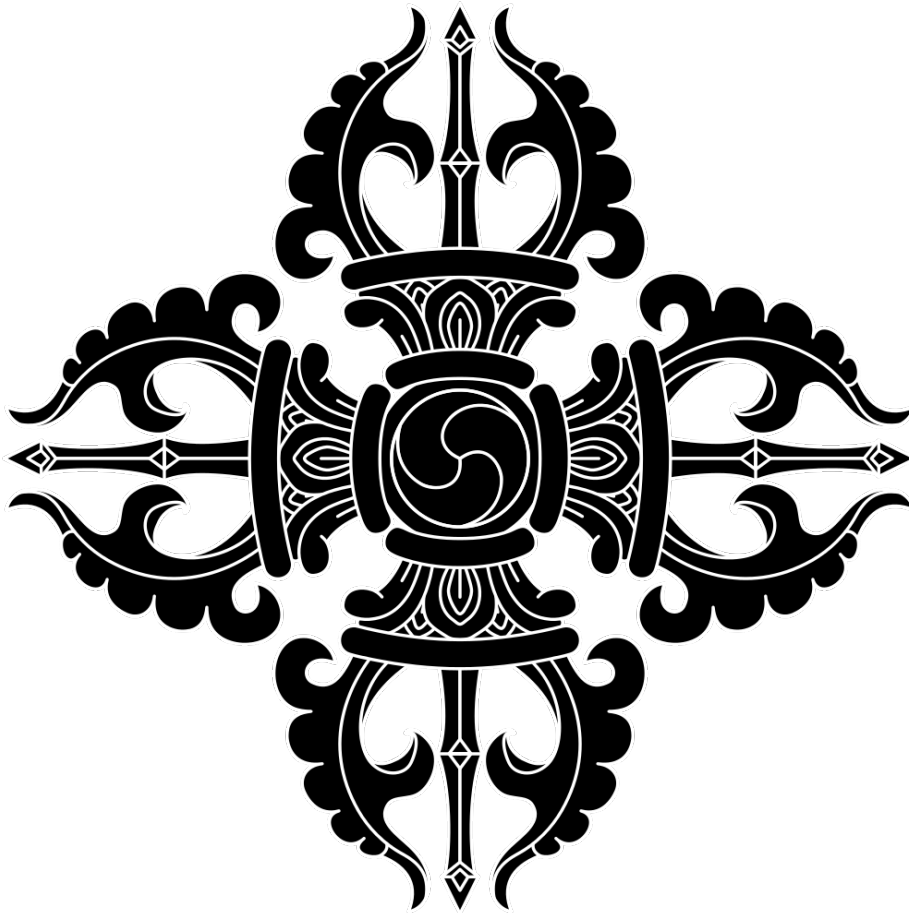


Taking the Mind as the Path

**Shamatha Vipashyana in the Mahamudra and Dzogchen Traditions
Based upon the Translations and Writings of B. Alan Wallace**

Part One: Overview and Focus on Shamatha

Sourcebook



RIME SHEDRA CHANTS

ASPIRATION

In order that all sentient beings may attain Buddhahood,
From my heart I take refuge in the three jewels.

This was composed by Mipham. Translated by the Nalanda Translation Committee

MANJUSHRI SUPPLICATION

Whatever the virtues of the many fields of knowledge
All are steps on the path of omniscience.
May these arise in the clear mirror of intellect.
O Manjushri, please accomplish this.

This was specially composed by Mangala (Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche). Translated by the Nalanda Translation Committee

DEDICATION OF MERIT

By this merit may all obtain omniscience
May it defeat the enemy, wrong doing.
From the stormy waves of birth, old age, sickness and death,
From the ocean of samsara, may I free all beings

By the confidence of the golden sun of the great east
May the lotus garden of the Rigden's wisdom bloom,
May the dark ignorance of sentient beings be dispelled.
May all beings enjoy profound, brilliant glory.

Translated by the Nalanda Translation Committee

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Taking the Mind as the Path Part One: Shamatha
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Taking the Mind as the Path
Shamatha Vipashyana in the Mahamudra and Dzogchen Traditions
Part One: Overview and Focus on Shamatha
Based upon the Translations and Writings of B. Alan Wallace
13 Tuesdays from March 1 thru May 24, 2022, at 7-9:15 pm

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STAGES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF SHAMATHA

FIVE OBSTACLES	EIGHT ANTIDOTES	SIX POWERS	NINE STAGES	EXPERIENCE	THREE LEVELS	THREE QUALITIES	FOUR MENTAL APPLICATIONS
1. Laziness	1. Faith 2. Aspiration 3. Effort 4. Suppleness/ pliancy	Learning	1. Directed Attention	Movement (waterfall)	Preparation (stages 1-3)	Stability (stages 1-3)	engaging through concentration (stages 1-2)
		Contemplating	2. Repeated Attention				
2. Forgetting the instructions	5. Mindfulness or Remembering to apply the Instructions	Mindfulness	3. Continuous Attention				
			4. Close Placement (coarse laxity)	Approach (fast river)	Actual Meditation (stages 4-6)	Vividness Clarity (stages 4-5)	interruptedly engaging (stages 3-7)
3. Elation / Laxity	6. Awareness / Introspection	Awareness/ Introspection (sheshin)	5. Taming (subtle laxity)				
			6. Pacifying (subtle elation)	7. Thoroughly Pacifying (subtle elation and laxity)	Stability (calm lake)	effortlessly engaging (stage 9)	
4. Not applying the antidotes	7. Applying the antidotes	Exertion or Enthusiasm	8. Making One-Pointed	Perfection (mountain)			
			9. Even Placement				
5. Over-application of the antidotes	8. Resting in equanimity	Thorough Familiarity					

Observing the Space of The Mind

Hidden Dimensions: The Unification of Physics and Consciousness

B. Alan Wallace, pp. 36-49

Parallels in Astronomy

For thousands of years, people have been fascinated by the night sky and observed celestial phenomena very carefully, but with the unaided eye, only a few thousand stars can be seen. Everything else remained hidden in the “subconscious” of deep space, beyond the scope of empirical research and therefore confined to the domain of metaphysics until 1609, when Galileo heard of the telescope invented by a Flemish spectacle maker, Hans Lipperhey, and swiftly constructed one for himself. His first attempt produced an eight-power telescope, which he later increased to twenty-power by grinding his own lenses, and he used his new instruments for observing the heavens in ways never before attempted. The next year he published his findings in a book, *The Starry Messenger*, in which he reported not only his observations of the moons of Jupiter but also his discovery that the Milky Way consists of a vast collection of stars that had never been seen before. In this way, the depths of the physical universe previously concealed from human consciousness began to be explored.

The science of astronomy has continuously progressed since Galileo’s time, but it was more than 300 years before scientists discovered galaxies beyond the Milky Way. As a result of a series of observations in 1923-1924, the American astronomer Edwin Powell Hubble, using the newly completed 100-inch Hooker Telescope at Mount Wilson, established beyond doubt that the fuzzy “nebulae” seen earlier with less powerful telescopes were not part of our galaxy, as had been thought, but galaxies themselves, outside the Milky Way. Hubble announced his discovery in 1924, and five years later, together with another American astronomer, Milton Humason, he formulated the empirical Redshift Distance Law of galaxies, or “Hubble’s law,” which states that the greater the distance between any two galaxies, the greater their relative speed of separation. This influenced the formulation of the big bang theory by George Gamow in 1948, for which the discovery of cosmic background radiation in 1965 provided empirical support.

Some of the most recent probes into deep space, made with the Hubble Space Telescope in 2003-2004, have unveiled the most detailed portrait of the visible universe ever achieved by humankind. The Hubble Ultra Deep Field, a million-second-long photo exposure taken over the course of 400 Hubble orbits around Earth, reveals the first galaxies to emerge from the so-called “dark ages,” the time shortly after the big bang

when the first stars reheated the cold, dark universe. The telescope was directed to a region of space in the constellation Fornax, of which ground-based telescopic images appear mostly empty. But in this long exposure from the orbiting Hubble telescope, with photons from the very faintest objects in space arriving at a trickle of one photon per minute, scientists were able to acquire a “deep” core sample of the universe, cutting across billions of light-years. By peering into a patch of sky just one-tenth the diameter of the full moon, scientists brought into view nearly 10,000 galaxies, some of them existing when the universe was only 800 million years old. The whole sky contains 12.7 million times more area than this Ultra Deep Field. Scientists expect that such observations will offer new insights into the birth and evolution of galaxies.

This brief history of astronomy gives some idea of the importance of sophisticated, penetrating observation for exploring the depths of space and the evolution of the physical universe. But such objective observations tell us nothing about the role of the observer in relation to the quantum fluctuations in the last stages of inflation after the big bang, without which there would be no galaxies and no matter in our universe.

Philosophical Resistance to Introspection

As discussed in the first chapter, since the time of Descartes, scientists have taken on the challenge of exploring the world of objective physical phenomena, leaving the world of subjective mental phenomena to philosophers. Renaissance philosophers such as Paracelsus, who advocated an organic philosophy in contrast to the mechanistic philosophy of Descartes, did emphasize the first-person observation of the mind and first-person experimentation using the power of imagination (*vis imaginativa*). But they lived in the tragically psychotic era of witch hunting, during which any such notions were suspiciously regarded as magic. Protestant reformers were especially quick to condemn anything of that sort as impious, useless, and potentially demonic, and those who advocated such theories and methods could find their lives imperiled. In contrast, Bacon's empiricism, which was confined to the objective world, was perfectly consistent with the new Protestant work ethic and the prevalent fear of probing the depths of the human psyche.

Since that time, instead of developing rigorous means to experientially explore the subjective dimensions of the natural world, generations of philosophers have devised ingenious arguments for denying that the mind can be explored from a first-person perspective. Immanuel Kant, for instance, claimed that due to the subjective nature of mental phenomena, any introspective observations could at most provide a *historical* account, not a true, “objective” *science*. But if “real-time” observations were a requirement for any objective science, the whole of astronomy would fail to meet it.

Even observations of the moon entail a time lag of more than a second, observations of the sun and planets record events minutes after they have taken place, and our knowledge of distant galaxies is billions of years old. Due to delays caused by the speed of light, astronomers may be regarded as “celestial journalists” with regard to the solar system and “historians” with regard to their observations of the rest of the universe. In twenty-first-century astronomy, historical accounts of the universe are the most we can ever hope for. In the introspective study of the mind, there are certainly many mental phenomena, such as emotions, that may be “observed” only retrospectively by way of memory. But there are many other mental phenomena, such as mental chit-chat, deliberately induced mental images, and dreamscapes, that are observed in real time. Arguably, the introspective observations of mental events as they occur are the only truly “real-time” accounts available to us. For even the visual and auditory perceptions of nearby colors and sounds are slightly delayed due to the speeds of light and sound.

Kant further argued that there could be no true science of the mind based on introspection since the observed mental phenomena are altered and transformed by the very act of observation.¹ Niels Bohr was among the first physicists to note the observer participancy parallel between examining mental phenomena and examining quantum processes. In quantum measurement, the act of observation invariably alters the observed phenomena, but that has not prevented quantum mechanics from becoming the most successful physical theory in the history of science.

In many experiments, it has been demonstrated that objects do not exist in a well-defined way prior to the act of measurement. For example, when single photons are emitted by a source so low in intensity that the probability of the simultaneous arrival of more than one photon at the detector is negligible, it is possible to count the number of detector actuations and thereby find the number of arriving photons. But it turns out that a light field cannot be represented as a collection of a definite number of photons, for the number of photons in it is not defined prior to the instant of measurement!²

Moreover, the extent to which mental events are altered and transformed by the very act of observation is variable. One testable hypothesis is that with training, one may observe mental phenomena more and more “objectively,” so as to exert less and less influence on what is being observed. This may occur in the dream state as well as the waking state. For example, one may observe events in a lucid dream (in which dreamers are aware that they are dreaming) without overtly altering them. Of course, there is still observer participancy, so the comparison with quantum mechanics is an excellent one, but in neither case does this imply that the objects being observed are mere artifacts of the method of observation.

Among cognitive scientists, William James took the bold step of emphasizing the primacy of introspection for the scientific study of the mind,³ and among philosophers, Edmund Husserl made a worthy attempt at developing a phenomenology of consciousness with his method of “bracketing” consciousness from its object.⁴ But twentieth-century philosophers have continued to raise serious questions about the possibility, let alone the efficacy, of developing a science of the mind based on the direct observation of mental phenomena.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, for instance, divided mental vocabulary into two classes: world-directed concepts and mind-directed concepts. Regarding the latter, he challenged the very possibility of a “private language” conveying meaningful information about internal experiences of being conscious.⁵ In support of this argument, it is true that science requires theories to be intersubjectively re-testable by replicating experiments with suitable instruments. But in addition, to test any sophisticated theory, the experimenters must have professional training in the use of those instruments and in interpreting the data produced. In modern scientific research, an untrained person called in from the street rarely qualifies as a suitable “third person” who can either validate or invalidate a previous finding.

A crucial element of scientific inquiry since the time of Pythagoras has been mathematics, which has taken on an especially prominent role since the scientific revolution. In 1623 Galileo famously wrote: “Philosophy is written in this grand book—the universe—which stands continuously open to our gaze. But the book cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and interpret the characters in which it is written. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometrical figures, without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it; without these one is wandering about in a dark labyrinth.”⁶ And the practice of higher mathematics takes place within the mind of the mathematician and is then communicated to other mathematicians. Writing equations on a chalkboard is simply a kind of public behavior that may or may not result from the internal process of understanding proofs and devising theorems. A mathematically uneducated person may be taught how to write down the same equations, but when subjected to interrogation by a qualified mathematician, will clearly not understand what he has written. Mathematicians do commonly converse among themselves in a kind of language that is unintelligible to nonmathematicians, and the same is true of experts in all fields of science. So there is no reason in principle that researchers could not receive professional training in observing mental phenomena and learn to communicate among themselves about their experiences. However, this is a major undertaking that neither philosophers nor cognitive scientists have yet tackled.

Sigmund Freud raised a formidable practical concern about the prospects for making unbiased observations of one's own mind: there are conscious and unconscious impulses in the mind that may sometimes conceal thoughts, memories, emotions, and desires we would prefer not to acknowledge, and we may imagine such mental processes even though they are not present.⁷ Albert Einstein is credited with the statement, "Only two things are infinite, the universe and human stupidity, and I'm not sure about the former," and this is a serious concern for raising introspection to a scientifically rigorous status. What is required is relentless self-honesty, which may be cultivated with intensive, prolonged training in introspection. This is where the validity of introspective observations may be crosschecked with sophisticated ways of evaluating behavior and determining the neural correlates of mental states and processes. This threefold approach is precisely what William James advocated when he set forth his strategy for the scientific study of the mind.

Psychologists have a lot of evidence to show that perception is a function of expectation, and introspective perception is clearly not immune to such influences.⁸ Both sensory and introspective experiences are precognitively structured; those structures enable us to perceive things in terms of specific aspects; and those aspects are constrained by our familiarity with sets of categories that enable us, in varying degrees, to assimilate our experiences, however novel, to the familiar. Making genuine discoveries in the space of the mind by means of introspection will evidently require months or years of rigorous training, and once again, cross-checking findings with behavioral and neural analyses.

Subtle distinctions must also be made, for example, between *imagining* that one desires something and *actually* desiring it. Within the space of the mind, superficial appearances do not always correspond to reality, especially when they have been sifted through complex and often subliminal processes of interpretation. In addition to this pragmatic psychological question, Gilbert Ryle raises the philosophical concern about making ontological inferences about the way mind is from the way mental states seem.⁹ This relates to an issue discussed in the first chapter the fact that mental phenomena appear to bear no distinctively physical attributes at all. But if one assumes that everything that exists must be physical, then the appearances of mental phenomena must be illusory.

This is precisely where the Baconian and Cartesian approaches to scientific inquiry diverge. If we follow Bacon's emphasis on empirical induction and apply it (as he did not) to the examination of subjective experience, we will be inclined to learn as much as possible about the mind by observing mental phenomena themselves. But if we follow Descartes' deductive, rationalistic lead as it has been adapted by scientific materialists,

then we will focus almost entirely on the physical correlates of consciousness, while marginalizing the observation of mental phenomena. Evidently, mainstream philosophy, psychology, and neuroscience have embraced the latter option. There are strengths and weaknesses to this approach; I am suggesting that it may be well complemented, not supplanted, by the incorporation of refined introspection into the scientific study of the mind.¹⁰

Developing a Telescope for the Mind

Philosophers have been debating the merits, limitations, and defects of introspection for centuries, but they do not seem to have refined our capacity for observing mental phenomena. We are as far as we ever were from developing a telescope for the mind. A thesis can in principle be proved or strongly argued, whereas a stance—such as a particular approach to scientific inquiry—can be adopted only by a sort of “Gestalt-switch.” And this is what I am proposing: a Gestalt-switch *away* from the common tendency to empirically and theoretically marginalize introspection *to* accepting the formidable challenge of enhancing introspection in ways that are unprecedented in the history of modern science. This implies a return to empiricism: taking the *methods* for making penetrating observations of all kinds of natural phenomena to be of the highest value, instead of assuming that the materialist *ideology* in its present formulation already provides a key to unlocking all the remaining mysteries of nature.

Scientific empiricists since Francis Bacon have generally confined their stance to observations of objective physical phenomena, whereas contemplative empiricists claim to have developed their faculty of mental perception to observe the space of the mind. To someone who has not utilized or refined this faculty, which the ancient Greeks called *noetos*, contemplatives' experiential reports may sound like nothing more than speculation. The semiprivate language of highly trained contemplatives, like that of professional mathematicians, therefore becomes either unintelligible to or misinterpreted by laypeople.

Over the past three millennia, contemplative traditions of varying degrees of sophistication have developed in the East and West, and one point on which they all seem to agree is the need to refine one's attention skills in order to make reliable observations of mental phenomena. Specifically, the deeply habituated tendencies of mental agitation and dullness need to be overcome through the development of attentional stability and vividness. These skills may be strengthened in a separate set of mental exercises¹¹ or in the very process of learning how to observe the mind. Both approaches have been explored in the Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist traditions of India, Southeast Asia, East Asia, and the Himalayan plateau. In the spirit of healthy, open-

minded, scientific skepticism, the alleged discoveries of contemplatives in these traditions should be treated with the same attitude with which scientists respond to any other claim of discovery: see if you can replicate their findings in your own laboratory.

For a minute fraction of the expense of building, maintaining, and operating the Hubble Space Telescope, contemplative observatories could be created for empirical research into the trainability of attention and the possibility of observing the space of the mind with scientific rigor and replicability. Such laboratories would ideally include facilities for conducting behavioral and neuroscientific research, together with simple, individual accommodations for people to devote themselves to mental training for months and years on end. This would be tantamount to creating a new profession of highly trained observers and experimentalists of the mind.

One valuable kind of mental training that I have explained elsewhere entails focusing one's attention on the space of mental events, distinct from appearances generated by the five physical senses.¹² Expertise in this mode of observation may require as much as 5,000 to 10,000 hours of training, 8 to 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, for months on end. In addition to this formal practice of observing the mind and whatever events arise within it, the practitioner must take all necessary steps in terms of lifestyle and emotional regulation to ensure mental health throughout the course of this extremely demanding discipline. Contemplative traditions that have developed such introspective practice have much sound advice to offer in these regards.¹³

As the faculty of mental perception is refined, one may begin probing the nature of the thoughts, images, emotions, and desires that arise in each moment. Specific questions may guide these observations, such as:

- Are any of these mental events, including one's awareness of them, static, or are they constantly in a state of flux?
- Are any mental phenomena inherently satisfying or unsatisfying, or do these qualities arise only relative to one's attitudes and desires?
- Is the space of the mind, any of its contents, or the awareness of them inherently "I" or "mine," or is one's sense of personal identity and possession of one's mind purely a conceptual projection?

Hypotheses

When a large number of researchers engage in such empirical inquiry in different laboratories, running their experiments with different sets of assumptions and expectations, it may turn out, contrary to Kant's expectations, that they can extract

features of the mind independent of the acts of observation. They may be able to identify universal qualities and regularities among mental phenomena and thereby formulate laws of the mind analogous to the rest of the laws of nature. As in any other branch of science, this research will require controlled experiments, repeated iterative evolving cycles of hypothesis formation, controlled testing, hypothesis revision, and prediction.

The above method of observing the space of the mind and everything that arises within it has been practiced in Tibet for more than a thousand years. Those engaged in this practice within a context of religious belief, which certainly colors experience, claim to have made many discoveries that can be replicated by any open-minded individual willing to devote the time and effort to putting their findings to the test.¹⁴ The following discussion highlights some of the alleged discoveries about the mind that maybe scientifically treated as hypotheses that can be tested through experience. Such scientific research is already in progress, with one notable project being conducted by the Santa Barbara Institute for Consciousness Studies in collaboration with a team of psychologists and neuroscientists at the University of California, Davis.¹⁵

With regard to Wittgenstein's concern about the unfeasibility of any private language, Tibetan contemplatives claim that a shared, highly specialized language concerning rarified subjective experience has been developing within a community of professionally trained observers of the mind. Throughout such training, participants converse among themselves and with their mentors and in this way learn to communicate their inner experiences. Nonparticipants overhearing such communication may believe they understand the kinds of experiences being narrated, but in fact most of what is said will be beyond their imagination, for they have never experienced the states of consciousness that are being probed.

Freud's concern about the obscuring and distorting influences of unconscious mental impulses has long been a major concern among Tibetan contemplatives. The remedy they have settled on is relentless, passive but vigilant observation of whatever arises in the space of the mind, without being carried away by or identifying with it. It is imperative not to respond to discursive thoughts, mental images, emotions, and desires with either aversion or craving. Rather, one must simply let them arise and pass of their own accord, without intervening or attempting to suppress or augment them. Metaphorically, one must rest in a "space of awareness" that is larger than the "space of one's own psyche." Whatever arises within the psyche is observed closely and with discerning intelligence, but without modifying, censoring, or editing in any way. This is an extraordinarily demanding endeavor, and it is pursued in close collaboration with an experienced and accomplished mentor who is well versed in such practice.

Buddhist contemplatives throughout Asia have taken special interest in the possible differences between the way mental processes appear and the way they exist, a concern raised more recently in Western research by Gilbert Ryle.¹⁶ Specifically, they have found that although mental states and processes often appear to be relatively static, upon close examination, all the immediate contents of the mind as well as our awareness of them are constantly in flux, arising and passing many times per second. A relatively homogenous continuum of a mental state, such as depression, may endure for seconds or even minutes, but that stream of emotion consists of discrete pulses of awareness, each of finite duration. There is nothing static in the human psyche, though habits may become deeply ingrained over the course of a lifetime.

A second discrepancy between appearances and reality is that certain mental states, such as joy and elation, may appear to be intrinsically satisfying, but upon more careful examination are found to be misleading. No mental state that arises from moment to moment in dependence upon sensory or intellectual stimuli is inherently satisfying. Every affective state is experienced as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral only in relation to a complex of attitudes and desires. When these affective states of mind are passively observed from the wider perspective of the space of awareness, without identifying with them, they have no absolute, independent attributes of either pleasure or pain.

A third disparity between mental appearances and reality pertains to the fact that thoughts, emotions, and other mental phenomena seem to have an inherent personal quality. When strong identification with these processes occurs, one may feel that one's very identity has become fused with them, and momentarily have the sense "I am angry," or "I am elated." But with some skill in observing the contents of the mind, one finds that thoughts and mental images arise by themselves, with no voluntary intervention or control by a separate agent or self. Psychophysiological causes and conditions come together to generate these mental events, but there is no evidence that a separate "I" is among those causal influences. To be sure, some thoughts and desires do appear to be under the control of an autonomous self, but as expertise is gained in this practice, this illusion fades away, and everything that arises in the mind is seen to be a natural event, dependent upon impersonal causes and conditions, like everything else in nature.

As noted previously, all usual kinds of experience, both sensory and introspective, are structured by memories, language, beliefs, and expectations, which cause us to assimilate even novel experiences, whether we want to or not. One of the names for the meditative practice I am describing here is "settling the mind in its natural state," which implies a radical deconstruction of the ways we habitually classify, evaluate, and

interpret experience. The Buddhist hypothesis in this regard is that it is possible to so profoundly settle the mind that virtually all thoughts and other mental constructs eventually become dormant. The result is not a trancelike, vegetative, or comatose state. On the contrary, it is a luminous, discerningly intelligent awareness in which the physical senses are withdrawn and the normal activities of the mind have subsided.¹⁷

The culmination of this meditative process is the experience of the *substrate consciousness (alaya-vijnana)*, which is characterized by three essential traits: bliss, luminosity, and nonconceptuality. The quality of bliss does not arise in response to any sensory stimulus, for the physical senses are dormant, as if one were deep asleep. Nor does it arise in dependence upon a pleasant thought or mental image, for such mental features have become subdued. Rather, it appears to be an innate quality of the mind when settled in its natural state, beyond the disturbing influences of conscious and unconscious mental activity.¹⁸ A person who has achieved this state of attentional balance can remain effortlessly in it for at least four hours, with physical senses fully withdrawn and mental awareness highly stable and alert.

The quality of luminosity is not any kind of interior light similar to what we see with the eyes. Rather, it is an intense vigilance that has the capacity to illuminate, or make consciously manifest, anything that may arise within the space of the mind. To get some idea of what this is like, imagine being wide awake as you are immersed in a perfect sensory deprivation tank so that you have no experience of any of the five senses, or even of your own body. Then imagine that all your thought processes involving memory and imagination are put on hold, so that you are vigilantly aware of nothing but your own experience of being conscious. This is also analogous to "lucid dreamless sleep," in which one is keenly aware of being deep asleep, in a kind of wakeful vacuum state of consciousness.¹⁹

The empty space of the mind of which one is aware, once the mind has been settled in its natural state, is called the *substrate (alaya)*.²⁰ Due to the relatively nonconceptual nature of this state of consciousness, there is no distinct experience of a division between subject and object, self and other. Relatively speaking, the subjective substrate consciousness is nondually aware of the objective substrate, an experiential vacuum into which all mental contents have temporarily subsided. The mind may now be likened to a luminously transparent snow globe in which all the normally agitated particles of mental activities have come to rest. To draw an analogy from classical physics, virtually all the kinetic energy of the human psyche has been turned into potential energy, stored in this nondual experience of the substrate.

This natural, or relatively unstructured, state is permeated with an extraordinary

amount of "creative energy" that has the capacity to generate alternative realities, such as whole dreamscapes that emerge from a state of deep sleep. To draw another analogy from contemporary physics, the substrate maybe likened to the zero-point field, a background sea of luminosity permeated by an enormous amount of energy. This is the lowest possible energy state of the mind that can be achieved through such straightforward calming practices, and the energy of all kinds of mental activity is over and above that zero-point state.

For the normal mind, enmeshed in a myriad of thoughts and emotions, this zero-point field—substrate—of consciousness is unobservable, for we see things by way of contrast. Our attention is normally drawn to appearances that arise to the physical senses and mental perception, and they alone are real for us. But all such appearances originate from this zeropoint field, which permeates all our experience. We are effectively blind to it, while the world of appearance arises over and above it. When sensory and mental appearances naturally cease, as in deep sleep, the mind is normally so dull that we are incapable of ascertaining the substrate consciousness that manifests.

The experience of the substrate is imbued with a relative degree of symmetry, and in this vacuum state reality does not appear in a structured form, either as a human psyche or as matter. This unstable equilibrium is perturbed by the activation of the conceptual mind, which creates the bifurcations of subject and object, mind and matter, which may be regarded as *broken symmetries*. When the fundamental symmetry of the substrate manifests in dreamless sleep, it is generally unobservable, and can only be retrospectively inferred on the basis of the broken symmetries of waking experience. But as mentioned before, as a result of continuous training in developing increasing stages of mental and physical relaxation, together with attentional stability and vividness, it is said that one may directly vividly ascertain this relative ground state of consciousness and observe how mental and sensory phenomena emerge from it in dependence upon a wide range of psychological and physical influences.

The mind gradually settles into the substrate consciousness as mental activities gradually subside, without suppression, throughout the course of this training. And in this process, memories, fantasies, and emotions of all kinds come to the surface of awareness. Our usual experience of our mental states is heavily edited and processed by the habitual structuring of the mind, so we tend to experience them in a way we regard as "normal." But in this training, the light of consciousness, like a probe into deep space, illuminates bizarre mental phenomena that seem utterly alien to one's past experience and sense of personal identity. As an analogy from contemporary astronomy, recall the million-second-long exposure of the Hubble Ultra Deep Field. Astronomers discovered in that region of deep space a zoo of oddball galaxies, in contrast to the classic images of

spiral and elliptical galaxies. Some look like toothpicks, others like links on a bracelet, and a few of them appear to be interacting. These bizarre galaxies chronicle a period when the universe was more chaotic, when order and structure were just beginning to emerge.

Likewise, consciously exposing the deep space of the mind to thousands of hours of observation reveals normally hidden dimensions that are more chaotic, where the order and structure of the human psyche are just beginning to emerge. Strata upon strata of mental phenomena previously concealed within the subconscious are made manifest, until finally the mind comes to rest in its natural state, from which both conscious and normally subconscious events arise. This is an exercise in true depth psychology, in which one observes deep core samples of the subconscious mind, penetrating many layers of accumulated conceptual structuring.

Just as scientists expect that observations of the Hubble Ultra Deep Field will offer new insights into the birth and evolution of galaxies, so do Tibetan contemplatives believe that the experience of the substrate consciousness offers insights into the birth and evolution of the human psyche. Drawing on an analogy from modern biology, this may be portrayed as a kind of “stem consciousness.” Much as a stem cell differentiates itself in relation to specific biochemical environments, such as a brain or a liver, the substrate consciousness becomes differentiated with respect to specific living organisms. This is the earliest state of consciousness of a human embryo, and it gradually takes on the distinctive characteristics of a specific human psyche as it is conditioned and structured by a wide range of physiological and, later, cultural influences. The substrate consciousness is not inherently human, for this is also the ground state of consciousness of all other sentient animals. Contrary to the hypothesis that consciousness ultimately emerges from complex configurations of neuronal activity, according to the Great Perfection (Dzogchen) tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, the human mind emerges from the unitary experience of the zero-point field of the substrate, which is prior to and more fundamental than the human, conceptual duality of mind and matter.²¹ This luminous space is undifferentiated in terms of any distinct sense of subject and object. So this hypothesis rejects both Cartesian dualism and materialistic monism, and it may be put to the test of experience, regardless of one’s ideological commitments and theoretical assumptions.

While resting in the substrate consciousness, one may deliberately direct attention to the past, gradually exercising memory until one can vividly and accurately recall events. Some Buddhists claim that within the distilled, luminous space of deep concentration, one may direct the attention back in time even before conception in this life and recall events in the distant past.²² As far-fetched as this hypothesis may seem, it can be

tested with carefully controlled experiments, assuming that the subjects involved are highly expert in this practice. By such rigorous examination, it should be a fairly straightforward process to determine whether such adepts' "memories" are accurate recollections from the past or mere fantasies.

Open-minded skepticism toward these claims—specifically, the kind of skepticism that inspires testing hypotheses in the most rigorous way possible— is healthy and appropriate for the scientific community. To the great detriment of science, however, the ideal of skepticism in the twentieth century has often degenerated into a kind of complacent closed-mindedness about any theory or method of inquiry that deviates from current mainstream science. Richard Feynman reminded us of the true ideal of scientific skepticism when he encouraged experimenters to search most diligently in precisely those areas where it seems most likely they can prove their own theories wrong.²³ Heraclitus, the sixth-century b.c.e. Greek philosopher known for his belief that the nature of everything is change itself, encouraged this open-minded attentiveness to novelty: "If you do not expect the unexpected, you will not find it, since it is trackless and unexplored."²⁴

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Refining Human Consciousness

Choosing Reality: A Buddhist View of Physics and the Mind

B. Alan Wallace, pp. 191-199

Western scientific research has led to a number of theoretical conclusions similar to the tenets of the Buddhist centrist view. For example, there is now a widespread belief among contemporary psychologists that refutes the existence of a homunculus, a little person in the mind/brain that controls all conscious mental functions. Much insight has also been gained concerning the pervasive role of language and concept in our experience. And scientists in various fields have begun to seriously ponder the possible relation between conceptual designation and reality itself.

Such insights, however, usually remain abstracted from daily life. They often remain on the level of an intellectual conviction without making a profound impact on the individual's personal experience. For example, one may be intellectually certain that an individual is not endowed with a substantial, autonomous personal identity; yet one may still strongly *feel* that one exists with such an ego. Especially in moments of strong ambition, passion, or arrogance this sense of personal identity may arise forcefully. Similarly, one's theories about the role of conceptualization in human experience and the nature of reality may be very acute, and yet one's day-to-day experience maybe virtually untouched by those theories.

In a previous chapter we investigated methods of realizing personal identitylessness. The modes of analysis that were presented made frequent use of the terms *body* and *mind*. Now if one's knowledge of the nature of one's own body and mind is largely abstract and intellectual, inquiry into the relation between the self and the body/mind is unlikely to penetrate to a deeper level. It will simply lead to further theoretical conclusions that have little power to transform one's experience of reality. Thus, as a basis for such analysis it is most useful to examine closely the nature and functioning of one's body (and sensory experience in general), feelings, mental states, and other mental contents.

One's own mind is potentially the most penetrating instrument for examining each of these four types of phenomena from moment to moment. Do they exist as static things, or do they exist in a continual state of flux? Is the experience of them essentially pleasurable, indifferent, or unsatisfactory? Do any of these phenomena exhibit qualities of "I" or "mine" in their own nature, or do they simply arise into consciousness and pass from it as mere impersonal events? A major challenge of this method of inquiry is to

distinguish what seems to be presented to one's awareness as opposed to the preconceived judgments that we project upon those appearances.

Upon investigating these phenomena from moment to moment, one proceeds to examine the sequential, causal relationships among these physical and mental events. As one witnesses with relative passivity the interactions among sensory experiences, feelings, desires, intentions, and so on, one may further question the existence of any controlling ego that lies outside the fields of one's experience. Even when that sense of personal identity is restrained from active manipulation of one's body / mind, it may be found that mental and physical interactions continue to take place. In this way one may experientially realize that no substantial, autonomous "I" is to be found within the experienced body /mind. And one may further realize that there is no evidence of mental and physical events being controlled by an ego that lies outside of one's experience. The "experiencer" itself can be identified as mental consciousness, which is devoid of "I" or "mine."¹

Such empirical insights can have an extremely profound effect upon one's intuitive sense of personal identity. This in turn makes a major impact on one's emotions, one's way of regarding other people, and the manner in which one responds to them. Such familiarity with the physical and mental phenomena that form the basis of designation for the self provides a firm foundation for yet deeper investigation from the perspective of the centrist view. The techniques outlined above are very challenging. They are examples of Buddhist "insight" meditation. Insight in this context is attained through a general and detailed examination of reality and the systematic application of intellectual discrimination.² The sole instrument for that research is one's own mind, and if its attention span is brief and its powers of observation heavily clouded with compulsive conceptualization, such inquiry is bound to be unreliable. Most of us may well find that our own present mental stability and clarity for such research are very limited.

To test this statement, let us pause to engage in a brief experiment to test the present level of these faculties. Sit comfortably in a chair, with the feet firmly resting on the floor. One's back should be reasonably erect, the eyes may be closed, and the muscles of the face, eyes, neck, and shoulders should be relaxed. Maintaining normal unforced respiration, direct the attention to the tactile sensations of the expansion and contraction of the diaphragm during inhalation and exhalation. Allow the mind to remain conceptually silent: quietly direct the awareness to these sensations associated with the breath, with the mind remaining in a passive, witnessing mode. Do not take the respiration as an object for conceptual analysis or cogitation but simply perceive the tactile sensations, moment by moment, with a continuity of clear, stable mindfulness.

Maintain this conceptually silent, yet lucid and wakeful state of awareness for five minutes, without mental wandering or torpor.

It is quite possible that in all your years of education, you have never been trained to cultivate this simple form of quiescent, stable, lucid awareness. If so, you probably found that much of that five-minute period was spent in conceptual distraction, and even when the attention was on the breath, it lacked clarity and continuity. Such an undisciplined mind is a very poor instrument for empirically investigating the nature of mental or physical events. This unrefined state of consciousness also makes us prone to unnecessary suffering when the mind is dominated by such emotions as fear, resentment, guilt, and aggression.

The disadvantages of an undisciplined mind were widely recognized in India during the time of the Buddha, twenty-five hundred years ago. Individuals who earnestly sought truth were therefore naturally encouraged first to refine the quality of their lives and to train their minds through contemplative practices. Traditionally, the initial emphasis in Buddhist meditative discipline is on stabilizing the mind. Such training requires very demanding preparation and sustained, undistracted commitment to meditative discipline, and it is fraught with physical and psychological perils. These are some of the reasons why this training is not frequently given nowadays, especially in the West, despite the obvious need for mental stability and clarity as a firm foundation for contemplative insight.

One may, of course, devote one's contemplative practice entirely to the cultivation of insight, without specifically seeking to stabilize the mind as a discipline in its own right. Such training can still yield many insights, but if one's awareness is unstable, such moments of realization are bound to be brief and intermittent at best, and limited in their transformative power to eliminate suffering and the mental afflictions that produce anxiety and grief. The emphasis in traditional Buddhist practice is on saturating the mind in the realization of the absence of a substantial personal identity and in the realization of emptiness. It is only by repeated and prolonged experience of those truths that one is freed from the mental distortion of ignorance. In principle, it is possible to develop mental stability in the very process of exploring the nature of reality. But as long as one's attention is moving from one object to another, deep stability is not gained.

In the Buddha's teachings recorded in the Pali language, forty techniques are set forth that lead to mental stabilization.³ Among them, specific methods are indicated for aspirants of various temperaments and inclinations. Among those forty methods, only one is appropriate for people with a strong tendency toward conceptualization and

imagination: mindfulness of the respiration.⁴ A wide variety of other techniques are presented in Sanskrit and Tibetan contemplative literature. Visualization of the Buddha, for example, is one commonly taught method,⁵ while focusing one's awareness on the mind itself is another potent method for achieving quiescence.⁶ Numerous other means are set forth in more advanced systems of Buddhist meditation.⁷

Given the fact that so many people brought up in modern Western society are prone to intense, compulsive conceptualization, it may be helpful to introduce briefly the technique of mindfulness of the respiration. In this practice one sits with the torso erect in a posture that is both stable and relaxed. At the beginning of an inhalation, the attention is focused on the apertures of the nostrils. Then throughout the inhalation, one follows the course of the sensations of the breath into the nose, down the throat, and down the torso to the level of the navel. The object of the awareness is the tactile sensations associated with the inhalation, rather than the actual movement of the air into the lungs. At the beginning of the exhalation, one focuses on the tactile sensations at the level of the navel, and then follows the sensations in the reverse direction back to the apertures of the nostrils. This practice entails a passive witnessing of those sensations, without conceptual elaboration.

The mental qualities to be cultivated here are clarity, stability, and relaxation. All of us have experienced periods of mental clarity and intense alertness, but at such times the mind is not usually very stable or relaxed. Such moments may occur, for example, while watching a thrilling movie or engaging in a fast-paced, competitive sport. We can also recall times when our minds were stable and calm—for example, after vigorous exercise or just before sleep—but on those occasions vivid mental clarity is rarely experienced. Thus, the emphasis in this training is to strive first of all for mental stability in which the mind is not being compulsively bombarded by conceptual distractions. As such stability is acquired, one then seeks to heighten one's mental clarity. The first of those qualities allows one to remain focused on the chosen object without being pulled away by conceptual or sensory distractions. The second allows one to examine the fine details of the object.

The integration of stability and clarity is very challenging, and the tendency among beginning trainees is to try to accomplish that goal by means of sheer determination and effort. Such an approach, however, leads to mental and physical exhaustion, and if one still perseveres, damage to the body and mind results. Effort must certainly be given to the cultivation of stability and clarity, but it must be skillfully applied. If the effort is too slack, the mind quickly succumbs to unrestrained conceptual wandering or to an increasingly dull stupor. If the effort is too tight, nervous exhaustion and physical discomfort are the result. When one skillfully combines the qualities of stability, clarity,

and relaxation, the quality of one's effort becomes increasingly refined. At the beginning of the training, one encounters gross levels of conceptual agitation and mental laxity, and a relatively gross type of effort is needed to counter this. But as those obstacles become more subtle, the appropriate effort in the practice also becomes refined.

When mindfulness can be maintained with continuity on the tactile sensations of the breath from the apertures of the nostrils to the level of the navel, one is ready for the next stage of this practice. One now focuses on the tactile sensations of the inhalation and exhalation where the breath strikes the apertures of the nostrils or the skin above the upper lip. Whereas previously one's attention moved through the body, now it is fixed at a single point. As one proceeds in this training, the mind and the breath are gradually calmed. As the object of one's awareness—the breath—is neither attractive nor repulsive, it stimulates neither craving nor aversion. The calmed mind that is not afflicted by those impulses experiences a relative emotional equilibrium, and from this arises an unprecedented state of mental and physical suppleness and well-being. In the early stages of the practice these qualities arise only intermittently, but as one progresses suppleness and joy are experienced with increasing frequency, intensity, and duration.

As one continues to apply oneself to the practice, there eventually arises an acquired sign.⁸ To some this sign appears to the mind's eye like a star, whereas for others it is seen as a cluster of gems or pearls or as various other forms.⁹ This sign may arise when one can remain focused on the breath for roughly an hour with only a few brief conceptual distractions. It arises spontaneously and is not to be intentionally visualized. When the sign appears regularly and with continuity, one directs the attention away from the tactile sensations of the breath and now focuses entirely on this purely mental image. With this as the object, mental stability and clarity are developed further until eventually one experiences the counterpart sign,¹⁰ which is far more refined than the earlier sign. This new sign is a purely mental representation of the primary quality of the breath. and, like the acquired sign, it varies from one individual to another. When this sign arises, one attains a meditative state known as *quiescence*.¹¹ Just prior to its attainment one experiences a marked increase in mental and physical suppleness and unprecedented mental and physical joy.

At this point the mind is endowed with intense clarity and stability during meditation that can be maintained effortlessly for hours on end. Throughout this time, one's awareness is untainted by even subtle distraction or dullness. Even upon arising from meditation, one's mental and physical pliancy is enhanced, and it is very difficult for such afflictions as craving and hostility to arise and dominate the mind.¹²

Upon attaining quiescence, it is said that one may engage in further training to develop various types of extrasensory perception. For example, Buddhist tradition asserts that one may attain the ability to hear sounds that occur far beyond the range of normal hearing. Such distant sounds are heard not with the ears but purely with mental awareness. Likewise, one may develop clairvoyance that enables one to perceive events far distant in space and time, including a limited ability to witness future events. The abilities to penetrate others' minds and to know one's own and others' past life experiences can also be developed upon the basis of the attainment of quiescence. Exact procedures for developing such types of extrasensory perception are clearly set forth in Buddhist meditation manuals.¹³

Other paranormal powers are also said to be attainable upon the basis of quiescence. The techniques for developing them are also described in Buddhist treatises,¹⁴ and there are many accounts in the history of Buddhism in India, Tibet, and elsewhere of people displaying such abilities. Some of the powers that are cited are the ability to cause one's body to vanish and reappear, to move physically through solid objects, and to create a "double" of one's physical body. These and other powers that are claimed by Buddhist contemplatives clearly break the laws of physics as we presently know them. Many of the technological abilities that we in the West take for granted today, however, would be regarded as miraculous in terms of the laws of nineteenth-century physics. This fact does not suggest that we should gullibly accept all claims of supernormal powers that are made by other cultures. At the same time, our civilization knows virtually nothing of the contemplative methods that lead to those abilities or of the theories that explain them. This fact makes it unreasonable for us to reject such claims without investigating their validity. In Buddhism such powers are not regarded as supernatural. Rather, they are explained in terms of theories that probe deeply into the potentials of refining consciousness and the vital energies within the body. If we wish to test whether such abilities can be developed, we may seek out those rare contemporary individuals who have attained them; or, better yet, we may engage in the mental training ourselves and thereby empirically test the results.

Regardless of the specific method that one chooses in the cultivation of quiescence, it is necessary to overcome the five obscurations of (1) sensual desire, (2) malice, (3) laxity and lethargy, (4) excitement and remorse, and (5) skeptical doubt.¹⁵ The essentially pure nature of the mind may be likened to a clear pool of water. Following this analogy, sensual desire is like a red dye in the water; malice is like boiling water; torpor and drowsiness are like algae and weeds that darken the water; restlessness and regret are like windswept waves; and skeptical doubt is like water that is clear but in darkness.

Upon the attainment of quiescence, the mind is temporarily free from the five obscurations. At this point one follows one of two paths of contemplative development. Individuals who are of a passionate nature, who have entered spiritual practice through strong faith, may benefit by stabilizing their minds to a higher degree before turning to the more essential cultivation of insight. People who are of a more intellectual and skeptical disposition and who are philosophically inclined may proceed directly from this attainment to the pursuit of insight.¹⁶ Such a state of quiescence is the minimum prerequisite for engaging in insight meditation with full effectiveness. It is only with this degree of mental stability and clarity that one gains access to ‘understanding arising from meditation.’¹⁷ Certainly much understanding may arise prior to this attainment, but such insight will be able to attenuate only temporarily the distortions of the mind.

Upon first learning of mental states described in traditions outside of one's own, there is a natural tendency to seek counterparts in one's own background or in the knowledge of one's native culture. For many people it is difficult to acknowledge the possibility that the attainment of quiescence may have no counterpart in Western civilization, that the contemplative science of ancient India made advances that the West has not duplicated. Especially over the past five hundred years, the West has made tremendous advances in developing physical instruments to aid us in exploring the world. Such research instruments have enabled us to probe deeply into the nature of physical phenomena, but they offer no direct access to mental events. The mind is the only instrument capable of examining all types of natural events—including both the physical and the mental. But in terms of refining human awareness in the development of stability and clarity as described above, Western civilization has made no progress since the Scientific Revolution. In this field of contemplative science ours is a backward, undeveloped culture. If we wish to explore these Buddhist theories and practices further, we are well advised to proceed not with blind faith, but with our full powers of critical intelligence. In so doing we follow the advice that the Buddha gave to his monks when he counseled:

O monks, sages accept my words after examining them well—like gold after it has been melted, cut, and rubbed—but not out of devotion [for me].¹⁸

B. ALAN WALLACE

CONTEMPLATIVE SCIENCE

WHERE BUDDHISM AND NEUROSCIENCE CONVERGE



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6

WORLDS OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY



INTERSUBJECTIVITY LIES AT the very heart of the Buddhist worldview and its path to spiritual awakening. According to this theory, each person exists as an individual, but the self, or personal identity, is not an independent ego that is somehow in control of the body and mind. Rather, the individual is understood as a matrix of dependently related events in a state of flux. There are three aspects to this dependence: 1) the self arises in dependence upon prior contributing causes and conditions, such as parents and all others who contribute to one's survival, education, and so on. In this way, our existence is invariably intersubjective, for we exist in a causal nexus in which we are constantly influenced by and exert influence upon the world around us, including other people; 2) the individual self does not exist independently of the body and mind, but rather in reliance upon myriad physical and mental processes that are constantly changing; 3) according to the Middle Way view, which seeks to avoid the two extremes of substantialism and nihilism, the self is brought into existence by the power of conceptual imputation. That is, on the basis of either some aspect of the body (e.g., I am tall) or some mental process (e.g., I am content), the self is conceptually imputed *upon something it is*

not. Thus, even though I am not the height of my body or the affective state of being content, within the conceptual framework in which I think of myself and others think of me, it is conventionally valid to assert that I am tall and content.

Moreover, Buddhism maintains that conceptual frameworks are not private ; they are public and consensual. So the ways I perceive and conceive of myself and others are inextricably related to the community of language of users and thinkers with whom I share a common language and conceptual framework. We view ourselves, others, and the world around us by way of shared ideas, without which the world *as we perceive it and conceive of it* would not exist. Thus, our very existence as individuals, whether living in a community or in solitude, is intersubjective to the core.

