free from conceptualization.

The nature of thought is dharmakaya, as is taught.
Nothing whatsoever, it arises as everything.
To the meditator for whom all arises in unceasing play,
grant your blessing that I realize samsara and nirvana as undivided .

Through all my births may I not be separated from the perfect lama,
and so enjoy the splendor of Dharma
Perfecting the qualities of the paths and stages,
may I swiftly attain the state of Vajradhara.

Translated by the Nalanda Translation Committee with revisions by Michele Martin.

Chapter 2

Shamatha Meditation

We begin by examining our mental disposition, which means turning our mind inwards and examining whether our attitude is pure or impure. Because we are just ordinary beings, sometimes our attitude will be pure and at other times it will be impure. There is nothing surprising about this. When we find our attitude is pure, we can rejoice and let it remain pure. When we find our attitude is impure, there's no reason to become disheartened, because we can change it. If we change it again and again, little by little our negative attitude will naturally become pure. To develop this disposition for enlightenment, we should think that whatever we are doing, we are doing it to help all beings reach Buddhahood.

The Need for Meditation

When we do a physical action, this action can have either a positive or a negative result. When we say something, it can be either good or bad. So with words and actions we can see tangible results, but with thoughts there is no concrete action expressed. The mind, however, determines all of our physical and verbal actions because whatever we do, there is thought behind it. When that thought is positive, the actions that follow are good; when that thought is negative, the actions that follow are negative. The starting point of changing what we do is to change the way we think.

When we try to change a mental disposition, we must modify our habits. We can do this through meditation; that is, by using our mind in a more concentrated, controlled way. What is troubling the mind can be removed with meditation so that our mind can exist in its purity. If our mind is distracted, we can change it into an undistracted mind through meditation. We can change bad habits into good habits through meditation. Then when we manage to change our mental habits, we can change our physical actions and verbal behavior. Once we have changed these, we can reach the ultimate goal of our practice, Buddhahood.

Faith and Devotion

The one thing common to all meditation practice is having the right motivation of wanting to benefit all persons, not just ourselves. Besides this, we also need to have very strong devotion to our guru and all the gurus of our lineage. If we pray to them with really sincere devotion, we can receive their blessings which lead to a very rapid growth of our meditation. It is said that the source of the growth of the four main and eight lesser schools⁵ of the *Kagyu* lineage was the blessings created by these meditators praying to their gurus with true devotion. They received the blessings and were able to develop their meditation and understanding quickly.

With the practice of meditation, we can actually get the mind to rest on what we want it to rest on and the mind becomes clearer and more peaceful. The Vajrayana tradition has developed a practice that makes it possible to go through this process much more quickly than in other meditation practices. In this practice one prays to one's guru and to all the gurus that have come before and develops a very strong devotion—an openness to receive their blessings. If one prays to the gurus, one receives the blessing, and through this blessing one's meditation progresses rapidly and naturally.

How is it possible that blessings are not felt by some? It is *not* because the Buddhas and the gurus feel, “Well, he doesn't pray to me, so I'm not going to give him blessings.” The Buddhas and gurus look upon all beings with the same kindness and love as a mother has for her only son, but only persons open to these blessings can feel them. For example, if we have a hook and try to catch an egg, we can't do it. However, if we try to catch a ring with a hook, it is easy. In the same way, the compassion and the blessings of the Buddhas are there constantly, but there has to be something in a being that is open to receive the blessings. Faith and devotion are like a ring for the hook of the Buddhas' compassion and blessings to pull us out of samsara. No matter how much compassion the Buddhas have, without devotion nothing will happen.

The Lineage Prayer

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To develop devotion we imagine our guru as the embodiment of all the Buddhas in the form of Dorje Chang (Skt. Vajradhara). The prayer to Dorje Chang is of special value. It was composed by the guru of the seventh Karmapa.⁶ For eighteen years he lived on a very small island in the middle of a lake in Tibet and meditated on the Mahamudra.⁷ He spent all that time just meditating until he reached full realization of Mahamudra. At this point he spontaneously composed the Dorje Chang prayer, and so this prayer has a great deal of blessing connected with it. When we say this prayer, we should be aware of the meaning of the words. We should do this prayer trying to really concentrate on what we're saying, to be very attentive, and not to let our mind wander to other things, all the time praying with sincere devotion remembering all the qualities of our guru.

When we begin meditation, we should put our mind in the disposition of enlightenment so that the other conditions for true meditation will arise in us. In the Vajrayana teachings it is said real meditation will arise naturally if we receive the blessing of our guru and the gurus of the lineage. This is why we say the prayer to Dorje Chang, who is visualized in the space in front of us surrounded by the lamas of the lineage. If we cannot manage to visualize that many objects, we can just imagine the form of Dorje Chang, but think of him as a condensation of all the qualities and essence of the lamas of the lineage.

The Dorje Chang prayer has four parts. The first part is to turn our mind away from samsara so that we can see its illusion and develop disgust with samsara and want to practice the dharma. The second part is to cultivate devotion towards the lama and the dharma so we will be able to receive the blessings of the lamas and develop true meditation. The third part is that we pray to achieve peace of mind and not be distracted so we will develop true meditation. The fourth part is trying to understand that the essence of our thoughts is the dharmakaya. When we have understood this, we actually become Dorje Chang. After that we just remain in meditation. Whatever thought comes up, we just rest within the essence of that thought.

When we imagine Dorje Chang, we think of him as being blue in color, with one face and two arms, holding a dorje and a bell. He is sitting in the vajra posture.⁸ We can either think of him as being on top of our head or being in front of us in space. We usually visualize him in front of us and if it is possible with all the gurus of

the lineage around him. We imagine that the lamas are not in their ordinary form with a solid body of flesh and blood, because if we did, they would arouse ordinary thoughts in our mind. Having ordinary thoughts during this meditation is a sign that we do not have much devotion. So we visualize our guru in the form of Dorje Chang to develop a pure vision in us and to see him not as ordinary flesh and blood, but in a pure way. We know that it is our guru, but in the form of Dorje Chang. If we cannot visualize all of these lamas, we simply imagine Dorje Chang and think that he represents all the aspects of the three jewels.⁹ While praying, we try to remember all the good qualities of our lama and the lamas of the Kagyu lineage and try to feel genuine devotion from the bottom of our heart. Feeling this, we say the lineage prayer. When this happens, we think, “I have received all the blessing of body, speech, and mind of all the Buddhas and the guru.” At the end of the prayer, we imagine that our guru and all the other gurus melt into light and this light is absorbed through the top of our head and goes into our heart. At that particular moment we think we have received all the blessings of the body, speech, and mind of our guru and all the other gurus. We think we have received exactly the same qualities that they possess because our mind and their minds are now one. So all their qualities of complete freedom from obscurations and their complete realization are now ours; it is as if they had imprinted a picture of their enlightened qualities on us. We think we’ve obtained the full blessing and whatever realization is in the mind of our guru is now in our mind.

The Posture in Meditation

There are two important points in meditation—the body and the mind. As far as the body is concerned, it is important to keep the body straight so that the subtle channels of the body will be straight, too. If these subtle channels are straight, then the subtle energies within these channels will circulate freely. It is said that the mind is like a man riding the horse of the circulation of the subtle energies of the body. When it is riding this energy freely, it is relaxed and peaceful.