What are the ramifications of this way of viewing reality? Here I shall focus on the following five questions, all pertaining closely to the idea of intersubjectivity:

1. Does individual human consciousness emerge solely from the dynamic interrelation of self and other, making it therefore inherently intersubjective? I shall address this topic within the framework of the Buddhist practice of the cultivation of meditative quiescence (*śamatha*), in which the conceptual mind is stilled and the attention is withdrawn away from the physical senses and purely into the realm of mental consciousness.
2. In what ways does Buddhist meditation cultivate a sense of empathy as an indispensable means for gaining insight into the nature of oneself, others, and the relation between oneself and the rest of the world? The response will be presented in accordance with the central Buddhist insight practice of the “four applications of mindfulness,” in which one attends to the nature of the body, feelings, mental processes, and mental objects.
3. How does the theme of intersubjectivity pertain to Buddhist practices designed to induce greater empathy with others? In response to this question, I shall explain the Buddhist cultivation of the “four immeasurables,” namely, loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity.
4. What significance does the Buddhist emphasis on the dreamlike nature of waking reality have for the issue of intersubjectivity? Here I will focus on the meditative practice of “dream yoga,” which

begins with training to induce lucid dreaming, or apprehending the dream state for what it is while dreaming.

5. Finally, how does Buddhism challenge the assertion of the existence of an inherently real, localized, ego-centered mind, and in what ways does it challenge the dichotomy of objective space and perceptual space? I will explain some of the essentials of the theory and practice of the Great Perfection tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, aimed at fathoming the essential nature of awareness.¹

MEDITATIVE QUIESCENCE

In Buddhism, the development of meditative quiescence is regarded as an indispensable prerequisite for the cultivation of contemplative insight. The fundamental distinction between the two disciplines is that the practice of quiescence involves refining the attention by means of enhancing attentional stability and vividness and counteracting the mind's habitual tendencies toward alternating attentional excitation and laxity. The cultivation of contemplative insight, on the other hand, entails the precise examination and investigation of various facets of reality, using the previously refined attentional abilities. Thus, the training in quiescence may be regarded as a kind of contemplative technology, aimed at developing one of the primary tools by means of which mental phenomena can be directly explored. The training in insight may be viewed as a kind of contemplative science, aimed at acquiring experiential knowledge of the mind, the phenomena that are apprehended by it, and the relation between the two.²

Buddhism asserts that human beings with unimpaired sense faculties have six modes of perception. Five of those modes are by way of the five physical senses, and the sixth is mental perception, by means of which we perceive mental phenomena, such as thoughts, mental imagery, dreams, and emotions. Mental perception is viewed as being quite distinct from our capacity to think, remember, and imagine, all of which are conceptual faculties. Among the six modes of perception, the five physical senses can, at least in principle, be corrected, enhanced, and extended by external, technological means. Common examples in the modern world (though not in classical India or Tibet) are the use of eyeglasses to correct vision and the use of telescopes and microscopes to enhance and extend our visual capacities.

Mental perception is not readily amenable to technological enhancement, but among the six senses it is, according to Buddhism, the one that can be the most refined and extended through training. To start with, the normal

untrained mind, which is so prone to alternating bouts of compulsive excitation and laxity, is regarded as “dysfunctional.” So the bad news is that most of us are “attentionally challenged,” regardless of whether we suffer from attention deficit (laxity) or hyperactivity (excitation) disorders. But the good news is that this mental disability can be successfully treated with rigorous, sustained training.

Traditionally, Buddhists who are dedicated to exploring the extent to which attentional stability and vividness can be enhanced are advised to disengage temporarily from social activity. Withdrawing into solitude for a period of weeks, months, or even years, they radically simplify their lifestyle and devote themselves single-pointedly to training the attention, while remaining as free as possible from all distracting influences. As long as we are actively engaged in society, our sense of personal identity is strongly reinforced by our intersubjective relations with others. But through withdrawal into solitude, our identity is significantly decontextualized. Externally, by disengaging from social interactions, the sense of self as holding a position in society is eroded. Internally, by disengaging from ideation—such as conceptually dwelling on events from our personal history, thinking about ourselves in the present, and anticipating what we will do in the future—our sense of self as occupying a real place in nature is eroded. To be decontextualized is to be deconstructed. This is one reason why in traditional societies, being sent into exile was regarded as one of the most severe forms of punishment, almost as drastic as capital punishment. And in the penal systems of modern society, one of the most severe forms of punishment is solitary confinement.

This existential shift is not undertaken casually or without suitable preparation. To illustrate this point, the Buddha gave the analogy of a great elephant that enters a shallow pond in order to enjoy the pleasures of drinking and bathing.³ Due to its great size, the elephant finds footing in the deep water and enjoys itself thoroughly. But when a cat seeks to emulate the elephant by jumping into the pond, it finds no footing and either sinks or thrashes around on the surface. Here is the meaning of this parable. If one is inadequately prepared for the austere simplicity of the reclusive life, while dwelling for a sustained period in solitude, the mind either sinks by way of laxity into dullness, boredom, and depression, or else rises by way of excitation into compulsive ideation and sensory distractions. The critical issue is whether one has cultivated sufficient emotional stability and

balance to be able to live happily without reliance upon the hedonic pleasures aroused by agreeable sensual, intellectual, aesthetic, and interpersonal stimuli. The single most powerful practice for achieving such emotional health is the cultivation of a sense of connectedness with others. This is done by empathetically reflecting again and again on others as subjects like oneself, with their hopes and fears, joys and sorrows, successes and failures. In this way, whether alone or with others, one overcomes the sense of loneliness and isolation.

Among the many techniques taught in Buddhism for training the attention, the most widely practiced entails cultivating mindfulness of the breathing. One begins by focusing the attention on the tactile sensations of the breath at the apertures of the nostrils. Over time, the body comes to feel light, and the respiration becomes more and more subtle. Eventually, while focusing the attention on the point of contact of the breath, right there a mental image spontaneously arises, on which one then sustains the attention. The type of image that arises varies from one person to the next, but may appear, for example, like a star, a round ruby, or a pearl.⁴ This mental object remains the focus of attention until eventually it is replaced by a far subtler “counterpart sign,” which also may arise in a variety of forms.

At this point, the attention is so concentrated in the field of mental perception that the mind is free of all physical sense impressions, including those of the body. If one then disengages the attention from the counterpart sign without relinquishing the heightened sense of attentional stability and vividness, in this absence of appearances comes the experience of a primal state of contentless awareness, the *bhavaṅga*, or “ground of becoming,” from which all active mental processes arise.⁵ As mentioned previously, this mode of awareness is said to shine with its own radiance, which is obscured only due to internal and external stimuli; and it is experienced as being primordially pure, regardless of whether it is temporarily blocked by adventitious defilements.⁶ Remarkably, some Buddhist contemplatives have also found that the nature of this relative ground state of consciousness is loving-kindness, and it is regarded as the source of people’s incentive to meditatively develop their minds in the pursuit of spiritual liberation.⁷

The experience of such a state of contentless mental awareness is common to various schools of Indian and Tibetan Buddhist meditation, as well as other, non-Buddhist contemplative traditions.⁸ So there are

empirical grounds for concluding that this is not simply a matter of speculation but rather an element of experience for contemplatives trained in a variety of techniques and adhering to a wide range of philosophical beliefs. If so, the possibility of such experience has profound implications for questions concerning the nature of consciousness. Is consciousness essentially intersubjective in the sense that its very nature, with its own innate luminosity, emerges by the relation of the self to others? The observation that the *bhavaṅga* is of the nature of love implies that empathy is innate to consciousness and exists prior to the emergence of all active mental processes. This, in turn, implies that empathy on the part of researchers must be a prerequisite for any genuine science of consciousness. On the other hand, the assertion that this state of awareness is free of all sensory and mental appearances implies a degree of autonomy from language, conceptual frameworks, and active engagement with others. So consciousness is not really *constituted* by the relation of the self to others, but rather is intersubjective in the weaker sense of simply being inherently open to and connected with others—an important theme to which I will return.

THE FOUR APPLICATIONS OF MINDFULNESS

The cultivation of compassion is like a silken thread that runs through and connects all the pearls of Buddhist meditative practices. Compassion is based upon empathy, but in a very deep sense, insight into the nature of oneself, others, and the relation between oneself and the rest of the world is also synergistically related to empathy. Moreover, a common Buddhist adage states that compassion without wisdom is bondage, and wisdom without compassion is another form of bondage. Thus, these qualities must be cultivated together, and empathy is a common root of both.

The classic Buddhist system of meditative practices known as the four applications of mindfulness is based on the *Satipaṭṭhānasutta*, the most revered of all Buddhist discourses in the Theravāda tradition.⁹ This practice entails the careful observation and consideration of the body, feelings, mental processes, and mental objects of oneself and of others. A common theme within each of these four applications of mindfulness is first considering these elements of one's own being, then attending to the same phenomena in others, and finally shifting attention back and forth between self and others. Especially in the final phase of practice, one engages in what has recently been called "reiterated empathy," imaginatively viewing one's own psychophysical processes from a "second-person" perspective. That is, I view my body and mind from what I imagine to be your perspective, so that I begin to sense my own presence not only "from within" but "from without." Such practice leads to the insight that the second-person perspective on one's own being is just as "real" as the first-person perspective, and neither exists independently of the other.

Another of the central aims of these four applications of mindfulness is to distinguish between the phenomena that are presented to our six modes of perception and the conceptual superimpositions that we often unconsciously and involuntarily place upon them, including labels, categories, and

thoughts aroused by emotional reactions. The Buddha summed up this theme when he declared, “In the seen there is only the seen; in the heard, there is only the heard; in the sensed, there is only the sensed; in the cognized, there is only the cognized.”¹⁰ Such practice leads to a kind of objectivity, perceiving things to a greater extent as they are, prior to personal conceptual overlays, judgments, and evaluations.

The first subject for the close application of mindfulness is the body, for this is our physical basis in reality, on which we most readily identify our whereabouts and distinguish ourselves from others. The Buddha quintessentially describes this practice as follows: “One dwells observing the body as the body internally, or one dwells observing the body as the body externally, or one dwells observing the body as the body both internally and externally.”¹¹ In Pāli the term translated here as “observing” (*anupassati*) has the various meanings of “observing,” “contemplating,” and “considering,” which override any strict demarcation between pure perception and conceptual reflection. It means taking in the observed phenomena as fully as possible, both perceptually and conceptually, while still being sensitive to practical distinctions between what is presented to the senses and what is superimposed upon them. So it has a considerably richer connotation than “bare attention,” in the sense of moment-to-moment, nonjudgmental awareness of whatever arises. Such practice is done not only while sitting quietly in meditation but also while engaging in the various postures of walking, standing, sitting, and lying down, as well as the activities of looking, bending, stretching, dressing, eating, drinking, excreting, speaking, keeping silent, staying awake, and falling asleep.¹²

While first attending to one’s own body, one observes, among other things, the various events or factors that give rise to the emergence and dissolution of experiences of and in the body. By *observing* rather than simply *identifying* with it, the body is experienced simply as a network of phenomena, rather than as a self. Then, on the basis of the experiential insights gained in this way, one perceptually observes the body of another, experiencing that also as a matrix of phenomena. Finally, one alternates between observing both one’s own body and another’s body, perceiving qualities that are unique to each as well as common characteristics, which might include events that lead to the emergence and dissolution of body events from moment to moment.

The most important common characteristic of bodies is that none of them either is or contains a self, or personal identity. They are simply phenomena, arising in dependence upon prior causes and conditions. Realizing this begins to break down the reified sense of the locality of one's presence as being solely within the confines of one's own body. As William James declares, phenomenologically speaking, "*for the moment, what we attend to is reality.*"¹³ By habitually failing to attend either to one's own body or those of others, the bodies that we disregard are eventually not counted as existing. As James comments, "They are not even treated as appearances; they are treated as if they were mere waste, equivalent to nothing at all."¹⁴ Moreover, by attending internally, externally, and finally internally and externally in immediate succession, one neutralizes any biases of attention that might result from one's own introverted or extroverted disposition. In addition, this final phase of alternating the attention between self and others affords the opportunity to observe relationships that may not be apparent as long as one is focused on the self to the exclusion of others. And as James cogently argues, very much in accordance with Buddhist principles, "*The relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as 'real' as anything else in the system.*"¹⁵

In the traditional practice of applying mindfulness to feelings, one observes the arising and dissolution of the three basic kinds of feelings of physical and mental pleasure, pain, and indifference in oneself, others, and alternately between oneself and others. Other, more complex affective states are left to the next level of practice, but special attention is given to pleasant and unpleasant feelings because these have such an enormous effect on the kinds of choices we make and the ways we lead our lives.

While classical cognitive science has been "cognocentric," in the sense of maintaining that humans are cognizers first and foremost, recent advances in affective psychology and neuroscience suggest that emotions are primary, and cognition has a secondary role as an organizing influence. According to Buddhism, neither cognition nor emotion is primary; rather, they are coemergent, incapable of existing without the other. It is important to bear in mind, however, that the feeling of indifference, which some might regard as being an *absence* of feeling, is regarded in Buddhism as also being an affective state.

When observing the arising, presence, and dissolution of feelings firsthand, one recognizes that they are experienced in various regions throughout the body, and some do not appear to have any identifiable location at all. When empathetically attending to others' joys and sorrows, pleasures and pains, one may ask: Are such "observations" of others' internal affective states strictly inferential? That is, are these observations really conceptual conclusions based upon perceived outward signs? Or might this type of empathetic awareness be more direct, more akin to perception? I am not aware that either Buddhism or modern science has reached a consensus regarding these questions, but I believe they merit careful consideration.

The cultivation of mindfulness of mental processes follows the threefold sequence as above, while observing the mind as it is affected by different conative, attentional, cognitive, and affective states, such as craving, hatred, delusion, anxiety, elation, concentration, and agitation. The aim of this practice is explicitly therapeutic in nature. Some conative, attentional, cognitive, and affective states and processes are conducive to one's own and others' well-being ; others are harmful. By attending closely to the factors that give rise to a wide range of mental processes and by observing the effects they have on self and others, one begins to recognize through experience those processes that are conducive to one's own and others' well-being and those that are destructive. In this way one identifies the distinctions between wholesome and unwholesome mental states. This is an essential element of mindfulness within Buddhist practice. As one authoritative Theravāda text declares, "Mindfulness, when it arises, follows the courses of beneficial and unbeneficial tendencies, [recognizing] these tendencies are beneficial, these unbeneficial ; these tendencies are helpful, these unhelpful. Thus, one who practices yoga rejects unbeneficial tendencies and cultivates beneficial tendencies."¹⁶

In particular, like a physician diagnosing an illness, one pays special attention to what Buddhism calls "mental afflictions," which can be identified by the criterion that they disrupt the balance and equilibrium of the mind. While some wholesome mental processes, such as compassion, may indeed disturb the calm of the mind, this disruption is not deep, and its long-term effects on mental states and behavior are healthy. Other processes, however, such as resentment, have a deep and harmful impact on

mental health as well as subsequent behavior, so they are deemed afflictions.

As in the previous practices of attending mindfully to the body and feelings, in this phase of the practice one observes one's own and others' mental processes simply as impersonal phenomena, arising in dependence upon prior causes and conditions, paying special attention to the duration of these mental states: how long does each one last, and for as long as it lasts, does it exist as a stable entity persisting through time or as a sequence of momentary events? When one observes a process in one's own mental continuum, is it affected by the sheer fact of being observed? Is it possible to observe a mental state with an awareness that is not itself in that same state? For example, is it possible to observe anger with a calm, dispassionate awareness? Does one observe an intentional mental process *while* it is occurring, or is such mindfulness always retrospective? It is important to bear in mind that the Pāli term commonly translated as "mindfulness" (*sati*) also has the connotation of "recollection," implying that many, if not all, acts of mindfulness may actually be modes of short-term recall. The issue of observer participancy is obviously crucial to the first-person examination of mental states, and it should by no means disqualify such introspective inquiry any more than it has disqualified exploration in the field of quantum mechanics.

The fourth phase of this practice is the cultivation of mindfulness of mental objects, which include all nonintentional mental processes as well as all other kinds of phenomena that can be apprehended with the mind. Thus, this category is all-inclusive. At the same time, there is a special emphasis on observing in oneself, others, and both oneself and others the contents of the mind affiliated with wholesome and unwholesome mental states, as well as the conditions leading to their emergence and dissolution. In addition, one mindfully observes all the phenomena of the environment from one's own perspective by means of direct perception and empathetically attends to them from the perspective of others. The overarching theme of all these practices is the cultivation of a multiperspectival view of the self, others, and the intersubjective relations between them. The techniques are explicitly designed to yield insights into these facets of the lived world, but they all have a strong bearing on the cultivation of compassion and other wholesome affective states, without which the cultivation of wisdom alone is said to be one more form of bondage.

THE FOUR IMMEASURABLES

Just as the qualities of cognizance and loving-kindness are coexistent in the ground state of awareness known as the *bhavaṅga*, so too in the course of spiritual maturation must the light of insight and the warmth of a loving heart be cultivated together. Therefore, in Buddhism the four applications of mindfulness are traditionally complemented by the cultivation of the four immeasurables, namely loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity.¹⁷

Each of these affective states can easily be conflated with other emotions that may appear similar but are fundamentally different. To help distinguish between the affective states to be cultivated and their false facsimiles, it may be helpful to draw on the classification of different types of relations proposed by the philosopher Martin Buber in his classic work *I and Thou*.¹⁸ We can begin with what Buber calls an “I–it” relationship, in which one engages with another sentient being viewed simply as an object, to be manipulated in accordance with one’s self-centered desires. In such a relationship the other’s existence as a subject fundamentally like oneself is ignored or marginalized, viewed only in terms of how he or she (really “it”) may be of aid, be an obstacle, or be irrelevant in the pursuit of one’s own goals. On that basis, this individual comes to be regarded as a friend, enemy, or someone of no consequence. In an “I–it” relationship there is effectively only one subject, oneself, but in explicitly dehumanizing the other, one is implicitly dehumanizing oneself as well.

An “I–you” relationship, on the other hand, is essentially dialogical in the sense of one subject meaningfully engaging with the subjective reality of another person. While an “I–it” relationship is fundamentally manipulative, an “I–you” relationship is intersubjective and therefore based upon a sense of empathy. According to Buber, in the midst of an “I–you” relationship, one may transcend the polarity of self and other and engage with a sphere between self and other, in which both access the “eternal thou” that

transcends individuality. This cannot happen unless *both* subjects are involved in an “I–you” relationship. It is at heart a participatory experience.

Western thought, inspired by the Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman traditions, is largely anthropocentric when it comes to intersubjective relationships. But according to Buddhism, all sentient beings strive to experience pleasure and joy and to avoid pain and suffering. This is an indication that Buddhism is rightly characterized as more biocentric than anthropocentric, and its aim is to cultivate loving-kindness and the other wholesome affective states in this tetrad for all sentient beings to a degree that transcends all boundaries and demarcations.

The first of the four states to be cultivated is loving-kindness, which is understood as the heartfelt yearning for the well-being of others. Although it is tempting to translate the corresponding Sanskrit term (*maitri*) simply as “love,” it is not commonly done because in English, this term is often used in ways that conflate an “I–you” relationship with an “I–it” relationship. The loving-kindness cultivated in Buddhist practice emphatically entails an “I–you” relationship, for one is vividly aware of the other person’s joys and sorrows, hopes and fears. But in English the word “love” is also used in cases of sexual infatuation, personal attachment, and even strong attraction to inanimate objects and events, all of which involve “I–it” relationships. In Buddhism an entirely different term (*rāga*) is generally used to denote such kinds of attraction, and it is variously translated as “attachment,” “craving,” or “obsession.”

According to Buddhism, attachment is an attraction to an object on which one conceptually superimposes or exaggerates desirable qualities, while filtering out undesirable qualities. In cases of strong attachment, one transfers the very possibility of happiness onto the object, thereby disempowering oneself and empowering it. Even when such attachment is directed toward another person, it entails more of an “intrasubjective” than an intersubjective relationship, for one is engaging more poignantly with one’s own conceptual superimpositions than with the other person as a genuine subject. When the reality of the idealized object of attachment—with all his or her faults and limitations—breaks through the fantasies, disillusionment may ensue. That in turn may lead to hostility and aversion, which superimposes negative qualities upon the person previously held dear.

Thus, according to Buddhism, loving-kindness does not readily turn into aversion, but attachment does. And while loving-kindness is a wholesome conative state (not simply an emotion) that is conducive to one's own and others' well-being, attachment is a major source of anxiety, distress, and interpersonal conflict. It is therefore very important not to conflate them, but in most close human relations, such as between parents and children, spouses, and friends, they are normally mixed. In these complex human relationships the Buddhist ideal is to attenuate the mental affliction of attachment and cultivate the wholesome conative state of loving-kindness.

In what may appear at first glance to be paradoxical, in traditional Buddhist practice one first cultivates loving-kindness for oneself, then proceeds to extend this affectionate concern to others. The rationale for this is based on a fundamental premise expressed by the Buddha, "Whoever loves himself will never harm another."¹⁹ This strategy seems especially appropriate in the modern West, where feelings of self-contempt, low self-esteem, guilt, and being unworthy of happiness seem to have reached epidemic proportions.²⁰ In the meditative practice itself, one first attends to one's own longing for happiness and wish to be free of suffering, and generates the loving wish, "May I be free of animosity, affliction, and anxiety, and live happily." Like the preceding practices of mindfulness, this involves a process of objectifying oneself and yearning for the person brought to mind, "May you be well and happy." In this way one enters into an "I-you" relationship with oneself!

In the next phase of the practice, one brings to mind someone else whom one dearly loves and respects. Recalling this person's acts of kindness and virtues, one brings forth the heartfelt wish, "May this good person, like myself, be well and happy." Continuing in this practice, one similarly brings to mind in sequence a more casual friend, then a person toward whom one has been indifferent, and finally a person toward whom one has felt aversion. The aim of the practice is to gradually experience the same degree of loving-kindness for the dear friend as for oneself, for the neutral person as for the dear friend, and finally for the enemy as for the neutral person. In this way, the conceptually superimposed "I-it" barriers demarcating friend, stranger, and foe are broken down, and immeasurable, unconditional loving-kindness may be experienced.

As stated previously, the false facsimile of loving-kindness is attachment. According to Buddhism, the opposite of loving-kindness is not indifference

but hatred. While indifference may be viewed as being turned 90 degrees away from loving-kindness, hatred is turned 180 degrees away, for when the mind is dominated by hatred, one actually feels *unhappy* at the prospect of another's well-being. The proximate cause of loving-kindness is seeing loveable qualities within others, not merely their outer, surface attractions. One succeeds in this practice when it causes animosity to subside, and fails when it leads only to selfish affection, or attachment, for this implies that one is still stuck in an "I-it" mentality.

The second of the four immeasurables is compassion, which is inextricably linked with loving-kindness. With loving-kindness one yearns that others may find genuine happiness and the causes of happiness, and with compassion one yearns that they may be free of suffering and its causes. These are really two sides of the same coin. While attachment is frequently confused with loving-kindness, righteous indignation for the sake of others can easily be confused with compassion. If one's "compassion" extends only to the victims of the world and not to the victimizers, it is likely to be another case of attachment to the downtrodden, combined with aversion to the oppressors. In other words, one is still trapped in an "I-it" mentality. The compassion cultivated in Buddhist practice is focused not only on those who are experiencing suffering and pain but also on those who are sowing the seeds of further suffering and pain (for themselves and others), namely those who maliciously harm others. According to Buddhism, all the evil in the world stems from attachment, aversion, and the delusion that underlies both. These destructive tendencies are regarded as mental afflictions, very much like physical afflictions, and those who are dominated by them are even more deserving of compassion than those afflicted with physical diseases. But to feel compassion for evildoers is not to condone the evil they commit. It is to yearn that they be free of the impulses that compel them to behave in such harmful ways, and thereby to be free of the causes of suffering.

In the meditative cultivation of compassion, one attends first to someone who is wretched and miserable, wishing, "If only this person could be freed from such suffering!" Progressing in this practice, one then sequentially focuses on an evildoer (regardless of whether he or she seems happy), on a dear person, on a neutral person, and finally on someone toward whom one has felt aversion. The goal of the practice is like that of the cultivation of

loving-kindness, namely, to break down the barriers separating the different types of individuals until one's compassion extends equally to all beings.

The false facsimile of compassion is grief. In English, compassion is often verbally expressed with a comment such as "I feel so sorry for that person," but according to Buddhism, merely feeling sympathy for someone does not necessarily include compassion. When one empathetically attends to another person who is unhappy, one naturally experiences sadness. But such a feeling may lead instead to righteous indignation and the vengeful wish to exact retribution on whoever has made the other person unhappy. On the other hand, in the cultivation of compassion, sympathy acts instead as fuel for the warmth of compassion. One does not simply remain in a state of sadness or despair, but rises from it with the wish, "May you be free of this suffering and its causes!"—psychologically moving from the reality of the present suffering to the possibility of freedom from it.

The opposite of compassion is not indifference, but cruelty. When this mental affliction dominates the mind, one insidiously acknowledges the subjective reality of the other and wishes for that person to experience misery. This is widely regarded as the greatest evil to which the mind can succumb. The proximate cause of compassion is seeing the helplessness in those overwhelmed by suffering and its causes, while also recognizing the possibility of freedom from such misery. One succeeds in this practice when one's own proneness to cruelty subsides, and fails when the practice produces only sorrow. It is important to emphasize that the Buddhist meditative cultivation of loving-kindness and compassion was never intended as a *substitute* for active service to others. Rather, it is a *mental preparation* for such altruistic service that raises the likelihood of such outer behavior being truly an expression of an inner, benevolent concern for others' well-being.

The cultivation of the final two immeasurables follows naturally from progress in the cultivation of the first two. If one feels loving-kindness and compassion for others, then when they experience joy, the spontaneous response is to take delight in their happiness. But such empathetic joy can also be cultivated in its own right. In Buddhist practice, one focuses first on a very dear companion who is constantly of good cheer, then on a neutral person, and finally on a person who has shown hostility. In each case, one empathizes with the other's joy and experiences it as if it were one's own. However, it is possible get caught up in a kind of hedonistic pleasure in

relation to others, which is the false facsimile of empathetic joy. The opposite of this wholesome affective state is envy; its proximate cause is the awareness of others' happiness and success; and one fails in this practice when it results in hedonism.

Equanimity, the fourth of the immeasurables, actually suffuses the other three, as the practitioner breaks down the self-centered divisions that are superimposed on other people. With equanimity, loving and compassionate concern for others extends out evenly, with no bias for friends or against enemies. Such equanimity is based upon empathy, recognizing that all beings, like oneself, are equally worthy of happiness. This meditative practice begins by focusing on a neutral person, then a dear person, and finally a hostile person, in each case resting in a state of equanimity free of attachment and aversion. The false facsimile of the equanimity to be cultivated here is stupid indifference, wherein one does not care about the well-being of anyone else. The opposite of equanimity is attachment to loved ones and aversion to enemies, and its proximate cause is said to be taking responsibility for one's own conduct. One succeeds in this practice when it produces equanimity that is a fertile, level ground for the growth of loving-kindness and compassion, and fails when it produces aloof indifference.

THE FOUR IMMEASURABLES

IMMEASURABLE	LOVING-KINDNESS	COMPASSION	EMPATHETIC JOY	EQUANIMITY
Proximate Cause	perceiving the loveableness of sentient beings	perceiving the helplessness of sentient beings	perceiving the joys and virtues of others	perceiving the responsibility for one's deeds
False Facsimile	self-centered attachment	grief	hedonic pleasure	aloof indifference
Opposite	malice	cruelty	envy	attachment and aversion
Sign of Success	animosity subsides	cruelty subsides	cynicism subsides	attachment and aversion subside
Sign of Failure	selfish affection arises	sorrow arises	frivolity arises	cold indifference arises

In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the cultivation of loving-kindness and compassion is combined in a classic practice known in Tibetan as *tonglen*, meaning “giving and taking.”²¹ The enactment of loving-kindness is the “giving” component of the practice, and the enactment of compassion is the “taking” component. The latter begins by bringing vividly to mind a loved one or a community of people or other beings who are either suffering or sowing the seeds of suffering by means of harmful conduct. First, through empathy, one enters into the suffering and the sources of suffering of this person, then generates the wish, “May you be relieved of this burden and may this adversity ripen upon me.” Whatever the affliction or adversity, physical or mental, one imagines taking it upon oneself in the form of a black cloud being removed from the other’s body and mind and drawn into one’s heart. Simultaneously, one imagines that the other person is gradually relieved of the burden. As soon as this dark cloud enters the heart, one imagines that it meets with the sense of self-centeredness, visualized as an orb of darkness. And in an instant, that cloud of misery and the darkness of one’s self-centeredness extinguish each other, leaving not a trace of either behind.

In the “giving” component of this practice, one imagines all the prosperity, happiness, and goodness in one’s life as a powerful wellspring of brilliant white light emanating from one’s heart, reaching out and suffusing the other person as one wishes, “All that is good in my life, my possessions, my happiness, my good health, my virtues, I offer to you. May you be well and happy.” One imagines the light of this virtue and happiness suffusing the person who has been brought to mind, and imagines his or her most meaningful desires and aspirations being fulfilled. Yet as this light from the heart flows forth unimpeded, it is not depleted, for it is imagined as arising from an inexhaustible source.

As familiarity is acquired with this meditative practice, one may expand the scope of awareness finally to include all sentient beings, taking in all suffering and mental afflictions and sending forth all one’s virtue and goodness. This practice may then be conjoined with the breath: during each inhalation, one imagines taking in the burden of suffering and the sources of suffering, and with each exhalation rays of white light emerge from the heart, bringing happiness and the causes of happiness to all the world.

Śāntideva, on whose writings this practice is based, summed up the rationale behind it: “I should eliminate the suffering of others because it is suffering, just like my own suffering. I should take care of others because they are sentient beings, just as I am a sentient being.”²² This is a pure expression of an “I–you” relationship with all sentient beings. The “I–thou” relationship as it is cultivated in Buddhist practice will be discussed in the next section.

DREAM YOGA

The word “buddha” means “one who is awake,” and the implication is that everyone who is not a buddha is asleep, most of us leading lives very much akin to a nonlucid dream. According to the Middle Way view, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, waking experience has a dreamlike quality because of the disparity between the way things appear and the way they exist. All phenomena—oneself, others, and everything else in the perceived environment—*appear* as if they bear their own inherent existence, independently of the conceptual frameworks within which they are apprehended. But in terms of the way they *exist*, all conditioned phenomena are dependent upon the causes and conditions that gave rise to them, their own parts and attributes, and the conceptual designations by which they are demarcated from other phenomena and by which they bear their own components and qualities. In short, oneself, other beings, and all other phenomena appear to exist in and of themselves, but nothing has such an independent existence. According to the Middle Way view, that very absence of an inherent identity of any phenomenon is called “emptiness.”²³

Tsongkhapa asserts, “Although the objects of perception have forever utterly lacked a final self-nature or objective existence, nonetheless they indisputably appear with the nature of having real, inherent existence.... These things function conventionally on the basis of the laws of interdependence and causality.”²⁴ According to this view, the objects of perception—colors, sounds, smells, and so forth—do not exist in the objective world, independently of the sense modalities by which they are perceived. But, for example, do trees exist apart from our perception of them? The Middle Way answer is that trees and the many other objects in the natural world do indeed exist independently of our perceptions. Flowers continue to grow and bloom when no one is looking, and trees fall to the forest floor, sending out ripples in the atmosphere and over the ground, and then begin to decay, whether or not anyone is there to witness these events.

One may then ask, “Do flowers, trees, and other natural phenomena exist independently of any conceptual designations of them?” The answer is that the words “flowers,” “trees,” and so on have no meaning apart from the definitions we have attributed to them. Thus, the question has no meaning.²⁵ But we may then push this point and ask, “Does *anything* exist independently of human language and thought?” The question implies that the word “exist” is somehow self-defining, that it stands on its own, independent of any consensually accepted definition. But all terms such as “subject,” “object,” “existence,” “reference,” “meaning,” “reason,” “knowledge,” “observation,” and “experience” have a multitude of different uses, and none has a single absolute meaning to which priority must be granted. Since these terms are not self-defining, we employ their definitions according to the conceptual schemes of our choice. That is, we choose our definitions; they are not determined by objective reality. So, once again, proponents of the Middle Way view conclude that the question is meaningless: if the word “exist” has no meaning independent of all conceptual frameworks, then it makes no sense to ask whether anything exists independent of all conceptual frameworks.

For this reason the Middle Way view rejects metaphysical realism, which has been defined as the view that the world consists of mind-independent objects; there is exactly one true and complete description of the way the world is; and truth involves some sort of correspondence between an independently existent world and a description of it.²⁶ Scientists question nature with measuring devices created in collaboration with engineers. But the data collected arise in dependence upon both the objective phenomenon being studied and the measuring devices themselves. The data are thus produced as dependently related events, much as we hear sounds that are produced through the interaction of vibrations in some objective medium and our auditory faculties. But the *sounds we hear* do not exist *independently* in the objective world, nor do any of the other data collected by the instruments of technology.

Proponents of metaphysical realism might well grant this point but then counter that the conceptual world of physics exists, based upon objective magnitudes, and corresponds to the real, objective world, existing independent of language and thought. However, as scientists interpret the data gathered from their measuring devices, they must distinguish between significant data and “noise.” Moreover, the theory they are using plays an

instrumental role in such choices, just as it does in determining what types of measuring devices to create and how to interpret the data gathered from them. In all cases, what is finally “observed” is deeply theory-laden.

Thus, the perceptual objects detected with the senses or with the instruments of technology do not exist independent of those modes of detection, and they do not exist independent of the conceptual frameworks through which such measurements are filtered. Moreover, the theoretical entities conceived of by physicists are comprised of related events arising in dependence upon both observational data and the conceptual faculties of the scientists who interpret and make sense of those data. This implies the intersubjective nature of perceptual as well as conceptual experience, especially when we consider the consensual nature of conceptual frameworks.

While the Middle Way view has certain similarities with the thought of some of the founders of quantum theory, among contemporary philosophies it is perhaps most akin to the pragmatic realism of Hilary Putnam. In a statement closely in accord with the writings of Nāgārjuna, Putnam declares, “Elements of what we call ‘language’ or ‘mind’ *penetrate so deeply into what we call ‘reality’ that the very project of representing ourselves as being ‘mappers’ of something ‘language-independent’ is fatally compromised from the very start.*”²⁷ If there were no language users, there would not be anything true or anything with sense or reference. Thus, the rich and ever-growing collection of truths about the world is the product of experience intertwined with language users, who play a creative role in producing our knowledge of the world.

According to the views of both the Middle Way and pragmatic realism, once we have chosen a conceptual scheme, there are facts to be discovered, not merely legislated by our language or concepts. Our conceptual scheme restricts the range of descriptions available to us, but it does not predetermine the answers to our questions. In accordance with the Middle Way view, Putnam writes, “The stars are indeed independent of our minds in the sense of being causally independent; we did not make the stars.... The fact that there is no one metaphysically privileged description of the universe does not mean that the universe depends on our minds.”²⁸

While the Middle Way view rejects the philosophical extreme of metaphysical realism, it equally rejects the cultural relativist or postmodernist view that no truth claims can be made in ways that transcend

the culture in which they are embedded. For example, the assertion that all phenomena are empty of inherent existence is regarded as a universal truth, not contingent upon the beliefs of any one person or society. The Buddhist laws of karma are also presented as truths that are independent of any specific culture, time, or place. The Middle Way view also rejects materialism and philosophical idealism as two metaphysical extremes, each reifying the phenomenon of its choice—matter or mind—as being inherently real, independent of conceptual designation.

The Middle Way view provides the philosophical framework for the contemplative practice of dream yoga. In a nonlucid dream—in which there is no recognition that one is dreaming—all objective phenomena seem to exist in and of themselves. They, like one’s own persona in the dream, seem to be real. But upon waking, one recognizes that neither one’s own mind nor any person or situation encountered in the dream had any such independent existence. This is equally true during the waking state, and in the daytime practice of dream yoga, one maintains this awareness as constantly as possible. Everything experienced throughout the day—contrary to appearances—arises in relation to one’s own perceptions and conceptions. Every person encountered is perceived and conceived in relation to one’s own sensory and conceptual faculties. Never does one encounter the radically and absolutely “other,” for apprehension of the other is always dependent upon one’s own subjective perspective. Thus, upon fathoming the emptiness of inherent existence of all waking phenomena, one maintains throughout the day a sense of the dreamlike quality of all events, recognizing the profoundly intersubjective nature of all relationships with other beings and the environment.²⁹

As in modern techniques for inducing lucid dreaming, the daytime practice of dream yoga is complemented with nighttime practices.³⁰ Although many specific methods are taught, one common to the modern techniques and to dream yoga is to fall asleep with the strong resolution to apprehend the dream state as such while actually dreaming. It can be difficult to recognize the dream for what it is and difficult to maintain that awareness without either waking up immediately or fading back into a nonlucid dream, but when success in this practice is achieved, it often comes with a sense of great freedom and exhilaration. One now knows that one’s own body and everything else in the dream are manifestations of one’s own substrate consciousness, and even with no sensory experience of

the body lying in bed, one inferentially knows it is there, outside the context of the dream. In a nonlucid dream one has a very definite sense of one's own locality: other people in the dream are apprehended as being really "over there." But in a lucid dream, one is aware that everyone is an individual expression of some facet of the substrate consciousness.

To clarify this point: other people and objects in my dream are not manifestations of my mind as one more character in the dream; rather, they, like myself in the dream, are manifestations of my substrate consciousness, while I am asleep *outside* the dream. The dreamed self's mind still seems to be local, but in a lucid dream the dreamer is aware that his or her mind pervades all people, things, and events. So the lucid dreamer is, so to speak, localized as the dreamed persona, but nonlocalized in the knowledge of the self as being the dreamer. Another way of saying this is that as a dreamed persona, one engages in *intersubjective* relations with others in the dream, but with the recognition of oneself as the dreamer, one knows all these encounters to be *intrasubjective*. A lucid dreamer is aware of both these perspectives, and in the awareness that transcends the duality of self and others in the dream, enters into an "I-thou" relationship with the other, who is none other than the self.

This insight into nonduality enables one to see the fallacy of viewing others in the dream as being independently worthy of either hatred or attachment. If someone else in the dream has done something reprehensible, the agent of that act is not absolutely different from oneself and has no independent existence whatsoever. Likewise, if there is someone very attractive in the dream, out of habit, one may still experience desire, but know that the object of craving is a creation of one's own substrate consciousness. To overcome that habitual craving, one must thoroughly familiarize oneself with the insight that the object has no independent, objective existence.³¹ When this insight penetrates waking experience as well, this opens up the possibility of cultivating an "I-thou" relationship with others throughout the course of one's life.

Particularly in a lucid dream, one has the sense of perceiving events in the "private theater" of the mind, but Buddhism nevertheless maintains that this theater is pervious to external, spatially and temporally nonlocal influences. For example, this tradition accepts the possibility of precognition and remote viewing occurring in a dream, as well as during the waking state. Given the possibility of outside influences impinging, the

dreamscape may be likened to an open-air theater, in which one may not only perceive what is taking place on stage but also hear crickets from the surrounding fields and jets flying overhead. Likewise, during the waking state, the field of mental perception—that domain in which one experiences mental imagery while awake and dreams while asleep—is equally open to outside influences. This raises the fascinating question as to the whereabouts of the borders of the mind and how porous those borders are, if any can be found.

In the practice of dream yoga there are further techniques to be applied after one has apprehended the dream state for what it is, but here I shall focus on the practice of cultivating lucid dreamless sleep. Padmasambhava writes:

When you are fast asleep, if the vivid, indivisibly clear and empty light of deep sleep is recognized, the clear light is apprehended. One who remains without losing the experience of meditation all the time while asleep, without the advent of dreams or latent predispositions, is one who dwells in the nature of the clear light of sleep.

What he is describing is the nature of primordial consciousness when it is perceived devoid of content and conceptual structuring. This is called the “clear light” of awareness, about which Padmasambhava writes, “The nature of the clear light, even after the stream of thoughts has ceased and you have gone asleep, is a clear and empty phenomenon of the dream-state, which is like the center of limpid space, remaining nakedly, without an object.”³³

While the cultivation of meditative quiescence alone may withdraw the mind into the relative ground state of awareness, known as the substrate consciousness or ground of becoming, that does not ensure that one will actually ascertain the clear, empty, luminous nature of primordial consciousness. That is one of the goals of dream yoga, which is practiced while sleeping, and it is also the goal of the Great Perfection, which is primarily practiced while in the waking state.

THE GREAT PERFECTION

The theory and practice of the Great Perfection is based upon and perfectly compatible with the Middle Way view discussed earlier. The Great Perfection is considered by many Tibetans as the pinnacle of Buddhist insight, and it challenges the view that the human mind exists inherently independent of all conceptual frameworks. Cutting to the core of our very identity, the practice of the Great Perfection probes into the deeply held assumption that there is such a thing as an inherently real, localized, ego-centered mind.

The classic strategy for investigating the ontological status of the mind according to this tradition is to examine firsthand the mode of origination, the location, and the mode of dissolution of mental events, including awareness itself.³⁴ A primary challenge in this practice is to distinguish, by means of penetrating mindfulness, between what is perceptually given and what is conceptually superimposed upon perceptual experience. In this mode of contemplative inquiry, one focuses entirely on the *phenomena* of mental events, attending closely to the precise manner in which they arise in the field of mental perception. This contemplative inquiry is guided by such questions as, “Do they arise all at once or gradually? Can their place of origin be identified? What is the nature of that out of which these mental events arise?” In English, as in Sanskrit and Tibetan, it is often said that thoughts and emotions emerge from, or are produced by, the mind. One now seeks out the referent of “the mind” from which mental events allegedly arise.

In the second phase of this investigation, one attends closely to the location of mental events. Once again, one seeks to let *experience* answer this question, as opposed to preconceptions. Many neuroscientists claim that all mental events are located in the brain, and the basis for their assertion is the wide range of mind-brain correlates that they have ingeniously discovered. But the fact that two events, A and B, are

temporally or causally correlated does not logically or empirically require that B is located in A or that A is located in B. Thus, the close correlations between mental and neural events no more require that the mental events be located in the neural events than they require that the neural events be located in the mental events. And the temporal or causal correlation of the two certainly does not necessitate the conclusion that they are equivalent!

Another recent scientific hypothesis is that mental processes are embodied in the sensorimotor activity of the organism and are embedded in the environment. In the practice of the Great Perfection one puts all such speculations to the experiential test by closely examining the location of mental events firsthand. This inquiry is led by questions such as, “Are mental events located in the body? If so, in exactly which part of the body are they experienced as being present? If they are found to exist outside the body, where in the environment are they specifically located? Does the awareness of mental events have the same location as those objects of awareness?” Mental events are commonly said to exist “in the mind,” so in this practice one meticulously examines the nature of the perceptual space in which they purportedly take place. It is worth noting that such contemplative inquiry is commonly practiced while sitting motionless, so sensorimotor activity is held to a minimum. This has been found to facilitate attentional stability, but it certainly does not, by itself, decrease the amount of mental activity, which would be surprising if such activity were actually located in sensorimotor processes.

Finally, in this sequence of investigations, one examines how mental events disappear, whether gradually or suddenly, and inspects that into which they disappear. Some Buddhist writings suggest that they return to the substrate consciousness, where they are stored as propensities, or latent impulses. In this practice one is once again seeking out the real referent of the word “mind.”

The essence of the Great Perfection practice of investigating the nature of the mind is stated succinctly by Padmasambhava:

While steadily maintaining the gaze, place the awareness unwaveringly, steadily, clearly, nakedly and fixedly without having anything on which to meditate in the sphere of space. When stability increases, examine the consciousness that is stable. Then gently release and relax. Again place it steadily and steadfastly observe the

consciousness of that moment. What is the nature of that mind? Let it steadfastly observe itself. Is it something clear and steady or is it an emptiness that is nothing? Is there something there to recognize? Look again and report your experience to me!

By means of such inquiry, Buddhist contemplatives have come to the conclusion that the mind and awareness itself are not intrinsically identifiable. When sought out as inherently existing things or events, they are not to be found. This is equally true of all other perceptual and conceptual objects of awareness. The mind, like all other phenomena, is discovered to be empty, but it is not a mere vacuity. Rather, it is luminous, cognizant, and empty like boundless space, with no center or periphery, suffused with transparent light. Out of this luminous space of nonlocal awareness, all phenomena arise in relation to the conceptual frameworks within which they are designated. But neither the objects of awareness nor awareness itself can be said to exist independently of their conceptual designations. Recognition of this fundamental nature of the world of experience lends a dreamlike quality to life as a whole, in which all reified distinctions between subject and object, self and other, vanish.

Once one has recognized the lack of inherent existence of the mind and all mental objects, one is ready to be introduced to the nature of primordial consciousness that transcends all conceptual constructs, including the notions of existence and nonexistence. This is the central theme of practice of the Great Perfection and is considered the deepest of all insights. Padmasambhava points out the nature of primordial consciousness as follows:

To introduce this by pointing it out directly, past consciousness has disappeared without a trace. Moreover, future realization is unarisen, and in the freshness of its own present, unfabricated way of being, there is the ordinary consciousness of the present. When it peers into itself, with this observation there is a vividness in which nothing is seen. This awareness is direct, naked, vivid, unestablished, empty, limpid luminosity, unique, nondual clarity and emptiness. It is not permanent, but unestablished. It is not nihilistic, but radiantly vivid. It is not one, but is manifoldly aware and clear. It is not manifold, but is

indivisibly of one taste. It is none other than this very self-awareness. This is an authentic introduction to the primordial nature of being.

In this intimate exchange between contemplative mentor and student, the mentor ideally speaks directly out of immediate experience of pure awareness, and by receiving this introduction, the student identifies his or her own primordial consciousness firsthand. Unlike in conventional modes of cognition, that which is apprehended and that which apprehends are identical. Such a mentor–student encounter is a paradigmatic “I–thou” relationship, in which both realize a nonlocal reality that transcends the individuation of the subjects. But the realization of primordial consciousness can also occur without engaging with another person. It does not arise from the interaction of two subjects, but rather transcends the distinctions among all subjects and objects.

In the practice of the Great Perfection, close attention is paid to the spaces in which physical and mental phenomena appear to originate, abide, and disappear. At the outset there seem to be two distinct kinds of space: external space, in which one experiences the environment, other people, and even one’s own body, and internal space, in which one experiences one’s own private mental processes, such as thoughts, emotions, mental imagery, and dreams. According to Buddhist theory as a whole, all outer, public events and all inner, private events are equally “natural,” in the sense of arising in dependence upon prior causes and conditions. The notion that only matter and its properties are “natural,” while anything immaterial is “unnatural” or “supernatural,” is utterly alien to the Buddhist understanding of the world.

According to the Buddhist view, the natural world is filled with myriad phenomena, many of which are composed of atoms and their emergent properties, but also many of which are not. Contemporary examples of such immaterial phenomena include not only consciousness and other mental events but also such phenomena as justice, information, numbers, geometrical forms, the mathematical laws of nature, space, and time. Buddhism does not endorse materialism; neither does it embrace Cartesian dualism. It can rather be understood as a kind of empirical pluralism, recognizing that the natural world is far too rich to be categorized as being of only one or two types of substance. And unlike the Western scientific tradition, the Great Perfection, like the Middle Way view on which it is

based, avoids the reification of any kind of substance—mental, material, or otherwise.

Upon investigating the nature of external and internal space by means of the practice of the Great Perfection, one discovers that these two spaces are also empty of any inherent nature. They are fabricated by conceptual imputations, and there is no objectively real boundary between them. This realization enables one to identify what is called the “mysterious space,” which is the nonduality of external and internal space. A central aim of the Great Perfection is to maintain recognition of this nondual space of primordial consciousness not only while in meditation but also while actively engaging with the environment and other sentient beings. Dwelling in such a realization has been found to open up the reservoir of all-embracing, unconditional loving-kindness and compassion that is innate to the ultimate ground state of awareness. The distinction between wisdom and compassion has now vanished, and there is no bondage anywhere in sight.

All the previous practices of meditative quiescence, the four applications of mindfulness, the four immeasurables, and dream yoga are said to culminate in this one realization. Primordial consciousness is the alpha and omega of all such practice. Its gradual realization is the essence of the entire sequence of practices, and its perfect actualization is the final fruition. The immensely rich world of diverse natural phenomena, all arising as dependently related events, is seen as the play of this nonlocal awareness, which is fully present in each individual. Thus, according to this contemplative tradition, to know oneself is to know others. To know oneself is to know the whole of reality as an expression of the nondual wisdom and compassion of the clear light of awareness.

6. WORLDS OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY

This essay was first published under the title “Intersubjectivity in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism” in *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8, no. 5–7 (2001): 209–30.

[1](#) A detailed discussion of all five of these systems of meditation is presented in B. Alan Wallace, *Genuine Happiness: Meditation as the Path to Fulfillment* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2005).

[2](#) For a more elaborate discussion of meditative quiescence and its relation to contemplative insight, see Tsongkhapa, *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2002), 3:13–26; B. Alan Wallace, *Balancing the Mind: A Tibetan Buddhist Approach to Refining Attention* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2005) and *The Attention Revolution: Unlocking the Power of the Focused Mind* (Boston: Wisdom, 2006).

[3](#) *Aṅguttara Nikāya* V, 201ff.

[4](#) Paravaḥera Vajirañāṇa, *Buddhist Meditation in Theory and Practice*, 249.

[5](#) Peter Harvey, *The Selfless Mind*, 160.

[6](#) See Paravaḥera Vajirañāṇa, *Buddhist Meditation in Theory and Practice* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Buddhist Missionary Society, 1975), 151, 327–28, David J. Kalupahana, *The Principles of Buddhist Psychology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 112–15, and *Aṅguttara Nikāya* A.I.9–10, A.I.61.

[7](#) *Aṅguttara Nikāya* A.I.10–11.

[8](#) See the section “Quiescence According to Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga” in Wallace, *Balancing the Mind*; James Haughton Woods, *The Yoga System of Patañjali* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983); and Robert K.C. Forman, ed., *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

- [9](#) Soma Thera, *The Way of Mindfulness: The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and Commentary* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1975); R. M. L. Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001), 29–68.
- [10](#) *Udāna* 8.
- [11](#) Thera, *Satipaṭṭhānasutta*, 5.
- [12](#) For a discussion of observing the four subjects of mindfulness inwardly, outwardly, and both inwardly and outwardly, see Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1973), 58–60.
- [13](#) William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890; reprint, New York: Dover, 1950), 322.
- [14](#) *Ibid.*, 290–91.
- [15](#) William James, “A World of Pure Experience,” in *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 195.
- [16](#) *Milindapañha* 37–38.
- [17](#) Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga*, I:IX; Harvey B. Aronson, *Love and Sympathy in Theravāda Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980); B. Alan Wallace, *The Four Immeasurables: Cultivating a Boundless Heart*, rev. ed. (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2004).
- [18](#) Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (1937; reprint, New York: Touchstone, 1996).
- [19](#) *Udāna* 47.
- [20](#) For a fascinating account of a cross-cultural dialogue with the Dalai Lama on this theme, see Daniel Goleman, ed., *Healing Emotions: Conversations with the Dalai Lama on Mindfulness, Emotions, and Health* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997), 189–207.
- [21](#) B. Alan Wallace, *Buddhism with an Attitude: The Tibetan Seven-Point Mind-Training* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2001), 154–63.
- [22](#) Śāntideva, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*, trans. Vesna A. Wallace and B. Alan Wallace (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 1997), VIII:94.
- [23](#) Jay L. Garfield, trans., *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- [24](#) Glenn H. Mullin, trans., *Tsongkhapa’s Six Yogas of Naropa* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 1996), 174.

[25](#) Cf. Paul C. W. Davies, “An Overview of the Contributions of John Archibald Wheeler,” in *Science and Ultimate Reality: Quantum Theory, Cosmology and Complexity, Honoring John Wheeler’s 90th Birthday*, ed. John D. Barrow, Paul C. W. Davies, and Charles L. Harper Jr. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 8–10.

[26](#) This definition is taken from Hilary Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*, ed. James Conant (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 30.

[27](#) *Ibid.*, 28.

[28](#) Hilary Putnam, “Replies and Comments,” *Erkenntnis* 34, no. 3 (1991): 407. I have discussed this point at greater length in the chapter “The World of Human Experience” in B. Alan Wallace, *The Taboo of Subjectivity: Toward a New Science of Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[29](#) Traditional Tibetan Buddhist accounts of the practice of dream yoga can be found in Padmasambhava, *Natural Liberation: Padmasambhava’s Teachings on the Six Bardos*, commentary by Gyatrul Rinpoche; trans. B. Alan Wallace (Boston: Wisdom, 1998), part 2, ch. 4, and Mullin, *Tsongkhapa’s Six Yogas of Naropa*, 172–84.

[30](#) For a clear, modern account of the theory and practice of lucid dreaming, see Stephen LaBerge and Howard Rheingold, *Exploring the World of Lucid Dreaming* (New York: Ballantine, 1990).

[31](#) This same point is made regarding one’s realization of emptiness during the waking state in Śāntideva, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*, IX:30–32.

[32](#) Padmasambhava, *Natural Liberation*, 164.

[33](#) *Ibid.*, 168.

[34](#) Detailed, traditional presentations of this mode of investigation are found in the “Insight” chapter in Padmasambhava, *Natural Liberation*, and the “Insight” chapter of the seventeenth-century classic by Karma Chagmé, *A Spacious Path to Freedom: Practical Instructions on the Union of Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga*, commentary by Gyatrul Rinpoche; trans. B. Alan Wallace (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 1998).

[35](#) Padmasambhava, *Natural Liberation*, 116.

[36](#) *Ibid.*, 108.

MINDING CLOSELY

The Four Applications of Mindfulness

B. Alan Wallace



Introduction

THE TEACHINGS on the theory and practice of mindfulness belong to the class of methods for cultivating insight (Skt. *vipashyana*). This book will give you an introduction to the vast theoretical framework and profound motivation of these contemplative inquiries, as well as an experiential taste of their rewards. My aspiration is that you will learn to engage effectively and confidently in a range of mindfulness practices. If you find them to be meaningful and beneficial, I hope you will be inspired to continue applying these transformative practices to all aspects of your life—the potential benefits are unlimited.

BALANCING THEORY AND PRACTICE

As we did in the retreat in 2008, we will begin here by developing the ability to be grounded and relaxed, a process of stabilizing and clarifying the mind. Mindfulness is a foundation for all other kinds of meditation. The practices we will explore do not require any religious beliefs; they can be used by atheists or by devout, fundamentalist followers of any religion—anyone who would like to improve attentional balance. Our supporting techniques will include the development of universally valued qualities of the heart: loving-kindness, compassion, and empathy. Developing an open heart is a worthy goal for any human being, regardless of creed or philosophy.

Practices to develop insight into the actual nature of phenomena

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incorporate more theory, but you need not swear your allegiance to the theory prior to utilizing the practices. These methods require empirical investigation: you must test the theory to see if the results are beneficial. By exploring the nature of the mind in deeper states of consciousness and dreams, you will finally arrive at the very nature of awareness itself.

These are fundamental teachings that make good sense, with rapidly evident pragmatic value. We need not practice for months or years to see the results. The techniques described here will deliver practical benefits in daily life, even without considering the possibility of transcending ordinary existence. My teachers, including His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Gen Lamrimpa,¹¹ Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey, Geshe Rabten, and Gyatrul Rinpoche,¹² have all strongly emphasized the importance of laying solid foundations as the prerequisite to more advanced practices.

I have attempted to find a middle way between the rich theoretical framework of scholarly analysis that illuminates the Buddhist understanding of mindfulness and actual engagement in meditative practice. Theoretical analysis has many merits, but there is no benefit unless the theory is put into practice. On the other hand, the practice of mindfulness is impoverished without being rooted in the vast, fertile field of contemplative wisdom that has developed and perfected these techniques.

The vitality of this middle way emerges spontaneously as the integration of theory and practice. One's experiences in actual practice resonate with reports from past adepts, bringing theoretical concepts to life. At the same time, theoretical analysis provides the context necessary for understanding one's own unique experiences. The synergies between theory and practice are powerful and dynamic.

MATRIX OF SKILLFUL MEANS

Mindfulness practices do not exist in isolation but are embedded within a matrix of diverse techniques with various purposes and prerequisites. These can be grouped into five primary categories: (1) refining the attention, (2) achieving insight through mindfulness, (3) cultivating a good

heart, (4) exploring the ultimate nature of reality, and (5) realizing the Great Perfection—the culmination of the path to enlightenment.

Shamatha: Cultivating Meditative Quiescence and Samadhi

The first of these categories, historically as well as in practice, is meditative quiescence (Skt. *shamatha*), which is developed by training and refining the attention. The further goal of this contemplative technology is to achieve a state of highly focused and refined attention (Skt. *samadhi*). A refined mind becomes an accurate instrument for investigating the nature of reality, just as a properly cleaned and calibrated telescope provides the clearest possible observations of the cosmos.

The development of attention was mastered in ancient India, which led the world in formalizing such knowledge. Indian yogis were developing methods to refine their samadhi for hundreds of years before the Buddha's time. Contemplative practice had become a highly mature and sophisticated matrix of disciplines. These traditions were extensively adapted and developed as they spread throughout Asia, and they represent only one of India's extraordinary contributions to the world. Many generations of seekers found enormous benefits in extended samadhi practices that reached progressively subtler states. From the beginnings of shamatha, they strove to achieve increasingly refined absorptions in the form realm, where the object of meditation has a form, and in the subtler formless realm.

Mindfulness practice begins with the foundation of shamatha, which supports the development and cultivation of samadhi. Methods for developing meditative quiescence are not exclusive to Buddhist traditions, such as Theravada, Tibetan Vajrayana, Chinese Chan, and Japanese Zen; they also exist in the contemplative traditions of Vedanta, Christianity, Sufism, and Taoism. In fact, forms of shamatha are found to varying extents in all the world's great contemplative traditions. Practitioners have long recognized that if one wishes to devote oneself to meditation, the untrained mind presents an obstacle. The ordinary mind alternates between extremes of hyperactive mental activity and collapse into lethargy and sleep. During the daytime, one agitation follows

another, and at night we are comatose; the next morning, we repeat the cycle. Ordinary people call this life. Contemplatives have identified it as the normal human condition.

The mind we bring to meditation needs refinement, and that is the purpose of shamatha. These extremely practical methods do not require us to retreat to a cave. They can be enormously helpful in our daily lives, personal relationships, and professional endeavors, as they transcend all barriers of religious traditions, affiliations, and beliefs. Scientific materialists, atheists, and religious fundamentalists alike will experience tangible benefits from a serviceable mind that is stable and clear. Such a mind can be applied more effectively to everything. Shamatha is also the indispensable foundation for more advanced practices, such as vipashyana.

Vipashyana: Achieving Insight through Mindfulness

Historically, the Buddha himself started with the development of samadhi, but then he moved on. Bear in mind that his world was well populated with contemplatives. Many were wandering ascetics, who were often countercultural figures, living on one meal a day and devoting themselves to the pursuit of truth. With so much competition, how did Buddha Shakyamuni distinguish himself over the others of his era? Of course there are many reasons, but from a contemplative's perspective, he stands out because he refused to take samadhi itself as the goal.

The Buddha's greatest innovation was to assert that the practice of samadhi—single-pointed concentration with highly refined attention, which enables very subtle states of consciousness that transcend the physical senses and lead to states of equanimity and bliss—only temporarily suspends the mental afflictions (Skt. *kleshas*). Instead, the Buddha sought lasting freedom. Standing upon the shoulders of the contemplative giants of his era, the young Siddhartha Gautama developed and refined his samadhi, but then he purposefully applied this stable, clear, and highly focused instrument to an experiential investigation. By closely inspecting his own mind, his body, and the relationships among mind, body, and environment, he founded the genre of meditation for cultivating insight, or vipashyana.

As the Buddha formulated it, insight practice begins with a solid

foundation in ethics and a wholesome, noninjurious way of life. Upon this basis, the attention is refined into a reliable tool for investigation and employed to probe the ultimate nature of reality, with the mind at the very center of experiential reality. The Buddha's great innovation was the unification of shamatha and vipashyana. Prior to this discovery, contemplative inquiry into the nature of reality had not been linked with samadhi. The Buddha asserted that the fusion of shamatha with vipashyana is the key to liberation—an irreversible healing and purification of the mind. If the afflictive mental tendencies are irreversibly vanquished by severing the root of suffering, lasting freedom will be attained.

This search for insight and wisdom is not done for the sake of knowledge itself; it is a search to deepen our experiential understanding. Life is short, and we have many problems. The news media continuously remind us of the devastation of suffering. Profound outer and inner healing is needed. We are seeking the knowledge to live in harmony and flourish as human beings, in a balanced relationship with our environment. Mindfulness, the purpose of our expedition in this book, is central to both theory and practice in the traditions of Chan, Zen, and Vajrayana; the four close applications of mindfulness constitute the foundational vipashyana practices common to all schools of Buddhism.

A Good Heart: Cultivating the Four Immeasurables

The third category includes the practices of skillful means, which act as a counterbalance to insight and wisdom practices. This balance is symbolized by placing one's hands in the mudra of meditative equipoise, an element that appears in many Buddhist images. The Buddha and other great adepts are often shown with the left hand supporting the right and the tips of the two thumbs touching. The left hand symbolizes wisdom, and the right hand symbolizes skillful means, the essence of which is compassion. The union of wisdom and compassion is symbolized by the touching of the thumbs.

The cultivation of a good heart centers on what are known in Sanskrit as the four sublime abodes (Skt. *brahmanivharas*), often called the four immeasurables: loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. The Mahayana tradition adds the vast intent of the spirit of

awakening (Skt. *bodhicitta*), the altruistic motivation of a bodhisattva to bring all beings to the state of enlightenment. Also included here is the practice of mind training, or *lojong* (Tib. *blo sbyong*),¹³ which consists of techniques to transmute all experiences of felicity and adversity into sustenance for one's spiritual growth.

Emptiness and Dependent Origination: Exploring the Ultimate Nature of Reality

The fourth category concerns a deeper dimension of insight, drawn from the Mahayana tradition's *Perfection of Wisdom* sutras (Skt. *Prajñāparamita*). Although it's generally translated as "wisdom," the Sanskrit term *prajñā* denotes intelligent discernment resulting from study, contemplation, and meditation.¹⁴ The perfection (Skt. *paramita*) of *prajñā* culminates in the abolishment of delusion by direct realization of the nature of reality. The great Middle Way (Skt. *Madhyamaka*) teachings, promulgated by Nagarjuna (ca. 150–250 CE) and others, include quintessential meditations to develop insight into emptiness (Skt. *śūnyatā*) and dependent origination (Skt. *pratītyasamutpāda*).

One of the finest expositions of vipashyana practice is presented in a text by the extraordinary seventeenth-century Tibetan contemplative and scholar Karma Chagmé (1613–1678),¹⁵ and it appears in *A Spacious Path to Freedom*,¹⁶ which I translated under the guidance of Gyatrul Rinpoche. This teaching comes from the Tibetan Mahamudra¹⁷ lineage, which accords philosophically with the Middle Way view. In the chapter on the cultivation of insight, the author probes deeply into the quintessential nature of the mind itself, striking at the very core of duality, in a mere twenty pages. This is an ontological probe: What is the relationship between the mind and what appears to the mind? What is the true nature of existence?

Complementing these daytime practices are the very potent nighttime practices of lucid dreaming. The Buddha said that all phenomena are like a dream. Becoming lucid within a dream entails realizing that you are dreaming rather than mistaking your experience for waking reality. The ancient Buddhist practices of dream yoga have been augmented

by modern sleep researchers, such as Stephen LaBerge at Stanford University, who was the first scientist to empirically demonstrate the reality of lucid dreaming under laboratory conditions.

The Great Perfection: Accomplishing Buddha Nature

The fifth category concerns buddha nature, the deepest level of our own awareness, also called pristine awareness (Tib. *rig pa*). The practices of the Great Perfection, or *Dzogchen* (Tib. *rdzogs chen*), are said to represent the culmination of all lower practices, and their ultimate result is the realization of all buddhas—enlightenment.

PATH OF INSIGHT

Our expedition here belongs primarily to the second category of vipashyana, or insight meditation. In most cases, these five types of practice are best approached in sequence. However, they can each be explored profitably at any time. Every individual is different, with a unique psyche, various innate abilities, and diverse inclinations. Some people immediately gravitate to the practice of the four immeasurables in order to become more loving and compassionate. Others wish to transform their lives without abandoning their families, jobs, and responsibilities. Each person must follow his or her own heart in choosing the practices that are most meaningful and beneficial.

Many Methods

A single right way to develop insight in Buddhism does not exist. The Buddha's opening statement in his primary discourse on mindfulness begins, "This is the direct path," which some have mistranslated as "This is the only path."¹⁸ The Buddha taught a multitude of different methods. Vipashyana is a direct path, but there are many levels of vipashyana practice and other approaches as well. These diverse techniques do not lead to the same result any more than diverse physical experiments lead to the same conclusion. Various degrees of sophistication and types of practice will produce differing results.

Our approach will be based on the metaphysical realism¹⁹ of an early

Indian Buddhist school called the *Sautrantika*, a Sanskrit term that means “those who rely on the sutras.” This philosophy asserts that real things are causally efficacious, while the imaginary, conceptual fluff we superimpose upon things has no causal efficacy of its own. This is a very pragmatic worldview in which to embed our practice, even though it ultimately suffers from some subtle, but important, contradictions.

The four close applications of mindfulness—to the body, feelings, mental events, and all phenomena—are foundational for the practice of vipashyana. Nowhere in these teachings on vipashyana practice does the Buddha say, “And now analyze the nature of the self.” It never comes up. Instead, he encourages us to closely apply mindfulness to the body, inspecting it carefully in many ways. One strategy involves an analysis of the four elements, which are probed by direct observation as well as by the imagination. Each bodily part is examined closely, searching for anything that is suggestive of a person or a self. Am I the hand, heart, liver, kidney, lung, blood, bone, or marrow? If I were to donate an organ to you, would I be giving some of my self to you?

Pursuit of such questions requires direct observation of the phenomena that constitute the body. By carefully scrutinizing both our own and others’ bodies in myriad ways, mustering intelligence and insight, we can see all there is to see of the body. Having so analyzed it, we are directed to see nakedly everything we call the body, its parts, its functions, and so forth: they are simply impermanent phenomena arising and not true sources of happiness. Nowhere among any of them—including the brain—can we find the self, I, or mine. Without directly addressing how we conceive of ourselves, we simply investigate the phenomena habitually grasped as “I and mine,” to see what is actually there.

It is easy to be trapped in rationalizations, saying, “Of course, I know my brain is not me,” while behaving as though it is. Or one might conceptualize: “I think, therefore I am,” or “I have imagination and free will,” or “I have a soul and will be reborn in heaven.” But when we actually observe the entire array of impersonal phenomena nakedly, without the conceptually projected body, we find that none of it is the self, I, or mine.

Next, we will apply this same scrutiny to the origination, presence, and dissolution of feelings, by conducting a precise, penetrating investigation, both internally and externally, to see if there is anything in the nature of feelings that indicates the self, I, or mine. When we see feelings nakedly, we see that they too are simply phenomena.

Then we will direct the searchlight of mindfulness toward the gamut of mental phenomena, investigating every possible phenomenon from the first-person perspective. When we scrutinize objective and subjective phenomena to see whether they belong to a self, are generated by a self, or constitute a self, can we find any evidence? Once again, the conclusion is no—they are simply phenomena.

Finally, in the close application of mindfulness to all phenomena, we will examine the entanglement of our body with our feelings, which are enmeshed with thoughts, emotions, and mental processes, which are further intertwined with similar phenomena in other people. At this moment, your thought processes are arising in relationship to my words, which appear in dependence upon your visual perceptions, vocabulary, and experience—our phenomena are intimately entangled.

By recognizing the fact that internally and externally, all the relationships among various facets of reality are simply phenomena, one finally sees that there is no direct evidence for an autonomous self. Furthermore, one finds no indirect evidence or influence of an autonomous self. Everything operates quite naturally without one. This is not an intellectual conclusion but a direct perception.

Real or Not

The Sautrantika philosophy provides a simple, practical way to determine what is real. Those phenomena that can cause effects are categorized as real, a category coextensive with many others, including phenomena that are compound, impermanent, and those that can be directly perceived. Something that we simply imagine is not a real thing; however, when we directly perceive a dreamscape, it is as real—that is, as causally efficacious—as daytime reality.

Here’s an example: This cup that I directly perceive visually and tactually, as I sip my tea, is effectively containing my tea—it’s a real cup.

The fact that the cup is mine can't be seen, no matter how carefully we scrutinize the cup, so it's merely a designation—not real. Even if the cup were imprinted “ALAN'S CUP,” it might not belong to me. Ownership is strictly a matter of conventions that are conceptually superimposed upon a real cup. The result of investigating the phenomena of immediate experience is to see that they are all empty of self, I, and mine.

At first, the goal of vipashyana is to realize the true nature of the experiential world. When we arrive at the Middle Way view, vipashyana becomes a deeper, ontological probe. We seek to realize experientially whether anything whatsoever has its own inherent nature. This is not simply an intellectual exercise and not something to be accepted or assumed. We directly investigate whether anything in the universe, including elementary particles, exists by its own inherent nature. Obviously, this involves a different type of vipashyana with a different strategy.

I have heard religious studies scholars who do not meditate express the view that meditation is brainwashing oneself with doctrine. It is true that meditation can be used in that way. This is why a central theme in Buddhism is the need to strike a balance between intelligence and faith. With intelligence but no faith, one would continue to question everything, never develop certainty, and fail to accomplish anything. Excessive skepticism sabotages one's pursuit of understanding.

On the other hand, there is a real danger of overzealous faith that suffocates intelligence. People who simply believe whatever they are told, without asking questions, will discover dogma rather than knowledge. The Buddha did not claim that his teachings were sacrosanct. Come and see for yourself, he said; hear my teachings, but test them, as if you were testing gold.²⁰ In classical India, a purchaser of gold would test its purity by melting it, curting it, and rubbing it on a touchstone to avoid deception. Similarly, the stakes are high when we choose to follow this path. We are devoting precious days of our lives to this pursuit. It would be tragic if an ineffective teacher or corrupted teachings were to trap us in a dead end. After carefully verifying the teacher and teaching, we can proceed with confidence. We are not told to begin with the axiom: The Buddha was right—there's no self. We must actually investigate the

issue. We must first understand exactly what type of self he refuted and invited us to challenge. Then we must see for ourselves.

As we gain clear insight, two different types of criteria can be used to evaluate our findings: epistemic and pragmatic. Epistemic criteria involve the application of intelligence to check for truth or falsity. But in the Buddhist view, life is too short to pursue knowledge for its own sake. Therefore, as we pursue knowledge, refined attention, and skills such as shamatha, we should never forget the second criterion, which is pragmatic value. How does it affect my life? Does it improve the quality of my mind, behavior, clarity of awareness, or openness of heart in some tangible way? Both epistemic and pragmatic evaluations are essential.

FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

The foundation of all Buddhist teachings and practices is known as the Four Noble Truths. I was first exposed to these inaugural teachings of the Buddha in a one-year undergraduate course on India, taught by an anthropologist. When we got to Buddhism, I learned that the Buddha was quite a pessimist—India was such a horrible place that you couldn't blame him—and he asserted that everything was suffering. The Buddha's First Noble Truth was not very appealing to me!

Later, I was exposed to Buddhism as taught by those who understood it, which gave me a very different perspective. In Sanskrit, the Buddha's First Noble Truth simply means unsatisfactoriness (Skt. *dukkha*), but it is usually translated as suffering. This statement of truth is refreshingly honest and unambiguous. When hearing teachings about the nature of unsatisfactoriness, suffering, and discontent, if people simply cannot relate to this, then Buddhism is probably not for them. Most of us can easily recognize the nature of suffering in the form of feelings and experiences we do not want.

From the perspective of biology, pain is essential. If you didn't get hungry, you'd starve to death. If you walked into a fire and didn't feel pain, you'd probably die of your burns, and you wouldn't pass on your genes. For living organisms, pain is a powerful motivator that trumps

Excerpts from “Exploring the Mind”
In *The Taboo of Subjectivity:*
Toward a New Science of Consciousness
By B. Alan Wallace, Pages 103-112, 115-118

Vision-Induced, Sustained Attention

Unlike modern science, the contemplative traditions of the world have long devoted themselves to the challenge of developing means of refining mental perception with various methods of training the attention, and they have concluded that the faculty of attention is not a fixed characteristic of the individual, as [William] James assumed. One array of such techniques that is most closely connected to our sensory experience of the physical world has long been practiced in Theravāda Buddhism, which remains a living tradition to this day in southeast Asia. Buddhaghosa, an Indian contemporary of Augustine and the most authoritative commentator in the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, gives an elaborate account of techniques for developing sustained attention using emblems of various elements of sensory experience. Specifically, he lists ten types of emblems corresponding to the four elements of earth (solidity), water (fluidity), fire (heat), and air (motility); the four primary colors of blue, yellow, red, and white; and finally light and space.

To describe briefly one example of such practice, in the case of focusing on an earth emblem, one first fixes one’s gaze on a disc prepared of clay representing the entirety of the element of earth, or solidity. One repeatedly gazes at this device until an afterimage of it appears in the mind as clearly when the eyes are shut as when they are open. This mental image, the *sign* of the earth element, becomes the chief meditative object during the preliminary training in sustained attention. When one first crosses the threshold into meditative stabilization (*dhyāna*), there arises to the mind’s eye a more refined sign of the earth element. This image, the *counterpart sign*, is an appearance that arises purely from mental perception. It has no color, no appearance of solidity, and none of the blemishes of the original earth emblem that were evident in the earlier mental image. This counterpart sign is regarded as a mental representation of the primal quality of the element of earth.

In this Theravāda account, the development of sustained attention is closely linked to three kinds of signs that are the objects of one’s attention. The first of these is the sign for preliminary practice, which in the case of the earth emblem is the actual physical symbol of earth used for this practice. The second is the acquired sign, which in the case

of the earth emblem is the afterimage that appears as a precise copy of the first sign, with all its specific limitations, such as its molded form, color, and shape. The third is the counterpart sign, which is a subtle, emblematic representation of the whole quality of the element it symbolizes.

Theravāda Buddhist contemplatives claim that physical reality may be mentally altered by the contemplative manipulation of the counterpart signs. The role of meditative stabilization in the discipline of contemplation may be likened to the role of mathematics in the physical sciences. Without knowledge of mathematics and the ability to apply this knowledge in the study of the laws of nature, modern physical science would hardly have progressed as it has. Mathematics is indispensable not only for scientific understanding of the physical world but also for developing the necessary technology to further our knowledge and control of nature. Similarly, meditative stabilization is said to be indispensable for gaining contemplative insight into the nature of physical and mental phenomena; and it is said to allow for the development of various types of extrasensory perception and paranormal abilities that can be used in knowing and controlling nature.

Buddhaghosa explains in detail how the mind is exercised in the use of counterpart signs in order to develop extrasensory perception and paranormal abilities. To take one example, if one wishes to transform a liquid into a solid, one focuses on the counterpart sign of the earth emblem. Then, on emerging from the state of meditative stabilization, one focuses the attention on a body of liquid, such as a lake, and resolves, “Let there be earth”; and it becomes solid, so that one can walk upon it freely.” This contemplative tradition claims that this exertion of the mind’s power over matter can be either private or public, as the contemplative wishes. Thus, abilities such as walking on water and multiplying physical objects are seen not as acts of supernatural intervention but as rational, lawful manipulations of matter by the mind. The fundamental hypothesis is that consciousness is an integral element of the natural world and that it holds extraordinary capacities that run completely counter to commonsense experience. The Theravāda tradition asserts that after the counterpart sign appears and vanishes, one experiences the primal state of the mind from which thoughts originate. This state of awareness is said to be “process-free,” in contrast to the “active mind,” and as it is free from all sense impressions, it shines in its own radiance, which is otherwise obscured because of external influences.

According to this ancient contemplative tradition, it is possible to train the mind so that the attention can be uninterruptedly sustained for hours on end. Such concentrative ability is said to be crucial for fathoming the nature of consciousness and tapping its hidden potentials. These claims of Theravāda Buddhist contemplatives obviously appear

incredible in light of our commonsense assumptions about the mind. Moreover, our indoctrination into scientific materialism tells us that such claims must be false as a matter of principle, without our ever putting those training techniques to the test. Nevertheless, the simple fact is that Western scientists have never conducted the kind of research on developing sustained attention that was done in ancient India and continues to be pursued in southeast Asia today. It is experience alone—not the metaphysical assumptions of Buddhism or scientific materialism—that can determine whether the claims of this contemplative tradition are valid.

Imagination-Induced Sustained Attention

While Buddhaghosa relied heavily on Sinhalese accounts of Buddhist contemplative practice, two of his Indian contemporaries, Vasubandhu and Asanga, belonged to another Buddhist tradition whose records were preserved in Sanskrit. These two contemplatives, who were brothers, are among the most authoritative proponents of the school of Mahāyāna Buddhism, which remains today a living tradition among Tibetans and other Asian societies. Like Buddhaghosa, they assert that, contrary to James's belief, the healthy mind can in fact attend continuously to an object that does not change. However, while one focuses the attention on an unchanging object, there is the possibility of dementia setting in if one allows the potency of attentional vividness to wane. The result of such faulty practice is that one enters a kind of trance, or mental stupor, in which one's intelligence degenerates. The way to avert this danger is by taking on the difficult challenge of enhancing one's attentional vividness without sacrificing attentional stability.

The Mahāyāna Buddhist contemplative tradition uses a wide array of objects for the cultivation of sustained attention, but it especially emphasizes the practice of visualization. Here a clear distinction must be made between the *physical support* for the meditative object and the meditative object itself. Any kind of physical object, commonly one with religious significance, may be used in the preliminary stages of this practice so that one becomes thoroughly familiar with its characteristics. But during the actual training in sustained attention, one visualizes a mental image of that object. Unlike the previously described technique of attending to a visually induced afterimage, this method entails mentally creating and sustaining an image of a physical object, based either on seeing it or on hearing of its characteristics. Rather than viewing a two-dimensional mental image, one imagines the object three-dimensionally, bringing to mind its qualities on all its surfaces. It is commonly asserted in this tradition that the deepest states of samādhi, or single-pointed concentration, can be attained only when the attention is directed upon a mental object, for samādhi is accomplished with mental, not sensory consciousness.

In this form of training, two qualities must be cultivated: attentional stability and vividness. To understand these two qualities in terms of Buddhist psychology, one must note that Buddhist contemplatives commonly assert that the continuum of awareness is composed of successive moments, or pulses, of cognition having finite duration. Vasubandhu asserts that the duration of a single moment of awareness is between one and two milliseconds. For the meditatively untrained mind, however, due to its extreme brevity, no single moment of awareness has the capacity of ascertaining anything. Moreover, in a continuum of perception, many moments of awareness often consist of nonascertaining cognition; that is, objects *appear* to this inattentive awareness but they are not *ascertained*, so one cannot recall them later on.

In terms of this theory, the degree of attentional stability increases in relation to the proportion of ascertaining moments of cognition of the intentional object. That is, as stability increases, fewer and fewer moments of ascertaining consciousness are focused on any other object, making for a homogeneity of moments of ascertaining perception. The degree of attentional vividness corresponds to the ratio of moments of ascertaining to nonascertaining cognition: the higher the frequency of ascertaining perception, the greater the vividness. Thus, the achievement of meditative stabilization entails an exceptionally high density of homogenous moments of ascertaining consciousness. In the contemplative cultivation of sustained attention it is not enough that one's attention is stable and vivid; rather, one must *ascertain* the meditative object. Otherwise, the full potency of attentional vividness cannot arise, and one's samādhi remains impaired.

In order to develop attentional stability and vividness, two mental faculties must be cultivated: mindfulness and introspection. The task of mindfulness is to attend without distraction to a familiar object of attention, while the function of introspection is to monitor the attending awareness. Mindfulness is the most important factor for developing introspection and is the principal means of accomplishing meditative stabilization. When the power of mindfulness has fully emerged, the attention no longer strays from its object. At that time, if one does not continue striving to enhance the power of attentional vividness, one may fall into a complacent, pseudomeditative trance, which may result in dementia.

The two chief obstacles to the cultivation of attentional stability and vividness are excitation and laxity, respectively, and it is the task of introspection to detect the occurrence of these mental processes as soon as they arise. Thus, introspection is often likened to a sentry who stands guard against these two hindrances. Excitation is defined as an agitated mental state, driven by desire for pleasurable stimuli, which acts as an

obstacle to meditative stabilization. Laxity, on the other hand, is said to arise from lethargy and occurs when the attention is slack and one does not apprehend the meditative object with vividness or forcefulness. Excitation is easy to recognize, but since laxity is difficult to identify, under its influence one may easily overestimate the quality of one's attention.

The purpose of mindfulness is first to prevent the attention from being distracted from the meditative object. When *subtle excitation* arises, it may seem as if one's attention is continuously focused on the meditative object even while the mind is peripherally distracted to other objects; whereas in the case of *coarse excitation* the meditative object is forgotten entirely. However, according to Buddhist psychology, a single moment of consciousness cannot attend simultaneously to two or more dissimilar objects. Thus, subtle excitation must entail successive moments of cognition of the meditative object briefly interrupted by cognitions of other objects. As these moments of cognition are experientially blurred together, one may have the mistaken impression that, despite these distractions, there is an unbroken continuity of awareness of the meditative object. In the case of coarse excitation, the continuity of attention focused on the meditative object is interrupted so long that one notes that the meditative object has been forgotten altogether.

As a result of diligently counteracting even the most subtle laxity and excitation as soon as they occur, eventually effortless, sustained attention is said to arise due to the power of habituation. At this point, only an initial impulse of will and effort is needed at the beginning of each meditation session; thereafter, uninterrupted, sustained attention occurs effortlessly. Now it is actually a hindrance to engage the will or to exert effort. It is time to let the natural balance of the mind maintain itself without interference. In this state of meditative stabilization, because of the extraordinarily high degree of stability and vividness of the attention, the imagined visual object appears before the mind's eye with almost the brilliance of a visually perceived object.

When meditative stabilization is finally achieved, it is said that the entire continuum of one's attention is focused single-pointedly, nonconceptually, and internally in the very quiescence of the mind; and the attention is withdrawn fully from the physical senses. At that point, if occasional thoughts do arise, even about the meditative object, Asanga advises the trainee not to follow after them. Thus, one now disengages not only from extraneous thoughts and so forth but even from the meditative object. For the first time in this training, one does not attempt to fix the attention upon a familiar object. One's consciousness is now left in an absence of appearances, an experience that Asanga says is subtle and difficult to realize.

Upon achieving this meditative state, both Asanga and Vasubandhu assert, the mind disengages from the representations of sensory objects, and only the aspects of the sheer awareness, luminosity, and vivid joy of the mind appear. Thus, these contemplatives, in concert with Jewish, Christian, and Hindu contemplatives, present us with the truly astonishing hypothesis that joy arises from the very nature of consciousness once it is free of the afflictions of laxity and excitation and is disengaged from all sensory and mental appearances. In this state, any thoughts that arise neither are sustained nor do they proliferate; rather they vanish of their own accord, like bubbles emerging from water. One has no sense of one's own body, and it seems as if one's mind has become indivisible with space. This state is characterized as one of joy, luminosity, and nonconceptuality.

Asanga asserts that with the achievement of meditative stabilization one cuts through one's culturally and personally acquired conceptual conditioning, including the sense of one's own gender, and experientially fathoms the nature of the mind. He does not present this as a uniquely Buddhist comprehension of the mind, nor does he regard it as a comprehension of a uniquely Buddhist mind. Rather, in this state one gains a transcultural and transpersonal realization of the nature of consciousness. In the state of meditative stabilization, the mind is no longer consciously engaged with human thought, mental imagery, or language, and it is disengaged from the human senses. Thus, this training is presented as a means for experientially ascertaining the nature of consciousness itself, which is common to people of different cultures and times and to human and nonhuman sentient beings.

This assertion need not be interpreted as contradicting the hypothesis that consciousness cannot apprehend itself. That premise denies that a single consciousness can have itself as its own object. During the development of meditative stabilization, introspection has the function of monitoring the meditator's consciousness, particularly regarding the occurrence of the mental processes of laxity and excitation. Such metacognition is a form of *recollective* awareness that cognizes previous moments of consciousness. Likewise, once meditative stabilization is accomplished and one's meditative object dissolves, in this absence of appearances the continuum of one's attention may attend to *previous* moments of consciousness. Because of the homogeneity of this mental continuum, the experiential effect would be that of the mind apprehending itself.

Mahāyāna Buddhism, like the Theravāda tradition, declares that various types of extrasensory perception and paranormal abilities can be readily developed once meditative stabilization has been achieved. But in both traditions the chief purpose of developing sustained attention is to acquire insight into the nature of reality; and the

nature of the mind is characteristically of principal interest. Vasubandhu comments on the difficulty of this endeavor:

Subtle, unquestionably, are the specific characteristics of the mind and its mental processes. One discerns them only with difficulty even when one is content to consider each of the mental processes as developing in a homogenous series; how much more so when one envisions them in the [psychological] moment in which they all exist. If the differences of the taste of vegetables, tastes that we know through a material organ, are difficult to distinguish, how much more so is this true with non-material phenomena that are perceived through the mental consciousness.

Inverting Awareness

If it is possible to monitor the quality of one's attention while developing sustained attention, and if it is possible to attend to previous moments of consciousness free of appearances after achieving that state, might it also be possible to develop sustained attention with consciousness itself as one's object? Such a technique is commonly practiced in the Great Perfection (Dzogchen) tradition of contemplation first promulgated in Tibet in the eighth century by the Indian Buddhist contemplative Padmasambhava. In a method referred to by the term *maintaining the attention in nonconceptuality*, the mind is withdrawn from the physical senses, as well as all thoughts concerning the past, present, and future. One lets the mind come to rest like a cloudless sky, clear, luminous, and with no intentional object apart from its own presence.

Mindfulness and introspection are instrumental in this technique, and one must guard against laxity and excitation as explained earlier. Whenever a thought or any kind of mental imagery arises, one does not follow after it but releases it immediately, leaving one's awareness in the remaining vacuity. When the attention is sustained in that fashion, all mental engagement with other objects is stopped, as if one had fainted or fallen asleep. The crucial difference, however, is that in this meditative state, one is said to ascertain the essential features of consciousness vividly, single-pointedly, and without conceptual mediation. Each time thoughts are detected by means of introspection, they vanish by themselves, leaving only a vacuity in their wake. When the mind is observed free of any conceptual fluctuation, it is seen as an unobscured, clear, and vivid vacuity, without any difference between former and latter states. Tibetan contemplatives call this "the fusion of stillness and dispersion."

Like Augustine, Padmasambhava claims that this method leads to a direct realization of the nature of awareness. What are the defining characteristics of consciousness that is perceived in that way? According to the “Centrist” view (Madhyamaka) advocated by Padmasambhava, all types of consciousness are nonconceptual with respect to their own appearances, so they are said to be imbued with clarity regarding those appearances. In this sense, one of the defining characteristics of consciousness is said to be *clarity*, or luminosity. Because consciousness is experientially *aware* of those appearances, its second defining characteristic is said to be awareness, or cognizance. In this practice the attention is focused on the *sheer* awareness and the *sheer* clarity of experience, which are the irreducible, defining features of consciousness alone, as opposed to the qualities of other objects of consciousness. Thus, in this technique the object of mindfulness is preceding moments of consciousness; and introspection monitors whether or not the attention is straying from those qualities of the awareness and clarity of experience. As in the previously discussed practice of inducing sustained attention by means of the imagination, this method culminates in the experience of joy, luminosity, and nonconceptuality, which are said to be the natural qualities of the mind at rest.

Tibetan contemplatives, like Augustine, declare that theories about the nature of consciousness and the manner in which introspection functions are indeed artificial, conceptual constructions; for the experience of consciousness when the mind is settled in meditative stabilization is a state in which words and concepts are suspended. Any subsequent theory is nothing more than a conceptual overlay on an experience that is nonconceptual. The point of such theories, however, is to break down conceptual barriers to entering into this experience and to make such realization somewhat intelligible to those who lack it. But no description or explanation can capture this experience in words or concepts or convey the actual nature of the experience to noncontemplatives.

Releasing the Mind

Clarity and awareness are said to be the salient features of consciousness in general, not only of consciousness that is withdrawn from sensory and conceptual stimuli. If this is the case, these qualities should be apprehendable in *all* states of consciousness and not only in the state of meditative stabilization. Moreover, if joy, luminosity, and nonconceptuality are natural qualities of awareness, these should manifest when the mind is left in its natural state and not only when it is strenuously focused on a single object.

It is on this premise that a method known by the term *settling the mind in its natural state* has been widely taught and practiced, especially in the Great Perfection tradition of Buddhist contemplation. The distinguishing characteristic of this technique is maintaining the attention without distraction and without conceptual grasping, the latter referring to the mental process of conceptually identifying, or labeling, the objects of the mind. Thus, in this practice, one does not grasp onto the intentional objects of thoughts concerning the past, present, or future, nor does one judge or evaluate thoughts themselves. Now one does not try to get rid of thoughts but rather observes them nonconceptually. Without identifying the objects of the mind *as anything*, one tries simply to perceive them in their own nature, without identifying them within any conceptual framework. Thus, without conceptually grasping onto the contents of the mind, one perceptually ascertains their clear and cognitive nature; this method, like the previous one, is said to lead to insight into the nature of consciousness itself.

As a result of such practice there arises a nonconceptual sense that nothing can harm the mind, regardless of whether or not ideation has ceased. Whatever kinds of mental imagery occur—be they gentle or violent, subtle or gross, of long or short duration, strong or weak, good or bad—one is to observe their nature, and to avoid any obsessive evaluation of them as being one thing and not another. When this method of maintaining awareness in its natural state is followed precisely, the mind becomes serene, and one does not succumb to disturbing mental processes such as excitation, aggression, anxiety, or resentment.

The afflictions of the mind are naturally calmed when the mind is settled in a state of nongrasping, and the clear and empty nature of awareness is vividly perceived. Whenever thoughts arise, one simply observes them without aversion or approval, and by so doing, thoughts no longer impede the cultivation of sustained attention, nor do they obscure the nature of consciousness.

This practice is sometimes elucidated with the analogy of a raven at sea. According to ancient Indian tradition, when a ship went out to sea, a raven was brought along; and when the navigator wanted to know whether he had come near shore, he would release the raven. As in the biblical account of Noah and the ark, if there was no land nearby, the raven would circle around and around, and eventually alight back on the ship. Likewise, in this contemplative practice, one releases the mind so that thoughts flow out freely, without suppressing any of them. As long as thoughts are arising, one observes them without interference, and eventually they disappear, or “alight” back in the nature of awareness from which they originated. With sustained practice, without ever suppressing ideation, the mind becomes still and conceptual dispersion ceases of its own accord. The awareness that is perceived during this practice has no form but is

vacuous like space; and yet, like a stainless mirror, it takes on the appearance of all objects that are presented to it.

This practice, unlike all the preceding techniques, allows for a kind of free association of ideas, desires, and emotions. Because one is not intentionally suppressing, evaluating, judging, or directing any thoughts and so on that appear to the mind, and because the attention is maintained within the field of mental phenomena, without being distracted by physical objects, many contents of the unconscious are brought into consciousness. These may include old memories, long-forgotten fears and resentments, repressed desires and fantasies, and so on. As in the dream state, habitual propensities of the mind are catalyzed so that unconscious processes—including those that influence one's behavior, health, and so forth—are made conscious. This method is therefore designed to enhance the depth and scope of one's introspective abilities.

The practice of settling the mind in its natural state also challenges a fundamental assumption of Descartes concerning the nature of one's own personal identity. When this technique is first applied, thoughts tend to vanish as soon as they are detected; but with practice, as one develops a "lighter introspective touch," trains of thought arise, follow their course, and vanish of their own accord. At no point does one have the sense of being the creator, sustainer, or destroyer of thoughts. The sense that "I am thinking that" occurs only when one conceptually grasps onto and identifies with thoughts. This is presumably what led Descartes to conclude that he was a "thinking thing" that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, and feels, "a mind or soul, an understanding or a rational being ... a real thing, truly existent." Descartes expresses his absolute certainty that the I, or mind, is a real thinking substance, but this assumption is seriously challenged when thoughts are observed arising by themselves without being intentionally created by a thinking agent.

Even when the mind is settled in meditative stabilization without human conceptual constructs, it is not considered by Buddhist contemplatives to be entirely free of all traces of conceptualization. One's inborn sense of a reified self as the observer and the reified sense of the duality between subject and object are still present, even though they may be dormant while in meditation; and when one emerges from this nonconceptual state, the mind may still grasp onto all phenomena, including consciousness itself, as being real, inherently existing entities.

To penetrate to the fundamental nature of appearances and their relation to consciousness, it is said that one must go beyond meditative stabilization and engage in training for the cultivation of contemplative insight. Nevertheless, the achievement of meditative stabilization is taught as a crucial prerequisite to gaining conceptually

unstructured and unmediated insight into the fundamental nature of reality. Moreover, Padmasambhava warns that without having developed a high degree of attentional stability and vividness, even if one apprehends the nature of awareness, it remains only an object of intellectual understanding, leading merely to philosophical discourse at best and dogmatism at worst.

Padmasambhava on Conceptually Unstructured Awareness

According to the contemplative tradition of Padmasambhava, instead of first learning a theory of consciousness and using it to enter contemplation, one first seeks experiential insight into the nature of the mind, then derives one's theories from that experience. Thus, the first task is to settle one's mind in its natural state, achieve meditative stabilization, and then examine the nature of awareness.

In a meditative technique taught by Padmasambhava for seeking out the nature of consciousness, one's visual gaze is steadily directed at the space in front of one. Once the awareness is stabilized, one examines that very consciousness that has become steady, and one begins questioning: Is there something real that remains clearly and steadily, or when observing consciousness, is there nothing to see? Is the one who is directing the mind and the mind that is being directed the same, or are they distinct? If they are not different, is the one that truly exists the mind that is being directed? Temporarily adopting that hypothesis, one observes: What is the nature of that so-called mind? Is it anywhere to be found among the external objects of awareness? While steadily observing the consciousness of the one engaging in this training, one examines whether the so-called mind even exists. If so, does it have a shape? If one thinks that it may, one then examines the mind carefully to determine what that shape might be. Is it a pure geometrical form, like a sphere, a rectangle, a semicircle, or a triangle? Likewise, one examines the mind to see if it has any color or physical dimension. If one concludes that it has no such physical properties, one then proceeds to examine whether the mind might not exist at all. But if this were the case, how could something that does not exist engage in such contemplative inquiry?

Moreover, if the mind is a nonentity, what is it that generates such passions as hatred? If one concludes that the mind does not exist, is there not someone or something that drew that conclusion? With this question in mind, one steadily observes whether the consciousness that ponders whether it exists is itself the mind. If it does really exist, one would imagine it must be some kind of a substance; but if so, what are its qualities? On the other hand, if it does not exist, who or what is it that thinks this? In this way one's awareness is drawn inward, grappling with and breaking down the conceptual constructs of existence and nonexistence with respect to the mind.

In such introspective inquiry one also examines the origins, location, and disappearance of mental phenomena. One examines, for example, whether mental events arise from the external environment or from the body; and one investigates the exact manner in which they arise moment by moment. Once they occur, one investigates where they are present—whether outside or inside the body—and if they seem to be present inside the body, one examines exactly where they are located.

In addition, one inquires whether the mind and thoughts are the same or different. At times the mind is withdrawn from appearances and seems to be empty, and at times it engages with phenomena. Are those appearances and that emptiness the same or distinct, and are the stillness and the activities of the mind the same or different? If they are distinct, when does this differentiation occur, and what is the demarcation between them? Finally, when thoughts and other mental events cease, how does this occur? Do they proceed from existence to nonexistence, or do they go somewhere beyond the field of consciousness? If they do depart, do they leave in the same aspect as the one in which they were previously present, or do they depart in a more ethereal manner? Padmasambhava comments on the results of such inquiry as follows:

given the differences in intellect, in some, a nonconceptual, unmediated, conceptually unstructured reality will arise in their mind-streams. In some there will be a steadiness in awareness. In some, there will be a steady, natural luster of emptiness that is not an emptiness that is nothing, and there will arise a realization that this is awareness itself, it is the nature of the mind. In some, there will arise a sense of straightforward emptiness. In some, appearances and the mind will merge; appearances will not be left outside, and awareness will not be left inside. There will arise a sense that they have become inseparably equalized.