There are many descriptions of good meditation posture and we will use the five-point description. The first point is that the body should be straight and upright. It should be “as straight as an arrow” which means one’s back should be straight and one shouldn’t lean forwards, backwards, or to either side. The second

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point is that the chin should be slightly bent downwards like a hook. There are two subtle channels inside the throat, and if they are bent slightly forward, the energy will circulate in them reducing mental agitation in one's meditation. The third point is that the legs should be crossed in "patterns of latticework" which means that the legs should be kept in a crossed position. If one can put them in the full lotus posture, good. If not, simply cross them in the half lotus posture. The fourth point is the body should be "gathered together like chains." After straightening the body, lock it in that position as with iron shackles. The way to do this is to join the hands, placing them the width of four fingers below the navel. The fifth point is to keep one's mind and body reasonably tight, exerting a certain amount of effort so the body and mind are composed and focused. This is compared to one's tongue when one, for example, pronounces the Tibetan letters "l̥" and "r̥" which requires a certain amount of tension in the tongue. In the same way, one should always maintain a certain amount of effort and alertness in the body and mind.

The great teacher, Marpa, said that there are many different instructions on meditation posture,¹⁰ but he preferred this five-point posture saying that if one could keep the body in this posture, the subtle energy circulating in the body would be ideal and would actually circulate through the central channel of the body.

The Mind in Meditation

When one meditates, do it for a short time; but do it again and again and again. The whole point is to develop a habit of meditation. If one meditates at first for too long, the mind just becomes more and more agitated and difficult to control. If  meditates for a short time and renews the session many times, then each time the mind will be fresh and clear and able to settle down more easily. So meditate again and again until the habit of meditation grows stronger.

It is important to control the mind in meditation. The uncontrolled mind is very strong and dangerous like an angry elephant. Not only can it not be controlled, but the mind just goes its own way. If a very strong negative feeling of anger or desire arises, we are normally not able to control it. But it is our mind, so we can control it if we use the right tools of mindfulness and awareness. Awareness is knowing exactly what we are doing while

we are doing it. Mindfulness is having control of our mind and not letting it run out of control.

When meditating, we should not follow a thought about the past, we should not anticipate the future, and we should not be involved with thoughts of the present. Thoughts of the past are like what we did yesterday; thoughts of the future are like what we are planning to do tomorrow and thoughts of the present just pop up. In all cases we shouldn't follow the thread of these thoughts. We should just relax and leave them alone by not following them one way or another. For instance, in our meditation we may think of something that happened a month ago or think of a thought we just had and think, "I've been thinking about this." We then just end up following *that* thought. So we should not follow any of these thoughts. Similarly, we may be planning something for next week and immediately think, "I shouldn't be thinking of this!" We must avoid following thoughts in our meditation because meditation is simply leaving things just as they are without being too relaxed or too tense. If we manage to do this, we will find that the mind calms down quite naturally by itself.

General Obstacles to Meditation

During meditation the mind must have the right tension. For example, if we have a cat and we lock the cat up in a room, the cat will go crazy. Not finding a way to get out, it will start running up and down, meowing, and tearing things apart. But if we leave the door open, the cat will go out and take a little walk and then just come back in and fall asleep in the room. Similarly, if we begin our meditation thinking, "I really must stop thinking and keep my mind very concentrated and peaceful," we will constantly be worried and think, "Oh, I've had a thought!" or "Now I'm getting too tense." We will then work ourselves up so much that we can't stop thinking. So relax, just let the mind go and think, "Whatever comes, it just comes and goes." If we sit there very relaxed and let it all happen, we won't have very much trouble meditating.

If we use mindfulness and awareness properly in our meditation, our mind will become tranquil. There are two main obstacles to the tranquillity of the mind. One is becoming too relaxed and the other is becoming too tense. When we become too relaxed, we start to follow our thoughts and become absorbed in them. When we are too tense, we make too much effort focusing on the idea of concentrating and being tranquil so that in the end

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our mind cannot remain tranquil and we become distracted. We have to constantly try to find the balance between being too tense and too relaxed by finding just the right amount of effort to put into our meditation. Saraha, a great mahasiddha, said that when we meditate, the mind should be like a thread of the Brahmin. In India the Brahmins used to spin a lot of thread. If one puts too much tension on it, the thread breaks. If the thread is too loose, then it won't be strong enough. In the same way, when we meditate, the mind should maintain the right amount of alertness, neither too tight, nor too loose.

Meditating on an Outer Object

There are three main techniques of meditation: concentrating on an outer object, concentrating on an inner object, and concentrating on no object. The goal of meditation is to reach the point of not needing any object in meditation. But to prepare for this goal we need to gain familiarity with meditation using outer objects and then inner objects.

In the beginning it is useful to meditate on an outer object such as a statue of the Buddha. Meditating on an outer object is not to examine or think about its shape or composition or color, but to simply remain aware of the statue in front of us and not become distracted by other thoughts. When looking at the statue, our eyes shouldn't strain and we should just register the picture of the Buddha in our mind. If other thoughts arise, we should try to become aware of these thoughts as quickly as possible and immediately drop them and return our awareness to the statue.

For the beginner this meditation is difficult to do for a very long time because we become lost in our thoughts very easily. So we meditate for a brief time with good concentration so our meditation doesn't become entangled with thoughts all the time. We do it for a short time in the beginning, and when we find that it is becoming a little easier, we can extend the duration of the meditation session.

Tilopa said that one should abandon all physical activity and just remain very quiet when meditating. One should stop talking and stop thinking; just leave the mind at rest. If we meditate on a statue of the Buddha, we should not stare at it with a forced or fixed gaze because this will just give us a headache and eyestrain. We must relax letting our eyes rest on the statue, merely registering the image. Whether our sight is sharp or blurred makes no

difference. And when we look at it, we don't think, "Statue, statue, statue." We just look at it and try not to let the image drift out of our mind. If we start having an important thought that is taking us away from the statue, we just gently bring our attention back to the statue because if we follow the first thought, then another will come, then another and we will completely forget about the object of our meditation. When the thought comes, it is important to acknowledge its presence. If our mind starts to follow the thought, just recognize this fact and bring the mind back to the statue.

We should always focus on what is called the "support" of the meditation which is the statue or other object we are focusing on. If we develop the habit of trying to avoid the two defects of being too tight or too loose in our meditation, our meditation will improve. If we practice this kind of meditation more and more, we will then gradually have more and more mental peace with the mind being able to concentrate and there will be increasing clarity of one's meditation.

Insight Meditation

In the practice of dharma, we have to work with our body, speech, and mind. The mind determines the quality of our physical and verbal activity. We are trying to free ourselves from problems and suffering and thus go beyond samsara. The root of samsaric existence is the defilements and as long as these are present, we cannot expect to have any lasting happiness.

There are two ways through which we will be able to gain freedom from the defilements; both involve meditation. Through meditation we will first gain some mental tranquillity which leads to having fewer thoughts. With fewer thoughts, we will have fewer negative thoughts leading to fewer defilements. But the seed of the defilements is still present, so we must develop an understanding of the non-existence of "self." We therefore meditate on the actual nature of phenomena.