At this point, one's mentor is to offer the following guidance:

once you have calmed the compulsive thoughts in your mind right where they are, and the mind is unmodified, isn't there a motionless stability? Oh, this is called "quiescence," but it is not the nature of the mind. Now, steadily observe the very nature of your own mind that is being still. Is there a resplendent emptiness that is nothing, that is ungrounded in the nature of any substance, shape, or color? That is called the "empty essence." Isn't there a luster of that emptiness that is unceasing, clear, immaculate, soothing, and luminous, as it were? That is called its "luminous nature." Its essential nature is the indivisibility of sheer emptiness, not established as anything, and its unceasing, vivid luster. Such awareness is resplendent and brilliant, so to speak.

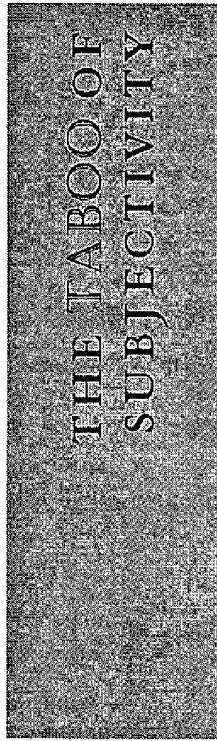
Such conceptually unstructured awareness, Padmasambhava claims, does not originate at any specific time, nor does it arise from certain causes and conditions. Likewise, such awareness does not die or cease at any specific time. While it does not conform to our notion of existence, its unimpeded creative power appears in all manner of ways, so it is no one single thing. On the other hand, while the mind takes on many different appearances, it has no inherent nature of its own, so it is not a multitude of things either. Thus, Padmasambhava thoroughly rejects the hypothesis that consciousness is some kind of purely subjective, spiritual substance from which all mental phenomena emerge. In this way, one is said to come to a conceptually unmediated experience of the nature of unmodified awareness.

Awareness, Padmasambhava suggests, is like a wild stallion that has roamed freely for so long that its owner cannot recognize it. It is not enough for the horse to be pointed out to its owner; rather, once that has been done, methods must be used to capture it, train it, and put it to work. Likewise, it is not enough merely to identify the nature of one's own wild mind; one must now sustain and utilize the experience of conceptually unstructured awareness. Now, as before, one's visual gaze and mental awareness are fixed in the space in front of one; and without meditating on anything, one lets the mind come to rest steadily, clearly, homogeneously, and without wavering.

At the beginning, one practices for only short sessions, but as one becomes accustomed to the training, the duration of each session is increased. When bringing each session to an end, one slowly emerges from contemplation without losing the sense of unstructured awareness, without distraction, and without conceptual grasping. Such unwavering mindfulness is to be maintained during all activities of eating, drinking, speaking, moving, working, and so on. Apart from that, there is nothing on which to meditate, for the introduction of any artificial technique into such experience only obscures the conceptually unstructured nature of pure experience.

Following each session of contemplation, whatever ideation arises, one repeatedly lets it appear and vanish of its own accord, without grasping onto it or its intentional object. When a hateful thought arises and later gives way to a compassionate thought, the earlier hatred did not go anywhere but is released by itself. Hatred never remains immutably. Moreover, according to this Great Perfection tradition, all mental processes, even afflictive ones such as hatred, are natural displays of the creative power of pristine, conceptually unstructured awareness. From this perspective, hatred and other mental processes are seen to be unborn, having no location or real existence of their own. Conceptually unstructured awareness—which is nondual from the phenomena that arise to it—is regarded as the ultimate reality, and the realization of such nondual

consciousness is the final goal of contemplative practice. In this experience, the very distinction between public, external space, in which physical phenomena appear to occur, and private, internal space, in which mental phenomena appear to occur, dissolves into a “mysterious space,” which is the very nonduality between the conceptually constructed external and internal spaces. The ultimate nature of objective phenomena, therefore, is found to be none other than the ultimate nature of subjective phenomena; and that is the nonduality of appearances and awareness. When one achieves perfect realization of this state, in which there is no longer any difference between one’s awareness during and after formal meditation sessions, it is claimed that one’s consciousness becomes boundless in terms of the scope of its knowledge, compassion, and power. Hence, the contemplative pursuit of such realization is said to be the most sublime of sciences.



• • • • •
*Toward a New Science
of Consciousness*

B. Alan Wallace

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16. William Lyons (1986), p. 104.
 17. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
 18. *Ibid.*
 19. See H. Ginsburg and S. Opper (1979), pp. 175–77; John Broughton (1978).
 20. Robert Woodworth and Harold Schlosberg (1955), p. 90.
 21. William James (1911), pp. 22–24.
 22. See Eugene Taylor (1990), p. 56.
 23. William James (1892), p. 146.
 24. *Ibid.*, p. 185.
 25. William James (1899/1958), vol. 1, pp. 28–29.
 26. William James (1890/1950), vol. 1, p. 195.
 27. See B. Alan Wallace (1998), pp. 278–83.
 28. William James (1890/1950), vol. 1, pp. 189–90.
 29. René Descartes (1960), p. 150.
 30. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
 31. William James (1890/1950), vol. 1, pp. 191–92, 197–98.
 32. William James (1899/1958), p. 19.
 33. See B. Alan Wallace (1998), pp. 269–89.
5. EXPLORING THE MIND
1. William James (1899/1958), p. 127.
 2. William James (1890/1950) vol. 1, p. 424.
 3. *Ibid.*
 4. James Deese (1990), p. 295.
 5. William James (1890/1950) vol. 1, pp. 447–48.
 6. William James (1899/1958), p. 126.
 7. William James (1902/1985), pp. 400–402.
 8. William James (1890/1950), vol. 1, pp. 420–23.
 9. William James (1899/1958), p. 84.
 10. See N. H. Mackworth (1950); J. F. Mackworth (1970); A. F. Sanders (1970).
 11. See M. I. Posner (1978).
 12. See Esther K. Sleanor, and William E. Pelham, Jr. (1986); Ronald A. Cohen (1993).
 13. *Physicians' Desk Reference* (1995), p. 897.
 14. James S. Hays (1993), pp. 36, 40.
 15. Dom Cuthbert Butler (1967), p. 29. In this discussion I am substituting the theological term “soul” for the more neutral terms “mind” and “consciousness.” Even though they are certainly not equivalent, Christian references to the soul certainly do include the mind and consciousness.
 16. Owen Chadwick (1958), pp. 198, 241.
 17. M. O’C Walshe (1979), vol. 2, p. 14.
 18. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 7.
 19. James Clark and John Skinner (1958), p. 101; Robert K. C. Forman (1990b), p. 104.
 20. William James (1905/1977), p. 191.

21. Augustine (416/1062), bks. 9 and 10. See Phyllis Hodson (1955), p. 3; Justin McCann (1952), pp. 140–141.
22. Augustine (416/1062), bk. 14, ch. 6, p. 421.
23. Donn Cuthbert Butler (1967), p. xxiv.
24. See Daniel C. Matt (1995); Don Cuthbert Butler (1967); Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood (1981) and William M. Indich (1995); Peter Harvey (1995) and Thrangu Rinpoche (1993).
25. William James (1902/1960) pp. 367–68.
26. John Burnaby (1938/1991) p. 52.
27. M. O'C. Walshe (1979), vol. 1, p. 7.
28. Buddhaghosa (1979), chs. 4 and 5; Paravahera Vajirañña (1975), ch. 13.
29. Buddhaghosa (1979), chs. 7 and 8; David W. Evans (1992), pp. 213–14.
30. Buddhaghosa (1979), ch. 12, US. 87–91.
31. Paravahera Vajirañña (1975), pp. 151, 327–28; David J. Kalupahana (1987), pp. 112–15; Peter Harvey (1995), pp. 155–179.
32. See B. Alan Wallace (1998); (1999); Gen Lamrimpa (1995).
33. Vasubandhu (1991), vol. 2, p. 474.
34. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 190. I have altered the translation of Poussin/Pruden slightly so that the terminology conforms to this work.
35. See Karma Chagmé (1998), pp. 80–84; Gyaltrul Rinpoche (1993), pp. 134–35, 151–54.
36. Padmasambhava (1998), pp. 105–14.
37. René Descartes (1964), p. 110.
38. William James (1904/1977), p. 169.
39. William James (1905/1977), p. 193.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 194.
41. William James (1904/1977), pp. 177–78.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 176; see William James (1890/1950), vol. 2, p. 294.
44. See Gerald Myers (1986), p. 64.
45. William James (1912/1976), p. 46.
46. See Padmasambhava (1998), ch. 5.
47. Padmasambhava (1998), p. 121.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
49. See Khenchen Kunzang Palden and Minyak Kunzang Sönam (1993), pp. 49–55.
50. See Padmasambhava (1998), pp. 179–193.
51. See Donald Rothberg (1990).
52. See Robert K. C. Forman (1990c); Peter Harvey (1995); William M. Indich (1995); David Loy (1988); Karma Chagmé (1998); Franklin Merrell-Wolff (1994); (1995).
53. Robert K. C. Forman (1990b), p. 106.
54. B. Alan Wallace (1998), pp. 230–48; Gen Lamrimpa (1999); Padmasambhava (1998), 114–40; 169–193; Karma Chagmé (1998), pp. 85–123.
55. Brian D. Josephson, in Michel Cazenave (1984), pp. 9–19.
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57. Nick Herbert (1985), p. 248.
6. THE MIND IN SCIENTIFIC MATERIALISM
1. Howard Gardner (1985), p. 39.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
3. See T. Shallice (1972).
4. See Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch (1991), pp. 157–71; Evan Thompson (1995).
5. See Paul M. Churchland (1990a), pp. 16–18.
6. Francis Crick and Christof Koch (1998).
7. William James (1989), p. 85–86.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
9. Augustine (391/1937), bk. 3, chs. 20–21.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 379.
11. Güven Güzeldere (1998), p. 45.
12. Bernard d'Espagnat (1981), p. 84; B. Alan Wallace (1996), ch. 6. Edward R. Harrison (1981), p. 148. Heisenberg, cited in Nick Herbert (1985), p. 22. Stapp cited in Paul Davies (1985), p. 49.
13. Richard Feynman, R. B. Leighton, and M. Sands (1963), p. 4–2.
14. See D. M. Armstrong (1990), p. 39.
15. David Hume (1980), p. 32.
16. William James (1890/1950), vol. 2, p. 291.
17. See Stephen Stich (1983), Kathleen Wilkes (1988), and Paul M. Churchland (1990b).
18. Paul M. Churchland (1990a), pp. 41, 48.
19. Daniel C. Dennett (1991), p. 74.
20. See Patricia S. Churchland (1986).
21. Paul M. Churchland (1990a), p. 46.
22. See Robin Horton (1982).
23. See William Lyons (1986), pp. 124, 149, 155.
24. See Frank Jackson (1990), p. 475.
25. See Terrence Horgan and James Woodward (1990), pp. 414, 418, n. 18.
26. Quoted in K. C. Cole (1999a).
27. John Horgan (1996), p. 8.
7. CONFUSING SCIENTIFIC MATERIALISM WITH SCIENCE
1. See Raymond Tallis (1994).
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3. John R. Searle (1994), p. 95. Page numbers cited in text hereafter.
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FROM THE GROUND UP

*A Practical Approach
for Modern Life*



B. ALAN WALLACE
WITH STEVEN WILHELM



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9

Stabilizing the Mind

THE PURPOSE OF MEDITATIVE QUIESCENCE

Suppose that each of us wore a device that picked up all our thoughts, even the most subtle, unintentional ones, and immediately blared them out through loudspeakers strapped to the tops of our heads. As long as these thoughts remain hidden, often even from ourselves, we are able to present a fine semblance of sanity to those around us. But for most of us this veneer would swiftly vanish if others could hear the chaotic turbulence of our minds.

The whole of spiritual practice can be seen as cultivation of deeper and deeper sanity. In Buddhism this path of making the mind sane is a gradual one, beginning with relatively easy practices that bring about obvious, tangible benefits. The first stage of practice is ethical discipline, discussed in the previous chapter. The direct, manifest result of a life focused on these ethical principles is a greater state of well-being for ourselves and for those around us. Even without deep study or meditation, this brings about greater sanity and contentment.

As a result of this foundation of spiritual practice, our thoughts will be more wholesome, but our minds may still be scattered, unstable, and unclear. It is helpful to reinforce this foundation further by stabilizing our minds in meditation. In Buddhism the result of this practice is called *meditative quiescence*, or *tranquility*. One contemplative of the Kagyüpa order of Tibetan Buddhism sums up tranquility practice as follows:

Tranquility is achieved by focusing the mind on an object and maintaining it in that state until finally it is channeled into one stream of attention and evenness.¹²

Thus, in the Buddhist context, meditative quiescence means more than just a peaceful feeling. It is a quality of awareness that is stable and vivid, clearly focused upon its chosen object. It is not an end in itself, but a fine tool to be employed in the third phase of traditional Buddhist practice, namely, insight. The same author says of insight practice:

Insight is attained through a general and detailed examination of reality and the systematic application of intellectual discrimination.¹³

Experiential insight into the nature of reality is the direct antidote to ignorance, the mental affliction that lies at the root of all distortions of the mind, unwholesome behavior, and suffering. However, without achieving meditative quiescence, the healing power of insight is limited, and ignorance cannot be fully dispelled.

The Kagyüpa order, known for its emphasis on meditation, passes on such adages as “Where there is no contemplative tranquility, there is no insight,” and “If one seeks insight too early, one will not achieve tranquility.”¹⁴ This Tibetan approach is very much in accord with the earlier Buddhism of India, as evidenced by the comments of the great Indian pandit Asaṅga regarding meditative quiescence and insight:

What is tranquility? It is to settle the mind in tranquility, regularly, attentively, intensely; to clear the mind; to pacify the mind completely; and to settle the mind in one-pointedness and equipoise...

What is insight? Insight is that which differentiates systematically and fully all things....¹⁵

Certainly it is possible to gain some degree of insight without having achieved great mental stability, but such illumination is like the light of a candle flickering in a breeze. This insight may be very meaningful, but due to the lack of meditative quiescence, it is fleeting, and difficult for the meditator to experience repeatedly.

Just as it is possible to acquire a limited degree of insight without meditative quiescence, so one may experience compassion to some extent without insight. But the most profound spiritual awakening occurs upon the foundation of all three—meditative quiescence, insight, and compassion—and it is for this purpose that one cultivates meditative quiescence.

THE CONDITIONS FOR MEDITATIVE QUIESCENCE

We can begin to stabilize our minds from the beginning of our spiritual practice, while placing our chief emphasis on ethical discipline. By taking out some time each day for the practice of meditative quiescence, we become increasingly aware of how our minds function; and in the process we begin to discover how scattered our minds have been all along. Recognizing this, we may yearn to explore the potentials of the human mind that become apparent only when the awareness is still and lucid.

Six conditions are necessary for the achievement of meditative quiescence. The first of these is a harmonious environment, one in which we feel secure, free from the dangers of war, pollution, contagious disease, and dangerous animals. Food and the other necessities should be easily acquired, and the people with whom we associate should be compatible. The cultivation of meditative quiescence requires a quiet environment, free from the noises of conversation during the day and such noises as the barking of dogs during the night.

The other five conditions are internal qualities. The first of these is having few desires. This is an attitude of being undisturbed by wishes for things we do not have, be it a nicer dwelling, better food, better clothing, and the like.

The third of the six conditions, contentment, complements the second. The attitude of contentment regards present circumstances, whatever they may be, with a sense of satisfaction. When we are

contented, we are concerned merely that the physical conditions for our practice are adequate. Once these are taken care of, we are free to focus our attention on our meditation.

The fourth condition of meditative quiescence is limiting our activities. When entering a contemplative retreat for the sake of stabilizing our minds, it is essential to reduce other activities to a bare minimum.

The fifth condition may be the most important of all: pure ethical discipline. This does not mean one is so far advanced one never engages in unwholesome behavior of body, speech, or mind. But it does mean that one is very familiar with the types of behavior to avoid, such as the ten unwholesome deeds; that one continually tries to hold to the ethical principles described previously; and that one takes steps to purify unwholesome actions once they have been committed.

The sixth and final condition is the elimination of compulsive, discursive thinking about desires and other distractions. Many of us find our minds inundated by a torrent of ideas throughout the day. This tendency must be curbed if we are ever to cultivate meditative quiescence. The point of Buddhist meditation is not to stop thinking for, as we have seen, cultivation of insight clearly requires intelligent use of thought and discrimination. What needs to be stopped is conceptualization that is compulsive, mechanical, and unintelligent, that is, activity that is always fatiguing, usually pointless, and at times seriously harmful.

It is not enough to learn a technique for stabilizing the mind and apply oneself to it with diligence. If these six underlying conditions are not satisfied, meditative quiescence will never arise, regardless of one's determination or perseverance. This is what the renowned Indian sage Atiśa meant in his *Lamp on the Path of Awakening*:

If the conditions for meditative quiescence are impaired,
One may meditate intensively

For as long as a thousand years
Without achieving tranquil absorption.

MEDITATIVE OBJECTS FOR STABILIZING THE MIND

In Buddhist practice we can choose among a wide variety of objects for stabilizing the mind. One common method in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition is to focus on an image of the Buddha. First we take a physical object, either a statue or painting of the Buddha, and gaze at it until we are very familiar with its appearance. Then we close our eyes and create a simulation of that image with our imagination.

The actual practice is not the visual one—this is only a preparation—for the point is to stabilize the mind, not the eyes. When we first try to visualize the Buddha, the mental image is bound to be vague and extremely unstable. We may not even be able to get an image at all. I remember teaching this technique many years ago to a group of students in the Swiss Alps. After we had been practicing together for a half hour or so, we took a break to discuss people's initial experiences. One fellow raised his hand, and with some consternation confessed that he was not able to see the Buddha in his mind's eye at all. For awhile his mind was blank; then finally the image of a sea gull flew through the space of his mind!

While the above method has many benefits, it is not ideal for everyone. For it to be effective, one must have a fairly peaceful mind, and it is helpful to have deep faith and reverence for the Buddha. For people of a devotional nature, this practice can be very inspiring, and effective at stabilizing the mind. One's heart is stirred by bringing the Buddha to mind with devotion, and consequently one's enthusiasm for the meditation grows. On the other hand, if one has a very agitated mind and little faith, this and other visualization techniques may very well lead to tension and unhappiness. And these problems may increase the more one practices.

With an agitated, conceptually congested mind, the sheer effort of imagining a visualized object may be too taxing. So if one is engaging in visualization practices, especially during several sessions a day, it is important to be aware of one's level of stress. It is important not to let it get out of hand; for if it does, instead of stabilizing the mind the practice will damage one's nervous system.

Another method that is practiced widely, especially in the Buddhist countries of east and southeast Asia, is focusing one's awareness on the breath. A key attribute of this practice, as opposed to visualization of the Buddha, is that in breath awareness the object of meditation, the breath, is present without our having to imagine it.

Awareness of the breath is practiced in many different ways. Some people focus on the rise and fall of the abdomen during the in- and out-breath. Another technique is to focus on the tactile sensations, from the nostrils down to the abdomen, that are associated with the respiration. In yet another method one focuses on the sensations of the breath passing through the apertures of the nostrils and above the upper lip. All of these are valuable methods, and they can be especially useful for people with highly discursive, imaginative minds. They offer a soothing way to calm the conceptually disturbed mind.

A third method of stabilizing the mind involves directing one's awareness to the mind itself. This is the most subtle of all the techniques mentioned here, and its rewards are great. I shall elaborate on this practice in a moment, but first I would like to discuss some of the themes common to all methods of stabilizing the mind.

Two facets of awareness are instrumental in all the above forms of meditative training. These are mindfulness and vigilance. Mindfulness is a mental factor that allows us to focus upon an object with continuity, without forgetting that object. So, if we are focusing on the sensations of our breath at our nostrils, mindfulness enables us to fasten our attention there continuously. When mindfulness

vanishes, the mind slips off its object like a seal off a slick rock. Vigilance is another mental factor, whose function is to check up on the quality of awareness itself. It checks to see if the meditating mind is becoming agitated and scattered, or dull and drowsy. It is the task of vigilance to guard against these extremes.

There are many inner hindrances to stabilizing the mind, but they boil down to the two extremes of excitement and laxity. Excitement is a mental factor that draws our attention away from our intended object. This hindrance is a derivative of desire. If we are meditating and suddenly find ourselves thinking about going to the refrigerator and getting a snack, we can identify this impulse as excitement born from desire. Excitement draws the mind outward. It can easily be stimulated by sound such as that of a car driving by. It compulsively latches onto the sound—a kind of mental hitchhiking—and elaborates on it with a series of images and thoughts.

When the mind is not agitated, it is prone to slipping off to the other extreme of laxity. This mental factor does not distract the attention outward, but brings on a sinking sensation. The mind becomes absorbed in its object without clarity, and drowsiness is bound to follow. At that point the object of the meditation is submerged under waves of lethargy or obliviousness.

The chief antidotes to excitement and laxity are mindfulness and vigilance, and the results of overcoming those hindrances are mental stability and clarity. These are the fruits of the practice.

Meditative stability necessarily implies an underlying ground of relaxation and serenity. The mind is peaceful, and the attention remains where we direct it for as long as we wish. Clarity refers more to the vividness of subjective awareness than to the clarity of the object. When it is present we can detect even the subtle and most fleeting qualities of our object. For example, if we are visualizing the Buddha with clarity, he will appear in our mind's eye in three dimensions and very lifelike. We will be able to see the color of his eyes, the individual folds in his robe. He will appear almost as clearly as if

we were seeing him directly with our eyes. Such subjective clarity is instrumental in focusing on the breath as well as on the mind.

All of us have experienced moments when our attention is extremely vivid. This may occur, for example, while driving a car or motorcycle at high speed on a winding road, or when rock climbing. But when such mental clarity is experienced it is usually combined with a high degree of tension, and the mind is neither serene nor stable. On the other hand, mental stability is a common experience when we are pleasantly tired and we lie down to sleep. But in such cases there is rarely much clarity of awareness.

The challenge of meditative quiescence practice is to cultivate stability integrated with clarity, generating an extraordinarily useful quality of awareness. To bring this about, experienced meditators have found that there must be a sequence of emphases in the practice. First seek a relaxed, wholesome, and cheerful state of mind. On this basis, emphasize stability, and then finally let clarity take priority. The importance of this sequence cannot be overemphasized.

FOCUSING AWARENESS ON THE MIND

Many meditation teachers have made a common observation concerning Western meditators: *We try so hard!* Our efforts in meditation may be sporadic, but when we put our minds to it, we show true grit. This attitude can create a lot of problems. For example, if we are trying to stabilize the mind through the practice of focusing on a Buddha image, the initial image is bound to be unclear and fleeting. At this stage, meditators are properly advised to be satisfied with a vague object. It is best not to try harder to improve the quality of the image; simply see if we can hold onto it without losing it.

However strongly this may be emphasized, there is a powerful tendency, especially among Westerners, to try harder and harder to create a vivid object, and to hold it with sheer tenacity. This same attitude often prevails among those practicing awareness of

the breath. Once again these serious meditators bear down on the object, trying very hard to see it clearly and to hold onto it for dear life. This, after all, is what we have been taught from childhood: “If you want to get ahead, do your best. Try your hardest.” Our society often considers these two phrases to be synonymous.

In meditation, however, they are not synonymous. Doing our best in this training does not mean to try our hardest; because, if we are trying our hardest, we are trying too hard. And if we try too hard, we will burn out; and our practice will be sporadic at best, until it fizzles out altogether. Doing our best in meditation means being as skillful as we can at finding the delicate balance between relaxation and exertion.

An especially helpful tool for this is meditation on the mind itself. In this practice we have no clearly delineated, concrete object on which to focus. The mind has no form or location. If we try strenuously to focus our minds on it as our object, it eludes us. The tendency to overexert simply does not work here.

To engage in meditation on the mind, one first finds a suitable posture. Much has been written on this subject, so I shall discuss only some of the major points. It is important to sit in an erect posture, with the spine straight. It is important not to become slouched forward or to tilt to the side or backward. Throughout the meditation session one should keep the body still and relaxed.

At the outset of this or any other Buddhist practice, it is helpful to take refuge. It is also vital to cultivate a good motivation, for this will profoundly influence the nature of the practice. Finally, it is helpful to be cheerful, cherishing this wonderful opportunity to explore the nature of consciousness.

Although the main practice here is awareness of the mind, it is useful to begin with a more tangible object to calm and refine one’s awareness. Breath awareness can be perfect for this. We should cultivate a general awareness of the breath coming in and going out. During inhalation, we should simply be aware that this is taking place.

During exhalation, we note that the breath is going out. Awareness is allowed to rest calmly in the present, while we breathe in a natural, unforced way.

As we now move on to the main practice, we may follow the counsel of Tilopa, the great Indian Buddhist contemplative: “Do not indulge in thought, but watch the natural awareness.”¹⁶ “Natural awareness” has no shape or color, and it has no location. So how can we focus on it? What does it mean “to watch” it?

First of all, our task is to focus our attention on the mind, as opposed to the physical sense fields. One way to do this is to focus our awareness initially on a mental event, such as a thought. This thought could be anything—a word or a phrase—but it is helpful if it is one that does not stimulate either desire or aversion.

One possibility is the phrase: “What is the mind?” The point here is not to speculate on this question, or to try to answer it. Rather, use that thought itself as the object of awareness. Very shortly after having brought that phrase to mind, it is bound to fade out of our consciousness. At that point we keep our awareness right where it is. We have now directed our attention on the mind, and what remains between the vanishing of one thought, and the arising of another, is simply awareness, empty and without obstruction, like space.

An analogy may be helpful. Imagine yourself as a child lying on your back, gazing up into a cloudless sky, and blowing soap bubbles through a plastic ring. As a bubble drifts up into the sky, you watch it rise, and this brings your attention into the sky. While you are looking at the bubble it pops, and you keep your attention right where the bubble had been. Your awareness now lies in empty space.

In the actual meditation practice one focuses initially on the bubble of a thought. When this thought vanishes one does not replace it with some other mental construct. Rather, one stabilizes one’s attention in natural awareness, uncontrived, without conceptual elaboration.

This practice is so subtle we may find we become tense in our efforts to do it right. Some people even find the intensity of their

concentration impedes their normal respiration—they restrict their breathing for fear it will disturb the delicate equilibrium of their minds. Such tension and constricted respiration can only impair the practice and our health in general. So it is crucial that we engage in the meditation with a sense of physical and mental relaxation.

Starting from relaxation one cultivates meditative stability, resting in natural awareness without being carried away by the turbulence of thoughts or emotions. Finally, it is important to recognize that this practice is not based upon a vague sort of trance or dull absorption; rather, it calls for vivid, clear awareness.

To cultivate these three qualities of relaxation, stability, and clarity, it is usually helpful to keep the meditation sessions relatively short. The chief criterion for determining the length of one's meditation sessions is the quality of one's awareness during the practice. Five minutes of finely conducted meditation is worth more than an hour of low-grade conceptual chatter. Another useful criterion is one's state of mind following meditation. The mind should be refreshed, stable, and clear. If one feels exhausted and dull, one's session was probably too long or of low quality.

PHASES OF THE PRACTICE

Once we have entered into this discipline, it may not be long before we experience short periods—perhaps up to ten seconds or longer—during which we are able to abide in a natural state of awareness, without grasping onto the thoughts and other events that arise in our consciousness. We may well find this delightfully exhilarating, and our minds may then leap upon the experience with glee. But as soon as our minds grasp in this way, the experience will fade. This can be frustrating.

The remedy is to enter into this state of awareness repeatedly. As we become familiar with it, we can then take it in stride, without expectation or anxiety. We learn to just let it be.

As the mind settles in this practice, our awareness of thoughts and other mental events is also bound to change. At times we may no longer sense ourselves thinking, yet a multitude of thoughts and images may arise as simple events. One friend of mine told me that while she was meditating in relative conceptual silence, the thought arose: "Pass the pizza, please." She had not had a pizza for months, nor did she particularly want one at that moment. Thoughts will simply arise, as will entire conversations. When this happens, just let them be.

Do not cling to these thoughts, identify with them, or try to sustain them. But also do not try to suppress them. Simply view them as spontaneous outflows of natural awareness, while centering your attention on the pure, unelaborated awareness from which they arise.

On many occasions we are bound to find ourselves carried away by trains of thought. When we recognize this has happened, we may react with frustration, disappointment, or restlessness.

All such responses are a waste of time. If we find our minds have become agitated, the antidote is to relax more deeply. Relax away the effort that is going into sustaining our conceptual or emotional turbulence. It is best not to silence the mind with a crushing blow of our will. Instead, we may release the effort of grasping onto those mental events. Grasping arises from attachment, and the antidote is simply to let go of this attachment.

On other occasions we may experience mental laxity. Although the mind is not agitated, it may rest in a nebulous blankness. The antidote for this hindrance is to revitalize our awareness by paying closer attention to the practice. The "middle path" here is to invigorate our awareness without agitating it.

The great Indian Buddhist contemplative Saraha says of this practice:

By releasing the tension that binds the mind,
One undoubtedly brings about inner freedom.¹⁷

Tilopa speaks of three phases of the meditation. In the initial stages the onslaught of compulsive ideation is like a stream rushing through a narrow gorge. At this point it may seem that our mind is more out of control, more conceptually turbulent, than it was before we began meditating. But in fact, we are only now realizing how much the mind normally gushes with semiconscious thoughts.

As the mind becomes more quiescent, more stable, the stream of mental activity will become like the Ganges—a broad, quietly flowing river. In the third phase of the practice, the continuum of awareness is like the river flowing into the sea. It is at this point that one recognizes the mind's natural serenity, vividness, transparency, and freshness.

During early stages of practice, we may experience moments of mental quiescence relatively free of conceptualization, and we may wonder whether we are now ascertaining natural awareness. Most likely we are not. Our mind at this point is probably still too gross and unclear for such a realization. Patience is needed to persist in the practice, without expectation or fear, until gradually the essential qualities of awareness become apparent. When we ascertain the simple clarity and knowing qualities of the awareness, we are well established in the practice. We can then proceed to the attainment of meditative quiescence focused on the mind.

THE ATTAINMENT OF MEDITATIVE QUIESCENCE

In Buddhist practice the achievement of meditative quiescence is clearly defined. As a result of the practice outlined above, one eventually experiences natural awareness, and the duration of this experience gradually increases. Eventually we no longer become distracted or agitated. At this point the emphasis of the practice should be on cultivating clarity. For the mind, even after it has become well stabilized, can still easily slip into laxity.

When we finally attain meditative quiescence, we are free of even the subtle forms of excitement and laxity. During the early phases of practice, considerable degrees of effort are required, but as we progress, more and more subtle effort suffices. Gradually the meditation becomes effortless, and we can sustain each session for hours on end.

Benefits from this practice are also evident between formal meditation sessions. The mind becomes so refined and stable that it is very difficult for mental distortions to arise. And even when they do occur, they are relatively impotent and short-lived. Through the attainment of meditative quiescence, the mind is brought to such a state of heightened sanity it is very difficult for these afflictions to thrive. In addition, one will experience an unprecedented quality of inner well-being that arises from the balance and health of the mind. Due to the shifts in the energies experienced in the body (closely related to the nervous system), one will experience a delightful sense of physical lightness and buoyancy.

The attainment of meditative quiescence is also said to be a fertile basis from which to cultivate various types of heightened awareness such as clairvoyance. When cultivated and employed with wisdom and compassion, these can be very useful. Otherwise, they are simply a distraction at best, and may be a real source of danger.

In Buddhist practice the chief purpose of attaining meditative quiescence is to use this refined state of awareness for investigating the nature of reality. Meditative quiescence by itself is a temporary achievement that can easily be lost, especially if one becomes immersed once again in a hectic, turbulent way of life. Only by using the mind that has been trained in meditative quiescence is it possible to gain the depth of insight needed to utterly uproot the fundamental distortions of the mind, which are the root of suffering.

In the meantime, the cultivation of meditative quiescence is something that brings us greater sanity, serenity, stability, and clarity. This is bound to aid us in all the pursuits worthy of our precious lives.

Balancing the Mind

A Tibetan Buddhist Approach
to Refining Attention

by B. ALAN WALLACE

Foreword by H.H. THE DALAI LAMA

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The Role of Mindfulness in the Cultivation of Quiescence

Quiescence According to Tsongkhapa

In the cultivation of quiescence, introspection has the function of monitoring the meditating awareness, while the task of mindfulness is to attend without distraction to the object of meditation.¹ In his two expositions of the stages of the path, Tsongkhapa gives brief accounts of a wide range of objects suitable for the cultivation of quiescence; but he gives detailed explanations of the method of focusing on a mental image of the Buddha's body.² Here a clear distinction must be made between the support* for the meditative object and the meditative object* itself. A statue or painting of the Buddha may be used in the preliminary stages of this practice to gain familiarity with the features of the Buddha's body; but during the actual meditation, one focuses purely on a mental image of that form. This image is not to be viewed merely as a product of the imagination, but as being naturally present. This advice is to be understood in terms of the Mahāyāna Buddhist assertion that the mind of the Buddha, or Dharmakāya, is everywhere present. Thus, when bringing an image of the Buddha to mind, the meditator recalls the compassion and other qualities of the Buddha as being immanently present.³

¹ Anne Klein discusses the contemporary context for mindfulness in Ch. III of *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen: Buddhists, Feminists, and the Art of the Self* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

² For this technique he invokes the authority of the *Pratyutpanna-buddha-saṃ-mukhāvasthita-samādhi-sūtra*, the *Samādhirājasūtra*, the *Bhāvanākramas II* and *III*, and the *Boḍḍhipathapadīpa*.

³ Paul Harrison correctly points out that the *sūtra* basis for this technique is derivative of the early practice of "recollection of the Buddha" (*buddhānusmṛti*); Paul Harrison, "Commemoration and Identification in *Buddhānusmṛti*," in *In the Mirror of Memory*, Janet Gyatsō, ed., pp. 220–238.

If this practice entailed remembering the body of the Buddha of which one has heard descriptions, or if it entailed remembering a previously perceived visual object, such as a statue or painting of the Buddha, that memory would be a conceptualization⁴ that recalls the Buddha's body by way of a generic image.⁵ In this case, the generic image *appears* to the mind, but it is not *ascertained*. That is not what Tsongkhapa has in mind for this practice. Here the main object of the attention is the mental image itself, which is viewed as an actual embodiment of the Buddha. One may use a statue or painting of the Buddha as the *basis* for one's visualization, but the mental image is viewed as a three-dimensional, transparent, luminous image of the actual Buddha.⁶ The mindfulness that directly apprehends this image as its main object must therefore be an instance of mental perception, and not a conceptualization. Thus, mindfulness may operate either as a conceptualization or as a mental perception, depending on whether it apprehends its *main object by way of a generic image* or it apprehends a *mental image as its main object*. Furthermore, to accomplish genuine quiescence it is necessary that mindfulness be directed upon a mental object, for *samādhi* is accomplished with mental, not sensory consciousness.⁷

Tsongkhapa bases his discussion of the role of mindfulness in the cultivation of quiescence on Asaiga's definition in the *Abhidharmasamuccaya*: "What is mindfulness? The non-forgetfulness of the mind with respect to a familiar object, having the

⁴For a detailed explanation of conceptualization see Lati Rinbochay, *Mind in Tibetan Buddhism*, trans. and ed. by Elizabeth Napper, pp. 21, 50–51, and 130–32. For a specifically Prāsaṅgika account of the distinction between conceptual and non-conceptual cognition see Blo bzang rgya mtsho, *mTha' gnyis dang bral ba'i dbu ma thal 'bur ba'i blo'i ruar gshag ches ther gsal bar byed pa blo rigs gong ma*, pp. 39–43.

⁵For an account of the Gelugpa debates concerning the nature of generic images see Jeffrey Hopkins, *Meditation on Emptiness*, pp. 347–349.

⁶Tsongkhapa, *Byang chub lam gyi rim pa chung ba*, p. 142A. For a Buddhist who believes that the Buddha is omnipresent, this perception of the mental image as being an actual Buddha could be regarded as valid; but for one who does not accept that theory, this cultivation of quiescence would entail the development of a sustained mistaken awareness.

⁷Ibid.

function of non-distraction."⁸ This definition indicates that mindfulness can arise only with respect to an object with which one is already familiar, and it entails not forgetting the object by being constantly mindful of it, without the slightest distraction. Mindfulness is the most important factor for developing introspection, and it is the principal means of accomplishing *samādhi*.

The purpose of mindfulness is first to prevent distraction away from the meditative object and then forgetfulness of that object. When subtle excitation arises, it may seem that one is continuously attending to the meditative object while the mind is peripherally distracted by other objects; whereas in the case of coarse excitation the meditative object is forgotten entirely. However, according to the *sūtra*-based Buddhist theory of moments of cognition, a single consciousness cannot attend simultaneously to two or more dissimilar objects. Thus, I surmise that the occurrence of subtle excitation must entail successive moments of cognition of the meditative object briefly interrupted by cognitions of other objects. As these moments of cognition are experientially blurred together, the meditator might have the mistaken impression that, despite these distractions, there is an unbroken continuity of awareness of the meditative object. In the case of coarse excitation, the continuity of attention focused on the meditative object is interrupted so long that the meditator notes that the meditative object has been forgotten altogether.

Tsongkhapa emphasizes that in the cultivation of quiescence it is not enough that one's attention is clear and limpid; rather, one must *ascertain* the meditative object by apprehending it firmly with mindfulness. Otherwise, the full potency of attentional clarity cannot arise, subtle laxity is not dispelled, and one's *samādhi* remains impaired.⁹ Among the nine attentional states leading up

⁸*Abhidharmasamuccaya*, Pradhan, ed., p. 6.6. In her essay "Mindfulness and Memory: The Scope of *Smṛti* from Early Buddhism to the Sarvāstivādin Abhidharma," Collett Cox cogently argues that the term *smṛti* represents an interrelated semantic complex, rather than two distinct mental processes of memory and mindfulness (*In the Mirror of Memory: Reflections on Mindfulness and Remembrance in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism*, Janet Gyatso, ed., pp. 67–107).

to the actual attainment of quiescence, the power of mindfulness is well developed in the fourth state. At that point, coarse excitation has been overcome, for the attention can no longer be distracted away from the meditative object during meditation sessions.¹⁰ When quiescence is finally achieved, the entire continuum of one's attention is focused single-pointedly, non-conceptually, and internally in the very quiescence of the mind; and the attention is withdrawn fully from the physical senses. At that point, if occasional thoughts do arise, even about the meditative object, the meditator is counseled not to follow after them, but to be *without mindfulness and without mental engagement*.¹¹ Thus, one now disengages not only from extraneous thoughts and so forth, but even from the meditative object. For the first time in this training, one does not attempt to fix the attention upon a familiar object. One's consciousness is now left in an absence of appearances, an experience that Asaṅga says is subtle and difficult to realize.¹²

Kamalaśīla, on whom Tsongkhapa relies heavily for his presentation of quiescence, points out that when something is perceived by being presented to cognition, it may then be removed through mental non-engagement.* Genuine mental non-engagement, however, is not a mere absence of mental engagement; rather it is a non-objectification that occurs only due to the analytical examination which penetrates beyond the signs* of phenomena.¹³ The mind engages with signs whenever a phenomenon is apprehended as indicating something else; thus mentally grasp-

⁹ Tsongkhapa, *Byang chub lam gyi rim pa chung ba*, p. 145A. Cf. *Madhyāntavibhāṅgātika*, by Sthiramati, Yamaguchi, ed., text p. 175.9-11.

¹⁰ During the spring and summer of 1980, I conducted field research on the practice of quiescence while living among Tibetan Buddhist contemplatives in the mountains above Dharamsala, India. Gen Jhampa Wangdü, a monk who had been living in contemplative retreat in Tibet and India for more than twenty years at that time, informed me that in the fourth attentional state one can maintain continuous meditation sessions of a few hours without distraction.

¹¹ *Yogasthāna III*, Bihar MS., 12A.6-5.

¹² *Yogasthāna III*, Bihar MS., 12A.6-5.

¹³ Cf. Bhāvanākrama I. (ed. Tucci) p. 212; Kamalaśīla, *Avikalpapravṛttsādāhāraṅkāṭīka* (P. f. 156b-157B); Cf. David Seyfort Ruegg, *Buddha-nature, Mind and the*

ing onto signs corresponds closely to the process of cognizing an object as something that makes sense within one's conceptual framework.¹⁴ The mental non-engagement upon the achievement of quiescence is, therefore, not of the same degree that occurs due to the cultivation of insight. For in quiescence, the mind is simply withdrawn from sensory objects and its own meditative object, without gaining insight into their true nature. The absence of phenomenal signs* is comprehended only by means of the analytical investigation that is characteristic of the cultivation of insight; and this is not pursued in the training in quiescence.

Tsongkhapa, drawing on Asaṅga,¹⁵ states that upon achieving quiescence, the mind disengages from the signs of sensory objects, and only the aspects of the sheer awareness, clarity, and vivid joy of the mind appear.¹⁶ Thus, joy is said to arise from the very nature of consciousness once it is free of the afflictions of laxity and excitation and is disengaged from all sensory and mental appearances. In this state, he says, any ideation* that arises is

Problem of Gradualism in a Comparative Perspective: On the Transmission and Reception of Buddhism in India and Tibet (London: University of London, 1989) fn. 179. While the process of analytical investigation is associated with mindfulness and mental engagement, when brought to its culmination, it is the necessary condition for the absence of both mindfulness and mental engagement and the ceasing of all conceptual proliferation. Cf. *Bhāvanāṅkrama III* (ed. Tucci), pp. 15-17; Ruegg, *Buddha-nature, Mind and the Problem of Gradualism in a Comparative Perspective*, p. 183. Asaṅga concurs that the culmination of contemplative insight does not entail a mere lack of mental engagement, as in the case of deep sleep or catatonia. Otherwise, one could effortlessly be liberated from all delusion. (*Mahāvāsanāṅgraha VIII*, 2, p. 233-cy). Cited in Edward Conze, trans., *The Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom: with the Divisions of the Abhisamayālaṅkāra* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), fn. 175, p. 30.

¹⁴ Cf. Edward Conze, trans., *The Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom*, p. 11.

¹⁵ *Yogasthāna III*, Bihar MS., 12A.6-5.

¹⁶ Vasubandhu concurs that in the first meditative stabilization the five sense consciousnesses are absent in a person who has entered into contemplation. [Louis de La Vallée Poussin, *Abhidharmaśāstra*, English trans. Le M. Pruden, Vol. IV, p. 1231.] I strongly suspect that the apprehension of these characteristics of the mind is analogous to the acquisition of the "sign of the mind" (*cittassa nimitta*) as a result of mental single-pointedness, which is regarded in the Pāli suttas as a prerequisite for the cultivation of insight. Cf. *Sarvyūta-Nikāya V*, 150-52; Kheminda Thera, *The Way of Buddhist Meditation*, pp. 53-54.

neither sustained, nor does it proliferate; rather it vanishes of its own accord, like bubbles emerging from water. One has no sense of one's own body, and it seems as if one's mind has become indivisible with space. Tsongkhapa characterizes this as a state of joy, clarity, and non-conceptuality, without mindfulness or mental engagement. He emphasizes that such a meditative state, sometimes said to be "intellectually uncontrived" and "without grasping,"* does not necessarily imply a realization of ultimate truth.¹⁷

Quiescence According to Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga

While Tsongkhapa does not elaborate here on the nature of meditation that is intellectually uncontrived and without grasping, this is a major theme in the Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga traditions of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. Karma Chagmé¹⁸ (1612–1678), a major lineage holder in both those traditions, addresses this point with respect to the achievement of quiescence:

By the power of stopping ideation and familiarizing oneself with that, one remains in a state of brilliant clarity without scattering. That must occur first, but that is not the point¹⁹ of Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga, for this is common to the view of the Chinese Hwashang, the four meditative stabilizations of non-Buddhist traditions, and the cessation of Śrāvakas. Why is that not Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga? Because it is not an uncontrived state, but a contrived one; and because there is the grasping of thinking, "attention is being sustained."²⁰

¹⁷ Tsongkhapa, *Byangchub lam gyi rim pa chung ba*, p. 162B. For Kamalāsīla's discussion of this point see his *Bhāvanākrānta III* in *The Third Process of Meditative Actualization*, trans. Robert F. Olson and Masao Ichishima (Taishō Daigaku Sōgō Bukkyō Kenkyūsho Nenpō 1, 1979), pp. 38–40. Tsongkhapa returns to this topic in his short treatise *Zhi lhag gnyis kyī dka' gnad rgyal ba'i dngongs pa bjuin bshad pa* (Collected Works, Vol. Pha).

¹⁸ Kar ma chags med. A brief biography of this contemplative is found in Tsering Lama Jampal Zangpo, *A Garland of Immortal Wish-fulfilling Trees: The Palyul Tradition of Nyingmapa*, trans. Sangye Khandro (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1988), pp. 35–44.

¹⁹ *don*

This view, which I find to be representative of the Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga traditions as a whole, clearly indicates that the state of quiescence, with its qualities of joy, clarity, and non-conceptuality, is not considered to be intellectually uncontrived, or unstructured, nor is it free of conceptual grasping. Thus, Tsongkhapa seems to agree with these contemplative traditions that quiescence by itself is not free of conceptual structuring or contrivance, and it is not free of conceptual grasping, even though it is easily mistaken as such.²¹

On the other hand, it does seem clear from Tsongkhapa's discussion, based on Asaṅga's *Śrāvakabhūmi*, that he believes the cultivation of quiescence to culminate in an experiential realization of the nature of consciousness. This assertion need not be interpreted as contradicting the premise, accepted by Tsongkhapa, that the mind cannot apprehend itself. That premise denies that a single consciousness can have itself as its own object. During the development of quiescence, introspection has

²⁰ Karma Chagmé, *Spacious Path to Freedom*, "The Ultimate Quiescence of Maintaining the Attention upon Non-conceptuality." There is at least one significant difference between Karma Chagmé's account of quiescence and that of Asaṅga, Vasubandhu, and Tsongkhapa. According to the Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga traditions, Karma Chagmé asserts that in the state of quiescence, the five kinds of sensory consciousness do not cease, but remain clear. [*Great Commentary to (Mi 'gyur rdo rje's) Buddhahood in the Palm of Your Hand (Sangs rgyas lag 'chang gi 'grel chen)* Ch. 15, p. 683.] The Nyingma Lama Gyatul Rinpoche explained this passage to me by asserting that whereas in flawed quiescence the senses are totally withdrawn, in flawless meditation sensory objects do appear to the senses, but they are not apprehended. I believe this interpretation is compatible with the assertion that the signs of sensory objects do not appear to the mind while in the state of quiescence; for those objects are not perceived as anything.

²¹ Although the state of quiescence is said to be non-conceptual, the meaning here is that the mind is not consciously engaged in discursive thought. However, it seems that conceptualization is still operating on a subliminal level, and one's experience is still structured by one's previous conceptual conditioning. According to the Madhyamaka view of Tsongkhapa, the mind is totally free of conceptualization only while engaged in the non-dual, conceptually unmediated realization of emptiness; and according to the Atiyoga tradition, one thoroughly transcends conceptual modification and grasping only in the unmediated realization of the empty and clear nature of the mind.

the function of monitoring the meditator's consciousness, particularly regarding the occurrence of the mental processes of laxity and excitation. Such metacognition is a form of recollective awareness that cognizes previous moments of consciousness. Likewise, once quiescence is accomplished and one's meditative object dissolves, in this absence of appearances the continuum of one's attention may attend to previous moments of consciousness. Due to the homogeneity of this mental continuum, the experiential effect would be that of the mind apprehending itself.

When Asaṅga and Tsongkhapa assert that with the achievement of quiescence one experientially fathoms the phenomenal nature of the mind, they are positing a realization that cuts through one's culturally and personally derived conceptual conditioning. This is not believed to be a uniquely Buddhist comprehension of the mind, nor is it regarded as a comprehension of a uniquely Buddhist mind. Rather, this is presented as a transcendental and transpersonal realization of the nature of consciousness. In the state of quiescence, the mind is no longer consciously engaged with human thought, mental imagery, or language, and it is disengaged from the human senses. Moreover, Tsongkhapa claims that the mind is also free of the signs of gender,²² clearly implying that the experienced mind is not seen as being either male or female. Thus, the training in quiescence is presented as a means for experientially ascertaining the phenomenal nature of consciousness itself, which is common to people of different cultures and times, to human and non-human sentient beings, and to males and females. For these reasons the achievement of quiescence is taught as a crucial step to reaching the conceptually unstructured and unmediated realization of ultimate truth by means of the cultivation of insight.²³

If it is possible to attend to previous moments of consciousness upon achieving quiescence, and if it is possible for introspection to monitor the flow of consciousness throughout the training in quiescence, we may well ask: might it then be possible to develop

quiescence with the mind as one's meditative object, instead of a mental image? Tsongkhapa does in fact acknowledge this possibility, and he briefly mentions ways in which this might be carried out. One method he cites is to cultivate quiescence by maintaining the attention free of ideation, by maintaining the resolve, "I shall settle the mind without thinking about any object."²⁴ That very absence of thought becomes the object of mindfulness, which has the function of preventing the attention from becoming scattered or distracted; and Tsongkhapa asserts that here, too, mindfulness must *ascertain* that object. Thus, Tsongkhapa takes non-conceptuality—one of the characteristics of the mind that is discerned upon accomplishing quiescence—as the primary object for the cultivation of quiescence. The implication is that if quiescence is achieved by focusing on this object, the other characteristics of consciousness—namely, clarity and joy—will be realized as a matter of course.

This technique is not without basis in the Mahāyāna sūtras. For example, the *Saṃhāhīnirmocanasūtra* states:

"Lord, how many objects of quiescence are there?"

He replied, "There is one: it has the form of no ideation . . ."

"How is one to cultivate quiescence?"

"When, with constant mental engagement, continually engaging with the mind itself, there is *samādhi* uninterrupted by laxity and excitation, that is flawless mental engagement with the mind itself."²⁵

Although this is not a technique strongly emphasized by Tsongkhapa or the Gelugpa order as a whole, it does figure prominently in the Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga traditions. The Indian Mahāsiddha Maitrīpa calls this the "ultimate quiescence of main-

Gimello, ed., *Paths to Liberation: The Marga and Its Transformations in Buddhist Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992) (Studies in East Asian Buddhism 7), pp. 278, 294.

²⁴ Tsongkhapa, *Byang chub lam gyi rim pa chung ba*, p. 145A.

²⁵ Cited in Kar ma chags med, *Great Commentary to (Mi 'gyur rdo rje's) Buddhahood in the Palm of Your Hand (Sangs rgyas lag 'chang gi 'gral chen)*, pp. 672–73. This is a new edition printed presumably in India, but I have been unable to discover the place or date of publication. The Tibetan translation of the *Saṃhāhīnirmocanasūtra* reads: *bcom ldan 'das du zhi gis zhi gnas dmigs pa lags*.

²² Tsongkhapa, *Byang chub lam gyi rim pa chung ba*, p. 162A.

²³ Cf. Anne C. Klein, "Mental Concentration and the Unconditioned: A Buddhist Case for Unmediated Experience" in Robert E. Buswell, Jr. and Robert M.

taining the attention upon non-conceptuality," and he describes it as follows:

Vacantly direct your eyes into the intervening vacuity.²⁶ See that the three conceptualizations of the past, future, and present, as well as wholesome, unwholesome, and ethically neutral thoughts, together with all the causes, assembly, and dispersal of thoughts of the three times are completely cut off. Bring no thoughts to mind. Let the mind, like a cloudless sky, be clear, empty, and evenly devoid of grasping, and settle it in utter vacuity. By so doing there arises the quiescence of joy, clarity, and non-conceptuality.²⁷

As noted previously, Tsongkhapa characterizes the achievement of quiescence as a state of non-conceptuality in which it seems as if one's mind has become indivisible with space. The above technique for developing quiescence takes those two *resultant* qualities as the *method* for achieving that same result. Tsongkhapa also states that upon achieving quiescence one realizes the aspects of the sheer awareness and clarity of experience,²⁸ and any thoughts that arise vanish of their own accord, like bubbles emerging from water. Moreover, he acknowledges that these aspects of awareness and clarity can also be taken as one's meditative object for developing quiescence.²⁹ Thus, both these techniques are analogous to the Vajrayāna theme of transforming the result into the path.³⁰

²⁶ *bka' rtsal pa, gcig ste, mam par mi rtog pa'i gzugs can no . . . ji tsam gyis na gcig zhi gnas bsgom pa laḡs gang gi tsho rgyur chags su yid la byed pas bar chad med pa'i sems nyid yid la byed pas, bying rḡod barchad med pa'i ting nge 'dzin skyon med pa'i sems nyid yid la byed pa'o.*

²⁷ *bar stong.* This intervening vacuity is the appearance of clear space that is perceived as being between one's visual object and oneself as the perceiving subject. As such, this space is a type of form that is apprehended by mental, and not sensory, perception (*mngon par skabs yod pa, abhyavakāśika*). Thus, it is included together with all types of mental imagery in the category of *dharmaṃyatanarūpa*. Cf. Jeffrey Hopkins, *Meditation on Emptiness*, p. 233.

²⁸ In the treatise entitled *Grub chen mi rti'i dmar khrid*, cited in Karma Chagmé, *Spacious Path to Freedom*, "The Ultimate Quiescence of Maintaining the Attention upon Non-conceptuality."

²⁹ *myong ba rig tsam gsal tsam*

According to the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka view advocated by Tsongkhapa, all types of consciousness are non-conceptual with respect to their own appearances, so they are said to be imbued with *clarity* regarding those appearances.³¹ In this sense, one of the defining characteristics of consciousness is said to be clarity.* Because consciousness is always experientially *aware* of those appearances, its second defining characteristic is said to be awareness, or knowing.* As mentioned previously, Tsongkhapa asserts that when recalling an object, one may also remember *perceiving* that object; and this should be equally true for short-term and long-term memory. While so doing, it is possible to shift the attention more towards the *object*, which de-accentuates the subjective experience; or one may focus more on the *experience*, which de-accentuates the object. When Tsongkhapa proposes focusing the attention on the *sheer* awareness and the *sheer* clarity of experience, he seems to be suggesting that one is to attend to the defining characteristics of consciousness alone, as opposed to the qualities of other objects of consciousness. Thus, in this technique the object of mindfulness is preceding moments of consciousness; and introspection monitors whether or not the attention is straying from those qualities of awareness and clarity of experience.

This technique also receives much stronger emphasis in the Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga traditions than in the Gelugpa order. The Mahāśiddha Maitrpa calls this "quiescence in which the attention is focused on conceptualization," and he describes it as follows:

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 149B. Both these suggestions are also found in the corresponding sections of Tsongkhapa's *Byang chub lam rim che ba* (Collected Works, Vol. Pa). The late, eminent Gelugpa Buddhist scholar and contemplative Geshe Rabten describes this technique in his *Echoes of Voidness*, Stephen Batchelor, trans. and ed. (London: Wisdom, 1986), pp. 113–128.

³⁰ *bras bu lam khyer.* The one cited quality of quiescence that is not presented here as a potential object for developing quiescence is joy, but this theme is well developed in Vajrayāna techniques of training in quiescence. Cf. Daniel Cozort, *Highest Yoga Tantra* (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1986).

³¹ Blo brang rgya mtsho, *mTḡa' gnyis dang bral ba'i dbu ma thal 'gyur ba'i blot mam gshag ches cher gsal bar byed pa blo rigs gong ma*, p. 5.

In relation to the excessive proliferation of conceptualization, including such afflictions as the five poisons or the three poisons, thoughts that revolve in subject/object duality, thoughts such as those of the ten virtues, the six perfections or the ten perfections—whatever virtuous and non-virtuous thoughts arise—steadily and non-conceptually observe their nature. By so doing, they are calmed in non-grasping; clear and empty awareness vividly arises, without recognition;³² and it arises in the nature of self-liberation, in which it recognizes itself. Again, direct the mind to whatever thoughts arise; and without acceptance or rejection, let it recognize its own nature. Thus implement the practical instructions on transforming ideation into the path.³³

The renowned Tibetan Atiyoga master Tertön Lerab Lingpa describes this same technique as “a crucial way of maintaining the mind in its natural state.”³⁴ In his presentation he stresses the importance of meditation “without distraction and without grasping,” a theme that appears prominently in the Atiyoga tradition. At first glance, this emphasis on non-grasping may seem at odds with Tsongkhapa’s insistence that quiescence must be developed while firmly apprehending one’s meditative object. This first impression, however, is misleading.³⁵ When Tsongkhapa states that the meditative object must be apprehended, he means simply that it must be ascertained.³⁶ In contrast, when Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga masters speak of grasping, they refer to the mental process of conceptually identifying, or labeling, the objects of the mind. Thus, in this practice, one does not grasp onto the inten-

tional objects of thoughts concerning the past, present or future, nor does one judge or evaluate the thoughts themselves. Without apprehending the objects of the mind as anything, one tries simply to perceive them in their own nature, without conceptual elaboration.³⁷ It is only in this way that one can follow the Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga injunction to observe thoughts non-conceptually. Thus, without conceptually grasping onto the contents of the mind, one perceptually ascertains their clear and cognitive nature, leading to insight into the nature of consciousness itself.

Lerab Lingpa states that due to such practice there arises “a non-conceptual sense that nothing can harm the mind, regardless of whether or not ideation has ceased. Whatever kinds of mental imagery occur—be they gentle or violent, subtle or gross, of long or short duration, strong or weak, good or bad—observe their nature, and avoid any obsessive evaluation of them as being one thing and not another.”³⁸ Like Tsongkhapa, Lerab Lingpa makes no claim that this technique alone results in a realization of ultimate truth. He does claim, however, that when this method of maintaining the mind in its natural state is followed precisely, “the afflictions of one’s own mind-stream will be inhibited, one will gain the autonomy of not succumbing to them, and one’s mind will constantly be calm and dispassionate.” And like Tsongkhapa, he asserts this as a sound basis for developing all the more advanced *samādhis* of the Vajrayāna stages of generation and completion.

³² Judging by the following statement that in this training, awareness recognizes its own nature, this statement that it is without recognition must mean that it does not ascertain any object other than the characteristics of consciousness.

³³ *Grub chen mi iri dmar khrid*. Cited in Karma Chagmé, *Spacious Path to Freedom*, Ch. 3.

³⁴ Ter ston las rab gling pa, *rDzogs pa chen po man ngag sdé'i bcud phur man ngag thams cad kyi rDpal po klong lnga'i yi ge shun bu gsum pa lce bitsun chen pot'i va ma la'i zab rig gi bshad khrid chu 'babs su bkod pa snying po'i bcud dril ye shes thig le*, ed. Ven Taklung Tsetul Pema Wangyal (Darjeeling: Orgyan Kunsang Chokhor Ling), pp. 20B–21B.

³⁵ The basis for misunderstanding here is that the same term, *dzin pa*, (Skt. *graha*), is used, which is translated here as *apprehend* and *grasp* for these two different contexts.

³⁶ That is, *'dzin pa = nges pa*.

³⁷ I am indebted to the contemporary Atiyoga teacher Gyatrul Rinpoche for clarification on this point. Compare this to the Buddha’s advice to Bāhiya Dārucīya: “Thus must you train yourself: so that in the seen there will be just the seen, in the heard just the heard . . . you will have no ‘thereby,’ you will have no ‘therein.’ As you, Bāhiya, will have no ‘therein,’ it follows that you will have no ‘here’ or ‘beyond’ or ‘midway between.’ That is just the end of ill.” (*Udāna* 8).

³⁸ This would be an instance of cultivating “unfastened mindfulness,” which is discussed in Pali Buddhist literature. Cf. Collett Cox, “Mindfulness and Memory: The Scope of *Smṛti*” from Early Buddhism to the Sarvāstivādin Abhidharma” in *In the Mirror or Memory: Reflections on Mindfulness and Remembrance in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism*, ed. Janet Gyatso (Albany: State University of New York, 1992), pp. 71–2.

Panchen Lozang Chökyi Gyaltsen³⁹ (1570–1662), a major scholar and contemplative in the Gelugpa order describes the results of this practice as follows:

Due to such practice, the nature of meditative equipoise is limpid and very clear, unobscured by anything. As it is not established as any entity having form, it is vacuous like space, as it were. Moreover, whatever good and bad objects of the five senses arise, it clearly, luminously takes on any appearance, like the reflections in a limpid mirror. You have the sense that it cannot be recognized as being this and not being that.

However stable such *samādhi* may be, if it is not imbued with the joy of physical and mental pliancy, it is single-pointed attention of the desire realm, whereas *samādhi* that is so imbued is said to be quiescence; and that is the source of many qualities such as extrasensory perception and paranormal abilities. In particular, the Ārya paths of all three vehicles are also reached in dependence upon this.

Well then, how is this path identified in terms of its own nature?

In that way, the reality of the mind is insightfully perceived, and yet it is ungraspable and undemonstrable. “Whatever appears, loosely attend to it without grasping—this is the quintessential advice that passes on the torch of the Buddha.” Such is the uniform proclamation nowadays of most meditators in these snowy mountains. Nevertheless, Chökyi Gyaltsen contends that this approach is a wonderfully skillful method for novices to still the mind, and it is a way to identify the phenomenal nature of the mind.⁴⁰

Thus, like Tsongkhapa, Chökyi Gyaltsen acknowledges the value of this practice as a means of developing attentional stability and of fathoming the phenomenal, or relative, nature of the mind; but he denies that it results in a realization of ultimate truth.

³⁹ Paṅ chen blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan. For a brief biography of this teacher see Janice D. Willis, *Enlightened Beings: Life Stories from the Garden Oral Tradition* (Boston: Wisdom, 1995), pp. 85–96.

⁴⁰ This passage is at the conclusion of the “Sems gnas pa'i thabs” section of his *dGe ldan bKa' bgyud rin po che'i bka' ston phyag rgya chen po'i rtsa ba rgyas par bshad pa yang gsal sgron me*. The concluding indented paragraph is from Chökyi Gyaltsen's

Tsongkhapa's writings on the whole do not explicitly deal with the Atiyoga tradition, but he did receive extensive teachings from the contemplative Lhodrak Khenchen Namkha Gyaltsen,⁴¹ a master of the Nyingma order of Tibetan Buddhism, which is most closely linked to the Atiyoga tradition. With this realized visionary as his channel, Tsongkhapa received instructions on Atiyoga from Vajrapāṇi, the divine embodiment of the power of the Buddhas. These teachings, entitled *Garland of Supremely Healing Nectars*,⁴² are included in Tsongkhapa's Collected Works, and he praises them as being free of excess, omission, and error.⁴³

Tsongkhapa and numerous contemplatives from the Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga traditions are in agreement that the accomplishment of quiescence—whether by focusing on a mental image, on the absence of conceptualization, or on the salient qualities of consciousness—does not by itself yield insight into the ultimate nature of the mind or any other phenomenon. Particularly in the latter two techniques, one tries to meditate non-conceptually, but at least some subliminal ideation persists. In Tsongkhapa's account, the thought is: “I shall settle the mind without thinking about any object”; and as Karṇa Chagmé describes it, there remains a lingering thought: “attention is being

primary text on Mahāmudrā [*Phyag rgya chen po'i rtsa ba* (Asian Classics Input Project, Source CD, Release A, S5939FACT, 1993)]. This primary text has been translated under the title *The Great Seal of Voidness* in Alex Berzin, (trans.) *The Mahāmudrā Eliminating the Markness of Ignorance* (Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1978). A commentary, entitled *sNyar rgyud lam bzang gsal ba'i sgron me* (*The Lamp of the Clear and Excellent Path of the Oral Tradition Lineage*) on the Paṅchen Lozang Chökyi Gyaltsen's autocommentary, was composed by Yongdzin Yeshe Gyaltsen (Yongs 'dzin ye shes rgyal mtshan), included in *The Collected Works of Tshe-mchog gling Yongs-'dzin Ye-shes-rgyal-mtshan* (New Delhi: Tibet House Library, 1974). For a concise account of Mahāmudrā in the Gelugpa order see Janice D. Willis, *Enlightened Beings: Life Stories from the Garden Oral Tradition* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), pp. 111–124.

⁴¹ Lho brag nam mkha' rgyal mtshan

⁴² *Zhu lan sman mchog bdud rtsi phreng ba* (Collected Works, Vol. Ka). An English translation of this work is found in *Life and Teachings of Tsong Khapa*, ed. Prof. R. Thurman (Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1982), pp. 213–230.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

sustained." Thus, the various techniques of quiescence alone are regarded as being insufficient for entering a contemplative state that is truly intellectually uncontrived and free of conceptual grasping.

According to the Madhyamaka, Mahāmudrā, and Atiyoga traditions alike, in order to realize ultimate truth in a manner that is intellectually unstructured and free of conceptual grasping, one must actively, discursively seek out the ultimate nature of phenomena by means of insight practices.⁴⁴ Once one has gained insight by means of such conceptual analysis, one sustains that insight in a manner that closely parallels the above technique of settling the mind in its natural state. But now, due to the power of insight, it is said that one may actually transcend all conceptual constructs, dispense with all grasping, and experientially realize ultimate truth.

For that to occur, however, all three of those traditions maintain that the attentional stability and clarity gained by the training in quiescence is indispensable. All three traditions also acknowledge the value of the whole range of quiescence practices discussed above. Among them, there is a distinctive flavor, however, in the practice which Tsongkhapa describes as focusing on the sheer awareness and the sheer clarity of experience, in Maitrīpa's technique of focusing the attention on conceptualization, and Lerab Lingpa's method for maintaining the mind in its natural state. In such practice, one does not suppress or counteract any mental process, any thoughts, desires, or emotions. Even

if even laxity and excitation occur, they are not to be counteracted with antidotes, as in the technique explained by Tsongkhapa. Rather, one simply observes the clear and cognizant nature of these and all other mental events, letting them arise and vanish of their own accord, like bubbles emerging from water.

In effect, one tries to use the resultant state of quiescence as the means for achieving quiescence; and, particularly according to the Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga traditions, that state of non-conceptual, clear awareness, as free as possible of conceptual grasping, is the natural state of the mind. Thus, rather than trying to create that state by applying intellectually contrived techniques, such as focusing the attention on a mental image, one lets the mind settle in its own nature, so that those qualities emerge spontaneously.⁴⁵

In terms of the effect of this technique on the mental processes themselves, this turns out to allow for a kind of "free association" of ideas, desires, and emotions. Because one is not intentionally suppressing, evaluating, judging, or directing any thoughts and so on that appear to the mind, and because the attention is maintained within the field of mental phenomena, without being distracted by physical objects, a wide variety of latent predispositions are brought into consciousness. These may include old memories, long-forgotten fears and resentments, repressed desires and fantasies, and so on. As in the dream state, latent propensities are catalyzed so that unconscious processes—including those that influence one's behavior, health, and so forth—are made conscious. If one can simply take note of these mental events, without grasping onto them as "mine," and without judging them, but simply observing their clear and cognizant nature, one can see that they dissolve of their own accord; and they cannot harm one's mind in the present. This is regarded as a most direct, uncontrived

⁴⁴ This point can be verified by examining almost any authoritative treatise on quiescence and insight in all of these three Buddhist traditions. Śāntideva makes this point abundantly clear in his *Bodhisattvacharyāvatāra*; Tsongkhapa does so in his two major expositions of the stages of the path; Padmasambhava does so in his treatise *Natural Liberation: Padmasambhava's Teachings on the Six Bardos*; Gyatrul Rinpoche, comm., B. Alan Wallace, trans. and ed. (Boston: Wisdom, 1997); Takpo Tashi Namgyal makes this point in his classic *Mahāmudrā: The Quintessence of Mind and Meditation*, trans. Lobsang P. Lhalungpa (Boston: Shambhala, 1986); and the late Dudjom Rinpoche, Jigdröl Yeshe Dorje, Head of the Nyingma order of Tibetan Buddhism, concurs in his essay "The Illumination of Primordial Wisdom" in Gyatrul Rinpoche, *Ancient Wisdom: Nyingma Teachings on Dream Yoga, Meditation and Transformation*, trans. B. Alan Wallace and Sangye Khandro (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1993), pp. 133–142.

⁴⁵ During an interview in April, 1994, the Tibetan Atiyoga master Kusum Lingpa expressed to me his conviction that quiescence achieved in this manner is more durable than that achieved by other more contrived methods; for this quiescence is less artificial than that achieved, for example, by focusing on a mental image.

means to realizing the nature of consciousness, and to bringing elements from the unconscious into the clear light of awareness.⁴⁶

This practice of cultivating quiescence by attending to thoughts, however, is not without its own pitfalls. As one has no fixed object on which to focus the attention, one may easily succumb to mere day-dreaming, drifting from one thought to another, without attentional stability or clarity. Instead of leading to the actual achievement of quiescence, such pseudo-meditation results merely in mental lassitude. Moreover, the method of focusing on non-conceptuality as one's object of quiescence, if not followed properly, may result in blank-mindedness, in which the mind apprehends nothing and is devoid of clarity. Although there may be some degree of attentional stability in this trance-like state, Tsongkhapa cautions that, rather than leading to the achievement of quiescence, such sustained practice actually impairs one's intelligence.

Using a visualized mental image as one's meditative object, as Tsongkhapa suggests, provides the meditator with a clearly defined object on which to fix the attention. With such an object held with mindfulness, one can readily employ introspection to determine the degree of one's attentional stability and clarity. Thus, the danger of slipping into idle day-dreaming or trance-like mental vacuity is decreased. In short, although the methods of attending to non-conceptuality and to conceptualization may, at first glance, appear easier, they are actually more subtle and challenging than methods using visualization. In the Tibetan tradition, the choice of technique is usually made in close collaboration with an experienced meditation teacher, so that the most appropriate method may be tailored to each individual.

⁴⁶ The closest analog to such experience that I have found in Western writings is in William James's essays on radical empiricism. Cf. "Radical Empiricism" in *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, John J. McDermott, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), pp. 134–310.

Beyond Quiescence

The central aim of Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga practice is the conceptually unmediated realization of a state of Awareness⁴⁷ that transcends all conceptual constructs of subject and object, the personal and the impersonal, unity and multiplicity, *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, and existence and non-existence. This awareness is said to be the primordial ground* of the whole of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, and it is identified as the Dharmakāya, the Buddha nature,* the Essence of the Tathāgata,* and mind-itself.⁴⁸ While it is utterly transcendent and never contaminated by mental afflictions or obscurations, it is constantly, immutably present in every moment of everyone's experience, unproduced and unconditioned by one's body or environment. It is this awareness that is the basis, the path, and the fruition of the practice of Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga.

What role do quiescence, meditative stabilization, and *samādhi* have in such training? Many passages in the literature of the Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga traditions seem to imply that meditative stabilization is simply antithetical to such practice. Herbert Guenther, who has probably written more on these two traditions than any other Western Buddhist, depicts the cultivation of meditative stabilization as a process of exchanging "one fixation

⁴⁷ This Atiyoga term has been variously translated as "pristine awareness," "intrinsic awareness," "basic awareness," and so on, with all of these modifiers intended to distinguish this from ordinary, conditioned awareness. In most psychological and philosophical contexts, the Tibetan term *rig pa* may be rendered simply as "awareness," "knowing," or "cognition," but in this Atiyoga context, the word clearly has a more exalted and transcendent connotation, while at the same time it is said to refer to simple, conceptually unmodified awareness that is manifest in each moment of ordinary consciousness. Since the Tibetan Atiyoga writers use the common term *rig pa*, I have chosen to translate it simply as *Awareness*, with only the capitalization to suggest its exalted, or primordial, status.

⁴⁸ This is a term for the ultimate nature of the mind. While Tsongkhapa's approach to Madhyamaka entails an investigation of the nature of objects of the mind, moving from phenomenal reality (*chos, dharmā*) to reality-itself (*chos nyid, dharmatā*), the emphasis in Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga is to investigate the nature of the mind, moving from the mind (*sens, citta*) to the mind-itself. When the nature of the mind-itself is realized, it is seen to be non-dual with reality-itself.

(physical reality) for another (imaginal reality), culminating in a state of quasi-comatose absorption;⁴⁹ and he contrasts this with the practice of Mahāmudrā, which aims to transcend the subject-object dichotomy in a realm of experience that is beyond the scope of the intellect.⁵⁰ Guenther asserts that advanced states of meditative stabilization are regarded in the Atiyoga tradition as forms of reifying, dichotomizing thought that must be replaced with the natural limpidity and clarity of Awareness.⁵¹ In short, he suggests that Atiyoga “marks a radical break from the older mechanistic determinism . . .”;⁵² and he claims that Saraha, who is regarded as one of the earliest and most important

⁴⁹ Herbert Guenther, *Ecstatic Spontaneity: Saraha's Three Cycles of Dohā* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1993), p. 57.

⁵⁰ Guenther, well known for his idiosyncratic translations of Buddhist terms, renders *dhyāna* as “foundation of thinking” (*Ibid.*, p. 66, fn. 20). This translation, however, is not only idiosyncratic, but simply incorrect. The Sanskrit *dhyāna* is derived from the root *dhyai*, itself related to several Vedic terms derived from the root *dhi*, which denotes a vision, while the corresponding verb means “to have a vision.” In the Tibetan *bsam gtan*, *bsam* may be rendered as “thought,” or “meditation,” while *gtan* means “enduring,” “sustained,” and “stabilized”; so the two terms together etymologically suggest “stabilized meditation.” Thus, the etymologies of neither the Sanskrit nor the Tibetan suggest a “foundation of thought.” In terms of the actual meaning of *dhyāna* in the Buddhist context, this term technically denotes a series of meditative states that begin with the attainment of quiescence and proceed to more subtle states of *samādhi* belonging to the form realm. As such, they do not function as the foundation of thought either in advanced contemplatives or in ordinary people. Thus, Guenther’s translation seems unfounded and incorrect, and his pejorative rendering of *samādhi* as “quasi-comatose absorption” appears equally misleading. His “foundation of thought” is most directly translated back into Tibetan as *bsam pa'i rten*, or *bsam rten*, which has the same pronunciation, but a totally different meaning than *bsam gtan*. I hope the basis of his translation is not simply a confusion of the two terms *gtan* and *rten*, which would be unworthy of a scholar of his great erudition.

⁵¹ Herbert Guenther, *Ecstatic Spontaneity*, p. 66, fn. 20.

⁵² Anne Klein makes a similar claim when she writes, “Mental quiescence is just one of the many splendid qualities spontaneously associated with this primordial wisdom; unlike in the dGe-lugs-pa described here, there is in rDzogs-chen no need to speak of or cultivate it separately.” [“Mental Concentration and the Unconditioned: A Buddhist Case for Unmediated Experience,” p. 296 in Robert E. Buswell, Jr. and Robert M. Gimello, ed. *Paths to Liberation: The Mārga and Its Transformations in Buddhist Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1992) (Studies in East Asian Buddhism 7)]. In contrast, to Guenther, Klein displays a

representatives of the Mahāmudrā tradition, rejects meditative stabilization outright.⁵³

While the more advanced states of meditative stabilization may indeed be incompatible with the practice of Mahāmudrā, it is a mistake to draw the same conclusion regarding the achievement of quiescence. Far from rejecting this attainment outright, Saraha states in a manner representative of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism as a whole:

Quiescence depends upon its cause—ethical discipline. Its nature is isolation from mental afflictions and ideation. Its cooperative condition is reliance upon special sustained attention. The benefit is that gross mental afflictions and suffering are inhibited.⁵⁴

To understand the role of quiescence in the practice of Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga, it is important to recognize that different types of people are said to reach the same contemplative goals by different means. Karma Chagmé points out that in “simultaneous individuals”⁵⁵ the signs of realization appear swiftly and simultaneously as a result of their spiritual maturation from past lives. Such people may not need to engage in the sequential trainings in ethics, quiescence, and insight, but may realize the nature of Awareness as soon as it is pointed out to them. But such individuals, Karma Chagmé says, are rare. “Gradually guided individuals,” (*rim skyel ba*) who are far more common, can reach the

sympathetic understanding of both the Gelugpa and Nyingma orders, and she avoids such pejorative, unilluminating phrases as “mechanistic determinism.” Guenther’s own aversion towards the Gelugpa order and his enthusiasm for the Nyingmapa order are flagrantly displayed in his caricatures of these two in his polemical essay “Buddhism in Tibet,” in *Buddhism and Asian History*, Joseph M. Kitigawa and Mark D. Cummings, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 175–187.

⁵³ Guenther addresses this theme at greater length in his *From Reduction to Creativity: rDzogs-chen and the new Sciences of the Mind* (Boston and Shaftsbury: Shambhala, 1989), Ch. 5.

⁵⁴ Cited in Karma Chagmé’s *Great Commentary to [Mi’gyur rdo rje’s] Buddhahood in the Palm of Your Hand* (Sangs rgyas lag ‘chang gi gre chen), pp. 68–81, *zhi gnas rgyu ni tshul khrims la brten te, ngo bo nyon mongs nam rtoḡ dben pa yi, rbyen ni sens gnas khyad par la brten te, phari yon nyon mongs sdag bsngal rags pas gron*. Cf. Herbert Guenther, *Ecstatic Spontaneity*, p. 199, fn. 26.

⁵⁵ *gang zag cig char*

same degrees of contemplative realization only as a result of continual, sustained meditation.⁵⁶ While the former may follow a “sudden path” to enlightenment, the latter have no practical option other than applying themselves to a “gradual path.” While the separate cultivation of quiescence may be unnecessary for the former, it is indispensable for the latter. For such people, Karma Chagmé claims, the more advanced practices of Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga will have little impact if they are not preceded by a thorough training in quiescence and insight.⁵⁷

The assertion that Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga practice is incompatible with the achievement of meditative stabilization is largely based on the frequent statements in the literature of these traditions that meditative experience of joy, clarity, and non-conceptuality are actually *hindrances* to the recognition of Awareness. Moreover, these traditions, like Tsongkhapa, assert that these are the salient characteristics of the achievement of quiescence. It should be immediately obvious, however, that the *sheer presence* of joy, clarity, and non-conceptuality are not the problem. The cultivation of their opposites, namely, misery, dullness, and compulsive conceptualization, is obviously not the way to fathom the essential nature of the mind. Moreover, Awareness itself is often described as being of the nature of inborn bliss and clear light, and as transcending all concepts. Thus, on the face of it, joy, clarity, and non-conceptuality hardly seem incompatible with the nature of Awareness.

The issue here is not so much the simple presence of these three qualities as it is the manner in which they are experienced. Citing such Tibetan patriarchs of the Mahāmudrā tradition as Jigten Gönpö,⁵⁸ Phagmo Drupa,⁵⁹ Gyalwa Chö Dingwa,⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Karma Chagmé, *Spacious Path to Freedom*, Ch. 7.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, Ch. 4.

⁵⁸ Jig rten mgon po

⁵⁹ Phag mo gru pa rdo rje rgyal po, a principle disciple of Dvags po lha rje, who in turn was a disciple of Mi la ras pa.

⁶⁰ rGyal ba chos lding ba

Min-gyur Dorje,⁶¹ and Gyalwang Chöjey,⁶² Karma Chagmé begins by commenting that “joy, clarity, and non-conceptuality are pitfalls of meditation.”⁶³ He then explains that if one responds to any of these experiences with craving and attachment, this simply perpetuates one’s continued existence in *samsāra*, in the desire, form, and formless realms. In particular, he notes that the absence of even subtle conceptualization may be mistaken for an experience of the Dharmakāya; but if one becomes fixated on such experience, this leads one away from the path of liberation to rebirth in the formless realm.

Joy, clarity, and non-conceptuality are pitfalls to meditation, he says, as long as they are experienced within a context of conceptual structuring, involving such ideas as *existence* and *non-existence*. When all conceptual modification, or adulteration, has been left behind, “the threefold sense of joy, clarity, and non-conceptuality are merged into one taste,”⁶⁴ resulting in “non-meditation” which is to be sustained constantly throughout the day and night. Thus, the very distinctions among these qualities of awareness are transcended. This “breakthrough”⁶⁵ experience to the ascertainment of Awareness is traditionally preceded by analytical meditation leading to insight into the clear and empty nature of the mind; and in order for such meditation to proceed effectively, quiescence is deemed to be indispensable.

While Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga do indeed entail practices that differ from other types of insight practices, including the Madhyamaka approach taught by Tsongkhapa, there is sufficient common ground among them to suggest that their break from other Buddhist traditions is not as radical as some authors, such as Guenther, would have one believe. Referring to the practices of Madhyamaka, Mahāmudrā, and Atiyoga, Pañchen Lozang Chökyi

⁶¹ Mi ’gyur rdo rje

⁶² rGyal dbang chos rje

⁶³ Karma Chagmé, *Spacious Path to Freedom*, Ch. 7.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 460.

⁶⁵ *khreg chod*

Gyaltsen comments that although they go under a variety of labels,

... if these are examined by one who is well-versed in the scriptures and reasoning by which one distinguishes between provisional and definitive meanings, they are seen, not as mutually incompatible, like hot and cold, but as coming down to the same point.⁶⁶

The Role of Introspection in the Cultivation of Quiescence

In Indo-Tibetan Buddhist contemplative practice, mental perception plays a key role in the cultivation of insight, and it is refined chiefly by means of the training in meditative quiescence. Tsongkhapa bases his presentation of the cultivation of quiescence on the following definition found in the *Samdhirimocanasūtra*.¹

Dwelling in solitude, perfectly directing the mind inwards, one attends just to the phenomena as they have been brought into consideration; and that attentive mind is mental engagement,² for it is continuously mentally engaged inwards. That state in which one is so directed and remains repeatedly, in which physical pliancy* and mental pliancy have arisen, is called *quiescence*.

The fact that the mind is directed inwards in this discipline suggests that the overall training in quiescence is introspective in nature. However, in the technique, emphasized by Tsongkhapa, of focusing on a mental image *in the space in front of one* casts an interesting light on the notion of *inwards*. The distinction between

¹ Cf. Lamotte, *Samdhirimocanasūtra*, VIII.3.

² Mental engagement is a mental process having the unique function of directing the mind and its concomitant mental processes upon an object and apprehending it. The province of mental engagement is to apprehend the object firmly without letting the attention stray elsewhere, so it is the basis of both mindfulness and introspection. Cf. Asaṅga, *Abhidharmasamuccaya*, ed. Pralhad Pradhan (*Visva Bharati, Santiniketan*, 1950), p. 6; Herbert V. Guenther and Leslie S. Kawamura, *Mind in Buddhist Psychology* (Emeryville: Dharmma Publishing, 1975), p. 28; Blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Rigs lam che ba blo rigs kyi miam bzahag nye mkho kun btus* (Dharamsala, 1974), p. 132; and Geshe Rabten, *The Mind and Its Functions*, trans. Stephen Batchelor (Mont. Pelerin: Tharpa Choeing, 1979), p. 60; See Edward Conze's discussion of mental engagement in his *The Large Sūtra on Perfect Wisdom: with the Divisions of the Abhisamayālaṅkāra* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p. 29.

⁶⁶ This comment is made at the end of his introduction preceding the "Sems gnas pa'i thabs" section of his *dGe ldan bKa' brgyud rin po che'i bka' srol phyag rgya chen po'i rtsa ba rgyas par bshad pa yang gsal sgron me*.

inwards and outwards is evidently not one of physical location or direction. Rather, turning the attention inwards means turning it away from the five fields of sensory objects and directing it towards the field of phenomena that are perceived by the mind alone.*

The training in quiescence hinges upon the development and employment of two mental processes—mindfulness* and introspection*—and both of these are directed towards mental phenomena. The distinction between them is that mindfulness is focused upon the meditative object, while introspection monitors the awareness of that object. Let us now attend to a detailed examination of the nature and function of introspection in Tsongkhapa's presentation of quiescence.

Tsongkhapa cites Śāntideva's general summation of introspection as the repeated investigation of the state of one's body and mind.³ Although introspection is not included among the fifty-one mental processes listed in Asaṅga's *Abhidharmasamuccaya*, it is regarded as a derivative of intelligence,⁴ which is listed there. Non-introspection, on the other hand, is explicitly included among those mental processes as one of twenty secondary mental afflictions. There it is defined as an intelligence that is afflicted due either to failing to discriminate or doing so in a crude fashion. As such, it induces a sense of carelessness, for it leaves one unaware of one's own physical, verbal, and mental conduct. In short, non-introspection acts to impair the power of one's intelligence and serves as a basis of non-virtuous behavior of all kinds.⁵ Defined in this way, it is clear that non-introspection is more than

³ *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, V:108.

⁴ Although *prajñā* frequently is translated as *wisdom*, within the context of the mental factors *intelligence* seems more accurate, for it is there defined as a discriminating mental process that has the unique characteristic of evaluating an object held with mindfulness. Its province is to arrive at certainty, and it is regarded as the root of all excellent qualities. Cf. Asaṅga, *Abhidharmasamuccaya*, ed. Pralhad Pradhan (Visva Bharati, Santiniketan, 1950), p. 6.; Herbert V. Guenther and Leslie S. Kawamura, *Mind in Buddhist Psychology* (Emeryville: Dharmapublishing, 1975), pp. 37–38; Blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Rigs lam che ba blo rigs kyi nam bzag nye mkho kun bñus*, p. 135; Geshe Rabten, *The Mind and Its Functions*, trans. Stephen Batchelor, pp. 63–4.

simply the absence of introspection; it is an afflicted type of intelligence that fails to take careful note of one's own conduct, including the functioning of one's own mind.

While introspection plays an important soteriological role in Buddhist practice as a whole, it is particularly crucial for the training in quiescence, in which it has the function of recognizing whether the attention has succumbed to either laxity or excitation. In the early stages of this training, the mind is especially prone to excitation, which is an agitated mental process that follows after attractive objects.⁶ As excitation draws the attention away from the meditative object towards sensory objects and other mental phenomena, it is a major obstacle to the cultivation of quiescence. By definition, excitation is defined as a derivative of attachment,⁷ though on other occasions the mind may also be distracted due to other mental processes such as anger and guilt.

Once the attention has been sufficiently trained so that it can remain unwaveringly on the meditative object for a sustained period of time, laxity becomes a formidable problem. This mental process occurs when the attention becomes slack and the meditative object is not apprehended with clarity and forcefulness.⁸ Tsongkhapa identifies laxity as a derivative of delusion,⁹ which is a mental affliction that either actively misconceives the nature of reality or else obscures reality due to its own lack of clarity.

⁵ Cf. Blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Rigs lam che ba blo rigs kyi nam bzag nye mkho kun bñus*, pp. 159–160; Geshe Rabten, *The Mind and Its Functions*, trans. Stephen Batchelor, pp. 87–88.

⁶ *Abhidharmasamuccaya*, p. 9.9–10.

⁷ Attachment is a mental affliction that by its very nature superimposes a quality of attractiveness upon its object and yearns for it. It distorts the cognition of that object, for attachment exaggerates its admirable qualities and screens out its disagreeable qualities. Cf. Asaṅga, *Abhidharmasamuccaya*, ed. Pralhad Pradhan (Visva Bharati, Santiniketan, 1950), p. 9.; Herbert V. Guenther and Leslie S. Kawamura, *Mind in Buddhist Psychology* (Emeryville: Dharmapublishing, 1975), p. 96; Blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Rigs lam che ba blo rigs kyi nam bzag nye mkho kun bñus*, p. 145; Geshe Rabten, *The Mind and Its Functions*, trans. Stephen Batchelor, pp. 74–75.

⁸ *Intermediate Bhāvānākrama*, Derge: dBu ma Ki 47.2.7–48a.1.1.

In the cultivation of quiescence, mindfulness of the meditative object needs to be maintained constantly, whereas introspection is only intermittently needed to monitor the functioning of the meditating awareness. While a conceptual understanding of laxity and excitation is relatively easy to acquire, Tsongkhapa emphasizes, "It is not enough merely to have an understanding of laxity and excitation; when meditating you must be able to generate introspection that correctly recognizes whether or not laxity and excitation have arisen."⁹ Until such introspection has arisen, he insists, one cannot be certain that one's meditation is free of laxity and excitation; and as long as the mind is still prone to these afflictions, quiescence has not been achieved.

In the process of counteracting laxity and excitation, attentional stability and clarity are enhanced. To understand these two qualities in terms of Buddhist psychology, one must note that Buddhists commonly assert that the continuum of awareness is composed of successive moments of cognition having finite duration; though different schools pose varying hypotheses concerning the exact frequency of these moments.¹⁰ Moreover, commonly in a continuum of perception, many moments of awareness consist of non-ascertaining cognition,^{*} that is, objects appear to this inattentive awareness, but they are not ascertained.¹¹

⁹ Tsongkhapa, *Byang chub lam gyi rim pa chung ba* (Collected Works, Vol. Pha) p. 149A.

¹⁰ Tibetan Buddhist psychology generally accepts the *Abhidharmakośa* assertion that a moment (*skad cig, kṣaṇa*) last for one-sixty-fifth of the duration of a finger-snap. (Louis de La Vallée Poussin, *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*, English trans. Leo M. Pruden, Vol. II, p. 474.) This is said to be the shortest duration in which a phenomenon can arise or change from one state to another—an assertion that can hardly stand up in light of modern science, which measures physical processes in terms of nanoseconds. Vasubandhu's interpretation of the duration of a moment is one among five opinions expressed in the *Vibhāṣā* (TD, 27, p. 701b2). I have not seen any evidence that this interpretation is derived from Buddhist contemplative experience, nor have I seen any practical application of this theory for contemplative training. According to the *Vibhāṣā*, the Buddha did not tell the true duration of a moment, for no one is capable of understanding it. (Louis de La Vallée Poussin, *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*, English trans. Leo M. Pruden, Vol. II, p. 540, fn. 484.)

¹¹ For a detailed account of non-ascertaining cognition see Lati Rinbochay, *Mind*

In terms of this theory, I surmise that the degree of attentional stability increases in relation to the proportion of ascertaining moments of cognition of the intended object; that is, as stability increases, fewer and fewer moments of ascertaining consciousness are focused on any other object. This makes for a homogeneity of moments of ascertaining perception. The degree of attentional clarity corresponds to the ratio of moments of ascertaining to non-ascertaining cognition: the higher the frequency of ascertaining perception, the greater the clarity. Thus, the achievement of quiescence entails an exceptionally high density of homogenous moments of ascertaining consciousness.

In the training in quiescence the stated function of introspection is to monitor the awareness of the meditator and to detect in particular any occurrence of either laxity or excitation. Now laxity and excitation are themselves mental processes having their own intentional objects. In such practice, the object of laxity is the meditative object itself, apprehended without the full force of clarity. The object of excitation may be any attractive, or interesting, object other than the meditative object. In light of our previous analysis of the ways in which the mind can and cannot monitor itself, it is evident that, according to Tsongkhapa, introspection may perceive an immediately prior occurrence of laxity and excitation in relation to their own intentional objects. Such perception is a clear case of *participatory observation*. That is, the very perception of any mental process by introspection necessarily influences the observed mental process. This is particularly evident in the case of excitation. For a continuum of excitation to be sustained, the mind must continually attend, with attachment, to one or more attractive objects. However, if introspection free of attachment detects the presence of excitation, the continuum of excitation would necessarily be interrupted. Likewise, if introspection with a high degree of clarity detects the presence of laxity, this would interrupt the continuum of laxity.

Tsongkhapa hammers home the subtlety of the introspective perception of laxity and excitation when he writes, “Moreover, by gradually developing powerful introspection, not only must you be able to induce introspection that recognizes laxity and excitation as soon as they have arisen; you must generate introspection that is aware of them when they are on the verge of occurring, before they have actually arisen.”¹² Thus, introspection must be so developed that it notes even a *prācivity* towards either of these hindrances. Finally, introspection may monitor the awareness even when neither laxity nor excitation is either present or on the verge of arising. On such occasions, one moment of introspection would note a prior moment of the meditating consciousness free of those mental processes.

As indicated by the preceding discussion, the fact that introspection entails a form of participatory observation does not exclude the possibility of its role in the scientific study of the mind. Buddhist contemplatives, such as Tsongkhapa, seem to be keenly aware of the fallibility of mental perception of mental phenomena; and it is for this reason that the training in quiescence is so strongly emphasized as a necessary prerequisite to the cultivation of contemplative insight into the nature of the mind and other phenomena. This training is not necessarily linked with any one psychological, philosophical, or theological theory of the mind, so there seems no reason in principle why it could not be incorporated into modern scientific research. For this to be done with full effectiveness, however, it would seem necessary for researchers themselves to enter into such training, and not simply leave it to “subjects” who would become objects of scientific scrutiny.

¹² Tsongkhapa, *Byang chub lam gyi rim pa chung ba*, p. 149A.

GUIDED MEDITATION:
Mindfulness III

*Sustain unwavering mindfulness of all appearances—
observing whatever arises in the present moment*

Begin each session by settling the body in its natural state, imbued with the three attributes of relaxation, stillness, and vigilance. You may round off the initial settling of the body with three slow, deep breaths, breathing into the abdomen, then the diaphragm, and finally into the chest. Breathe in, almost to full capacity, and then release the breath effortlessly. Be mindfully attentive to the sensations related to the breath arising throughout the body as you repeat this three times.

Now release all preferences and give up control of the breath. Let it flow in and out as effortlessly as the tide, at its own pace. Mindfully attend to the sensations of the breath throughout the body, while releasing any sense of control or influence.

With all senses open and the eyes at least partially open, cultivate a deepening ease in body and mind. Let your awareness rest in its own place of innate stillness, without grasping or aversion. Remain open and attentive to all appearances arising in the six fields of experience. If you find yourself distracted, having lost mindfulness, you might naturally bear down and try harder; counterintuitively, relax more deeply and release the grasping that distracted you.

Awareness, by nature, illuminates appearances and knows, or cognizes. Sustain awareness with an ongoing flow of unwavering mindfulness. Whatever arises in the present moment to the six modes of perception is the object of mindfulness. Attend to these appearances without distraction or grasping. ☸

MINDING CLOSELY

The Four Applications of Mindfulness

B. Alan Wallace



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MENTAL FACULTIES

Mindfulness and introspection are classically described as mental faculties, and you can get a clear sense of the meaning of these terms from

some of the wisest voices in the Buddhist tradition. There are no disagreements or sectarian issues here; in fact, there is a strong congruence in the usage of these two key terms throughout the Indian, Theravadin, Zen, and Tibetan Buddhist traditions.

Mindfulness

The term “mindfulness” (Skt. *smṛiti*; Pali *satī*) is enormously important in Buddhism and has been defined by the Buddha and many of the greatest Buddhist commentators. The four close applications of mindfulness have been splendidly presented and extensively practiced for over two thousand years in the Theravadin tradition, from which we will examine two classic definitions. The first was given by the Indian Buddhist monk Nagasena, a liberated being who realized the culmination of nirvana (Skt. *arhat*), as taught by the Buddha in his early discourses recorded in the Pali Canon.

Nagasena conducted the first East-West dialogue on record, in the second century BCE, with a Greek king who governed one of the principalities created during Alexander the Great’s (356–323 BCE) brief and unfortunate occupation of India. King Menander I, known in Pali as Milinda, was a well-educated Greek citizen who eventually converted to Buddhism. In the *Milindapañha*, the text recording their dialogue, the king asked Nagasena what is meant by the term “mindfulness.” Nagasena was very generous in his answers to the king’s many questions, and he responded that mindfulness has both the characteristic of “calling to mind” and the characteristic of “cultivating”:

Mindfulness, when it arises, calls to mind wholesome and unwholesome tendencies, with faults and faultless, inferior and refined, dark and pure, together with their counterparts . . .