The second aspect of meditation that can clear the defilements away is insight meditation (vipashyana meditation). But to develop strong insight meditation, we must first develop strong tranquillity meditation. Without tranquillity meditation the mind just goes everywhere and we are not able to control it. Once we have developed tranquillity meditation, we are able to use the mind in a controlled way. So if we decide to let it be at rest, we can do that. If we decide to focus it on something, we can also do that. The ideal

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way to gain tranquillity meditation is to just let the mind rest naturally without any thoughts. This is extremely difficult to achieve because we have become so used to having thoughts and being involved with them. Because we have always turned our minds towards objects outside of us, it is easier to use an external object for our meditation when we first begin to meditate. So the first step is to meditate on an outer object such as a small Buddha statue.

Obstacles to Tranquillity Meditation

In meditation there are two main obstacles to actual tranquillity meditation. The first obstacle is “thinking” which means that when the mind starts thinking, it becomes heavy and lethargic and we start feeling sleepy. It’s a feeling of apathy and wanting to sleep but we can’t, so there’s no clarity in the meditation. The other obstacle is agitation in which the mind becomes wild and one has many thoughts and follows these thoughts in all directions—into the future, the present, or the past—so that the mind cannot rest at all.

The way to correct this dullness is to think of the qualities of the Buddha and the dharma and how much we can gain through meditation. Thinking this will create a feeling of happiness, and our inspiration and enthusiasm will be renewed so we will automatically correct our sinking mind. To do this, we think that through meditation we will become free from defilements and emotional difficulties and gain freedom. Even before achieving complete freedom, meditation will bring peace of mind, which will help us gain more happiness. Remember, we have so many difficulties and tension and frustrations because we have so many thoughts and are involved with these thoughts. If we start thinking, “I want this” or “I need this” our mind will expect these things and there will be a constant tension from this wanting. Then if we can’t have or achieve what we want, there will be the constant pain and frustration of being trapped. If, however, we can pacify the mind, there will be fewer thoughts which means our craving will diminish and this constant thirst will be reduced. So meditation has the short-term effect of creating tranquillity and the long-term effect of making one free from the defilements, the cause of all unhappiness.

Mental agitation is caused by distraction, which can come from pride or desire. The remedy to this problem is to think of all the suffering that is inherent in conditioned existence (samsara) and to become aware of the drawbacks of being distracted. We’ve been

wandering in samsara for a very long time because we have allowed our minds to be continually distracted and this generates only suffering. By allowing the mind to be distracted, we gain nothing. Also, if we are distracted in our daily life, we can't achieve very much. So when we think of the drawbacks of distraction and wandering in samsara, we will automatically work on calming the mental agitation in our meditation.

The way to eliminate drowsiness in meditation is to imagine that there is an eight-petalled lotus in our heart which is facing upwards. Then we imagine there are very white, very bright little light dots on the lotus. We send these white dots up to the top of our head at about the level of the hair. We should also straighten our body a little more and generally make it move a little upwards. To eliminate agitation in meditation, we should imagine a black lotus which is turned upside down (facing downwards). In this lotus we imagine a black dot and send it downwards to the ground. At the same time we should relax our posture, letting the body stoop a little.

Developing Clarity in Meditation

If we want our meditation to be clear, we should cultivate a feeling of great joy towards the meditation. That feeling can be developed by thinking of all the qualities that come from meditation. The opposite of these qualities comes with distraction. What is the harm in distraction? The harm is that whatever we do is of poor quality when we are distracted and therefore is a waste of time. If we are distracted when we are meditating, or studying, or visualizing a deity, then that time is wasted. However, if we leave our mind in a natural state without following thoughts, then what we do is very precise, very clear, and very efficient. When distracted, we are wasting some of the time of our precious human existence which can never be recovered.

We might think that it may be nice to let ourselves just follow our thoughts and this will bring about mental comfort. But if we fall under the influence of negative feelings such as passion, aggression, pride, or jealousy, it is not very pleasant. Once one of these emotions gets started, it is very hard to stop it and it only brings about suffering. For example, once we start feeling anger, it brings about a lot of mental discomfort and if that feeling remains for a long time, it can actually make us feel physically and mentally ill. Similarly, the negative feeling of desire is constant craving. We

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are always looking for something which we think is going to give us pleasure, satisfaction, or contentment. But somehow we never seem able to get this something, so we keep wanting constantly. It becomes very painful because we never seem to achieve what we are aiming for. So if we look carefully at these negative feelings and thoughts, we see that their nature is basically suffering.

However, by practicing meditation, we can eliminate pain because our mind will be under control and peaceful. By developing concentration through our meditation, we can attain tranquillity. It is taught that once one reaches a certain degree of mastery in meditation, it automatically brings great physical and mental comfort. This is because meditation reduces thoughts that are constantly distracting us and this reduces our negative feelings. Meditation will also bring a very great feeling of happiness because little by little, we will be able to gain control over our thoughts and feelings.

Post-Meditation Practice

As our concentration gets better little by little through the power of meditation, we will be able to expand this natural concentration to the rest of our life. Whether we are walking, sitting, talking to other people, or working we can learn to stop our mind from wandering. If we are distracted while working, we can't do our work properly. If we can eliminate distractions and develop better mental concentration, our life will automatically be better, which will also improve our worldly as well as our dharma practice. If we had to depend on other people to modify our state of mind, it might be a very involved process. Controlling our mind is entirely up to us. This is something we can do ourselves with a little mindfulness and awareness. Little by little as our concentration improves, we can turn our mind inwards more easily.

Giving and Taking Practice

Our goal is the birth of true meditation. So we have to try to arouse devotion in ourselves, which doesn't necessarily arise very naturally in most people. So we have to work on it by praying to Dorje Chang, the *dharmakaya*, who is the union of our guru and all the other gurus and all the aspects of refuge. If we want the blessing to come, our meditation has to be supported by the right kind of motivation. This motivation should be that of enlightenment,

thinking that we are doing this for the sake of all beings; that we may reach Buddhahood in order to help all other beings. This motivation is known as “basic motivation,” and we have this before we start to practice. There is also “immediate motivation” which is what we have from instant to instant when we are actually practicing.

Normally, we are not very concerned about others. Because of this, we have developed this very strong belief in the “I.” From this arises all our emotional negativity. To eliminate all our emotional negativity and thoughts of “I,” we have to learn how to train our mind which can be done by giving and taking meditation. Giving and taking (Tib. *tonglen*) meditation is meant to help us develop a pure attitude by diminishing our involvement with ourselves and increasing our thoughts of others. Giving and taking meditation will help us develop bodhichitta,¹¹ the aspiration to achieve Buddhahood for the sake of all beings. In this practice we exchange our happiness for the unhappiness and suffering of other beings. This meditation is also connected with breathing. When we exhale, we imagine that we send a very bright light which goes out to reach all beings. This white light represents all our happiness, everything that is good in our life. We also think that it contains the seeds of happiness, which are all our virtues. So this white light reaches all beings and as it reaches them, it brings them great happiness and joy. In return, when we inhale we imagine that we are taking in a very dark, black light which carries with it all the suffering, problems, difficulties and all the causes of those problems. We do this meditation just following the natural rhythm of breathing. We know we want happiness and with giving and taking practice we realize that others want this happiness also. So whatever we have, we offer it to them. Whatever unhappiness and suffering they do not want, we imagine taking it. So giving and taking meditation is an excellent tool to further the growth of bodhichitta, the motivation of enlightenment.

It is a very good thing to think in terms of accepting our suffering and trying to really be open to others in a compassionate way. But to do it properly, we have to train our mind first. We try to think that we really want to give something to others and really want to take on and relieve their suffering. It is only through training ourselves that really pure motivation can be born in us. Once we have this pure motivation, then we can really help others. We can't change another person's karma, but we are able to change the immediate conditions that are affecting them. If we have true

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compassion, we will be able to do a great deal. What is most important is to have pure motivation. Once we have the genuine wish to help other beings, we will really be able to help them. We find that if we try to help others when we're not ready, we will regret it afterwards. For example, when Shariputra took the resolution to reach enlightenment for the sake of all beings, he decided to give anything that was asked of him. One day a demon wanted to make trouble so he came along and said, "Give me your hand." Because Shariputra didn't want to refuse, with much courage he cut off his right hand and gave it to the demon. The demon just laughed at him and said, "I didn't want your right hand. I wanted your left hand." Then, of course, Shariputra thought it was a bit too much and regretted it.

When doing Giving and Taking practice, we shouldn't fear that we will receive the difficulties of others because we are imagining that we are taking the troubles of everyone. But we shouldn't think that there is no point in doing the meditation because we are not really taking on any real suffering or giving any real happiness. This practice is important because while we are doing giving and taking meditation, we are training our mind to gradually change our very selfish attitude to a more open and loving relationship to others so we can develop the true disposition of enlightenment.

Inner Meditation

In the beginning our mind is not stable and this is why we can fall under the influence of our emotions so easily. We begin meditation by stabilizing our mind with the help of an external support. When we become more proficient, we can concentrate the mind inwards. With meditation we try to refocus the mind by focusing on something that is fairly small, but not too small. So we learn how to focus using a statue of the Buddha. Little by little our concentration improves, and we can then focus on a letter representing the Buddha's speech.¹² Later on we concentrate on a symbol of the Buddha's mind which is a small dot. In the beginning our attention is scattered over hundreds of objects, then gradually it becomes centered on something much smaller such as a statue of the Buddha. The statue has a face, arms and hands, etc., and when we have developed more concentration, we focus on a single letter and still later a single dot. In all cases, the technique is the same with the object of our concentration becoming more and more focused producing a finer and finer type of concentration.

The Buddha taught six different points of shamatha meditation.¹³ There are three main meditations based on breathing.

The first method is counting the breath. We should, first of all, breathe quite naturally. When exhaling, we think, “Now the air is coming out, now I’m exhaling.” When inhaling, we are aware of this air entering our body. Each time we are aware of the air going in and going out, we count this as one. We count it mentally. This becomes easier when we develop the habit of this meditation. Just keep a very clear count of how many times one is breathing.

The second method of meditation is called “following the breath.” We breathe normally, but when we are inhaling, we imagine the air being taken in fills up our whole body. When we are exhaling, we imagine all this air inside us going out through the nose and dissolving into space. As we are doing this, we are following this movement with our mind so our mind and the air are connected continually during the meditation. This is a very good way to develop mental tranquillity.

The third method is to combine the counting of the breath and following the breath, so first we count our breath up to twenty-one with each inhalation and exhalation being counted as one. This keeps our mind concentrated on breathing and not forgetting to count. As soon as we finish counting up to twenty-one, we begin doing the following breath meditation.

While meditating on the breath, we may find our mind has a tendency to grow a bit dark and not be very clear. When this happens, we should sharpen our attention. To make meditation clearer, we can do “the three cycle meditation.” First we take the air in (first cycle) and keep it inside us (the second cycle) and then exhale (third cycle). When we are inhaling we think of the sound OM. When the air is inside of the body think of an AH. And when the air is going out of the body think of HUM. All three cycles should be natural and not forced and one should try to make the three cycles equal. If we do this, we will find that we don’t become too agitated or too drowsy. This meditation keeps the mind clear so when we find the mind becoming agitated or drowsy, we can just switch to the three cycles of breathing.

As with other shamatha meditation when we practice breathing meditation, we should practice it in very short sessions, but multiply the sessions. While we actually meditate, we should do it with much care and with as much precision as possible.

Mahamudra Meditation

Receiving the blessings at the end of the Dorje Chang prayer is the way that true meditation will be born in us and we will achieve the realization of the true nature of phenomena. This true nature is both voidness and clarity. In an ordinary being this clarity is called Buddha-nature (Skt. *tathagatagarbha*). When Buddhahood is realized, this clarity is called the dharmakaya. On the path to Buddhahood, Buddha-nature is the gradual realization of all the good qualities and the gradual elimination of all the bad qualities. This is why it is so important to meditate on the true nature of phenomena and on the nature of the mind. First one gains a theoretical understanding of this through the great teaching such as the *Uttaratantra*.¹⁴ Then through Mahamudra meditation, one comes to the direct recognition of the true nature of phenomena by looking at the true nature of the mind.

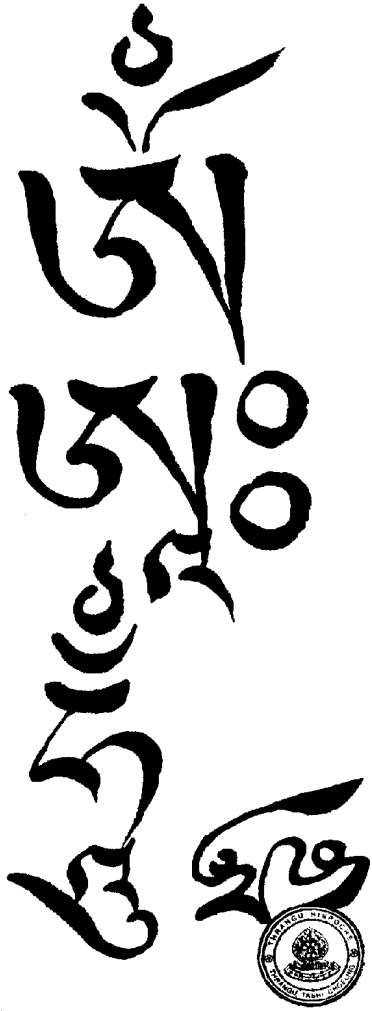
Questions

Question: In practicing compassion, there's the practice of giving and taking. In this practice, it seems to go well for a while, but then there's a subtle sense of "I" that creeps in that says, "I don't really want to take the suffering."

Rinpoche: What you say is very true, especially in the beginning of undertaking this practice. It is okay that it be experienced that way. Even though there is a quality of faking it about the degree to which you actually really are ready to take on the suffering of others in the beginning, there's still benefit in doing the practice, because up until you begin this practice, you've probably been entirely selfish. To attempt to fake altruism is a tremendous improvement. But it doesn't remain insincere like that, because eventually the habit starts to deepen and starts to counteract the habit of selfishness.

Now, if, when you began practicing giving and taking and you already had one hundred percent concern with the welfare of others and no concern for your own welfare, then you wouldn't need to practice giving and taking in the first place. So, it is designed to work for a practitioner who's starting from a place of selfishness and to lead them into this place of concern for others. And, gradually, by using the practice, you will actually cultivate the sincere desire to take suffering away from others and experience it yourselves; you will cultivate real love and compassion for others. But on the other hand, you don't really do the practice in order to

be able to, at that moment, take on the suffering of others and experience it yourselves; you're really doing it in order to train your mind. And by training your mind and developing the motivation and the actual wish to free others from suffering, then the long-term result is that you have the ability to directly dispel the suffering of others.