Mindfulness, when it arises, follows the courses of beneficial and unbeneficial tendencies: these tendencies are beneficial, these unbeneficial; these tendencies are helpful, these unhelpful. Thus one who practices yoga rejects unbeneficial tendencies and cultivates beneficial tendencies.³⁶

In this quote, “counterparts” means the other concomitant mental factors operating simultaneously with mindfulness. “One who practices yoga” refers to a follower of the spiritual path. Mindfulness requires discerning, ethical concern. Which processes and activities arising in the body and mind give rise to beneficial results? Which give rise to detrimental results? We must differentiate, applying mindfulness strategically and discerningly because we care about ourselves. Are we flourishing, or are we sowing the seeds of our own misery and discontent? According to Nagasena, mindfulness means attending closely to what is occurring in the mind and body.

For the second definition, we look to the most authoritative commentator in the Theravadin tradition, Buddhaghosa. In his extraordinary compendium, *The Path of Purification*, which draws on over nine hundred years of Buddhist contemplative study and practice, he says first of mindfulness: “By means of it they [that is, the concomitant, or simultaneous mental processes] remember, or it itself remembers, or it is simply just remembering, thus it is mindfulness.”

Buddhaghosa conveys the sense that mindfulness itself recollects or remembers. The very experience of recalling something is his first emphasis in defining mindfulness, and it was also the Buddha’s emphasis when he defined this term. We would call it memory because it means retaining something in the mind. What did you have for breakfast? Where did you live when you were six years old? What’s your mother’s name? How many fingers do you have? The faculty that remembers accurately is mindfulness. It is the capacity to retain, recollect, and bear in mind that which has been known.

But mindfulness is not confined to past events, let alone distant past events. Present-centered mindfulness is focused face-to-face on something that is arising in the present moment, an ongoing recollection that overcomes the entropy of the mind. The force of entropy leads to disarray, fragmentation, and disintegration of mindfulness, as the mind becomes disoriented, excited, or distracted. Mindfulness means holding everything together, not with grasping, but with presence that can be directed to immediate experience as well as to past events.

Buddhaghosa’s definition of mindfulness continues: “Its characteris-

tic is not floating.” In our practice of mindfulness, it’s very easy to float. When we are not latched on to something, whether it’s our body, mind, possessions, or another object of grasping, then it’s very easy to simply space out and float. We are so accustomed to compulsively grasping, clinging, identifying with our thoughts, and mistaking them for their referents that when we release our grasp and simply try to be present, we often find ourselves floating—or sleeping! Mindfulness means not floating, not forgetting, and not disengaging.

Buddhaghosa continues, “Its property is not losing; its manifestation is guarding, or the state of being face to face with an object.” This is the goal of our practice. We may closely apply mindfulness to whatever presents itself, from moment to moment, in any of the six fields of experience, fully engaged and attentive, as if we were gazing face-to-face with someone. We are not spacing out or grasping but mindfully present. Mindfulness of the tactile sensations of the breath means being face-to-face, from moment to moment, with the respiration. We are not remembering past breaths, and we are not lost or floating—we remain focused continuously on the current sensations of the breath.

Mindfulness can also be prospective. For example, if you must drive to an appointment at three o’clock, remember to leave on time. Bearing a future occurrence in mind, without forgetting, is prospective mindfulness, which is very useful in these practices as well as in everyday life.

Buddhaghosa’s definition continues: “Its basis is strong noting, or the close application of mindfulness to the body, and so on.” This means that the basis of mindfulness is strongly engaged attention that notes well, without grasping or clinging. Then, in the very definition of mindfulness, he mentions the practice that we are learning. Finally he says, “It should be seen as like a post due to its state of being firmly set in the object, and as like a gatekeeper because it guards the gate of the eye, and so on.”³⁷ Mindfulness focused upon its object is planted like a post or engaged like a guard.

These two authoritative voices from the Buddhist tradition define mindfulness very clearly, with retrospective, present-centered, and prospective modes. Our practice—approaching bare attention, being focused and attentive from moment to moment, and not reacting to

whatever is arising—is not yet comprehensive, but it is a fundamental expression of mindfulness.

Introspection

The second key term appearing in the Buddha’s discourses on the matrix of vipashyana or insight practices is introspection (Skt. *samprajāna*; Pali *sampajañña*), which is often translated as “clear comprehension.” The great bodhisattva Shantideva (eighth century CE) is another wise voice of Buddhism, from the Mahayana tradition. He defines this corollary faculty, immensely important for practicing the four close applications of mindfulness, very succinctly. “In brief, this alone is the definition of introspection: the repeated examination of the state of one’s body and mind.”³⁸

The faculty of introspection is reflexive. While mindfulness may be directed anywhere—to galaxies, electrons, mental states, or to your feet—introspection means attending to phenomena arising within the field of reality that we call “I and mine.” I attend to my body, the position of my hands, the sensations in my abdomen, the movements of my mind, and the sound of my voice. Introspection is attending reflexively to the state and actions of one’s body, speech, and mind embedded in an environment.

Introspection is an expression of intelligence (Skt. *prajña*) because it is discerning. Given current circumstances, is this mode of comporting my body appropriate or inappropriate? Should I gesture with my hands and smile now? Are the content and tone of my voice too harsh, too soft, or just what’s needed? Likewise, as it monitors the processes arising in the mind—attending to thoughts, desires, intentions, and so forth, embedded in reality—introspection asks: Are they suitable or unsuitable? Helpful or unhelpful? Monitoring during meditation may include mindfully attending to the sensations of the breath, while introspection monitors the meditative process. Am I practicing correctly or not? Am I sustaining a flow of mindfulness, or have I fallen into distraction, excitation, laxity, or dullness? Introspection is the quality control monitor for the entire process, repeatedly examining the state of one’s body and mind.

Asanga (fourth century CE), of the Mahayana tradition, sums up the two terms “mindfulness” and “introspection,” and he is quoted a thousand years later by Tsongkhapa (1357–1419), who found no need to improve upon Asanga’s definitions: “Mindfulness and introspection are taught, for the first prevents the attention from straying from the meditative object.” In other words, mindfulness is face-to-face, engaged, and present, without losing, floating, or straying. It prevents the attention from straying from its object.

Asanga’s definition of introspection follows: “The second recognizes that the attention is straying.”³⁹ Introspection monitors the meditative process and recognizes attentional imbalances: spacing out, laxity, dullness, sleepiness, restlessness, excitement, distraction, agitation, and so forth. It alerts us, “This isn’t working; please regain your balance!” With intelligence and will, we can balance the attention. Mindfulness prevents the attention from straying, and introspection recognizes when it has strayed: two key faculties of mind.

In our practice, we are seeking to sustain an ongoing flow of sanity—not losing our minds, not being carried away by obsessive thinking and grasping, and not compulsively equating whatever arises in our minds with objective reality. Conceptualization can be very useful, but the very nature of a flow of discursive conceptualization about reality locks us into constructs that are isolated from reality. Such is the nature of thoughts.

As soon I think of John, I think of something very nice that John did. While I’m focusing on this, I’ve forgotten the rest of John. Replaying my memory of his actions, I think, “John’s such a nice person, and so generous.” Fixated upon this pleasant memory—and isolated from the complex fabric of his actual life—my imaginary video clip becomes John: what a jolly good fellow! This is conceptualization, and it can be very powerful. We all use it a great deal. But this conceptualization isolates, freezes, and decontextualizes the actual John, who continues to evolve, embedded in his environment, and does not exist as my caricature.

In this practice, rather than getting caught up in conceptualization, to the best of our ability we simply sustain an ongoing flow of sanity. We practice wholeness rather than fragmentation. Concepts entail

fragmentation and isolation, locking on to a construct that is divorced from the rest of reality. The flow of sanity to be sustained is open, attentive, intelligent, and not fixated on any aspect or fragment extracted from the whole. We are open to whatever appears from moment to moment, maintaining an ongoing flow of wholeness and sanity.

GUIDED MEDITATION: Mindfulness IV

Sustain unwavering mindfulness of all appearances— monitoring with introspection

Begin, as always, by settling the body in its natural state, imbued with the three qualities of relaxation, stillness, and vigilance. Round off this process by taking three slow, deep breaths and settling your respiration in its natural rhythm, effortless and spontaneous.

With your eyes at least partially open, settle your mind in its natural state. Let your awareness rest in its own space, illuminating all appearances to the six portals of experience in all directions. Allow these appearances to arise and pass of their own accord, without latching on to them or interpreting them. Simply perceive them for what they are, without distraction and without grasping.

With the faculty of introspection, note whenever you have been carried away by thoughts. Let your initial response be to relax more deeply and release all grasping. If you note that you have become spaced-out or lethargic, reignite your interest, freshen your awareness, and pay closer attention. Monitor the balance of mindfulness with introspection, maintaining an ongoing flow of engaged but nonreactive attentiveness to whatever appearances arise in the present moment. ❧

Mindfulness in the Mind Sciences and in Buddhism

From *Meditations of a Buddhist Skeptic*

By B. Allan Wallace

SCIENTIFIC AND PHILOSOPHICAL REJECTION OF INTROSPECTIVE MINDFULNESS

[Page 173] At the dawn of the scientific study of the mind, William James embraced a method of inquiry consistent with all other branches of science, namely the direct observation of the phenomena of interest with maximum care, precision, and sophistication. While acknowledging the value of indirectly studying the mind by way of its neural influences and behavioral expressions, he took the radically empirical approach of placing the highest priority on direct observation of mental states and processes themselves. Such observations must be as free as possible of dogmatic biases, both dualistic and materialistic, so that theory is guided by observed phenomena rather than being predetermined by the classes of phenomena that are scientifically sanctioned.

Although the Introspectionist movement was fraught with many theoretical and methodological challenges, the reasons for its demise early in the twentieth century were largely ideological rather than pragmatic. The direct observation of objective, physical, quantifiable phenomena had played a central role in the tremendous progress made by science since the early seventeenth century. Philosophy, in contrast, had made no comparable progress in developing effective methods to directly observe the subjective, intangible, qualitative phenomena of the mind. The conclusion [Page 174] drawn by many materialists at the turn of the twentieth century was that the only way to study the mind was to focus on objective, physical, quantifiable phenomena, *for only they were real*.

Early psychologists were faced with a choice. Either they could prioritize the inductive ideal of empiricism and utilize a combination of first person and third-person observations to formulate fresh hypotheses and theories of the mind, or they could prioritize the deductive ideal of scientific materialism and follow its ideological principles to determine what qualified as experiential observations.

In the early twentieth century, the pioneering behaviorist John B. Watson opted for the latter, more dogmatic approach, and this set the course for the development of behavioral psychology over the next sixty years. B. F. Skinner, perhaps the most influential behaviorist, advocated a stance diametrically opposed to that of William James. Skinner took as his basis the materialistic assumption that all one feels or

introspectively observes consists of conditions of one's body. From this ideological basis, it follows that we must understand in purely physical terms both the perceptual process of seeing and the metacognitive process of seeing that we see. Following the consequences of this deductive logic, the term "mind" is replaced by "brain," and the person can then be equated with the brain. This method of inquiry permits only objective, physical, quantifiable observations to be called facts. The subjective, intangible, qualitative phenomena that are observed when one directly examines mental states and processes were dismissed as unimportant parts of a physiological process.

Philosopher John Searle sums up the consequences of this rejection, or at least marginalization, of the first-person experience of the mind:

It would be difficult to exaggerate the disastrous effects that the failure to come to terms with the subjectivity of consciousness has had on the philosophical and psychological work of the post half century. In ways that are not at all obvious on the surface, much of the bankruptcy of most work in the philosophy of mind and a great deal or the sterility of academic psychology over the past fifty years...have come from a persistent failure to recognize and come to terms with the fact that the ontology of the mental is an irreducibly first-person ontology.

Given his acknowledgment of the vital importance of subjective experience of states of consciousness, one might expect Searle to embrace [Page 175] William James's advocacy of the primacy of introspection for understanding the mind. Nevertheless, ironically and illogically, Searle then reverses course and denies the very possibility of "specting intro" with respect to one's own mind. His dubious rationale for rejecting this obvious component of human experience is that when it comes to states of consciousness, no distinction can be made between the object "spected" and the "specting" of it. He summarizes his position with the assertion that our modern, materialistic model of reality and of the relation between reality and observation cannot accommodate the phenomenon of subjectivity. Rather than inductively seeking to scientifically accommodate subjective phenomena, he deductively resorts to an uncritical allegiance to the dogmatic principles of materialism.

The religious tenacity with which modern scientists and philosophers cleave to materialistic dogma—thereby blinding themselves to a first-person perspective—is strikingly oppressive. To draw an analogy, it's as if we are endowed with two eyes with which to see the universe: the left eye that surveys the objective, physical, quantifiable phenomena in the outside world, and the right eye that observes the subjective, intangible, qualitative phenomena of the inner mind. Jesus declared, "If your right eye

makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.” Since John Watson’s time, the right eye of introspection has led materialists to stumble into a morass of inexplicable mind-body causal interactions; therefore, they have metaphorically torn it out and thrown it away. For a materialist, it is better to lose this mode of observation along with the resulting depth perception than to be thrown into the hell of mind-body dualism.

One line of defense by behaviorists against such criticism is that subjective, intangible, qualitative phenomena of the mind, such as mental images, simply don’t exist, so there’s nothing to observe inwardly. This was Watson’s position, and it may have resulted in part from the fact, later reported by Skinner, that Watson didn’t experience any mental imagery himself. He took his own cognitive impairment as the norm and refuted the existence of what he hadn’t personally experienced. Skinner adopted a similar view regarding dreams, which he said should be understood not as a display of things seen by the dreamer but simply as the behavior of seeing. He justified this with the comment, “It took man a long time to understand that when he dreamed of a wolf, no wolf was actually there. It [Page 176] has taken him much longer to understand that not even a representation of a wolf is there.” By flatly denying that dreamers mentally “see” any mental representations or images, behaviorists could simply eliminate dreams from their analysis.

The dominance of such reductionist views in academic psychology and analytical philosophy of mind has stunted the development of the science and philosophy of mind. Proponents of reductionism are hampered by the dogmatic assumptions of scientific materialism, and at least some, such as Watson, are metacognitively challenged as well. Nevertheless, not everyone suffers from these mental impairments, and it is terribly limiting to regard blindness in one’s inner vision as the norm.

SCIENTIFIC AND PHILOSOPHICAL ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF INTROSPECTIVE MINDFULNESS

Despite the fierce resistance from behaviorists, the existence of mental imagery, including dream appearances, which become particularly obvious during lucid dreams, has now been well established in the field of cognitive psychology. Likewise, the existence of “metacognitive monitoring” has been widely accepted in personality and social psychology. Clinical psychology too has increasingly cast off the methodological and ideological constraints of behaviorism and scientific materialism. Even during the heyday of behaviorism, psychodynamic therapists were trained through personal therapy that used introspection to enhance awareness of their own feelings, thoughts,

fantasies, tendencies, sensitivities, and so on. In addition to this subjective aspect of their training, such therapists today study intersubjective attention and discernment, which comprises the intersubjective field of therapist and patient, recognizing and exploring their mutual influences via transference, projection, and inner defenses.

Over the past few decades, research into these aspects of psychotherapy has been structured and systematized and is being correlated with neuroimaging studies. Such studies have revealed that the medial prefrontal cortex—the sole region of the prefrontal cortex that is disproportionately larger in humans than in other primates—is associated with [Page 177] self-awareness, and it seems to be critical for thinking about oneself and reflecting on one's preferences and values.

Mindfulness-based therapies also make excellent use of introspection in treating mental problems. Jon Kabat-Zinn, who has taken a seminal role in the development of such therapies, describes mindfulness as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment.” Clinical psychologists have discovered that the loss of this introspective capacity is more damaging to the personality than the loss of a sensory faculty or motor functions, for it plays a crucial role in acquiring and maintaining complex types of behavior and in adapting to changing conditions. A growing number of cognitive neuroscientists have also concluded that people's ability to introspectively monitor and modulate their emotions and behavior enables them to meet the socio-emotional demands of daily life.

Finally, in contrast to analytical philosophers like Daniel Dennett, John Searle, and Peter Hacker, some phenomenologists and other philosophers take introspection seriously and appreciate the value of meditation in exploring the mind, including Evan Thompson, Francisco Varela, and Jonathan Shear. Modern scientists and philosophers are gradually emerging from the darkness of scientific materialism by acknowledging, as William James proposed more than a century ago, the importance of introspection for gaining a thorough understanding of the mind. In this way, a three-dimensional perspective on the depths of subjective experience is restored when the left eye of objective observation is complemented by the right eye of introspection.

BUDDHIST CONCEPTS OF MINDFULNESS

Apart from the early seventeenth-century development of natural philosophy, which we now call “natural science,” Western philosophy as a whole has never been able to produce a body of consensual knowledge. Furthermore, unlike science, it has rarely developed practical applications of its theories that have been of general use to

humanity. A crucial difference between science and philosophy is that the former relies heavily on direct, [Page 178] sophisticated, and repeatable observations of the phenomena under investigation, while the latter has never devised any such empirical methods for its domains of inquiry, including the mind. In contrast, Buddhist philosophy is incomplete without the utilization and refinement of one's faculties of direct observation, and no mental faculty is more important in this regard than mindfulness.

According to Theravadin Buddhism, the Buddha defined mindfulness (Pali *sati*; Skt. *smṛiti*) as the faculty of remembering, or recalling what was done and said in the past, and this primary meaning recurs in later *Abhidhamma* treatises. The great commentator Buddhaghosa adds that "its characteristic is not floating, its property is not disengaging from one's chosen object of attention, its manifestation is the state of being face to face with the object, and its basis is strong noting." It should be seen, he writes, "as being like a post due to its state of being set in the object, and as like a gatekeeper because it guards the gate of the eye and so on." The fifth-century Indian Mahayana Buddhist scholar and contemplative Asanga, a leading authority in both Indian and Tibetan Buddhism, defines mindfulness as "the non-forgetfulness of the mind with respect to a familiar object, having the function of non-distraction." This definition obviously coincides closely with those from the Theravadin tradition. Finally, in the Zen Buddhist tradition, the corresponding term (Jap. *nen*) is glossed in a similar way as "remembrance, reminiscence, thinking of or upon, calling to mind, memory."

Despite minor differences in theories and practices among the various schools of Buddhism, there is a strong consensus in their definitions of mindfulness. In contrast to this unified cluster of traditional Buddhist definitions, modern clinical psychologists have defined mindfulness as nonjudgmental, present-centered awareness in which whatever arises to attention is accepted as it is. Although this definition is stated to be of Buddhist origin, there is no basis for this claim. Rather, it appears that promoters of the Modern Vipassana Movement (MVM) adapted this definition from Jiddu Krishnamurti's (1895-1986) concept of "choiceless awareness." Insisting that this is the "only way" to know the true nature of reality, he defined it as the observation of whatever is occurring in the present moment, without any reaction, resistance, justification, or condemnation. Such awareness entails no remembrance, recollection, recognition, or naming, and it is free from ideas, ideals, opinions, prejudice, [Page 179] likes, dislikes, and motives. There is no Pali term corresponding to "choiceless awareness," so there are no grounds for claiming that this is a traditional Buddhist insight practice.

Even though Buddhist meditative practices do exist in which such awareness is cultivated, Krishnamurti's definition is incompatible with all traditional Buddhist definitions of mindfulness, while it accords perfectly well with the modern psychological

definition and that of the MVM. Although it is false to equate this with the Buddhist understanding of mindfulness, it is an even greater mistake to equate it with Buddhist *vipashyana* meditation, regardless of how commonly this is done.

Some MVM teachers propose that instead of relying on traditional definitions of mindfulness as they are presented in authoritative Buddhist texts, we should denote mindfulness with whatever terms in English best express the practical experience of mindfulness when it is developed according to classical instructions. They argue that as the practice of *vipashyana* moves from one culture to another, different terms and images will best express the essence of the mind states involved. But before embracing this attitude, it's important to remember that during the first 2,500 years after the Buddha's time, "classical instructions" on *vipashyana* were traditionally given to dedicated meditators who had deep faith in the Buddha, the Dharma he taught, and the Buddhist community, the *sangha*. In stark contrast, MVM instructors commonly teach *vipashyana* to people with little or no faith or knowledge of Buddhism; consequently, they invariably delete large sections of the Buddha's teachings on the four applications of mindfulness that are unappealing or too difficult for novices to practice. As a close reading of the Buddha's *Discourse on the Applications of Mindfulness (Pali Satipatthana Sutta)*, together with its ancient commentaries, reveals, the "classical instructions" of the MVM are quite different from the "classical instructions" of the Buddha.

Modern secular people can easily relate to certain elements of this discourse, such as the practices of "remembering" the present moment of experience in the sense of coming face to face with the object, not floating off into distracting thoughts, and simply being attentive to the bare experience of the immediate sensations of the body, feelings, and so on. But such bare attention constitutes only a fraction of the meditative practices taught in the Buddha's discourses. Meditators who create new definitions of mindfulness on the basis of their own experience of this highly simplified version [Page 180] of *vipashyana* will naturally come to the conclusion that the essence of mindfulness is nothing more than bare attention. Such logic is circular.

Other MVM proponents have suggested that the ancient meaning of mindfulness, which includes retention, recollection, or memory, as in keeping the object of attention firmly in mind and knowing when it has wandered, is a limited notion confined to Tibetan Buddhism. Rather than upholding this early meaning, they suggest that the definition of mindfulness might change over time as the Dharma enters new cultures, as it now does once again. In this process, they argue, we might legitimately expand the meaning of the term in the English language to be a sort of placeholder for the Dharma itself. This is seen as a skillful means for catalyzing a more universal understanding of the mind and its potential for wisdom, compassion, and freedom. But will this new "mindfulness"

truly lead to the fulfillment of our individual capacities to realize our true nature in this lifetime—resulting in liberation?

As noted above, the sense of mindfulness as retention, recollection, or memory is common to Theravada, Zen, and Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, all of which trace this meaning back to the Buddha's own teachings as recorded in Pali and Sanskrit. With its traditional definition, mindfulness is a crucial element of the Noble Eightfold Path, and the dynamic synergy between mindfulness and introspection (Pali *sampajañña*) is essential for the practice of both *shamatha* and vipashyana. Therefore, although people are free to newly define "mindfulness" as a placeholder for the Dharma, it is standing in for their own teaching, not the Buddha Dharma.

Finally, some MVM teachers continue to insist that the description of "momentary concentration" (Pali *khanika-samadhi*), as discussed in Buddhaghosa's classic, *The Path of Purification*, is right in line with the experience of mindfulness as bare attention paid to rapidly changing objects. This assertion is representative of their claim that one can reap the full benefits of vipashyana on the basis of momentary concentration, without achieving even the first *dhyana*. In a classic commentary on *The Path of Purification*, momentary concentration is defined as "concentration lasting only for a moment. For that too, when it occurs uninterruptedly on its object in a single mode and is not overcome by opposition, fixes the mind immovably as if in absorption." A crucial point, often overlooked by modern teachers, is that this reference to momentary concentration refers to a passage in *The Path of Purification* describing a stage of practice [Page 181] that *follows* the achievement of *at least the first dhyana*! The Theravada scholar Kheminda Thera clarifies this point, stating that momentary concentration "occurs only after the insight of the third purification, Purification of View, which already pre-supposes completion of the second purification as its proximate cause; and...even then it is the prerogative solely of the jhana attainer and thus cannot serve as a substitute for jhana." In short, the Buddha clearly indicated the indispensability of the first *dhyana* in order to achieve liberation, but he never mentioned momentary concentration or suggested that it provides a sufficient basis in *samadhi* to gain the full benefits of vipashyana.

The Buddha also never drew a distinction between absorption concentration (Pali *appana-samadhi*), which comes with the full attainment of *dhyana*, and access concentration (Pali *upachara-samadhi*), which precedes that full attainment. However, later Theravada and Mahayana contemplatives, drawing from their own meditative experiences, have found this distinction useful. Some eminent Indian and Tibetan Mahayana Buddhist contemplatives, including Ashvaghosha (fl. 80-150 C.E.) and Tsongkhapa, assert that in terms of *samadhi*, access concentration is a sufficient basis

for achieving liberation. Other Buddhist references actually refer to the practice of vipashyana *after* the attainment of access concentration, following which dhyana is fully achieved. This is also the most plausible meaning of the Theravadin Buddhist term “dry insight” (Pali *sukkha-vipassana*), used by the commentators to denote vipashyana supported by access concentration alone, without the “moisture” of absorption concentration.

Just as many people nowadays disregard the authoritative, traditional definitions of mindfulness in favor of new definitions based on their own experience, they tend to create new definitions of access concentration and the full achievement of the dhyanas. In the Theravadin commentaries, the distinction between access and absorption concentration hinges on the difference between a mental image, or sign, of the meditative object called the acquired sign (Pali *uggaha-nimitta*), upon which one focuses until achieving access concentration, and the counterpart sign (Pali *patibhaga-nimitta*), which appears with the achievement of access concentration. In the practice of mindfulness of breathing, one first focuses on the tactile sensations of the breath, but eventually the acquired sign arises as a mental image, taking on forms such as cotton wool, a bright [Page 182] point or orb of light, a wreath of flowers, a puff of smoke, a cobweb, a film of mist, a lotus, a chariot wheel, a moon, or a sun. One focuses on this acquired sign until the counterpart sign appears, which is said to be a subtle, emblematic representation of the whole quality of the air element. Buddhaghosa explains:

The counterpart sign appears as if breaking out from the acquired sign, and a hundred times, a thousand times more purified, like a looking-glass disk drawn from its case, like a mother-of-pearl dish well washed, like the moon’s disk coming out from behind a cloud, like cranes against a thunder cloud. But it has neither color nor shape...it is born only of perception in one who has obtained concentration, being a mere mode of appearance.

According to Buddhaghosa, it is extremely difficult to sustain attention on this very subtle mental image, so the mind loses the counterpart sign and slips back into the ground of becoming (Skt. *bhavanga*). He likens this to a young child who is lifted up and stood on his or her feet but repeatedly falls down on the ground. If one wishes to proceed beyond access concentration to absorption concentration or the actual state of the first dhyana, one must steadfastly focus on the counterpart sign until one can sustain concentration on it “for a whole night and for a whole day, just as a healthy man, after rising from his seat, could stand for a whole day.”

In stark contrast to this authoritative account of the difference between the acquired

sign and counterpart sign, some MVM teachers declare that the primary difference between the acquired sign and the counterpart sign is that the former is usually dull and opaque, while the latter is brilliant and dear. Some add that if you can keep your mind on the counterpart sign for one, two, or three hours, you have reached either access or absorption concentration. Such descriptions are clearly incompatible with Buddhaghosa's account of the two kinds of signs and the difference between access and absorption concentration. Degraded meanings are all too prevalent when modern meditators insist on identifying and classifying their individual meditation within a Buddhist framework. Instead of practicing until their own experiences meet the standards of the great contemplatives of the past, they downgrade the Buddhist definitions of mindfulness, the counterpart sign, access concentration, and absorption concentration to conform to their own particular experiences.

[Page 183] It is no wonder that modern practitioners who abandon traditional Buddhist theory and practice often lose faith in the traditional Buddhist understanding of liberation. Some people then conclude that traditional Buddhist accounts of the enlightenment of the Buddha and other Eastern sages are "misleading," for we can never transcend the world of change. This view is reinforced by the Freudian belief that psychological conditioning inevitably warps the personality so that a conflict-free stage of human life with permanent mental purification is impossible. Conflict and suffering are seen as inevitable aspects of human existence. This is precisely the view held by Freud:

When I have promised my patients help or improvement by means of cathartic treatment I have often been faced by this objection: "Why, you tell me yourself that my illness is probably connected with my circumstances and the events of my life. You cannot alter these in any way. How do you propose to help me then?" And I have been able to make this reply: "No doubt fate would find it easier than I do to relieve you of your illness. But you will be able to convince yourself that much will be gained if we succeed in transforming your hysterical misery into common unhappiness. With a mental life that has been restored to health you will be better armed against that unhappiness."

In contrast to the modern psychoanalytic tradition, the Buddha's teachings on the third noble truth declare nirvana to be the complete cessation of suffering and its inner causes. The possibility of liberation in this lifetime is unequivocally asserted. The Buddha described nirvana as a dimension of existence that is not born, not brought into being, not made, and not conditioned. Without it, there would be no possibility of liberation from the cycle of rebirth in a world that is born, brought into being, made, and conditioned.

It is hard to understand how people can call themselves Buddhists while rejecting the Buddha's teachings on nirvana as freedom from the world of change and conflict. For example, a Darwinist is commonly regarded as someone who accepts the Darwinian theory that species originate by natural selection based on reproductive success. A Freudian is someone who accepts the theories of Sigmund Freud, including the existence of the subconscious, the role of the libido, and so on. Following that trend, it would be reasonable to define a Buddhist as someone who accepts [Page 184] the fundamental tenets of the Buddha, as presented in the accounts of his teachings, the Dharma, which have been preserved and taught by his followers, the sangha. It would make no sense to refute natural selection while calling oneself a Darwinian, and it makes just as little sense to reject the immutable reality of nirvana, as taught in all schools of Buddhism, while calling oneself a Buddhist.

The above definitions suggest a cognitive commitment to the teachings of Darwin, Freud, and the Buddha, but this misses a crucial point. In the Buddhist tradition, one entrusts oneself, or takes refuge (Skt. *sharana*), in the Buddha, Dharma, and sangha in terms of one's pursuit of freedom from suffering and the realization of genuine happiness. This is more like the relationship between patient and doctor than between student and teacher. One may distrust the sangha, beginning with the first council of five hundred arhats who recited the Buddha's words right after his death, believing they have misrepresented his teachings. One may distrust the Dharma, as expressed in the historically reliable accounts of the Buddha's teachings. One may distrust the Buddha as he is portrayed in the Pali and Sanskrit sutras. We are all free to trust or distrust as we choose, but if we do not trust in the Buddha, Dharma, and sangha, it is misleading to call ourselves Buddhists. Whether or not Buddhist practice truly culminates in the complete purification of the mind from all mental afflictions and obscurations is indeed a matter of belief; nevertheless, it is misguided for Buddhists to wait for others to demonstrate the validity of this belief.

MINDFULNESS PRACTICE IN BUDDHISM

Enmeshed Mindfulness

Common ground between Buddhist concepts of mindfulness and those of modern psychology can be found in the Tibetan Buddhist practice variously known as "shamatha focused on the mind," "settling the mind in its natural state," "taking the mind as the path to liberation," and "taking appearances and awareness as the path." This process is simultaneously diagnostic—learning the nature of one's own mind and of consciousness itself—and therapeutic—healing the mind until it settles into a natural [Page 185] state

of sublime health and balance. When one attains shamatha, the ordinary mind dissolves into the substrate consciousness, which is characterized by bliss, luminosity, and nonconceptuality.

Düdjom Lingpa, the nineteenth-century Dzogchen master, gives a detailed, compelling explanation of this practice in his “mind treasure” (Tib. *terma*), *The Vajra Essence*. In this account, mindfulness is focused on the domain of the mind and whatever thoughts or other mental events arise within that space. Düdjom Lingpa describes different kinds of mindfulness that come into play in the course of this practice: “Mindfulness is presented as being like a cowherd, and thoughts as being like cows. Their steady, vivid manifestation, without interruption by various expressions of hope, fear, joy, and sorrow, is called *enmeshed mindfulness*.” Likening the mind to a cripple and the body’s closely associated vital energies to a blind, wild stallion, he advises that both are to be controlled and subdued with the reins of mindfulness and introspection.

In this practice, single-pointed mindfulness is to be sustained to the best of one’s ability, without distraction and without grasping. The term “grasping” refers to any kind of labeling, identification, or emotional reactions of hope, fear, and so on that commonly arise in response to various mental appearances. One common type of grasping has been aptly called “cognitive fusion” by modern psychologists. This occurs when one’s very sense of identity fuses with one’s thoughts. Attention is then diverted away from the immediate occurrence of thoughts themselves in the space of the mind and toward the referents of these thoughts. For example, when an image of a loved one’s face spontaneously comes to mind, attention is to remain focused on that image itself. But when cognitive fusion occurs, awareness is distracted from the mental image to the actual person, wherever he or she might be.

It is very challenging and sometimes stressful to devote oneself to full-time, solitary practice for many hours each day, for weeks or months on end, without entertainment or other distractions. We are accustomed to letting our attention roam at will and to occupying our minds with all kinds of outer and inner entertainment. In the Buddhist literature, such distractions are sometimes referred to as the abode of Mara, the tempter. In this practice, withdrawal symptoms can sometimes be as fierce as those evoked by quitting an addictive drug “cold turkey.” The habituated mind reacts to such discipline with great resistance, as the Buddha declared: [Page 186] “The wise one straightens the fluttering, unsteady mind, which is difficult to guard and hard to restrain, just as a fletcher straightens an arrow shaft. Like a fish that has been taken out of its watery abode and thrown onto dry land, this mind flutters and trembles when it is removed from the abode of Mara.”

For this reason, two indispensable prerequisites for the successful practice of settling the mind in its natural state are contentment and few desires. Engaging in this practice, it is imperative to know that one is meditating correctly. Once confidence is established, the challenge is simply to continue meditating in a spirit of desireless contentment. Following are the indications that one is on the right track:

- Awareness rests in the immediate present.
- Attention is focused on the domain of the mind.
- As soon as a mental event, thought, or image arises, it is noted.
- While observing mental events coming and going, awareness remains still and unmoved by the grasping of either desire or aversion.

In such practice, some people initially find it easiest to recognize sensory-based mental imagery. Others have no problem noting discursive thoughts, but many find it difficult to attend to desires and emotions without cognitive fusion. By resting awareness in stillness even as mental events come and go, mindfulness becomes imbued with a vivid perception of the simultaneity of stillness and movement, yielding insight, or vipashyana, into the nature of mental phenomena.

A central theme of this method of shamatha is to recognize mental events as such rather than conflating them with the objective referents of subjective experiences. This is very much like becoming lucid within a dream—recognizing the dream state for what it is, while still dreaming. In a nonlucid dream, one easily falls prey to all kinds of mental and even physical distress due to grasping onto and reifying the dreamed persona and everything else appearing in the dream. But to the extent that one clearly recognizes dream events as such, one will no longer be victimized by dream circumstances. Instead, one may transform the dream at will, or even let it unfold without intervention, all the while remaining calm and relaxed, regardless of whatever occurs. Similarly, the mindfulness practice of meditatively observing the mind and recognizing mental events [Page 187] for what they are allows one to attend to whatever appears in the waking state without hope or fear, desire or aversion. In both dreaming and waking states of consciousness, the truth does indeed set us free.

Some mental images and events are observed in “real time,” in that their appearance and the awareness of them occur simultaneously. The mental domain is characterized by a kind of objectivity, with an experienced sense of the separation of subject, or awareness, and object, or mental image. This is especially clear when one attends to

mental images in a lucid dream. During the waking and dreaming states, it is also possible to be mindful of more subjective mental processes, such as desires and emotions. For example, when one becomes aware of a desire to move, the desire to move occurs first, and the awareness of that desire may arise a fraction of a second later. Desire and the observation of it occur sequentially, not simultaneously. The same is true for the observation of emotions.

According to Buddhist psychology, consciousness consists not of an unbroken, continuous stream, but rather of a continuum of brief, discrete moments of awareness. There is no consensus as to the shortest duration of such bursts of awareness, but one source widely considered authoritative in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism states that the shortest moment lasts for one sixty-fifth of the duration of a finger snap. This equates to about six hundred pulses of consciousness per second. Buddhist epistemologists generally assert that for a person with ordinary attention skills, a single pulse of awareness is too short to ascertain anything. But when clusters of these individual moments coalesce, focused on the same object, they are able to apprehend it collectively. Each individual mind moment is classified as “nonascertaining awareness,” because consciousness is implicit rather than explicit. Each moment holds the potential for participating in a conscious experience, but it cannot do so by itself.

Two qualities of attention are explicitly refined during the practice of shamatha: stability and vividness. The quality of stability refers to the ability to sustain one’s attention upon the chosen object without forgetfulness or distraction. This can be explained in terms of the homogeneity of ascertaining clusters of attention on the meditative object: one after the other, these clusters of moments of awareness are successively focused on the same object. In the practice of settling the mind in its natural state, the object is the domain of mental events and whatever comes and goes in that domain.

[Page 188] The quality of vividness is of two kinds, temporal and qualitative. Temporal vividness refers to the ability to ascertain very brief, fleeting events, which can be understood in terms of the frequency of clusters of ascertaining consciousness. When moments of awareness cluster densely within a brief time span, one’s ability to detect fleeting events is enhanced. For example, if a mental image lasts only fifty milliseconds, but during that interval there occurs an ascertaining cluster of mind moments, then the image will be detected. But if the duration of the image is shorter than that of the cluster of mind moments, the image will pass unnoticed.

Qualitative vividness refers to the ability to ascertain events that may linger for longer periods, but are so subtle we fail to recognize them. These include the subtlest discursive thoughts, mental dialogues, images, memories, desires, and emotions. Even

though they go undetected, they may strongly influence our minds and behavior. Unconscious mental processes, as Freud discovered centuries after Buddhist contemplatives, can actually exert deep and lasting influences in our mental lives. This practice is a path of self-knowledge, as subconscious influences are gradually identified via increasingly refined qualitative vividness. Such vividness can be explained as clusters of intensely luminous mind moments, where the innate luminosity of the substrate consciousness is increasingly unveiled and the obscuration by grasping subsides. Short, dense, high-intensity clusters of ascertaining consciousness may enhance both temporal and qualitative vividness, so the two kinds of vividness are closely intertwined.

Resting in deep, dreamless sleep, when comatose, and when we die, the ordinary mind naturally withdraws into the substrate consciousness, and the six domains of mental and sensory experience dissolve into the substrate. On these occasions, if one is not lucid—not recognizing the substrate for what it is—consciousness doesn't ascertain anything, for it has become entirely implicit rather than explicit. It is imbued with great stability but virtually no vividness. But if one retains consciousness while the mind dissolves into the substrate consciousness via shamatha, one apprehends the substrate with exceptional stability and vividness.

Buddhist tradition states that each of the five modes of sensory perception arises in partial dependence upon a physical organ, or faculty (Skt. *indriya*). Neurophysiologists identify these as regions of the brain [Page 189] such as the visual cortex, auditory cortex, olfactory bulb, and so on, and they assume that sensory perceptions are generated exclusively by the physical interactions of the brain with the physical environment. Buddhist contemplatives disagree, claiming that when the faculties of the physical senses meet with objective stimuli they *enable* and *condition* sensory consciousness, but they do not *generate* it. Sensory perceptions do not arise from the brain or its interactions with the rest of the body and the physical world. The first moment of visual perception upon opening one's eyes emerges from the preceding moment of mental consciousness. Subsequent moments in the continuum of visual awareness arise from the immediately preceding moments, and this is true for all five modes of sensory perception.

Neuroscientists have so far been unsuccessful in identifying the neural correlates of consciousness, namely the minimal levels and types of neural activity needed to generate consciousness. Buddhist contemplatives counter that mental consciousness can occur without dependence on any physical organ. Rather, it arises in dependence upon a nonphysical mental faculty (Sh. *manendriya*), which is generally identified as the preceding moment of mental awareness.

When one first emerges from deep, dreamless sleep into a dream, which entails a kind of mental consciousness, the first moment of dreaming awareness arises in dependence upon the mental faculty that is the preceding moment of awareness. That awareness is none other than the substrate consciousness. Likewise, if one suddenly awakens from dreamless sleep, the first moment of waking mental consciousness emerges from the preceding moment of the substrate consciousness, which serves as its mental faculty. Buddhist contemplatives likewise assert that the first moment of mental consciousness of a human fetus arises not from the brain but from the preceding moment of substrate consciousness of the conscious being that has been conceived. The practice of shamatha may provide an experiential means for putting this hypothesis to the test.

Naturally Settled Mindfulness

Düdjom Lingpa explains that when we sustain the flow of mindfulness of mental events, recognizing them for what they are, without hope or fear, [Page 190] they eventually disappear by themselves, and consciousness rests in a spacious and loose state. He describes the culmination of this shamatha practice of observing the mind:

Consciousness comes to rest in its own state, mindfulness emerges, and because there is less clinging to experiences, consciousness settles into its own natural, unmodified state. In this way you come to a state of *naturally settled mindfulness*. That experience is soothing and gentle, with clear, limpid consciousness that is neither benefited nor harmed by thoughts; and you experience a remarkable sense of stillness without needing to modify, reject, or embrace anything.

All subtle and coarse thoughts vanish; the ordinary mind of a sentient being disappears into the substrate consciousness; and all appearances of oneself, others, and objects disappear into the substrate.

At this point, one's consciousness may become absorbed in the substrate, such that mindfulness is not even aware of itself. Slipping into this spacious vacuity, devoid of roving thoughts, is called "*collapsing into empty mindfulness*," and this signifies reversion to a deluded state. When we arouse mindfulness once again, without reifying any experiences with various hopes or fears, such deluded experience naturally vanishes. Düdjom Lingpa explains: "At this time there is a prominent sense of bliss, luminosity, and nonconceptuality, and various visions of gods and demons may arise. These are expressions of the luminosity of the substrate consciousness, so this is called *naturally luminous mindfulness*." He warns that it is imperative not to become absorbed in such visions or to reify them, for this blocks one's path to awakening.

The process of thoughts and sensory appearances dissolving into the substrate during the final process of settling the mind in its natural state closely parallels the dissolution of the ordinary mind when falling asleep. Indeed, by engaging in this practice as one falls asleep, it is possible to maintain consciousness during the transition from the waking state to dreamless sleep. One can then experience the substrate and substrate consciousness, but not with the same degree of vividness that occurs when one enters this state by achieving shamatha. A similar dissolution of appearances and the mind into the substrate naturally occurs during the dying process, culminating in a temporary state of oblivion called the [Page 191] “dark attainment.” Dūdjom Lingpa comments that this may persist from six hours up to three days.” If one is highly experienced in the practice of settling the mind in its natural state, one may retain consciousness throughout the entire dying process, including finally entering the dark attainment lucidly. The initial experience of the dark attainment is the moment when Buddhists deem a person to be dead, so by entering and dwelling in it with full consciousness, one reclassifies death from being inherently unknowable to being consciously knowable. In this way, the dying process is transformed from an experience of slipping into darkness to one of clearly emerging into the light of the substrate consciousness.

Cutting the Rope of Mindfulness

Luminously realizing the substrate consciousness by the shamatha practice of taking the mind as the path is not the culmination of the Buddhist path. Rather, it provides an unprecedented degree of mental equilibrium, stability, and clarity with which to venture into the deepest dimension of consciousness: pristine awareness. To quote the renowned statement made by Winston Churchill in response to Britain’s victory in the battle of Egypt, “Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.” According to Dūdjom Lingpa, the way to directly identify pristine awareness, the ultimate ground of one’s own being, is to first realize the emptiness of inherent nature of all phenomena in samsara and nirvana through the cultivation of vipashyana:

Once one has ascertained them as the play of the space of ultimate reality, one identifies that state as the great actualization, and apprehends one’s own nature. As a result, one naturally settles in ground awareness as the great freedom from extremes. That is the swift path, the vehicle of the Great Perfection.

Dūdjom Lingpa explains what comes next with extraordinary clarity:

By continuing to meditate, all such experiences of a blankness, vacuity, and

luminosity tainted by clinging vanish into absolute space, as if one were waking up. After this, outer appearances are not impeded, and the [Page 192] rope of inner mindfulness and firmly maintained attention is cut. Then one is not bound by the restraints of good meditation, nor does one fall back to an ordinary state through pernicious ignorance. Rather, ever-present, translucent, luminous consciousness transcending the conventions of view, meditation, and conduct shines through. Without dichotomizing self and object, such that one can say “this is consciousness and “this is the object of consciousness,” the primordial, self-originating mind that has experiences is freed from clinging. When you settle in a spaciousness in which there is no cogitation or referent of the attention, all phenomena become manifest, for the power of awareness is unimpeded. Thoughts merge with their objects, they disappear as they become nondual with those objects, and they dissolve. Since not a single one has an objective referent, they are not thoughts of sentient beings. Rather, the mind has been transformed into wisdom, the power of awareness is transformed, and stability is achieved there. Understand that this is like water that is clear of sediment.

If one has gained such realization through the practice of the Great Perfection, following the experience of death, one may consciously experience the dissolution of the dark attainment into the clear light. In the words of Dūdjom Lingpa:

As an analogy, just as the space inside a jar is united with the space outside, without even a speck of any appearance of a self, a radiant, clear expanse arises like all-pervasive space, free of contamination, like dawn breaking in the sky. At this time, people who are already very familiar with the ground awareness by means of the breakthrough [to pristine awareness, or the practice of Tib. *trekchō*] and who have gained confidence in this will recognize the junction of the awareness in which they have previously trained—which is like a familiar person—and the clear light that emerges later on. There they must hold their own ground, like a king sitting upon his throne.... The number of days one remains in meditative stabilization in the clear light of the dying process corresponds to the stability and duration of one’s present practice. Those who have achieved stability of practice lasting an entire day and night may achieve stability lasting seven human days at death. But for those who have not [Page 193] entered the path, the clear light will not appear longer than the time it takes to eat a bowl of food.

There are many practices in Tibetan Buddhism that are said to result in the realization of the “nature of mind.” By becoming lucid during the dream state and then consciously releasing the dream and letting all appearances vanish, one may experience one’s own

substrate consciousness. By bringing the shamatha practice of settling the mind in its natural state to its culmination, one may realize the relative nature of mind by luminously accessing the substrate consciousness during the waking state. Through the practice of vipashyana, one may realize the ultimate nature of mind by recognizing its emptiness of inherent existence. Finally, one may realize the primordial nature of mind by realizing pristine awareness. Mindfulness plays a crucial role along this entire path, until it has finally served its ultimate purpose and the rope of mindfulness is cut.

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while Buddhaghosa later replaces the final two emblems with light and limited space.⁴

To describe briefly one example of such practice according to the Theravāda tradition, in the case of focusing on the earth-emblem, one first attends closely to a disc prepared of clay as a physical representation of the entire element of earth, or solidity. One repeatedly gazes at this device until an acquired sign,⁵ or mental image, of it appears in the mind as clearly when the eyes are shut as when they are open. This mental image is a sign of the earth element, and that becomes the chief meditative object of the preliminary concentration⁶ leading up to the first proximate meditative stabilization. Once the quiescence of the first proximate stabilization has been achieved, there arises to the mind's eye a counterpart sign⁷ of the earth element, which is far more "purified" than the previous mental image. This counterpart sign is an appearance that arises purely from perception, being without color or the appearance of solidity, and having none of the blishes of the original earth-emblem that were evident in the earlier mental image. In short, the counterpart-sign is regarded as a mental representation of the primal quality of object, in this case the element of earth.⁸

In this Theravāda account, the development of quiescence is closely linked to three kinds of signs that are the objects of one's attention. The first of these is the sign for preliminary practice,⁹

limitless consciousness which is revealed by the removal of the element of space. The emblem of space is that which is revealed by removing the meditative object of the form realm, so it is identical to limitless space.

⁴ Pāli: *pariccanna-ākāsa. The Path of Purification*, [trans. by Bhikkhu Ñānamoli, (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1979), V. 21–26, pp. 181–182. Buddhaghosa explains his reasons for this alteration in his *Atthasālini*, p. 186.

⁵ Skt. *udgraha-nimāta. Pāli: uggaha-nimāta.*

⁶ Pāli: *parikkamma-samādhi*

⁷ Skt. *pratibhāga-nimāta, Pāli: pratibhāga-nimāta*

⁸ A definitive presentation of the use of emblems is found in Buddhaghosa's *The Path of Purification*, IV and V. Another illuminating explanation of these practices is presented by Paravahera Vajirañāna in his *Buddhist Meditation in Theory and Practice*, Ch. 13.