A Calligraphy by Thrangu Rinpoche of OM (top letter,
AH (middle letter) and HUM (bottom letter).



**The Amitabha Buddha
in the Seven Point Meditation Posture**

Chapter 3

General Meditation Instructions

The Lineage Supplication

The study of Vajrayana is extremely beneficial and useful, because, in general, all of the goodness of human life and all of the ability within the context of human life to actually benefit others and affect others in a positive way comes from a cultivation of dharma and in particular from the practice of meditation.

The custom of our tradition of the Karma Kagyu is to begin a teaching by chanting the lineage supplication used in all the Tibetan and overseas practice centers of our tradition. The reason for this is that this particular liturgy was composed by Penkar Jampal Zangpo, who was a disciple of the Sixth Karmapa, Tongwa Donden, and the root guru of the Seventh Karmapa, Chötrag Gyamtso.

Penkar Jampal Zangpo lived in a cave for eighteen years on an island of which he was the only inhabitant. The island is in the middle of a lake. Now, we have all entered the gate of the genuine dharma, so therefore we're very fortunate to have the motivation to practice dharma. But because we are ordinary people, at times our motivation may decrease. It's necessary then to actually examine our motivation, and see what it really is. If our motivation is good and genuine, then we should delight in that and to expand it. But if we find that our motivation is a negative one such as based on a fixation on a self, then we should simply let go of it and generate a pure motivation. When we consciously generate a pure motivation, initially it may seem as though we're faking something, but in the long term we are not really faking anything, because by intentionally cultivating it, gradually it will become real and very much part of us. By pure motivation, we mean the attitude that we hold of doing the practice or study in order to benefit all beings.

Because we possess the habit of fixation on the self since beginningless time, it is natural for us to desire our own happiness as our primary wish or goal. This is not a particularly bad motivation; it's just a limited motivation. The scope of this wish to

benefit only ourselves is not large enough to serve as the proper motivation for the bodhisattva training of the Mahayana. So, if you recognize this lesser motivation in yourselves, let go of it, and generate the intention that what you're doing is for the benefit of all beings.

This motivation of practicing and studying in order to benefit all beings without exception is called bodhichitta or awakened mind. Bodhichitta requires two things: compassion directed at all beings and the development of wisdom which will help us aid beings not just in present circumstances but toward their ultimate liberation. So please listen to the teachings with the motivation of bodhichitta that possesses both this impartial compassion and this wisdom.

Giving and Taking Practice

Because the motivation of bodhichitta is so important for the practice of Vajrayana, there are a number of methods for increasing it in Vajrayana practice. These include meditations upon love and compassion, such as the practice of taking and giving. Taking and giving (Tib. *tonglen*), is a practice in which we imagine taking into ourselves all of the suffering and causes of suffering which afflict others and then imagine giving all of the happiness and causes of happiness within us to all others.

Normally this practice is coordinated with the breathing. As we breathe in, we think that we breathe in all of the sufferings of all other beings, freeing them from these sufferings. As we breathe out, we send out with our breath all of our own happiness and virtue so that other beings thereby receive and enjoy these things. The meditation is just a visualization yet it actually generates, over time, the intention to be able to actually take on the sufferings and to actually relieve the sufferings of others.


The practice of taking and giving uses the breath and it uses the visualization of rays of light. When we do the practice, we visualize in front of us all the countless sentient beings that exist. As we breathe out, we think that rays of brilliant, white, and very luminous light comes out of us and strikes and engulfs all other beings, causing all of the happiness and causes of happiness such as proper conduct and virtue to transfer from us to other beings, causing them to actually experience this happiness and the cause of future happiness. As we breathe in, we think that we take all of their misery, the suffering, and the pain, as well as their causes from all

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of these beings in the form of murky, smoky, grimy light. We imagine that when we inhale this that other beings are thereafter free of all of this suffering and these causes of suffering.

In giving and taking meditation we are actually taking into ourselves the suffering and causes of suffering which would otherwise afflict others. But there is no actual danger that we will experience their suffering or illness because in this practice we are cultivating a virtuous state of mind which cannot become a cause for suffering. Nevertheless, because we're cultivating the readiness to actually undertake the suffering of others, it's natural that, as beginners, we may experience some fear. Now, if we find that there is fear inhibiting our ability to do the practice, it's appropriate to then imagine that in the center of our heart is a white, very luminous and brilliant HRI syllable like the rays we breathe out or simply a mass of brilliant light. And when we breathe in all the smoky, murky, grim stuff, we think that, rather than it filling our entire body, that it all dissolves into the HRI.

Whether we are studying or practicing dharma, we need this motivation of love and compassion. Therefore we have specific practices to enhance it and develop it: in general, meditation on love and compassion; in particular, the precise instructions of taking and giving, and the extraordinary Vajrayana techniques such as the Chenrezig meditation.

Our main concern  practitioners is the recognition of the true nature of things or *dharmata*. To achieve this recognition, we need to let go of those afflictions which obscure our capacity to recognize the true nature of phenomena and we need to expand the wisdom which can recognize it. The process of removing the obscurations to this nature has to begin with the accomplishment of tranquillity or shamatha meditation. Shamatha practice has two aspects: the aspect of peace or tranquillity which means the pacification of the disturbance of thought, and the aspect of stillness which is the capacity to rest the mind. These are the two qualities attained through shamatha meditation.

The actual practice of shamatha has two aspects: the physical technique and the mental technique.

Of course, the main thing in meditation is the mind and not the body, because it is the mind that actually performs the meditation. But at the same time, our mind inhabits and relies upon our body, so the physical posture is extremely important.

The Seven Points of Vairocana

The physical posture which was practiced by all of the founders and lineage holders of the Kagyu tradition is called the seven dharmas of Vairocana. Vairocana is the name of a particular buddha and it also literally means “the illuminator.” There are two reasons why this posture is called that. First, the posture is called the seven dharmas of the illuminator because, if you take this posture, your mind’s natural clarity is enhanced or brought out, and therefore your mind’s nature is greatly facilitated through the posture itself. Second, the five families, of whom Vairocana is one, are correlated with the five aggregates, which is to say that our five aggregates (or skandhas) are in their true nature these five buddhas. Now, Vairocana is the pure nature of the aggregate of form. Since it is through the physical posture that the experience of form as an aggregate is transformed into the experience of its pure nature as the Buddha Vairocana, this posture is called the seven dharmas of Vairocana.

The first of the seven dharmas or points is the placement of the legs. The traditional explanation is that the legs should be crossed in what is called the vajra posture, which is where the legs are fully crossed with the feet placed on the opposite thighs. Now, if we can cross your legs in this manner, this is the best posture; but if we cannot, it does not mean that we cannot meditate. To fully cross our legs in the vajra posture makes our body extremely stable. If we try to meditate standing up or walking around it can cause our mind to become scattered, so we choose a posture which emphasizes stillness and stability. We could also meditate lying down, and specific practices, such as the dream and luminosity practices, can be conducted in that way. But lying down is not the best posture for ordinary meditation because lying down makes our mind torpid. Sitting is the halfway point in between the two, so our mind is neither too dull nor too excited. If we can sit on the ground on a cushion, with our legs crossed, that’s excellent, but if we can’t, it’s also acceptable to sit on a chair.

The second point of posture is the placement of the hands. This is said to be the placement of the hands in the gesture of even placement. Quite often, this is taken to mean the actual *mudra* found in paintings and statues in which the left hand is placed palm up in the lap and the right hand is placed palm up in or on the left hand. This position can be seen, for example, in the position of the Buddha Amitabha. This is acceptable as a meditation posture. The



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meaning of the words “even placement,” however, has a wider connotation meaning simply that the hands should be placed at the same level, placed evenly, as opposed to, for example, holding one hand aloft in space and placing the other one down on the ground. It is then also acceptable to place one’s hands palms down on the thighs. Either one of these interpretations of posture is fine.

The third point of posture is that the spine be straight, which means that you sit up straight. The reason why it’s necessary to sit up straight when you’re meditating is that your body and your mind are very connected. Specifically, your mind rides on the subtle winds or energies, which depend upon the channels which are present within your body. So if your posture is bent or crooked, or if you’re leaning to the left or to the right, or you’re leaning forward, then the channels will be bent as well. If the channels are bent, then the winds won’t flow smoothly and your mind will be in a state of agitation or unrest. If you sit up straight and your channels are straight, then the winds flow smoothly and properly, and your mind will be naturally at rest.

The fourth point is that the upper arms be spread like the wings of a vulture. What actual form this takes depends upon which of the two positions of the hands you are using. If you are using the position where the hands are placed palm up in the lap, then it means rather than allowing your elbows to be stuck to your sides, you bring them outward somewhat, like spread wings.

If you’re using the posture where your hands are palms down on the thighs, it means that instead of allowing your elbows to sink and be extremely bent, you straighten them somewhat. In either case, the function of this aspect of the posture is to make your entire posture somewhat more erect, and the function of that is to promote the clarity within your mind. By doing this you somewhat prevent the occurrence of mental dullness in meditation.

The fifth point of posture is that the neck be slightly bent, which is to say that you’re not sticking your chin out. The reason for this is that by bending the neck slightly, bringing the chin in, then you naturally enhance your mindfulness and alertness.

The sixth aspect of posture is that the tongue touches the palate. The reason for this is that it will cause less saliva to be present in your mouth and you will swallow saliva less often. Now, this sounds extremely unimportant, but when you’re actually practicing meditation, if you constantly have to swallow saliva, it’s very distracting.

The seventh point of posture is the gaze. Closing your eyes when you meditate tends to make your mind dull. On the other hand, if your eyes are wide open and you're staring at what you see, then this will distract you. So, the gaze for meditation is to look naturally straight forward. When you're doing shamatha meditation, you would look straight forward, but slightly downward. When you're practicing vipashyana meditation, you still look straight forward as far as left and right is concerned, but slightly upward. In any case, you don't direct your attention to what you see. You don't try not to focus the eyes, and you don't send your mind after your vision. So, whether your eyes are focusing clearly or not, you simply don't follow it. Instead, you look at your mind. In other words, you perform the meditation.

These are the seven points of posture called the seven dharmas of Vairocana. When you implement these, your body needs to be comfortable, which is to say that the posture should be neither tense nor rigid, and should not be uncomfortable. This means that if any particular point of the posture is painful or uncomfortable for you—if it causes pain in your arms or pain in your legs or pain in your spine or back—then you should not force yourselves to take this posture. There's no rule that all seven points of this posture have to be present in order to meditate. The point of the posture is to allow your channels, and therefore your winds, to come comfortably to rest through taking a certain physical posture. But if taking this posture defeats its own purpose by generating too much tension and pain, then you should not force yourselves to do it, and you should not think that all points of this posture are absolutely essential for the practice of meditation.

Machig Labron's Techniques

In Tibet, there arose eight principal traditions of meditation practice. The initial founders of these eight traditions are called the eight chariots of the practice lineages. One of these eight traditions is called *chod practice*, and the source of the teachings of chod was a Tibetan woman, a mahasiddha, named *Machig Labron*. She is therefore considered one of these eight great teachers who founded the practice lineages. In her teachings on meditation, she said that the physical posture is relaxation of the four limbs. What this means is that one of the most essential points of physical posture is that you relax your muscles, your joints, and your sinews, that you not attempt to maintain the physical posture with muscular

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exertion. When you're practicing, if you discover physical tension, in a specific part of your body, then you should consciously relax that part and let go of that tension. She further said that the mental technique is to "destroy fixated perception" meaning to neither follow nor expel thoughts. We are to simply let go of thoughts as they arise, neither attempting to follow their content nor to attempt to get rid of them. The posture of speech is to sing melodiously of experience. This means that the use of melody in liturgy, for example, in supplications enhances meditation practice and experience. In any case, the physical posture, as she said, needs to be one which the muscles are relaxed.

Mental Technique

The mental technique that has been presented by most teachers of our tradition is to follow the breath. This was taught by the Buddha, who said, "When thoughts are intense, follow the breath." Because the technique of shamatha is appropriate for anyone, it's always all right to use this technique. Sometimes, however, it's also helpful to let your mind simply rest, without a specific object to focus on other than itself. So sometimes just let your mind rest without following the breath, provided you're not distracted. But what I'm going to talk about now is not a specific technique you use, but how you relate to the meditation of tranquillity in general.

Normally we have a lot of thoughts running through our mind, and many of these are based on thinking about the past. Other thoughts are those that concern what may happen or what we want to happen. Now, when a thought arises that is concerned with the past, then simply let it go. When a thought arises that is speculation about the future, simply let it go.

Thoughts about the future can present themselves as being very important. You may think, "I have to think about this." When that thought arises, then simply remind yourselves that there are twenty-four hours in a day, and, at this moment, you have designated this time as meditation time, not as thinking about the future. You can simply say to yourselves, "I will think about this later."

Rather than thinking about the past or thinking about the future, it is recommended to simply maintain a direct awareness of your present experience in meditation. This means that thoughts may be extremely intense or have a strong emotional tinge to them, but you simply don't get involved with the contents of thought.

This does not in any way inhibit the clarity of your mind. Not following a thought does not make you less aware, but makes you less conceptual. So, if you allow your mind to simply rest in direct experience of the present moment and are not drawn by the contents of the thoughts that arise in your mind, then your mind will come to abide in a state of natural peace, which is extremely helpful.

When you rest in awareness of the present moment and do not think about the past or the future, then for a short time not many thoughts will appear. This resting in the present moment is not the same thing as trying to get rid of thoughts. It's not like the thought, "I must get rid of all my thoughts," which is a thought, or, "I must cultivate a state of non-conceptuality." It's not a reflection upon your motivation in meditation but a state that is free of thoughts of hope and fear. At present we are not free of hope and fear. We hope to attain Buddhahood and hope to attain freedom, and so on. But, while these are our motivations, in the context of the meditation, we do not entertain them. In other words, the thoughts, "I would like this meditation to work out; I'm afraid it might not; I'm afraid I'm thinking too much," have no special status. These are thoughts just like any other thoughts. So what we are cultivating here is simply allowing our mind to rest naturally in present experience, and no thought that could possibly arise in that state is an exception. Therefore, any thought is just simply let go of naturally.

Initially, we can rest naturally only for a very brief period of time. The faculty which we are applying at that point is called "placement" meaning simply being able to restore mind for a very brief period of time without thinking about the past or the future. As we continue to practice, these very, very brief periods of placement will start to somewhat lengthen—the period of time during which we can rest in present awareness without becoming distracted by a thought will lengthen. When these periods become longer, then we reach the stage of "continual placement." Continual doesn't mean unbroken or continuous; it just means slightly longer. Then there is the further development of being able to return from distraction, and this is called "returning to placement." This is being able, through the use of mindfulness and alertness, to recognize that we've become distracted and to return to this placement, this state of direct or simple awareness.