⁹ Pāli: *parikkamma-nimāta*

which in the case of the earth-emblem is the actual physical symbol of earth used for this practice. The second is the acquired sign, which in the case of the earth-emblem is the thought impression as a precise copy of the first sign, with all its specific limitations, such as its molded form, color, and shape. The third is the counterpart sign,¹⁰ which is a subtle, emblematic representation of the whole quality of the element it symbolizes.¹¹ This threefold division of signs relating to stages in the development of quiescence does not appear to be prevalent in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

Within Tibetan Buddhism, the Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga traditions strongly emphasize the cultivation of quiescence while focused on the nature of consciousness, as in the previously discussed technique of "maintaining the attention upon non-conceptuality." This seems to be analogous to the Theravāda practice of attending to the emblem of consciousness, and the culmination of this training is the appearance of the sign of consciousness, presumably referring to the counterpart sign. Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga also encourage the practice of "quiescence in which the attention is focused on conceptualization," also called "maintaining the mind in its natural state." This method, which is also said to lead to a realization of the essential characteristics of consciousness, appears to have a counterpart in Pāli Buddhist literature, where it is called "unfastened mindfulness."¹² As noted previously, according to Asaṅga and Tsongkhapa, an immediate perception of the primal characteristics of consciousness also occurs upon achieving the first proximate meditative stabilization, after the attention has been disengaged from the previous mental image used as one's meditative object.

Indo-Tibetan Buddhist accounts of the cultivation of quiescence commonly emphasize the role of mindfulness and intro-

¹⁰ Pāli: *pratibhāga-nimāta*

¹¹ Paravahera Vajirañāna, *Buddhist Meditation in Theory and Practice* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Buddhist Missionary Society, 1975), p. 145.

¹² Cf. Collett Cox, "Mindfulness and Memory: The Scope of Smṛti from Early Buddhism to the Sarvāstivādin Abhidharma" in *In the Mirror or Memory: Reflections on Mindfulness and Remembrance in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism*, ed. Janet Gyatsō (Albany: State University of New York, 1992), pp. 71–72.

spection, as these have been discussed here in earlier chapters. The Theravāda tradition, however, understands the corresponding Pāli terms in a somewhat different manner. According to Nyanaponika Thera, mindfulness¹³ applies preeminently to the attitude and practice of bare attention in a purely receptive state of mind. The Pāli equivalent of the term translated here as "introspection," namely *sampajañña*, is commonly translated from the Pāli as "clear comprehension"; and it comes into operation when any kind of action is required, including active reflective thoughts on things observed. The purpose of clear comprehension is to make all our activities purposeful, efficient and accordant with reality. In both traditions this mental factor is regarded as a facet of intelligence.¹⁴

The Relation between Quiescence and Insight

Tsongkhapa maintains that the first proximate meditative stabilization provides a sufficient basis in *samādhi* for the further cultivation of insight into ultimate truth. While the Pāli *suttas* indicate that the first stabilization alone is indispensable for the cultivation of supramundane insight and the achievement of *nirvāṇa*, they do not make the distinction between proximate¹⁵ and basic¹⁶ stabilization. This distinction appears first in the commentaries to the *suttas*. Thus, when the *suttas* declare that the first meditative stabilization is a necessary prerequisite to the cultivation of insight, this may be interpreted as referring to either the first proximate or basic stabilization. The Theravāda tradition, however, maintains that the first basic stabilization is neces-

¹³ Pāli: *sati*

¹⁴ Pāli: *pañña*. The four kinds of clear comprehension discussed in the Pāli commentaries to the Buddha's discourses are explained in Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1973), pp. 45–56.

¹⁵ Pāli: *upacāra*

¹⁶ Pāli: *appanā*

sary due to the strength its five factors of stabilization and its freedom from the five hindrances.¹⁷ Nevertheless, since supramundane insight in union with quiescence is capable of utterly eliminating the five hindrances, it seems at least plausible that the first proximate stabilization could provide an adequate basis in *samādhi* for the development of such insight.

In the Pāli canon the Buddha explicitly states that the four applications of mindfulness¹⁸ can bring about the realizations for which they were designed only if the meditator has already abandoned the impurities and practices with a concentrated, unified mind.¹⁹ Specifically, it is said that one must have acquired the "sign of the mind,"²⁰ which the Indo-Tibetan tradition suggests is characteristic of the achievement of the first proximate meditative stabilization. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the terms "concentrated"²¹ and "unified mind"²² correspond to the terms used to describe the final two of the nine attentional states leading to that state of quiescence. The commentary to this discourse explains that "the impurities" refers to the five hindrances;²³ and in the Buddha's words, "So long as these five hindrances are not abandoned one considers himself as indebted, sick, in bonds, enslaved and lost in a desert track."²⁴

¹⁷ This point is made in the commentary and sub-commentary to the *Samyutta sutta* (cf. Kheminda Thera, *The Way of Buddhist Meditation*, p. 31). However, in his *Theravāda Meditation: The Buddhist Transformation of Yoga* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980), Winston L. King suggests that proximate stabilization may indeed be a sufficient basis for the successful cultivation of insight in Theravāda Buddhist practice.

¹⁸ Tib., *dran pa nye bar bzhag pa*; Skt., *smṛtyupasthāna*; Pāli, *satiṭipatthāna*. These four are the application of mindfulness to the body, feelings, mental states, and mental objects. For a clear exposition of this training in the modern Burmese Buddhist tradition see Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1973).

¹⁹ S. V. 144–45, 150–52.

²⁰ Pāli: *cittassa nimitta*

²¹ Pāli: *samāhita*

²² Pāli: *ekaggacitta*

²³ Spk. III, 201.

²⁴ *Sāraṇāphala Sutta* (D. I, 73).

Thus, according to both the Indo-Tibetan and Pāli traditions the attainment of any Ārya path—be it that of a Śrāvaka, Pratyekabuddha, or Bodhisattva—is contingent upon the unification of quiescence and insight. As Buddhaghosa's classic treatise *The Path of Purification* declares, "there is no supramundane [insight] without meditative stabilization."²⁵

Quiescence alone can only temporarily inhibit the activation of mental afflictions, and insight alone lacks the necessary degree of attentional stability and clarity needed to eliminate the afflictions altogether. The Indo-Tibetan and Theravāda Buddhist traditions agree that only by means of the union of quiescence and insight can one achieve *nirvāṇa*. However, there is a recent trend among Theravāda Buddhists to substitute momentary stabilization²⁶ for genuine meditative stabilization. Momentary stabilization is discussed in traditional Theravāda literature, and it is defined in the *Paramatthamaññisā* as "concentration lasting only for a moment. For that too, when it occurs uninterruptedly on its object in a single mode and is not overcome by opposition, fixes the mind immovably as if in absorption."²⁷ But *The Path of Purification* explains this point as follows:

When, having entered upon those *jhānas* and emerged from them, he comprehends with insight the consciousness associated with the *jhānas* as liable to destruction and fall, then at the actual time of insight momentary unification of the mind arises through the penetration of the characteristics [of impermanence, and so on.]²⁸

Thus, as Kheminda Thera, a modern Theravāda Buddhist scholar, points out,²⁹ momentary concentration is here shown definitively and clearly to emerge during the actual time of insight

²⁵ *Vis. Mag.* 461. The sub-commentary to the *Mahāpadāna Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* [*Dīgha* Sub-commentary (Sinh. ed.) 337] identifies the first meditative stabilization as renunciation; and the *Itivuttaka* (II, 41) states, "Renunciation' means the first stabilization."

²⁶ Pāli: *khariṅka samādhi*.

²⁷ *Paramatthamaññisā* 278.

²⁸ *The Path of Purification*, XIII, 232, pp. 311–12.

²⁹ *The Way of Buddhist Meditation*, p. 44

specifically for a person who has *already achieved meditative stabilization*. Moreover, within the context of the seven purifications discussed at length in *The Path of Purification*, momentary concentration occurs only after the third purification, namely, purification of the view, which already presupposes completion of the second purification, purification of mind, which entails at least the attainment of the first meditative stabilization. Thus, according to Buddhaghosa, momentary concentration is the prerogative solely of one who has accomplished meditative stabilization, and it cannot serve as a substitute for genuine stabilization.

On the other hand, there are numerous accounts in the Pāli *suttas*, such as the well-known *Ādittapariyāyasutta*, of individuals suddenly achieving *nirvāṇa* upon hearing the Buddha or his disciples reveal the Dharma.³⁰ For people of this type, there may be no need to train in quiescence prior to achieving insight, for the two may arise swiftly and simultaneously. But such individuals appear to be rare, so for almost everyone following this gradual path, actual meditative stabilization, and not merely momentary stabilization, appears to be an indispensable prerequisite to the successful cultivation of insight.

Tsongkhapa also acknowledges that some individuals may practice most effectively by cultivating quiescence and insight simultaneously. Moreover, as we have noted previously, Karma Chagmé, representing the Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga traditions, declares that there are rare "simultaneous individuals" in whom the signs of realization appear swiftly and simultaneously as a result of their spiritual maturation from past lives. For such people, like those mentioned in the *Ādittapariyāyasutta*, liberating realization arises as soon as Dharma teachings are heard. But Karma Chagmé points out that such individuals are rare, and most people can cultivate insight only by following the traditional, sequential path of ethical discipline, *samādhi*, and wisdom.

³⁰ Cf. Rahula, Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, Rev. ed. (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1974), pp. 95–97.

The Achievement of Quiescence

According to Tsongkhapa's account of the attainment of quiescence by meditating on a mental image of the Buddha, in the final stage one mentally disengages from all signs—including the sign of that mental image—and attention is sustained in the absence of appearances. This is the achievement of the first proximate stabilization, and he soon moves on to the discussion of the cultivation of insight. The Theravāda tradition, on the other hand, is concerned with achieving at least the first basic stabilization as a minimum prerequisite for the cultivation of insight; and it therefore strongly emphasizes the nurturing of the counterpart sign as a means to achieve basic stabilization.

The fact that the counterpart sign does not figure prominently in the Indo-Tibetan tradition raises the question of whether or not the Indo-Tibetan and Theravāda accounts of the first proximate and basic stabilizations are even referring to the same meditative states. Moreover, there appear, at least at first glance, to be significant differences in their descriptions of the first stabilization with respect to the state of one's physical senses. According to Buddhaghosa, during the training in meditative stabilization that immediately follows the attainment of the first proximate stabilization, one may practice in any of the four traditional Buddhist postures, namely, walking, standing, sitting, or lying down.³¹ The fact that the sign can be maintained while walking suggests that the physical senses are not dormant while one is striving to progress from proximate to basic stabilization; otherwise, it is hard to imagine how the meditator would be able to meditate while walking. Moreover, Buddhaghosa also remarks that in the first proximate stabilization one may experience bodily pain due to being bitten by gadflies, or due to the discomfort of an uneven seat; and in the first basic stabilization the whole body is saturated with bliss. This, too, indicates that one's bodily awareness has not become dormant even in the first basic stabilization.³²

³¹ *The Path of Purification*, IV, 41, p. 134.

³² *The Path of Purification*, IV, 187, pp. 172–73.

This assertion appears to be incompatible with the view of Tsongkhapa and of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu,³³ on whom Tsongkhapa relies. Tsongkhapa acknowledges that even after quiescence is achieved, sensory images may appear to the mind due to lack of strong habituation with quiescence. If this occurs, one is advised to be mindful of the disadvantages of the mind coming under the influence of sensory objects, and not follow after them. By habituating oneself to such practice, he says, sensory objects no longer appear to the mind,³⁴ and one no longer senses the presence of one's physical body. The Theravāda view, on the other hand, appears to accord with certain discussions of quiescence in the Atiyoga tradition. Karma Chagmé, for example, writes of the attainment of quiescence:

Now then, what is flawless meditation? Wherever the mind is directed, it remains still and clear. When you are meditating, the eight collections of consciousness, including the eyes, ears and so on, do not cease; rather each one is clear. The body and mind are saturated with joy, without irritation. This happens whenever you are meditating. When you are not meditating, effortlessly there is great freedom. This is quiescence alone, and it is the foundation of meditation.³⁵

Although Karma Chagmé does not explicitly identify the attainment of quiescence with the first proximate stabilization, as Tsongkhapa does, his description of this state does have some resemblance with the Theravāda account of that initial state of stabilization. However, according to the contemporary Atiyoga teacher Gyatrul Rinpoche, the assertion that in the state of quiescence the sensory faculties are "clear" means that sensory objects do appear to the senses, but they are not necessarily apprehended. In contrast, in the flawed cultivation of quiescence the senses are

³³ *Yogasthāna III*, Būhar MS., 12B.1.1. Derge: Sems tsam Dzi 145.1.6. Cf. Louis de La Vallée Poussin, *Abhidharmakośābhāṣyaṃ*, English trans. Leo M. Pruden, Vol. IV, p. 1231.

³⁴ Cf. Tsongkhapa's discussion of "The Actual Marks of Having Mental Engagement" in Chapter 2 above.

³⁵ Karma Chagmé's *Great Commentary to [Mi 'gyur rdo rje's] Buddhahood in the Palm of Your Hand (Sangs rgyas lag 'chang gt. 'grel chen)*, Ch. 15, p. 683.

totally withdrawn, and objects do not even appear to them. In this case, this Atiyoga account of quiescence differs significantly from the views of both Tsongkhapa and Buddhaghosa. This would seem to imply that the achievement of quiescence, specifically the first proximate stabilization, is understood differently by Asaṅga, Vasubandhu, and Tsongkhapa on the one hand, and Buddhaghosa on the other; while the Atiyoga tradition may accord with Buddhaghosa's account, or it may present its own unique interpretation of quiescence.

This issue becomes yet more complex, however, when one takes into consideration the striking similarity between the Indo-Tibetan and Theravāda Buddhist accounts of the experience of consciousness once the first proximate stabilization has been attained. Asaṅga claims that upon achieving quiescence, the qualities of awareness, clarity and joy are experienced non-dually once the mindfulness of, and mental engagement with, objective appearances has been released. In this sense the state of quiescence may be regarded as mentally uncontrived and free of conceptual grasping. It is also immediately preceded by an experience of extraordinary joy, and it is sustained in a state of exceptional mental clarity and non-conceptuality. All of these characteristics are also cited frequently in descriptions of profound realizations of thatness which arise in the practice of Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga. Because of the superficial resemblance of quiescence and these much more advanced *samādhis*, Tsongkhapa cautions aspiring contemplatives to examine carefully the differences between them. The authentic insights of Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga are based upon the prior attainment of quiescence, and they differ from quiescence in terms of the practices leading to them, the nature of the realizations themselves, and their resultant benefits.

Similarly, the Theravāda tradition asserts that upon the achievement of the first proximate meditative stabilization there arises an experience of the "constituent of becoming."³⁵ This is characterized as the original, or primal, state of the mind from which thoughts originate; and it is said to be "process-free,"³⁷ in

³⁵ Pāli: *bhavaṅga*

³⁶ Pāli: *vīthi-mutta*

contrast to the "active mind".³⁸ This natural state of the mind is further said to be free not only from all impurities *but also from all sense impressions* that cause impurities; hence it shines in its own radiance, which is obscured only due to external influence.³⁹ Thus, it seems that when one is experiencing this constituent of becoming without the presence of a counterpart sign, the mind is totally withdrawn from the physical senses. This accords quite closely with Asaṅga's account cited above. Moreover, the Theravāda tradition cautions that, due to its superficial similarity with the state of cessation⁴⁰ the constituent of becoming may be mistaken for the consciousness of one who is freed.⁴¹ The parallel to Tsongkhapa's warning is obvious.

Although the acquisition of the sign of the mind is said to be a necessary prerequisite to the successful cultivation of the four applications of mindfulness—and thus, to the cultivation of insight—and though the experience of the constituent of becoming is closely linked to the first proximate stabilization, I have seen no evidence that the Theravāda tradition equates these two experiences. On the contrary, in the context of meditative stabilization, Buddhaghosa refers to the experience of the constituent of becoming merely as a failure to maintain the counterpart sign, and he does not appear to attach any particular value or significance to that experience of consciousness.⁴² The Indo-Tibetan and Theravāda traditions, however, do both agree that once the first proximate stabilization is attained, one enters into a state of appearance-free consciousness, during which the physical senses remain dormant. Buddhaghosa indicates that when one proceeds in the training to sustain the counterpart-sign as a means to achieving the first basic stabilization, the physical senses are once again activated. Thus, it seems plausible that Asaṅga's and

³⁸ Pāli: *vīthi-mutta*

³⁹ Cf. Paravahera Vajrañāna's *Buddhist Meditation in Theory and Practice*, pp. 151, 327–28; David J. Kalupahana, *The Principles of Buddhist Psychology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), pp. 112–15.

⁴⁰ Pāli: *nirodha-samāpatti*

⁴¹ Pāli: *nibbuta*

⁴² *The Path of Purification*, IV, 33, p. 131.

Buddhaghosa's discussions of the first proximate stabilization are indeed referring to the same, or at least very similar, states of *samādhi*.

Is the Atiyoga account of quiescence actually at variance with both Asaṅga and Buddhaghosa? In the context of quiescence, Karma Chagmé characterizes "flawed meditation" as a state of consciousness comparable to deep sleep, in which the physical senses are dormant and mental awareness is unclear. If one persists in that semi-comatose state, he warns, one will be reborn as an animal.⁴³ This description closely parallels Tsongkhapa's account of the state of subtle laxity, in which the mind is excessively withdrawn and the full force of attentional clarity is absent. Tsongkhapa claims that by dwelling in such a state, which can easily be confused with meditative equipoise, in the near term one's intelligence is impaired, and in the long term one is reborn as an animal. Subtle laxity, he insists, must be completely eliminated before quiescence is accomplished. Thus, Karma Chagmé's previously cited description of quiescence may indeed refer to the first proximate stabilization, but not to the specific experience of appearance-free consciousness. He may, in fact be referring to this experience when he mentions a meditative state in which there is the mere discrimination of the mind's remaining single-pointedly, without the presence of any other thoughts or memories. In common with Theravāda writings, he comments that this bears some similarity with the Śrāvaka state of cessation. And he concludes with the comment that there is no harm in remaining in this state momentarily, but it is inappropriate to meditate continually in that way.⁴⁴ Taking all the above points into account, there seem to be sufficient similarities in the accounts of Asaṅga, Buddhaghosa, and Karma Chagmé to conclude that their discussions of quiescence are indeed referring to the same, or at least very similar, meditative states. And all are agreed that quiescence is an indispensable prerequisite to the cultivation of insight, which alone has the power to liberate the mind from all afflictions.

⁴³ Karma Chagmé, *Sangs rgyas lag 'chang gi 'grel chen*, Ch. 15, p. 682.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 682-83.

In addition to serving as the basis for insight, Tsongkhapa claims that the first proximate stabilization is a sufficient basis for developing a wide array of paranormal abilities. In the Tibetan tradition such abilities are said to have been cultivated chiefly by means of methods unique to the Vajrayāna. In the Theravāda tradition, on the other hand, the fourth meditative stabilization is often cited as the basis for developing paranormal abilities. Moreover, the Theravāda tradition closely associates the acquisition of counterpart signs with the form realm and the plane of meditative equipoise.⁴⁵ Buddhaghosa explains in detail how the mind is exercised in the use of counterpart signs in order to develop paranormal abilities.⁴⁶ To take one example, if one wishes to move unimpededly through solid objects, one enters into the fourth meditative stabilization focused on the counterpart sign of the space-emblem. Then, upon emerging from the state of meditative equipoise, one focuses the attention on a solid object, such as a wall, and resolves, "Let there be space"; and it becomes space, so that one can move through it freely.⁴⁷

Although the counterpart sign does not figure prominently in Indo-Tibetan Buddhist accounts of quiescence, the contemporary Tibetan Buddhist contemplative Gen Lamrimpa claims that the signs of any of the ten emblems can be made to transform into the actual entities that they represent.⁴⁸ The hypothesis that one can gain mastery over the physical elements by meditatively acquiring and manipulating the quintessential ideas that represent them is one that conforms closely to the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka theory

⁴⁵ It should be noted that in Buddhaghosa's *The Path of Purification* only twenty-two of the forty subjects for the cultivation of *samādhi* transform into counterpart signs. Cf. Paravahera Vajrīṅga Mahāthera, *Buddhist Meditation in Theory and Practice*, p. 106.

⁴⁶ *The Path of Purification*, trans. by Bhikkhu Ñānamoli, Ch. XII. The standard list of paranormal abilities that can be achieved through the cultivation of meditative stabilization is presented in *Discourses of Gotama Buddha: Middle Collection*, trans. David W. Evans (London: Janus, 1992) "Major Discourse with Vacchagotta," pp. 213-14.

⁴⁷ *The Path of Purification*, XII, 87-91.

⁴⁸ Gen Lamrimpa, *Śmātha Meditation*, trans. E. Alan Wallace, p. 122.

that all phenomena come into existence solely by the power of conceptual designation.

The late Tibetan Buddhist scholar Geshe Gedün Lodrö gives another explanation for the paranormal ability to move through solid objects. He claims that the cultivation of *samādhi* and the accomplishment of pliancy results in the formation of an unimpeded mental body,* pervading and equal in size to one's physical body, but not composed of matter. After achieving this mental body, he says, one can move both one's mental body and physical body unimpededly through solid objects while the mind is in the state of *samādhi*. He adds that a mental body, together with this ability to move through walls, can also be achieved through repeated, conceptual realization of emptiness, even without the achievement of quiescence.⁴⁹

In short, the above accounts hypothesize that the paranormal ability to move unimpededly through solid objects may be achieved either through the manipulation of ideas using the power of meditative stabilization, without insight into emptiness, or through complete familiarization with emptiness, without the achievement of meditative stabilization. If so, it would naturally follow that unified meditative stabilization and realization of emptiness would also provide a more than adequate basis for the development of a variety of paranormal abilities.

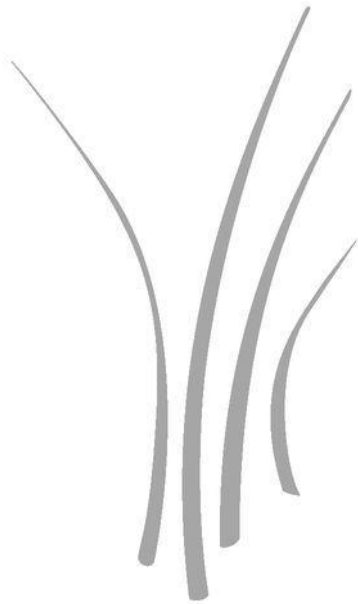
There are certainly striking similarities between the Indo-Tibetan and Theravāda Buddhist accounts of quiescence, and yet differences remain between the claims of these two traditions and within the Indo-Tibetan tradition itself. It is difficult to draw definite conclusions at this time about the relationship between these meditative states as they are cultivated in these different disciplines. With further research, both textual and experiential, greater clarity may be forthcoming. Whatever future investigations may reveal, the cultivation of quiescence certainly plays a vital role in both these Buddhist traditions, and it warrants greater attention than it has been granted in the recent past.

⁴⁹ Geshe Gedün Lodrö, *Walking Through Walls: A Presentation of Tibetan Meditation*, trans. and ed. Jeffrey Hopkins, pp. 227–29, 232–33.

B. ALAN WALLACE

CONTEMPLATIVE SCIENCE

WHERE BUDDHISM AND NEUROSCIENCE CONVERGE



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7

ŚAMATHA

THE CONTEMPLATIVE REFINEMENT OF ATTENTION



THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF ŚAMATHA

Buddhist inquiry into the natural world proceeds from a radically different point of departure than Western science, and its methods differ correspondingly. As discussed previously, the pioneers of the scientific revolution, including Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo, expressed an initial interest in the nature of the physical objects farthest removed from human subjectivity, such as the relative motions of the sun and earth, the surface of the moon, and the orbits of the planets. And a central principle of scientific naturalism is the complete objectification of the natural world, free of any contamination of subjectivity. This principle of objectivism demands that science deal with empirical facts testable by third-person means; such facts must, therefore, be public rather than private—accessible to more than one observer.

Another aspect of this principle is that scientific knowledge—paradigmatically, knowledge of astronomy and physics—must be epistemically objective, which is to say, observer-independent. A profound limitation of this ideal is that it cannot accommodate the study of subjective phenomena, which presumably accounts for the fact that the scientific study of the mind did not even begin until three hundred years after the launching of the scientific revolution. And it was roughly another hundred years before the nature of consciousness came to be accepted as a legitimate object of scientific inquiry. In short, the principle of objectivity excludes the subjective human mind and consciousness itself from the domain of natural science.

In stark contrast to this objective orientation, Buddhism begins with the premise that the mind is the primary source of human joy and misery and is central to understanding the natural world as a whole. In a well-known discourse attributed to the Buddha, he declares, “All phenomena are preceded by the mind. When the mind is comprehended, all phenomena are comprehended.” ¹ The mind and consciousness itself are therefore the

primary subjects of introspective investigation within the Buddhist tradition. Moreover, just as unaided human vision was found to be an inadequate instrument for examining the moon, planets, and stars, Buddhists regard the undisciplined mind as an unreliable instrument for examining mental objects, mental processes, and the nature of consciousness.

Drawing from the experience of earlier Indian contemplatives, the Buddha refined techniques for stabilizing and refining the attention and used them in new ways, much as Galileo improved and utilized the telescope for observing the heavens. Over the 2,500 years since, Buddhist contemplatives have further developed and made use of those methods for training the mind, which they regard as the one instrument by which mental phenomena can be directly observed. As a result of their investigations, they have formulated elaborate, sophisticated theories of the origins and nature of consciousness and its active role in nature, but their inquiries have not produced anything akin to an empirical study or theory of the brain.

They did, however, develop rigorous techniques for examining and probing the mind firsthand. The initial problem was to train the attention so that it could be a more reliable, precise instrument of observation. Without such training, it is certainly possible to direct one's awareness inward, but the undisciplined mind has been found to succumb very swiftly to attentional excitation, or scattering; when it eventually calms down, it tends to drift into attentional laxity in which vividness is sacrificed. A mind that is alternately prone to excitation and laxity is a poor instrument for examining anything, and indeed, the Buddhist tradition deems it "dysfunctional."

Thus, the first task in the Buddhist investigation of the mind is to so refine the attention and balance the nervous system that the mind is made properly functional, free of the detrimental influences of excitation and laxity. Those two hindrances must be clearly identified in terms of one's own experience. Excitation, the first obvious interference in observing the mind, is defined as an agitated mental process that follows after attractive objects,² and it is a derivative of compulsive desire.³ Laxity is a mental process that occurs when the attention becomes slack and the meditative object is not apprehended with vividness and forcefulness. It is said to be a derivative of delusion.

The genre of attentional training Buddhists have devised to counteract excitation and laxity is known as *śamatha*, the literal meaning of which is “quiescence.” *Śamatha* is a serene attentional state in which the hindrances of excitation and laxity have been thoroughly calmed. The central goals of its cultivation are the development of attentional stability and acuity. In Buddhist psychology, the continuum of awareness is composed of successive moments, or “pulses,” of cognition each lasting on the order of one millisecond.⁴ Moreover, commonly in a continuum of perception, many moments consist of nonascertaining cognition, that is, moments in which objects *appear* to the inattentive awareness but are not *ascertained*, or consciously recognized so that they can be recalled later.⁵

In terms of this theory, I surmise that the degree of attentional stability increases in relation to the proportion of moments of ascertaining cognition of the intended object; that is, as stability increases, fewer and fewer moments are focused on any other object. This makes for a homogeneous continuum of perception. The degree of attentional vividness corresponds to the ratio of moments of ascertaining to nonascertaining cognition: the higher the frequency of the former, the greater the vividness. Thus, the achievement of *śamatha* entails an exceptionally high density of homogenous moments of ascertaining consciousness.

To return to the analogy of the telescope, the development of attentional stability may be likened to mounting a telescope on a firm platform; the development of attentional vividness is like highly polishing the lenses and bringing the telescope into clear focus. Recall the more traditional analogy, cited earlier, to illustrate the importance of attentional stability and vividness for the cultivation of contemplative insight: in trying to examine a hanging tapestry at night, if you light an oil lamp that is both radiant and unflickering, you can vividly observe the depicted images. But if the lamp is either dim or—even if it is bright—flickers due to wind, you cannot clearly see those forms.

THE USE OF A MENTAL IMAGE AS THE OBJECT IN ŚAMATHA PRACTICE

Among the wide variety of techniques devised for the cultivation of *śamatha*, one of the most commonly practiced among Tibetan Buddhist contemplatives entails focusing the attention upon a mental image. It may be of a visual object, such as a stick or a pebble, although Tibetan Buddhists tend to prefer mental images having great religious significance to them, such as an image of the Buddha.⁶

Regardless of the particular technique followed in the pursuit of *śamatha*, two mental faculties are said to be indispensable for the cultivation of attentional stability and vividness: mindfulness and introspection. The Pāli term translated here as “mindfulness” (*sati*) also has the connotation of “recollection,” and it is the faculty of sustaining the attention upon a familiar object without being distracted. Thus, when using a mental image as the meditative object, mindfulness is applied steadily to it. Moreover, the image must be clearly ascertained, otherwise the full potency of attentional vividness cannot arise, subtle laxity is not dispelled, and concentration will remain flawed.

Mindfulness of a mental image is said to be a kind of mental perception. In the actual practice of *śamatha* it is common first to attend visually to an actual physical object, such as a pebble, and once one has grown thoroughly familiar with its appearance, to reconstruct a mental image of it and focus on that. In that phase of practice, mental perception apprehends the form of the pebble by the power of the visual perception of it. Thus, mental perception does not apprehend the pebble directly, but rather *recollects* it on the basis of the immediately preceding visual perception.

According to Buddhist psychology, the mental image of the pebble is not a mental faculty or process, for it does not cognize its own object, but neither is it material in the Buddhist sense of being composed of particles of matter. Rather, it is regarded as a form for mental consciousness,⁷ of the

same type as the forms that appear in the dream state. In this practice, mindfulness is focused on that mental image itself, not on the physical pebble of which the image is a likeness. In other words, it is the function of mindfulness to sustain the recollection of the image of the pebble, steadily observing it “internally” in a manner analogous to the visual observation of the pebble itself.

Mindfulness is the principal means of accomplishing *śamatha*, but it must be accompanied by the mental faculty of introspection. While mindfulness attends unwaveringly to the meditative object, introspection has the function of monitoring the meditative process. Thus, introspection is a type of metacognition that operates as the “quality control” in the development of *śamatha*, swiftly detecting the occurrence of either excitation or laxity. In the Buddhist tradition, introspection is defined as the repeated examination of the state of one’s body and mind,⁸ and it is regarded as a derivative of intelligence.⁹

The Buddhist assertion of the possibility of introspection as a form of metacognition raises the interesting problem of whether or not it is possible for the mind to observe itself. Buddhists generally assert that at any given moment, consciousness and its concomitant mental processes have the same intentional object, and at any given moment, only one consciousness can be produced in a single individual.¹⁰ Moreover, a famous discourse attributed to the Buddha declares that the mind cannot observe itself, just as a sword cannot cut itself and a fingertip cannot touch itself; nor can the mind be seen in external sense objects or in the sense organs.¹¹

I suspect the rationale behind that assertion is that even when one is aware of one’s own subjective experience of an object, there is still a sense of separateness between the observer of that experience and the experience itself. The sense of duality remains. Within the context of ordinary, dualistic cognition, there can be no subjective awareness without an object, just as there can be no object without reference to a subject that cognizes or designates it. According to Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, subject and object are mutually interdependent. All phenomena experienced as subjects and objects arise within, and in dependence upon, the conceptual framework in which they are designated.

When one observes one’s own subjective experience of an object, the observer seems to be distinct from that experience, and if one takes note of that observer, there remains a sense of duality between the noted observer

and the one who notes that observer. This hypothesis of an observer perceiving a simultaneously existing observer perceiving a simultaneously existing observer leads to an infinite regression. Śāntideva avoided this problem by suggesting that instead of such metacognition occurring with respect to a simultaneously existing cognition, one is rather *recollecting* past moments of consciousness. In short, he hypothesized that it is possible to recollect a subjective experience that was not previously cognized as a distinct, isolated entity. In his view, when one remembers seeing a certain event, one recalls both the perceived event and oneself perceiving that event. The subject and object are recalled as an integrated, experienced event, in which the subject is retrospectively identified as such; but he denied that it is possible for a single cognition to take itself as its own object.¹²

THE STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT OF ŚAMATHA

Progress in the gradual training leading up to the achievement of *śamatha* is mapped out in terms of nine successive attentional states. The initial challenge is to develop a continuity of sustained, voluntary awareness, but in the first state, called “directed attention,” the mind is strongly dominated by excitation. Indeed, because one is now consciously trying to sustain the attention unwaveringly on a single object instead of allowing it to roam freely, the mind seems more overwhelmed by compulsive ideation than usual. One brings the mental image to mind, but almost immediately it is lost and the attention is scattered.

This initial, limited capacity for sustained attention is borne out by modern experiments that have measured transient, focused attention on the basis of the performance of simple sensory tasks. Such research indicates that this transient, high level of focused attention lasts between one and three seconds. ¹³ Scientific investigation of attention during the late nineteenth century also suggested that voluntary attention cannot be sustained for more than a few seconds at a time. Such research led William James to conclude, “*No one can possibly attend continuously to an object that does not change.*”¹⁴

According to the Buddhist tradition, it is very difficult to attend continuously to an object that does not change, but the ability can be developed through sustained training. During the successive stages of *śamatha* practice, even the presence of mindfulness and introspection is no guarantee that progress will be made, for one may recognize the presence of laxity or excitation and still fail to take steps to counteract it. The remedy is the cultivation of the will, which is closely associated with intervention and effort. According to Buddhist psychology, the will is the mental process that intentionally engages the mind with various types of objects and activities. In this case, when either laxity or excitation occurs, the mind is stimulated

by the will to intervene in order to eliminate them. The relationship of the mind to the will is likened to that of iron that moves under the influence of a magnet. The will to eliminate laxity and excitation is aroused by recognizing the disadvantages of succumbing to those hindrances and the advantages of overcoming them.¹⁵ Thus, the initial two phases of this training are accomplished by learning about the nature of the practice and contemplating the benefits of pursuing it.

At the outset, one is encouraged to practice for many short sessions each day with as few distractions between sessions as possible. As a result of persevering in this practice, it is said that one ascends to the second state, called “continuous attention.” During this phase, the mind is still subject to so much excitation that the attention is more often away from the object than on it, but at times one experiences brief periods of attentional continuity, for up to a minute or so. In other words, occasionally, for up to a minute, the attention does not completely disengage from the chosen mental image. But even during those periods of sustained attention, the mind is still prone to excitation, which manifests as peripheral “noise” or mental chitchat. Experientially, it seems as if the attention is still fixed on the mental image even while other thoughts and sensory impressions come to mind. According to Buddhist psychology, however, it seems more likely that the attention is disengaged from the mental image during those interludes, but they are so brief that there seems to be an unbroken continuity of attention to the main object. In any case, at this point only a gross level of attentional stability has been achieved, and that too is interspersed with periods of gross excitation, in which the meditative object is forgotten altogether.

With further training, one gradually reduces the number of sessions per day while increasing their duration. The emphasis is always on maintaining the highest quality of attention, rather than opting for mere quantity of time spent. The next state in this development is called “resurgent attention,” at which point the attention is mostly on the meditative object, and its continuity needs only to be reinstated now and then when gross excitation occurs. Thus, there are more frequent periods of sustained attention, and they are of longer duration.

When one accomplishes the fourth state, called “close attention,” the mind is stabilized to the point that one does not entirely disengage from the meditative object for the full duration of each session. The third and fourth

states are achieved chiefly by the cultivation of mindfulness, and the principal emphasis up to that point is on the development of attentional stability, rather than vividness. In fact, Buddhist contemplatives have found that if one strives initially for enhanced vividness, that effort will actually undermine the development of stability. With the attainment of close attention, the power of mindfulness is well exhibited, gross attentional stability is achieved, and the mind is free of gross excitation.

Particularly at this point in the training, it is very easy to fall into complacency, a feeling of having already achieved the aim of sustained, voluntary attention. In reality, one is still very much subject to subtle excitation and to both gross and subtle laxity, and Tsongkhapa warns that if one fails to recognize these flaws, continued practice may actually impair one's intelligence. William James was also aware of pathological cases in which the mind was possessed by a fixed and ever monotonously recurring idea, and he mistakenly concluded that those were the only kind of cases in which the attention does become fixed on an unchanging object.¹⁶ According to all the evidence available to him, voluntary attention is by necessity only a momentary affair.¹⁷ Buddhist contemplatives maintain, on the contrary, that mental health can be retained and even enhanced as long as one cultivates a high degree of vividness in such sustained attention. The principal difference between such meditatively stabilized awareness and the kind of attention that occurs, for example, in obsessive-compulsive disorders is that the meditative awareness is voluntary and supple. It can be directed at will, instead of being obsessive or compulsive.

The fifth attentional state, called "tamed attention," and the sixth, called "pacified attention," are achieved with the force of introspection, with which one closely monitors the meditative process, watching for the occurrence of laxity and subtle excitation. In the stage of taming, gross laxity, in which vividness of the attention is missing, is dispelled; in the phase of pacification, subtle excitation is eliminated, so that even peripheral distractions disappear.

By that time, an increasing sense of joy and satisfaction arises while meditating, so the seventh and eighth attentional states of "fully pacified attention" and "single-pointed attention" are achieved by the force of enthusiasm. In the seventh state even subtle laxity, in which the full potency of attentional vividness is not attained, is eliminated; in single-pointed attention, the mind can dwell with utter stability and vividness on its chosen

object for hours on end, without the occurrence of even subtle laxity or excitement. William James predicted that if the attention were concentrated on a mental image long enough, it would acquire before the mind's eye almost the brilliancy of a visually perceived object,¹⁸ and this is exactly what Buddhist contemplatives report from their experience at this point of the training.

With the attainment of the ninth state, called “attentional balance,” accomplished with the force of familiarization, only an initial impulse of will and effort is needed at the beginning of each meditation session; after that, uninterrupted, sustained attention occurs effortlessly. Moreover, the engagement of the will, effort, and intervention at this point is actually a hindrance. It is time to let the natural balance of the mind maintain itself without interference.

THE ATTAINMENT OF ŚAMATHA

Even at the state of attentional balance, *śamatha* has still not been fully achieved. Its attainment is marked first by a dramatic shift in the nervous system, characterized briefly by a strange but not unpleasant sense of heaviness and numbness on the top of the head. This is followed by an obvious increase in mental and then physical pliancy, entailing a cheerfulness and lightness of the mind and a buoyancy and lightness of the body. Consequently, experiences of physical bliss and then mental bliss arise, which are temporarily quite overwhelming. But that rapture soon fades, and with its disappearance, the attention is sustained firmly and calmly upon the meditative object, and *śamatha* is fully achieved. The above claims concerning a shift in the nervous system and its consequences have to do with firsthand, empirical, physiological experiences. It remains to be seen how, or whether, such a theory and the corresponding physiological changes can be detected objectively and understood in modern scientific terms.

With the achievement of *śamatha*, one disengages the attention from the previous meditative object, and the entire continuum of attention is focused single-pointedly, nonconceptually, and internally in the substrate consciousness, withdrawn fully from the physical senses. Thus, for the first time in this training, one does not attempt to recall a familiar object or mentally engage with it. One's consciousness is now left in an absence of appearances, an experience that is said to be subtle and difficult to realize. Only the aspects of the sheer awareness, luminosity, and joy of the mind remain, without the intrusion of any sensory objects. Any thoughts that arise do not persist, nor do they proliferate; rather, they vanish of their own accord, like bubbles emerging from water. One has no sense of one's own body, and it seems as if one's mind has become indivisible with space.

While remaining in this absence of appearances, even though it is still impossible for a single moment of consciousness to observe itself, one

moment of consciousness may recall the experience of the immediately preceding moment, which, in turn, may recall its immediately preceding moment—each moment having no other appearances or objects arising to it. Thus, due to the homogeneity of this mental continuum, with each moment of consciousness recalling the previous one, the experiential effect is that of consciousness apprehending itself.

The defining characteristics of consciousness retrospectively perceived in that state are first a sense of *clarity*, or implicit luminosity capable of manifesting as all manner of appearances, and second the quality of *cognizance*, or the event of knowing. Upon attaining *śamatha*, by focusing the attention on the *sheer* clarity and the *sheer* cognizance of experience, one attends to the defining characteristics of consciousness alone, as opposed to the qualities of other *objects* of consciousness.

THE USE OF NONIDEATION AS THE OBJECT IN ŚAMATHA PRACTICE

If one's chief aim in developing *śamatha* is to ascertain the nature of consciousness, one might ask whether a more direct strategy—not engaging with a mental image or any other object—might be used. Many Buddhist contemplatives have in fact trained in an alternative technique of cultivating nonconceptual attention from the outset, without focusing on any other object such as a mental image. In this method the eyes are left open, gazing vacantly into the space ahead. According to Buddhist psychology, this space is a type of form that is apprehended by mental, not sensory, perception.¹⁹ Mentally, one completely cuts off all thoughts of the past, future, and present. Bringing no thoughts to mind, one lets it remain like a cloudless sky, clear, empty, and evenly devoid of grasping onto any kind of object.

In this, as in all other techniques for the development of *śamatha*, attentional stability and vividness are cultivated by means of mindfulness and introspection. The object of mindfulness is the mere absence of ideation, and with introspection one monitors whether the mind has come under the influence of excitation or laxity. Tsongkhapa especially emphasized that while following this method, one must *ascertain* the absence of ideation as the meditative object, rather than simply letting the mind go blank. His concern, I presume, was to ensure that the meditator does not drift into a nebulous trance but maintains an actively engaged intelligence throughout this training. In this way, one progresses through the nine attentional states explained previously. Eventually *śamatha* is achieved, and—as in the previous method—it is characterized by joy, luminosity, and nonconceptuality.²⁰

Buddhist contemplatives raise the question of whether this nonconceptual state of *śamatha* actually transcends all conceptual structuring and modification and whether the mere suppression of ideation is sufficient for

entering a totally nonconceptual state of awareness. The eminent Tibetan Buddhist contemplative Karma Chagmé (1612–1678) voiced the consensus within the Tibetan tradition when he asserted that although this state may easily be mistaken for conceptually unstructured awareness, it is not unmodified by ideation, for one still maintains the conceptual sense that attention is being sustained in the absence of conceptualization.²¹

Once *śamatha* is achieved, the conceptually discursive mind becomes almost entirely quiescent. Only occasionally does an isolated thought or mental image fleetingly arise, only to fade back into the space of awareness, with no ripple effect. But even though one's awareness seems to be devoid of thoughts, there is still a subliminal sense of subject and object and other indications that this experience is subject to precognitive conceptual structuring. So the vacuum state of the mind of *śamatha* is relatively empty of conceptual content, but not absolutely so.

SETTLING THE MIND IN ITS NATURAL STATE

There is something contrived about the above state of nonconceptuality, for during the training that leads to it, the mind has been artificially withdrawn from appearances and ideation has been suppressed. The consciousness in which one perceives the characteristics of joy, luminosity, and nonconceptuality has been conceptually isolated from its normal processes and from the appearances with which it is normally engaged. The question may then be raised: Is it not possible to identify the natural characteristics of consciousness in the midst of the mind's activity, without suppressing ideation? After all, consciousness is obviously present and active while thoughts arise, so in principle there seems no reason it could not be identified.

It is for this purpose that the technique of “settling the mind in its natural state” has been devised and taught within the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition. ²² Like all other techniques for developing *śamatha*, it entails freeing the mind from distraction, so that the attention is not compulsively carried away by either mental or sensory stimuli. However, this method is exceptional in that the attention is not fixed upon any object. One gazes steadily into the space ahead, but without visually focusing on anything. Mentally, one brings the attention into the domain of the mind, and whenever any type of mental event is observed—a thought, an image, a feeling, a desire, and so on—one simply takes note of it, without conceptually classifying it and without trying to suppress or sustain it. Letting the mind remain at ease, one watches all manner of mental events arise and pass of their own accord, without intervention of any kind. Settling awareness in the present, the attention is not allowed to stray in thoughts concerning the past or the future, or to latch onto any object in the present.

Normally when thoughts arise, one conceptually engages with the referents, or intentional objects, of those thoughts, but in this practice one perceptually attends to the thoughts themselves, without judging or evaluating them. The heart of the practice is allowing consciousness to remain in its “natural state,” limpid and vivid, without becoming agitated in fluctuating emotions and habitual thought patterns.

While following this practice, one alternately seeks out the consciousness that is engaging in the meditation and then releases awareness. This is said to be an effective means of dispelling laxity. The First Panchen Lama, writing in the seventeenth century, described this as follows:

Whatever sort of thoughts arise, without suppressing them, recognize where they are moving and where they are moving to; and focus while observing the nature of those thoughts. By so doing, eventually their movement ceases and there is stillness.

The result of this practice is that flawless *śamatha* arises, such that wherever the awareness is placed, it is unwaveringly present, unmoved by adventitious thoughts, and vividly clear, unsullied by laxity, lethargy, or dimness. In this way, too, the sheer clarity and cognizance of consciousness can be recognized.

THE ALLEGED TRAIT EFFECTS OF ACCOMPLISHING ŚAMATHA

In addition to various, valuable state effects of attaining *śamatha*, mentioned earlier, a number of trait effects are also claimed by Buddhist contemplatives. Following such meditation, afflictive mental states such as aggression and craving are said to occur less frequently and to be of briefer duration than previously. Even when destructive mental processes arise, one does not readily succumb to them, and the mind remains calm and composed. Moreover, particularly as a result of settling the mind in its natural state, one experiences a nonconceptual sense that nothing can harm the mind, regardless of whether or not ideation has ceased. In between meditation sessions, when going about normal daily activities, one experiences a heightened sense of attentional vividness; it seems as if even sleep is suffused with exceptional concentration, and dream life takes on special significance. These claims are psychologically and physiologically significant, and they lend themselves to being tested scientifically so that we can understand more precisely what is meant by “attentional vividness” and the other purported shifts in consciousness while sleeping and dreaming.

Claims of extrasensory perception and paranormal abilities are quite common within the Buddhist tradition, in which no theoretical principles refute the possibility of such attainments and numerous methods are taught and practiced to acquire them. Recall the earlier cited statement of the Buddha : “All phenomena are preceded by the mind. When the mind is comprehended, all phenomena are comprehended.” This is followed by an equally provocative assertion: “By bringing the mind under control, all things are brought under control.”²⁴ Modern science has apparently assumed the opposite perspective: when the environment and the body, and specifically the brain, are brought under control, the mind is brought under control. In its pursuit of hedonic well-being, the modern West has sought

techniques to control the environment and maintain fine physical health, and it has produced a stunning array of drugs to control the mind, enabling people to relax, to become mentally aroused and alert, to sleep, to relieve anxiety, to overcome depression, to counteract attentional disorders, to improve the memory, and to experience euphoria, bliss, and even alleged mystical states of consciousness.

While the modern Western approach is remarkably empowering for those who create, market, and distribute the above types of technology and drugs, it is profoundly disempowering for the individual. The Buddhist approach, with its emphasis on eudaimonic well-being, provides little incentive for the rigorous, sustained, extraspective investigation of physical processes and for the development of technology. Given the current, unprecedented encounter of the ancient Buddhist tradition and modern science, there is no reason we should be forced to choose one and exclude the other, although the question of which to emphasize more strongly is a matter of personal inclination.

The ultimate aim of the practice of *śamatha* is not simply to ascertain the primary characteristics of consciousness or to attain exceptional mental powers. Rather, it is to realize the nature of primordial consciousness. For exceptional individuals, the previously described method of settling the mind in its natural state may be sufficient for gaining such realization, but for most people, further training in the practice of the Great Perfection is required.²⁵

PROLEGOMENA TO A FUTURE CONTEMPLATIVE SCIENCE

By the end of the nineteenth century, many physicists were utterly convinced that there were no more great discoveries to be made in their field—their understanding of the physical universe was complete in all important respects. One of the few lingering problems to be solved was known as the “ultraviolet catastrophe,” which had to do with the incompatibility of entropy-energy formulas derived from classical thermodynamics. The solution to this problem came from Max Planck, who thereby laid the foundation for modern quantum theory, which shook the very foundations of physicists’ views of the universe.²⁶

While there is certainly no comparable sense that the cognitive sciences have formulated a comprehensive theory of the brain and mind—far to the contrary!—many experts in this field have concluded beyond a shadow of a doubt that consciousness is produced solely by the brain and that it has no causal efficacy apart from the brain. The fact that modern science has failed to identify the nature of consciousness, its necessary and sufficient causes, and its brain correlates in no way diminishes the certainty of those holding materialist views of the mind. When empirical knowledge of the nature and potentials of consciousness replaces these current metaphysical assumptions, I strongly suspect that the “problem of consciousness” will turn out to have a role in the history of science comparable to that of the ultraviolet catastrophe.