Notes

1. These are channels that carry subtle energies. They are not anatomical structures, but can be identified much like meridians in acupuncture. It is said when these channels are blocked, it causes problems with thoughts and the mind.
2. There are three main traditions in Buddhism: the Hinayana, the Mahayana, and the Vajrayana. The Vajrayana is practiced principally in Tibet.
3. Dorje Chang (Sanskrit Vajradhara) is a dharmakaya form of the Buddha so he represents the Buddha's mind.
4. When we say the mind is empty, we mean that the mind is not a solid thing such as a bone. When we are in meditation and try to find out where the mind is—is it inside the body or outside the body?, does it have a beginning or end?, does it have a color or shape? we find that it does not exist as a definable object. However, the mind is not a voidness or nothingness because the mind still has intelligence and constant awareness. So we say the mind (and thoughts) are empty giving it some unique qualities. This is explored in much greater detail in Thrangu Rinpoche's *Transcending Ego: Distinguishing Consciousness from Wisdom* (Boulder: Namu Buddha Publications, 2001)
5. The four greater schools of the Kagyu lineage were founded by four disciples of Gampopa: The Karma Kagyu school founded by Tsum Khyenpa, Barampa school founded by Baram Dharma Wangchug, Phagmodrupa school founded by Phagmodrupa Dorje Gyelpo, and Tshelpa school founded by Tsondu Trakpa. Then eight students of Phagmodrupa founded the eight lesser schools which are not smaller, but simply one generation removed from Gampopa.
6. The Karmapa founded the Karma Kagyu lineage which is the lineage of Thrangu Rinpoche. Each lifetime, the Karmapa would write a letter before he died giving the name and location of his next rebirth. The present Karmapa is the 17th reincarnation of the Karmapa.
7. There is shamatha meditation, which is training the mind to stay or rest wherever we place it, such as on the breath and there is vipashyana meditation which is actually discerning the nature of reality. Then there is Mahamudra meditation which is looking directly at mind to see its inherent emptiness and the emptiness of outside phenomena. Mahamudra, the primary meditation of the Kagyu lineage can only be done when shamatha and vipashyana meditation have been thoroughly mastered.
8. The vajra or full-lotus posture is sitting cross-legged with the soles of the feet resting on each thigh.

9. The three jewels are the Buddha (who originated the Buddhist teachings), the Dharma (or the teachings of the Buddha), and the sangha (or the Buddhist practitioners).
10. The most common instruction of posture is the seven points of Vairocana are: (1) Straighten the upper body and spinal column, (2) look slightly downward into space straight across from the tip of the nose, (3) straighten the shoulder blades evenly, (4) keep the lips touching gently, (5) let the tip of the tongue touch the upper palate, (6) cross the legs in either half or full lotus position, and (7) place the back of the right hand on top of the palm of the left hand and have the thumbs touch gently.
11. Bodhichitta is universal compassion in which one aspires to help all sentient beings achieve true and lasting happiness.
12. This is the Tibetan letter AH. This is the middle letter on the calligraphy on page 25.
13. These points are: (1) having correct posture, (2) holding the mind on any visual object, (3) cutting the stream of conceptual thoughts and chatter, (4) eliminating dullness and agitation in meditation, (5) not keeping the mind too tight or too loose, and (6) not breaking the continuity between meditation and non-meditation.
14. See Thrangu Rinpoche's *The Uttaratantra: A Treatise on Buddha Nature* (Boulder, Nammo Buddha Publications, 1989) for more detail on this topic.

Glossary of Terms

- bindu** Vital essence drops located within the body and visualized in Vajrayana practices.
- bodhichitta** Literally, the mind of enlightenment. There are two kinds of bodhichitta—absolute bodhichitta which is completely awakened mind that sees the emptiness of phenomena and relative bodhichitta which is the aspiration to practice the six paramitas and free all beings from the sufferings of samsara.
- chod practice** Pronounced “chö” and literally means “to cut off” (Tib. *chod yul*) and refers to a practice that is designed to cut off all ego involvement and defilements. The *mo chod* (female chod) practice was founded by the famous female saint Machig Labdrön (1031 to 1129 C.E.).
- dharma** This has two main meanings: Any truth such as the sky is blue, and secondly, as it is used in this text, the teachings of the Buddha (also called buddha-dharma).
- dharmakaya** One of the three bodies of Buddha. It is enlightenment itself, that is wisdom beyond reference point. See **kayas, three**.
- dharmata** (Tib. *chö nyi*) Dharmata is often translated as “suchness” or “the true nature of things” or “things as they are.” It is phenomena as it really is or as seen by a completely enlightened being without any distortion or obscuration. One can say it is “reality” as it really is.
- disturbing emotion** (Skt. *kleśha*) The emotional obscurations (in contrast to intellectual obscurations) which are also translated as “afflictions” or “poisons.” The three main disturbing emotions are (passion or attachment), (aggression or anger); and (ignorance or delusion). The five disturbing emotions are the three above plus pride and (envy or jealousy).
- dorje** Usually translated “diamond like.” This may be an implement held in the hand during certain Vajrayana ceremonies or it can refer to a quality which is so pure and so enduring that it is like a diamond.
- emptiness** Also translated as “voidness.” The Buddha taught in the second turning of the wheel of dharma that external phenomena and the internal phenomena or concept of self or “I” have no real existence and therefore are “empty.”
- giving and taking practice** (Tib. *tonglen*) A meditation practice promulgated by Atisha in which the practitioner takes on the negative conditions of others and gives out all that is positive.
- insight meditation** (Skt. *vipashyana*, Tib. *lha tong*) Meditation that develops insight into the nature of mind. The other main meditation is shamatha meditation.
- Kagyu** One of the four major schools of Buddhism in Tibet. It is headed by His Holiness, Karmapa. The other three are the Nyingma, the Sakya, and the Gelug schools.

- kayas, three** The three bodies of the Buddha: the nirmanakaya, sambhogakaya and dharmakaya. The dharmakaya, also called the “truth body,” is complete wisdom of the Buddha which is primordial wisdom beyond form which manifests in the sambhogakaya and the nirmanakaya. The sambhogakaya, also called the “enjoyment body,” is a realm in which the Buddha manifests only to bodhisattvas. The Buddha manifests in the world as an ordinary being as the historical Buddha.
- Machig Labdron** (1031-1129 C.E.) A famous female saint who developed the chod practice which is said to be the only practice developed in Tibet that actually was taken back to India and practiced there.
- Mahamudra** Literally means “great seal” or “great symbol.” This meditative transmission is especially emphasized in the Kagyu school.
- mahasiddha** A great practitioner who has achieved great realization.
- Milarepa** (1040-1123 C.E.) Milarepa was a student of Marpa who attained enlightenment in one lifetime. His student Gampopa founded the (Dagpo) Kagyu lineage.
- mudra** Gestures which are performed in specific tantric ritual practices to symbolize certain aspects of the practice being done.
- nadi** Subtle channels through which the subtle energies flow.
- nirvana** Literally, “extinguished.” Individuals live in samsara and with spiritual practice can attain a state of enlightenment in which all false ideas and conflicting emotions have been extinguished. This is called nirvana.
- samsara** Conditioned existence; ordinary life; suffering which occurs because one still possesses passion, aggression, and ignorance. It is contrasted to nirvana.
- sambhogakaya** There are three bodies of the Buddha and the sambhogakaya, also called the “enjoyment body,” is a realm of the dharmakaya which only manifests to bodhisattvas. See the three kayas.
- shamatha** or tranquillity meditation (Tib. *she nay*) This is basic sitting meditation in which one usually follows the breath, while observing the workings of the mind, while sitting in the cross-legged posture. The main purpose of shamatha meditation is to settle or tame the mind so that it will stay where one places it.
- spiritual song** (Skt. *doha*, Tib. *gur*) A religious song spontaneously composed by a Vajrayana practitioner. It usually has nine syllables per line.
- subtle channels** These refer to the subtle channels which are not anatomical ones but ones in which psychic energies or “winds” (Skt. *prana*, Tib. *lung*) travel.
- supreme attainment** Another name for enlightenment.
- sutra** These are the Hinayana and Mahayana texts which are the words of the Buddha. These are often contrasted with the tantras which are

A Guide to Shamatha Meditation

the Buddha's Vajrayana teachings and the shastras which are commentaries on the words of the Buddha.

tantra One can divide Tibetan Buddhism into the sutra tradition and the tantra tradition. The sutra tradition primarily involves the academic study of the Mahayana sutras and the tantric path primarily involves practicing the Vajrayana practices. The tantras are primarily the texts of the Vajrayana practices.

tathagatagarbha Literally, the seed or essence of tathagatas which is usually translated as Buddha-nature or buddha-essence. It is the seed or essence of enlightenment possessed by all sentient beings and which allows them to have the potential to attain Buddhahood.

Vajrayana There are three major traditions of Buddhism (Hinayana, Mahayana, Vajrayana) The Vajrayana is based on the tantras and emphasizes the clarity aspect of phenomena and is mainly practiced in Tibet.

vipashyana meditation Sanskrit for "insight meditation" This meditation develops insight into the nature of reality (Skt. dharmata). The other main meditation is shamatha meditation

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We would suggest the booklets in roughly the following order.

SERIES A

1. ***The Life of the Buddha and the Four Noble Truths.*** A brief summary of the life of the Buddha followed by a teaching on the Four Noble Truths which was the first teaching the Buddha gave which lays out the foundation of Buddhism.
2. ***A Guide to Shamatha Meditation.*** The fundamental meditation done by all sects of Buddhism is basic sitting or shamatha meditation. The booklet contains practical hands on information for the meditator.
3. ***The Ten Virtuous Actions.*** To make any progress on the Buddhist path one must actually conduct oneself in a positive manner. This booklet describes this conduct and describes the conditions for incurring positive and negative karma.
4. ***The Twelve Links of Interdependent Origination.*** The Buddha said that there was no god or gods creating or directing the world, rather everything comes about because of Interdependent Origination. This booklet on this topic has been used in many dharma classes.
5. ***The Four Dharmas of Gampopa.*** These four dharmas are a summary of the whole Buddhist path by the great Tibetan meditation master Gampopa. These four lines are studied in Tibet to augment the Four Noble Truths.

SERIES B

6. ***The Five Buddha Families and Eight Consciousnesses.*** Thrangu Rinpoche describes the Five Buddha Families which are prominent in Vajrayana Buddhism. Also included is a summary of the Eight Consciousnesses and how they function.
7. ***A Guide to Mahamudra Meditation.*** Mahamudra is the principle meditation of the Kagyu lineage. Unlike Shamatha and Vipashyana meditation, Mahamudra meditation can be done in during the daily life activities and involves techniques of looking directly into the mind.
8. ***An Aspirational Prayer for Mahamudra.*** The Third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje wrote a very concise teaching summarizing all the aspects of Mahamudra Meditation. This booklet gives the root verses of Rangjung Dorje as well as a comprehensive explanation by Thrangu Rinpoche.

PAPERBACK BOOKS BY THRANGU RINPOCHE

SERIES A

- The Three Vehicles of Buddhist Practice.* This book gives an overview of the Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana as it was practiced in Tibet. Boulder: Namo Buddha Publications, 1998.
- The Four Foundations of Buddhist Practice.* There are four thoughts one should contemplate before practicing precious human birth, impermanence, karma, and the downfalls of samsara. Boulder: Namo Buddha Publications, 2001.
- The Middle-way Meditation Instructions of Mipham Rinpoche.* This great Tibetan scholar who actually stayed for a while with the previous Thrangu Rinpoche at his monastery describes how one develops compassion and then expands this to bodhichitta and eventually develops prajna or wisdom. Boulder: Namo Buddha Publications, 2000.
- The Practice of Tranquillity and Insight.* This book is a practical guide to the two types of meditation that form the core of Buddhist spiritual practice. Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1993.
- A complete description of the 22 books by Thrangu Rinpoche is available on www.rinpoche.com with downloadable sample chapters. Or write or email us asking for the free publications list:

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A Brief Biography of Thrangu Rinpoche

Thrangu Rinpoche was born in Kham in 1933. At the age of five he was formally recognized by the Sixteenth Karmapa and the previous Situ Rinpoche as the incarnation of the great Thrangu tulku. Entering Thrangu monastery, from the ages of seven to sixteen he studied reading, writing, grammar, poetry, and astrology, memorized ritual texts, and completed two preliminary retreats. At sixteen under the direction of Khenpo Lodro Rabsel he began the study of the three vehicles of Buddhism while staying in retreat.

At twenty-three he received full ordination from the Karmapa. When he was twenty-seven Rinpoche left Tibet for India at the time of the Chinese military takeover. He was called to Rumtek, Sikkim, where the Karmapa had his seat in exile. At the age of thirty-five he took the geshe examination before 1500 monks at Buxador monastic refugee camp in Bengal, and was awarded the degree of Geshe Lharampa. On his return to Rumtek he was named Abbot of Rumtek monastery and the Nalanda Institute for Higher Buddhist studies at Rumtek. He has been the personal teacher of the four principal Karma Kagyu tulkus: Shamar Rinpoche, Situ Rinpoche, Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche, and Gyaltsab Rinpoche.

Thrangu Rinpoche has traveled extensively throughout Europe, the Far East and the USA and is the abbot of Gampo Abbey, Nova Scotia, Canada. In 1984 he spent several months in Tibet where he ordained over 100 monks and nuns and visited several monasteries. In Nepal Rinpoche has also founded a monastery, Thrangu Tashi Choling in Bodhanath, a retreat center and college at Namu Buddha, east of the Katmandu Valley, and has established a school in Bodhanath for the general education of lay children and young monks. He also has built in Katmandu Tara Abbey offering a full dharma education for nuns. He has also completed a beautiful monastery in Sarnath, India a few minutes walking distance from where the Buddha gave his first teaching on the Four Noble Truths. Presently, Rinpoche has begun planning a retreat center for his Western students in Colorado, USA.

Thrangu Rinpoche has given teachings in over 25 countries and is especially known for taking complex teachings and making them accessible to Western students. Thrangu Rinpoche is a recognized master of Mahamudra meditation.

More recently, because of his vast knowledge of the Dharma, he was appointed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama to be the personal tutor for the 17th Karmapa.