The most effective way to acquire such knowledge, I believe, is by a concerted, collaborative effort on the part of professional cognitive scientists and professional contemplatives, using their combined extraspective and introspective skills to tackle the hard problem of consciousness. This might involve, among other things, conducting longitudinal studies of the gradual development of *śamatha* by people devoting themselves to this training with the same dedication displayed by

the scientists employed in the Genome Project. The successful completion of that effort to understand the genetic code is changing the face of the modern world. The collaborative scientific and contemplative study of *śamatha* may also help to restore a true spirit of empiricism to the study of consciousness and its relation to the world at large.

MINDING CLOSELY

The Four Applications of Mindfulness

B. Alan Wallace



keep the counts succinct. Do not fall into mindfulness of counting. The counts are passing road markers, while your attention is focused continuously on the course of the breath.

Periodically verify that the body is relaxed, still, and maintaining a posture of vigilance. Ensure that the breath flows naturally, without impediment. If you find yourself caught up and carried away by thoughts, immediately relax, release all thoughts, and return to the tactile sensations of the breath at the abdomen. If you find yourself falling into dullness or drowsiness, open the eyes to let in a bit of light and focus more closely, taking a fresh interest in the practice. ❁

DEPENDENT METHODS

In his discourse on the four close applications of mindfulness, the Buddha refers to these quintessential vipashyana teachings as the direct path to nirvana. A wide variety of meditations are designed to bring about various personal transformations, mental abilities, and other goals. The specific purpose of the four close applications of mindfulness is the complete purification of all mental afflictions, leading directly to the realization of nirvana.

Vipashyana is not a stand-alone practice. The path to the cessation of suffering asserted in the Fourth Noble Truth is depicted as a pyramid in traditional Buddhism. The foundation of the pyramid is ethics. Resting upon ethics are mental balance and samadhi, constituting a platform. Resting upon this platform is vipashyana, which severs the root of mental afflictions.

The ancient Pali commentaries liken shamatha to a great warrior and vipashyana to a wise minister.⁵³ The example is given of a wise minister authorized to negotiate with a wayward prince who had fallen under the influence of evil friends, symbolizing the five obscurations. If the minister attempts to admonish the prince by himself, he might be killed. But if he is accompanied and protected by a strong warrior, who first subdues the prince, then the minister can persuade him to change his ways.

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Similarly, the efforts of the wise minister of vipashyana are strengthened and protected by the great warrior of shamatha.

Ethical Foundation

It is unrealistic to think that without any development of ethics and samadhi, one could still practice vipashyana and achieve the same result. But how ethical do we need to be in order to create a stable foundation for samadhi? What degree of samadhi constitutes an effective platform for practicing vipashyana? To me, these crucial questions are not raised often enough. Many people practice vipashyana simply to cultivate mindfulness, serenity, and harmony in their lives, which is perfectly fine. There's nothing wrong with using vipashyana methods to relieve stress.

A question was posed to the Dalai Lama, in 1990, concerning the teaching of basic mindfulness practices that were radically decontextualized from the framework of Buddhist theory, without ethics, without samadhi, and not even attributed to the Buddha: Did His Holiness think that teaching these mindfulness practices was a kind of plagiarism? The Dalai Lama answered: "If following these practices helps people to simply alleviate stress, even without the framework of ethics, samadhi, and the larger worldview, this is a good thing." All the Buddha's teachings were given in order to alleviate suffering. Even if people derive only a fraction of the benefit of his teachings, simplified practices can help alleviate their suffering. But then the Dalai Lama added this precaution: "Just don't mistake it for the *Buddhadharma*." A radically simplified, decontextualized mindfulness practice, without ethics or samadhi, is only one small aspect of the vast framework of the Dharma.

How important is the issue of ethics? To pursue the practice of vipashyana effectively requires proper supporting conditions. For example, if you are sick and take a prescribed medicine, following all the dosage, dietary, and exercise requirements, it may yield a complete cure. If you don't follow all the conditions of the prescription, it may result only in temporary relief.

Is it necessary to take monastic vows and be celibate in order to achieve nirvana? The answer is very clear—no. During the Buddha's lifetime, the

monastic lifestyle was specifically designed for people intent on achieving nirvana, but it is not necessary. The Pali Canon describes cases of lay people achieving nirvana. Nevertheless, a very high level of ethics—doing one's best to avoid harming others and trying to be of service where possible—is essential for both lay people and monks.

There's an interesting corollary here. As one's quality of life becomes refined through developing increasing mental balance and samadhi, the mind becomes finely tuned, sensitive, stable, and clear. Then, as insight develops through the practice of vipashyana, one finds something quite remarkable taking place: one becomes increasingly sensitive to one's own mistakes. Even while avoiding any blatantly negative behavior, one becomes acutely aware of the pain caused by one's subtler mental afflictions, insensitive comments, thoughtless acts, and innocent gaffes.

A classical Tibetan analogy says that for an ordinary person, the arising of a mental affliction such as craving or hostility is like a hair falling on the palm of one's hand—its presence is barely felt. On the other hand, for a person who is advanced on the path of developing insight, the arising of the same mental affliction is like a hair falling into one's eye—it is quite intolerable. This suggests that one's standard of ethics becomes elevated and refined along the path. The cultivation of ethics is not simply learning a set of ten nonvirtues to avoid, or even abiding by 253 monastic precepts. The enhancement and refinement of the quality of one's behavior, speech, and mental activity is an ongoing process. Experiences of increasing sensitivity lead to increasing purification and elevation of ethical standards. Becoming a monk or a nun can be helpful and is the optimal way of life for some people, but it is not required or necessary for everyone.

Samadhi Platform

Finally, what degree of samadhi is sufficient? Can one disregard samadhi altogether in favor of practicing vipashyana? Clearly not, or the Buddha would not have described the path as consisting of ethics, samadhi, and wisdom. Learned scholars in the Theravadin tradition debate this point and defend different views. I cannot end the debate. Nevertheless, the Buddha's teachings give us a strong hint, such as in the wonderful

account he gave to his followers after he achieved enlightenment. I can imagine a disciple asking, "What was the ultimate reason why—after having achieved high levels of samadhi and finding this insufficient; then undergoing six years of incredible austerities and recognizing that this didn't work either; and finally, with good food and restored health, sitting beneath the bodhi tree—suddenly, you were enlightened?"

At the age of thirty-five—having experimented with all the major methods of his time, endured six years of great asceticism, and accomplished deep samadhi—the proverbial light bulb went on in the Buddha's head. Here is what he told his disciples about what was going through his mind just before he sat down and completed the job of becoming fully enlightened:

I thought of a time when my Sakyan father was working and I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose apple tree; quite secluded from sensual desires and disengaged from unwholesome things, I entered into and abode in the first *dhyana*, which is accompanied by coarse and precise investigation, with well-being and bliss born of seclusion. I thought, "Might this be the way to enlightenment?" Then, following that memory, there came the recognition that this was the way to enlightenment.⁴⁴

His father was a king performing a ritual spring plowing, and young Prince Gautama was off duty, sitting in the cool shade of a rose apple tree on a hot spring day. Saying that he was quite secluded from sensual desire—an enormously important phrase here—means that his mind was withdrawn, not looking for entertainment, not fantasizing about sensual pleasures, and not engaged with unwholesome things. He had settled his body, speech, and mind.

Then, as a contemplative prodigy, Gautama spontaneously slipped into the samadhi known as the first meditative stabilization (Skt. *dhyana*; Pali *jhana*). (The term "dhyana" gave rise to the names of the Chan and Zen schools.) He achieved this state without meditative training. Why was he so lucky? From the Buddhist perspective, he had

already achieved it in many prior lifetimes. Similarly, Plato held that much of the knowledge we seem to acquire in this lifetime consists of rekindled memories from past lifetimes.

The Buddha described this very profound state of samadhi, the first dhyana, as being accompanied by coarse and precise investigation. The mind is utterly controlled and settled in a state of equipoise that is nothing like a trance, in which you cannot think or function. To the contrary, in this state you can engage in general investigations or precise analysis of any subject. Your intelligence and conceptual abilities are fully available, but you are completely free of obsessive-compulsive thinking. This state is suffused with a blissful well-being; it's not ecstasy or teeth-chattering, incapacitating bliss. Being born of seclusion means the mind is withdrawn from the sense fields and compulsive ideation, resting naturally in balance. When the mind is settled in the first dhyana, bliss arises from the very nature of awareness.

At the age of thirty-five, the Buddha remembered his spontaneous experience as a youth. Having recalled it, the thought arose, "Might this be the way to enlightenment?" He was clearly referring to the first dhyana, the first of four stages within what is called the form realm. This state is imbued with discerning intelligence, a sense of blissful well-being, and a highly focused mind. Buddhists claim that a mind settled in such equipoise—with awareness that is malleable, supple, calm, clear, and intelligent—comes to know reality as it is.

Following this thought, the Buddha recognized that this was indeed the way to enlightenment. I am happy to take that statement at face value; he couldn't have said it more clearly. He did not mention the second meditative stabilization, let alone the formless absorptions, in which the capacities for investigation and analysis are dormant. He simply said that the first dhyana was the way to enlightenment.

Vipashyana Method

Very shortly thereafter, the Buddha sat beneath the bodhi tree with an adamant resolve: "I shall not move from this seat until I have achieved enlightenment," and that's what he did. The first dhyana seems to have been his platform for launching into vipashyana. This ultimately

led him to what is called supermundane vipashyana, the examination of the facets of reality that directly liberate the mind.

But first, in mundane vipashyana, one simply investigates certain critical aspects of the phenomenal world in which we live. The Buddha described his experiences during that night's three watches, each lasting about three hours. He might have sat down as the sun was setting, and in the first watch of the night, he settled immediately into samadhi. From this platform, he directed his attention back in time to ascertain the circumstances in thousands of his previous lifetimes. In this first exploration, the Buddha probed the history of his own mind-stream, and he declared that he saw with direct knowledge the vast sequence of his past lives.

In the second watch of the night, he directed his attention panoramically, attending to the mind-streams of other sentient beings. He found that they also had long histories, and he attended to their myriad past lives. Then, still applying mundane vipashyana, he examined the patterns in this massive database of the lives of myriad sentient beings, performing a meta-analysis of their actions and the consequences. The results of the Buddha's analysis in the second watch of that night came to be known as the laws of karma; the Sanskrit term "karma" means action. He saw that actions in one lifetime are like seeds sowed that eventually give rise to consequences in later lifetimes. He observed regular patterns of causal sequences from one lifetime to the next, and his experiential insights into rebirth and karma were significantly different from any of the views that were prevalent before his enlightenment. So recent claims that he simply adopted these ideas from common beliefs of his era are entirely spurious, without any basis in historical fact.

In the third watch of the night, he probed into the reality of suffering and its origins, the path, and the culmination of the path. He directly realized the twelve links of dependent origination, the mechanics of samsara, and the path to liberation. As the sun rose, he achieved enlightenment—the Buddha awakened! His platform was the samadhi of the first dhyana.

There are many methods for achieving the first dhyana, and dozens of them were taught by the Buddha. Bear in mind that in teaching the

development of the dhyanas, he truly stood on the shoulders of giants. He was born into a culture with a rich tradition in samadhi. Without attaining the extraordinarily sublime mental balance of the first dhyana, he would have had no platform for developing fully effective vipashyana.

It is interesting to consider whether the Pythagoreans might have rivaled the Indian tradition of samadhi. Pythagoras may have achieved very deep samadhi, and some speculate that he learned it from Indian adepts. Legend says that Pythagoras traveled to Egypt, where he received knowledge of India. The travelers between the Indian subcontinent, Egypt, and the near East included wandering ascetics, who were called "gymnosophists" by the Greeks. These naked (*gymno*) wise (*sophia*) people were probably Indian yogis, highly accomplished in samadhi; this could indicate a samadhi lineage in early Greek thought. It is said that Pythagoras remembered twenty of his past lives, including some as members of nonhuman species. This belief in reincarnation persisted through Plato and into the Neoplatonic tradition.

Nevertheless, the development of samadhi was not in our legacy from the Greeks. Plato and Aristotle were titans in the realms of mathematics, logic, philosophy, and physics, but they were not renowned for their methods of developing samadhi. We have no knowledge of the methods Pythagoras might have employed because the brotherhood he founded was quasi-secret.

The cultivation of samadhi at that time in India surpassed that in China, the Americas, and Australia, as well as in the Jewish tradition. Gautama was born in the best possible place for the practice of samadhi, and he inherited a rich tradition from hundreds of years of contemplative research. The trajectory of shamatha had been explored to the heights of subtlety and the depths of samadhi. The Buddha's second teacher had achieved the highest absorption in the formless realm, called the peak of existence, and Gautama reached it ever so rapidly. The practice begins with many obscurations and hindrances, eventually becoming peaceful, then blissful, and finally giving way to an inconceivable equanimity that transcends pleasure and pain.

The nature of this continuum of quiescence is sweet, calm, and

soothing. No wonder people pursued this trajectory for hundreds of years, much longer than the history of modern science. Then the Buddha launched a revolution in Indian contemplative culture by claiming that samadhi does not produce irreversible change, and neither do austerities, physical exercises, or the sheer exertion of will. He embraced the wisdom he inherited, refined it, and formulated it into his triad of ethics, samadhi, and wisdom. The Buddha introduced the fusion of shamatha and vipashyana as the technology to effect irreversible change. The vipashyana mode of inquiry does not have the same sweet ambience as shamatha—it can be unsettling, challenging, and demanding. Of course, the revelations and insights can be pretty exciting, but the task is more like research than relaxation. You may pursue peace in a meditative retreat by practicing shamatha, but the practice of vipashyana is an expedition in the pursuit of freedom.

MINDFULNESS OF THE BREATH

In the Buddha's time, there were myriad methods for developing samadhi. The one he emphasized and taught most often, including in his discourse on the four close applications of mindfulness, is mindfulness of the breath. Here is his metaphor for the great power of this simple method:

Just as in the last month of the hot season, when a mass of dust and dirt has swirled up, and a great, unseasonable rain cloud disperses it and quells it on the spot, so too concentration by mindfulness of the breath, when developed and cultivated, is peaceful and sublime, an ambrosial dwelling; and it disperses and quells evil, unwholesome states on the spot, whenever they arise.⁵⁵

Imagine India in May or June, before the monsoon hits: sweltering, gritty, acrid, and suffocating. A sudden cloudburst can drench the land and make the air crystal clear instantaneously. Likewise, the Buddha said, the single-pointed, focused attention that is achieved by way of

mindfulness of the breath, when developed and cultivated, is peaceful and sublime. This development might not occur overnight, but a sublime psychosomatic state can result from simply focusing on the sensations of the breath.

Sweet Abode

It is crucial to note that this sweet, ambrosial dwelling is not the result of attending to some highly pleasant stimulus. The sensations of the breath are quite neutral: neither disagreeable nor agreeable. When one focuses on the breath and settles the mind to be free of craving and aversion, a peaceful and sublime state arises out of the nature of awareness itself. Balancing and settling the mind in this ambrosial dwelling disperses and quells mental afflictions on the spot.

This practice has enormous potential to improve mental health. If mindfulness of the breath can really subdue unwholesome states, such as hatred, malice, resentment, and greed, it is profoundly therapeutic. The Buddha does not say that by merely focusing on the breath and settling the mind in equilibrium, the virtues of loving-kindness, compassion, generosity, and wisdom will spring forth full-blown. He says that this will allow you to achieve a sublime state of neutrality. You will not be irreversibly free; but temporarily, the mind's unwholesome tendencies will be subdued on the spot, and you'll settle into a state of equilibrium that gives rise to a sense of bliss.

First, you must establish a neutral state of balance, without craving, hostility, and resentment. If you can establish this sense of equilibrium and well-being, your development of virtue is bound to be much more effective. You will be equipped with a platform that can be used to actively cultivate wisdom, insight, compassion, loving-kindness, and all other virtues.

The power of a sense of well-being has been measured by research, over the past ten years, in the field of positive psychology.⁵⁶ Rigorous psychological studies have been conducted in which subjects are given an opportunity to engage in an act of kindness, generosity, altruism, or some other virtue. One group consists of subjects who report feeling unhappy, depressed, or anxious. Another group consists of subjects who

report feeling happy, relaxed, and cheerful. When both groups are presented with opportunities to be of service to others, the happy subjects are much more likely to extend themselves in acts of kindness and generosity. Simple happiness is a valuable thing.

All-Purpose Vehicle

The instructions for mindfulness of the breath occur many times in the record of the Buddha's forty-five-year teaching career. His quintessential description of this practice was largely standardized and most often unelaborate. The commentaries by Buddhaghosa and others give a much richer picture, but the Buddha's words are quite succinct. In the *Satipatthana Sutta*, the Buddha describes a fourfold sequence of practices for mindfulness of the breath, designed to establish shamatha or meditative equipoise.

In the *Anapanasati Sutta*, the Buddha's primary discourse on mindfulness of breathing in and out (Skt. *anapanasati*), he describes sixteen phases, where the first four phases concern the development of shamatha. The next twelve phases concern vipashyana. Mindfulness of the breath evolves from an exercise for developing attention skills into a platform for probing the nature of reality. Having developed shamatha, we can utilize this extraordinary equilibrium and balance of attention to investigate the nature of the mind itself. The breath is the vehicle for exploring the fundamental marks of existence: the reality of impermanence, the nature of suffering, and the lack of an inherent self. At the culmination of stage sixteen, congratulations—you're an arhat! How difficult could that be?

The *Satipatthana Sutta* begins with *anapanasati*, but the Buddha teaches mindfulness of the breath only in the first four stages, as a preliminary exercise to develop shamatha and achieve the *dhyanas*. Even though mindfulness of the breath can be one's sole vehicle to reach liberation or nirvana, this sutra reveals another powerful method. The rest of the discourse concerns vipashyana, the act of inquiry into the central features of reality: impermanence, dukkha, and nonself. The framework of the four close applications of mindfulness is a broader one: it

addresses not only the body but feelings, mental phenomena, and the array of interdependencies between all internal and external phenomena. In the larger scope of vipashyana practice, mindfulness of the breath appears at the introductory stage.

The Buddha's discourse to Bahiya consisted of a very short instruction. So little needed to be said to this extremely mature contemplative that the Buddha just gave him a couple of paragraphs. These simple words are profoundly deep. If we could listen to them with Bahiya's ears, then we would achieve nirvana too! The Buddha did not mention the close application of mindfulness to the breath, body, feelings, or mental states. He simply said, "In the seen, there is only the seen."

This quintessential exposition progresses from seeing that there is no reified subject that is separate from the rest of reality to seeing that there is no reified object with intrinsic existence; nothing arises independently of the matrix of existence. There is no evidence for an internal subjective agent or self that is somehow separate from perceived objects—nothing here that is the observer. Seeing this, one turns the attention to see that there is nothing external as an independent object—nothing there. Finally, one recognizes that there is no self between internal and external. The Buddha led Bahiya in a stepwise manner and cut through his delusion on the spot. To use my trivial example, Bahiya recognized that he wasn't Napoleon, and now that he's seen the truth, he'll never imagine he's Napoleon again. He was not using the power of *samadhi* to subdue his grasping into dormancy. He was taking the bull by the horns, investigating very closely, and seeing for himself that there is no Napoleon anywhere.

When the vipashyana insight into the absence of a self here, there, and in between is fully backed by the muscle of shamatha, it's like a wise minister protected by a warrior. When insight breaks through with the stability and vividness of shamatha, there is radiant clarity and adamant stability, and the practitioner retains this insight—you absolutely and irreversibly grok it. This is like knowing "I'm not Napoleon," with enough certainty to fully eradicate every habitual pattern of thinking and proclivity for grasping. You're free!

ESSENTIAL INSTRUCTIONS

The Buddha's primary teachings on the practice of mindfulness of the breath are pointed:

Breathing in long, one is aware: "I breathe in long."

Breathing out long, one is aware: "I breathe out long."

Breathing in short, one is aware: "I breathe in short."

Breathing out short, one is aware: "I breathe out short."⁵⁷

At first, your mindfulness might not include much finesse. When you begin practicing mindfulness of the breath, your mind is bound to be relatively coarse, and your breath will tend to be long. If your inhalation and exhalation are long, simply note their duration. Continuing to breathe in and out while noting this, you settle down, just as if you were falling asleep. Gradually, as your body requires less oxygen, the volume of your respiration may subside and the duration of each breath may become shorter. Let this occur naturally, without trying to make your respiration conform to your expectations.

The Buddha continues, "Attending to the whole body, I shall breathe in.' Thus one trains oneself. 'Attending to the whole body, I shall breathe out.' Thus one trains."⁵⁸ Now the quality of attention is being enhanced, and a greater continuity of mindfulness is being sustained. This requires more attention than simply noticing the length of the breath. According to all the great commentaries, "the whole body" means the whole course of the breath. A classic metaphor says that the breath is like a horse, and awareness is like a rider trying to stay on the horse throughout the ride—a stable union of rider and horse. In a similar fashion, you mount the breath and maintain a face-to-face encounter throughout the entire course of the inhalation and exhalation.

This approaches what Csikszentmihalyi called the state of "flow." At least on a coarse level, you are mindfully and uninterruptedly attentive to the breath—you're not bucked off your horse. Along with the ongoing flow of sensations of the breath, you maintain a corollary flow of mindfulness of these sensations. When you develop and cultivate a

smooth flow throughout the whole course of the breath, you begin to taste that which the Buddha called peaceful and sublime.

Going deeper into the practice, stage four is simply described by "Soothing the composite of the body, I shall breathe in.' Thus one trains oneself. 'Soothing the composite of the body, I shall breathe out.' Thus one trains."⁵⁹ The Buddha is describing a progressively deepening calm in the whole body-mind system, not merely in the physical body. Everything is settling into an increasingly profound state of equilibrium. The breath becomes rhythmic, but not because you are trying to make it so. It gradually settles into a gentle, sinusoidal pattern, with lower volume, simply because you don't need as much air anymore.

Achieving the First Dhyana

The body's energy system is settling into a silky, sweet state of balance. The mind is calm, settling into an ambrosial equilibrium, peaceful and sublime. You are approaching the first dhyana, in which your abilities to think clearly and analytically are available, should you wish to use them for coarse or subtle investigation. This is like a surgeon with a wide variety of tools at hand, from coarse saws for cutting bone to fine scalpels for dissecting the tiniest vessels. Your equilibrium, focus of attention, and sense of well-being enable you to venture into vipashyana, which is the ultimate reason for achieving samadhi. By soothing the whole composite of myriad interdependently arising phenomena that we label "body and mind," this system naturally settles into equilibrium.

A great deal of confusion about the first dhyana has been generated in the last twenty years, particularly in European languages. This is not the result of ill will but of ignorance. People hear sound bites, read short descriptions of the first, second, third, and fourth dhyanas, and they say, "Yeah, I had that one!" Misconceiving the Dharma to fit their own expectations, some people go so far as to redefine classic Buddhist concepts in terms of their own experience. It is crucial to study the authoritative accounts of the dhyanas. What are the causes of the dhyanas, what is their nature, and what are their results? The full picture will not appear in a short passage or a select aphorism. Misinformed people think that a dhyana is something you can score at a weekend retreat, and

they boast: "I had this dhyana. Then I lost it, but it came back." It sounds like a missing sock!

Buddhaghosa was not only an exceedingly authoritative commentator and scholar, but he was the chronicler of the first nine hundred years after the Buddha—prime time for Buddhists, especially the Theravadins. In this glorious era, many people achieved advanced stages of the path, all the states of samadhi in the form and formless realms, arhatship, and so forth. Buddhaghosa made no claim to be an innovative philosopher or a contemplative adept. Drawing from the Buddha's teachings, upon which he wrote many commentaries, his masterpiece, *The Path of Purification*, narrates meticulous descriptions of the practices, struggles, and accomplishments of adepts during this golden age.

Buddhaghosa's *The Path of Purification* is a brilliant record of the theory and practice in the Theravadin tradition. He includes compelling accounts of innumerable accomplished yogis and arhats from this founding era. He claims that when one has actually achieved the state of the first dhyana, samadhi can be sustained "for a whole night and a whole day, just as a healthy man, after rising from his seat, could stand a whole day."⁶⁰ When you enter into and abide in the first dhyana, indicated by the Buddha's experience under the rose apple tree, you can sustain your samadhi for a whole night and a whole day. It is clear that achieving the first dhyana is an exceptional, transcendent state if you can maintain unwavering samadhi for a twenty-four-hour period.

Such an accomplishment is not common. I would love to hear about anyone who achieves this on a weekend retreat. The top neuroscientists will definitely invite him or her into their labs because they have never tested anyone like this, as far as I know. The actual first dhyana—characterized by the sheer power to remain in samadhi for twenty-four hours, little notice of the passage of time, full use of conceptual ability, and a largely nonconceptual repose—is an extraordinary state.

Free of Obscurations

Is the point of this practice to win samadhi marathons? No, the primary reason that the first dhyana is said to be an indispensable foundation for fully effective vipashyana is that it temporarily subdues mental

obscurations, or hindrances. This is not irreversible, but your mind is no longer prone to the five obscurations that disrupt the balance of the mind: sensual craving, malice, laxity and lethargy, excitation and anxiety, and uncertainty. With the achievement of the first dhyana, you are free of these factors, albeit temporarily.

This is like receiving the tetanus vaccine, which can prevent the disease for ten years or so. If you get regular booster shots, you can avoid contracting tetanus. Still, your immunity is not permanent, and if the vaccination wears off, you could be infected. In a similar fashion, by achieving the first dhyana, you will be free for as long as you sustain it. If you let it atrophy, you will lose it. If you recognize its profound benefits and modify your behavior, by developing at least a quasi-contemplative lifestyle, you can sustain it.

When you abide in the first dhyana, sensual craving does not arise. Although not eradicated, it is dormant. For all practical purposes, the five obscurations no longer trouble you. Enjoyment of good food, art, music, and the beauty of nature does not lead to craving. You know that these are not true sources of happiness because you have discovered an authentic source. This is not a reasoned deduction but a conviction based on personal experience. Settling in the first dhyana yields a blissful sense of well-being, and everything else pales in comparison. Who would search downstream for a few flakes of gold when they have found the mother lode—the source? Sensual craving no longer occurs, making life much more peaceful. Malice and enmity, which so often arise when someone thwarts our desires, disappear as well. Laxity, lethargy, excitation, and anxiety are banished from the scene by excellent samadhi. Finally, the plague of doubts and uncertainties simply evaporates. Such are the results of abiding within the attentional balance of the first dhyana.

We often deny our potential by thinking, "Even if I tried, I probably wouldn't achieve anything. Maybe nobody's ever done it." Of course, if we don't try, we'll never succeed. Nevertheless, there is value in vibrant, energetic skepticism that challenges us to look more closely. How can we be sure that death entails an absolute termination of an individual consciousness? Was there a continuity of lives before this one? Such

important questions challenge our very notions of existence. If there is no continuity, and we are locked into a handful of decades, I can live with that. But if there have been countless previous existences, and this continuum of consciousness cannot be snuffed out—like a Buddhist principle of conservation of consciousness—I'd like some idea of what's in store, before I die.

These questions concerning the nature of the mind, consciousness, and death are sometimes presented as imponderable. Theologians and philosophers call them perennial mysteries. How could you possibly know the nature of death? You can't know anything when you're dead, and until then, you're still alive. German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) believed that death is unknowable. More often, the assumption goes unsaid: the mind is just a product of the brain. Many people are quite content with that assumption. On the other hand, if the continuity of consciousness before this life and following it can be determined through meditative experience, this is no longer a metaphysical issue but an empirical one. This Buddhist hypothesis can best be put to the test if one develops excellent samadhi, which is not a common strength in our modern world. India developed a vast tradition of samadhi, which has been maintained by Tibetans and other Buddhist cultures.

In order to be irreversibly free of the mental afflictions, one needs to develop the extraordinary mental health and balance of the first dhyana as a platform for the real work—practicing vipashyana to effect a full cure. The achievement of shamatha still occurs today, especially in the Tibetan tradition, and is virtually equated with the achievement of the first dhyana; this is more accurately called “access to the first dhyana.” Achieving shamatha is right on the threshold, where samadhi can be sustained for about four hours instead of twenty-four. Note that these are not precise limits.

Even if you have achieved only access to the first dhyana and not the actual state of the first dhyana, you are equally free of the five obscurations. They can still crop up on occasion, but they're manageable. This means that you can tap into them out of curiosity, or perhaps to transmute them, as is done in certain types of Vajrayana practice. By utilizing

the energy of desire and transmuting it, or sublimating it (in Freudian terms), this energy can actually propel you toward enlightenment. In this case, you might not want to remain in the actual state of the first dhyana because you may not be able to give rise to desires at all.

Luminous Glow

The notion of the five obscurations raises this question: What do they obscure? Of course they implicitly obscure buddha nature, but you will not realize buddha nature simply by achieving the first dhyana and becoming free of the five obscurations. They also explicitly obscure something more proximate: the substrate consciousness (Skt. *alayavijñāna*). The substrate consciousness is the relative ground state from which the psyche emerges each time we awaken, and into which the psyche dissolves each time we fall asleep. When you access the substrate consciousness clearly and vividly by way of shamatha, it's like falling deep asleep while remaining luminously awake. This state is imbued with three universal qualities: bliss, luminosity, and nonconceptuality.

Everyone's individual psyche is unique, like a snowflake. Your psyche is built from the experiences of this lifetime and is influenced by past lifetimes, genetic dispositions, parenting, cultural values, and language, which make your psyche and everyone else's absolutely unique. But if we melt any snowflake, its fundamental ingredient is simply water. Similarly, when you or anyone “melts” the psyche by using shamatha, and it settles back into the substrate consciousness from which it arose, then the three traits that you or anyone will find, regardless of genetic and cultural background, are that the substrate consciousness is blissful, luminous, and nonconceptual.

The substrate (Skt. *alaya*) and the substrate consciousness are not the same. The substrate is the space of the mind itself, and the substrate consciousness is the awareness of that space. The substrate consciousness is the stem consciousness, whereas the psyche is a configured stem consciousness. Just as a stem cell becomes a specific kind of cell in the body, such as a blood cell or neuron, the stem consciousness becomes configured as a specific individual's psyche, which is precisely what psychologists study. The vast array of our mental states and processes

is strongly conditioned by genetics, brain chemistry, diet, exercise, language, personal history, and social influences. Without addressing the precise details here, everyone's psyche has a finite duration, beginning in the womb and ending at death. Death is the end of the story for the psyche. The origin of the psyche is the subject of two primary hypotheses. One view is that the psyche emerges from the brain or is equivalent to brain function—the materialist hypothesis.

Consciousness emerging from a complex network of neurons seems just as improbable to me as an emotion arising from my laptop computer. The brain does have emergent properties—such as density and temperature—and they are all physical and are therefore physically measurable. Mental events have no physical attributes and are physically unmeasurable, so the evidence suggests that thoughts and emotions are not emergent properties of the brain. Any cell, whether a liver cell or a neuron, has descended from a stem cell. But no matter how complex this network of cells might be, it strikes me as mystical thinking to imagine that something as radically different as an emotion or a dream could emerge from neurons. We could just as easily believe in the emergence of a genie from a magic lamp.

The alternate hypothesis is that the psyche emerges not from neurons but from the substrate consciousness. If we develop the requisite skills of observation, we can actually witness mental events and emotions emerging from this dimension of awareness. Nevertheless, this does not eliminate the possibility that mental events emerge from the brain. Many scientists say that introspective observations and neuroscientific observations of the brain are concerned with the same phenomena. They assert that the mind and the brain are the same thing viewed from two different perspectives: inside and outside. This could be true, but so far there is no evidence for it.

Why do we often feel dull and lethargic? What obscures the innate luminosity of the mind's relative ground state? If one of the three fundamental qualities of the substrate consciousness is bliss, why don't we always feel blissful? These qualities are always present, but they are veiled by malice, sensual craving, and the other obscurations. Medicative quiescence is not like being gagged and bound. The mind is settled in a

state of peaceful, luminous silence in which you can think at any time. Your abilities to investigate and analyze are on tap, but you are no longer subject to obsessive-compulsive ideation. You can finally switch off the mind's motor-mouth. The five obscurations no longer veil the natural serenity and silence of the substrate. On the other hand, without achieving the first dhyana, the Buddha's assessment is sobering:

So long as these five obscurations are not abandoned, one considers oneself as indebted, sick, in bonds, enslaved, and lost on a desert track.⁶

In other words, don't be content with such a state. This is like living in a village where tuberculosis is endemic and everybody thinks it's incurable; people assume it's natural to cough chronically and die at the age of thirty-five. A doctor might visit such a community and say, "Please realize that you're sick and there's a cure!" In Buddhism, the typical mind is not considered to be a healthy mind. Don't tolerate mental illness any longer!

A Serviceable Mind
From *Fathoming the Mind:*
Inquiry and Insight in Dūdjom Lingpa's Vajra Essence
Translation and commentary by B. Alan Wallace

The Path of Meditation

[Page 2] In this text, the practice of vipaśyanā is referred to as “taking ultimate reality (Skt. *dharmatā*) as the path.” One nice metaphor for this is cutting down the tree of ignorance with the axe of wisdom. To chop down this huge tree, [page 3] you must first be able to plant your feet in a firm stance—this means having a solid foundation in ethics (Skt. *śīla*). Then you must be able to swing your axe and repeatedly strike the right spot—this means meditative concentration (Skt. *samādhi*). Finally, you must have a very sharp axe that can cut through ignorance—this means wisdom (Skt. *prajñā*).

In order to derive the full benefits of vipaśyanā, the essential preparation is the practice of śamatha, with the goal of rendering the body and mind serviceable: relaxed, stable, and clear. On this basis, one is well prepared to venture into the profound discoveries and insights of vipaśyanā, which, unlike śamatha, invariably entails an element of inquiry. Such inquiry may be primarily experiential, as in the four close applications of mindfulness, or it may be deeply analytical, as in the Madhyamaka, or Middle Way, approaches to vipaśyanā.

Three Types of Śamatha

Śamatha is exemplified by three practices that have been thoroughly described elsewhere. These are *mindfulness of breathing*, *taking the impure mind as the path*, and awareness of awareness. The Buddha taught that it is our close identification with, or grasping to, the five aggregates, and implicitly the body, speech, and mind, that fundamentally makes us vulnerable to suffering. In his pith instructions on śamatha presented in *The Foolish Dharma of an Idiot Clothed in Mud and Feathers*, Dūdjom Lingpa writes that in following the śamatha practice of taking the impure mind as the path, meditators “observe their thoughts 'over there' like an old herdsman on a wide-open plain watching his calves and sheep from afar.” The theme of observing the tactile sensations of the body, the “inner speech of the mind” expressing itself in discursive thoughts, and of observing all mental processes and mental consciousness itself as if “from afar” occurs throughout each of these three śamatha practices.

The first of these, mindfulness of breathing, is itself taught in three phases, focusing on the sensations of the respiration throughout the entire body, on the sensations of the rise and fall of the abdomen with each in-breath and out-breath, and on the sensations of the breath at the nostrils. By closely applying mindfulness to the sensations of the respiration, one observes these bodily sensations in a detached manner, thereby counteracting the deeply ingrained tendency to identify with these sensations. In this way, one achieves some degree of separation

from the body, which can open the way for the radical shift in perspective that takes place in a much more advanced Vajrayāna practice known as "isolation from the body."

The second śamatha practice, known as taking the impure mind as the [Page 4] path, or *settling the mind in its natural state*, is the principal method taught in the preceding section of Dūdjom Lingpa's *Vajra Essence*. This entails *observing* the movements of thoughts rather than *identifying with* them, and in its much higher evolution could be seen as analogous to the Vajrayāna practice of "isolation from the speech."

The third practice is awareness of awareness, for which Padmasambhava provides a detailed explanation in *Natural Liberation: Padmasambhava's Teachings on the Six Bardos*, where he calls it śamatha without signs. In this practice one releases grasping to all the subjective impulses of the mind and observes the flow of mental consciousness itself, thereby counteracting the habit of identifying with any aspect of the ordinary mind. Though certainly not identical with the Vajrayāna practice of "isolation from the mind," the practice of awareness of awareness can, in its ultimate evolution, lead to the direct realization of pristine awareness. Once breaking through to this level of primordial consciousness, awareness of awareness could become analogous to the Vajrayāna completion-stage realization of the indwelling mind of clear light.

There is a smooth progression among these three śamatha practices. Engaging in mindfulness of breathing, we withdraw our attention from the environment and turn it inward, to the space of the body. While the primary object of mindfulness consists of the sensations correlated with the respiration throughout the body, we also use introspection to monitor the flow of the mind to see if it has fallen into laxity or excitation. Progressing to settling the mind in its natural state, we further withdraw our attention from all five sensory domains, including tactile sensations, and limit it to the mental domain alone. The primary object of mindfulness is the space of the mind and whatever thoughts, images, and other mental events arise within this space. In awareness of awareness, we withdraw our awareness even further; instead of the objects in the mental domain, we invert awareness exclusively upon itself.

You might imagine this to be like drinking a double shot of espresso, so that you are wide awake, and then entering a sensory deprivation tank, in which you are completely isolated from your environment and even your own body. Then, imagine that your mind becomes completely quiet—while at the same time wide awake. With absolutely nothing appearing to your awareness, what do you know? You still know that you are aware.

These three methods are like nested Russian dolls. In mindfulness of [Page 5] breathing, attention is focused primarily on the breath, while introspectively noting and releasing involuntary thoughts and images when they arise. Meanwhile, you're also aware of being aware; you are confident that you are not unconscious. So awareness of awareness is inherent in mindfulness of breathing, as it is while being aware of anything else. When you move to settling the mind in its natural state, the outer Russian doll of awareness of the body falls away, and you focus on the mind alone. But this also entails awareness of awareness. Finally, the

Russian doll of the space of the mind and its contents falls away, and you are left with the nucleus that was always present: awareness of awareness. This knowing has been reached by a process of subtraction. By releasing all the other kinds of knowing, you are left with only the knowing of your own awareness.

Three Characteristics of Śamatha

Śamatha can be described as cultivating a balance among three key characteristics. First is relaxation, which cannot be overemphasized in the modern world, so unlike ancient India or Tibet. Scientists studying the attention find that when people become very aroused and focused, using effort to sustain a high degree of attention, they soon become exhausted. Modern life is a cycle of alternating arousal and exhaustion. To break this cycle, you must learn how to cultivate a deepening sense of release, relaxation, and comfort in body and mind without losing the degree of clarity with which you began. Particularly in the supine position, it's as if you're inviting your body to fall asleep, and your respiration gradually settles in a rhythm as if you were asleep. Never losing the clarity of awareness, this is like falling asleep lucidly. Your body falls asleep, your senses eventually implode, and your mind falls asleep—but you keep the light of awareness on.

On the basis of such deep relaxation, the second balance is to cultivate stability. This means developing a continuity of attention that is free of excitation and lethargy, while never sacrificing the sense of ease and relaxation—the opposite of our habitually tight, focused effort. Attention is maintained continuously, with a deepening sense of ease that reinforces increasing stability.

With this stable foundation, the third balance is to refine and enhance the vividness and acuity of relaxation without undermining the stability of attention.

The key practices of mindfulness of breathing and settling the mind in its natural state can be very synergistic in balancing these three aspects. Mindfulness of breathing, especially in the supine position, develops relaxation [Page 6] and stability; and settling the mind in its natural state sharpens and refines the vividness of attention.

Düdjom Lingpa's practice of śamatha called *taking the impure mind as the path* means taking our own minds, with their mental afflictions, dualistic grasping, neuroses, and so forth, as the path. This simple method of śamatha entails withdrawing your attention from all five sensory fields and focusing single-pointedly on the domain of the mind: thoughts, memories, dreams, and so on, which are undetectable by the five physical senses and by all instruments of technology. Single-pointedly direct your attention to the domain of mental experience; and whatever arises, let it be. Whether mental afflictions (such as craving, hatred, and confusion), virtues, or nonvirtues arise, simply observe their nature and allow them to release themselves, without following after thoughts of the past or being drawn into thoughts about the future.

Synopsis of the Stages

Here is a brief synopsis of the stages of this practice as given in the *Sharp Vajra of Conscious Awareness Tantra*. Entry into taking the impure mind as the path is defined by the experience of distinguishing between the stillness of awareness and the movements of the mind. Ordinarily when a thought arises, we have the sense of thinking it, and our attention is diverted to the *referent* of the thought. Similarly, when a desire arises, there is a cognitive fusion of awareness and the desire, so awareness is drawn to the object of desire. In such cases, our very sense of identity merges with these mental processes, with our attention riveted on the object of the thought, desire, or emotion. In this practice, we do our best to sustain the stillness of our awareness, and from this perspective of stillness and clarity we illuminate the thoughts, memories, desires, and so forth that arise in the mind. Distinguishing between the stillness of awareness and the comings and goings of the mind is the entry into the practice of taking the impure mind as the path.

The Four Types of Mindfulness

Continuing in the practice, four types of mindfulness are experienced in sequence. First *single-pointed mindfulness*, which occurs when you simultaneously experience the stillness of awareness and the movement of the mind. This is like watching images coming and going in a movie and hearing the soundtrack, while never reifying these appearances—that is, taking them to be inherently real things—or getting caught up in the drama.

As you grow more accustomed to letting your awareness rest in its own place—accompanied by a deepening sense of loose release and nongrasping together with the clarity of awareness illuminating the space of the mind—you enter into an effortless flow of the simultaneous awareness of stillness and [Page 7] motion: this second stage is manifest mindfulness. Eruptions of memories, desires, and mental afflictions surge up periodically rather than continuously, and over time, your mind gradually settles in its natural state, like a blizzard in a snow globe that gradually dissipates and settles into transparency.

In the third stage of mindfulness, awareness of the body and the five senses withdraws into single-pointed awareness of the space of the mind, and you become oblivious to your body and environment. Prior to this stage, thoughts and other mental appearances become fewer and subtler, until finally they all dissolve and your ordinary mind and all its concomitant mental processes go dormant: this corresponds to *the absence of mindfulness*. Bear in mind that the terms translated as "mindfulness" in Pali (*sati*), Sanskrit (*smṛti*), and Tibetan (*dran pa*) primarily connote recollection, or bearing in mind. Now you're not recalling or holding anything in mind; your coarse mind has gone dormant, as if you'd fallen into deep, dreamless sleep. But at the same time, your awareness is luminously clear. The coarse mental factor of mindfulness that allowed you to reach this state has also gone dormant: hence it is called *the absence of mindfulness*.

When you are in this transitional state, you are aware only of the sheer vacuity of the space of the mind: this is the *substrate* (Skt. *ālaya*). The consciousness of this vacuity is the *substrate*

consciousness (Skt. *ālayavijñāna*). Here is a twenty-first-century analogy: When your computer downloads and installs a software upgrade, it becomes nonoperational for a short time before the new software is activated. Similarly, when your coarse mind dissolves into the substrate consciousness, the coarse mindfulness that brought you to this point has gone dormant, as if you had fainted—but you're wide awake. This is a brief, transitional phase, and it's important not to get stuck here, for if you do so for a prolonged period, your intelligence may atrophy like an unused muscle. This is like being lucid in a state of dreamless sleep, with your awareness absorbed in the sheer vacuity of the empty space of your mind. That space is full of potential, but for the time being, that potential remains dormant.

Finally, there arises the fourth type of mindfulness: *self-illuminating mindfulness*. This occurs when you invert your awareness upon itself and the substrate consciousness illuminates and knows itself. In the Pāli canon, the Buddha characterized this mind as brightly shining (Pāli *pabhassara*) and naturally pure (Pāli *pakati-parisuddha*). This subtle dimension of mental consciousness is experientially realized with the achievement of *śamatha* corresponding to the threshold of the first *dhyāna*, or meditative [Page 8] stabilization. Resting in this state of consciousness you experience three distinctive qualities of awareness: it is blissful, luminous, and nonconceptual. Most important, this awareness is called *serviceable*; both your body and mind are infused with an unprecedented degree of pliancy, so they are fit for use as you wish.

The Buddha explains the profound shift that takes place upon achieving this first *dhyāna*:

Being thus detached from hedonic craving, detached from unwholesome states, one enters and remains in the first *dhyāna*, which is imbued with coarse investigation and subtle analysis, born of detachment, filled with delight and joy. And with this delight and joy born of detachment, one so suffuses, drenches, fills, and irradiates one's body that there is no spot in one's entire body that is untouched by this delight and joy born of detachment.

A similar point is made in the Mahāyāna discourse known as *Samadhinirmocanasūtra*:

Lord, when a Bodhisattva directs his attention inwards, with the mind focused upon the mind, as long as physical pliancy and mental pliancy are not achieved, what is that mental activity called? Maitreya, this is not *śamatha*. It is said to be associated with an aspiration that is a facsimile of *śamatha*.

Benefits of this Meditation

Even when you emerge from meditation, this body-mind upgrade is yours to employ in your dealings with the world. It's a radical psychophysiological shift; although not irreversible, it can likely be sustained for the rest of your life. The five obscurations of hedonic craving, malice, laxity and dullness, excitation and anxiety, and afflictive uncertainty are largely dormant. There is an unprecedented pliancy and suppleness of both body and mind during formal meditation sessions and between them.

Such refinement of the body's energy system can be cultivated to some degree with controlled breathing and physical exercises such as *prāṇāyāma*, *chi gung*, and *tai chi*. The Buddha knew well the many ascetic disciplines of body and breath practiced in his time, but they are not taught in the Pāli [Page 9] canon; instead, he strongly emphasized the simple practice of mindfulness of breathing. This is a profound practice for seeding the subtle body, the energetic body, in its natural state, and it is closely related to settling the mind in its natural state. The Buddha described the benefits of mindfulness of breathing with an analogy:

Just as in the last month of the hot season, when a mass of dust and dirt has swirled up, a great rain cloud out of season disperses it and quells it on the spot, so too concentration by mindfulness of breathing, when developed and cultivated, is peaceful, sublime, an ambrosial dwelling, and it disperses and quells on the spot unwholesome states whenever they arise.

In the practice of settling the mind, through the process of bringing full, clear awareness single-pointedly to the space of the mind and releasing all control over what appears there, you allow your mind to heal itself. This occurs simply by being gently aware of whatever arises, without the grasping of aversion or desire, and without identifying with thoughts.

Keep in mind that this will not always be a smooth ride! All your angels and demons will rise up to greet you or assault you, depending on how you conceptually designate them. But all the buddhas that appear cannot help you, and all the demons cannot hurt you. You are becoming lucid in the waking state. Like someone who is adept in lucid dreaming, you know that nothing can harm your mind, because nothing you are witnessing is truly existent: everything consists of empty appearances to your mind.

In parallel fashion, the practice of mindfulness of breathing, as the Buddha taught it, is a natural kind of *prāṇāyāma*. Instead of regulating the breath—as one would in many classical practices of *prāṇāyāma*—here we're allowing the entire system of the subtle body-and-mind to balance and heal itself. This practice is especially relevant in modern times, when so many of us hold chronic tensions and blockages in the body; if we don't know how to release them, they will block our meditative practice as well as our vital energy (Skt. *prāṇā*).

Stages of the Practice

In mindfulness of breathing, even as we allow the respiration to settle in its natural rhythm, we bring this same quality of awareness (that we bring to the space of the mind, when settling the mind) to the space of the body. We observe the sensations associated with the fluctuations of vital energy, or *prāṇā*, which correspond to the rhythm of the respiration as they arise [Page 10] throughout the body, and simply let them be. At times the breath may be strong, erratic, or halting; it may be shallow or deep, fast or slow, regular or irregular. Just let it be. Allow the flow of respiration to gradually settle in its natural rhythm, while keeping your awareness still, resting in its own place. After some time, the fluctuations in the energy field of the body

corresponding to the respiration will become gentle, subtle, and rhythmic; but don't force this—allow it to occur naturally. Your entire body-mind system settles into equilibrium, and for this to occur, your mind must also become quieter and subtler. Learn how to release control and influence at increasingly subtle levels. Avoid any sort of influence or modification of the breath. The corpse pose (Skt. *śavāsana*) is extremely valuable in this practice because it promotes total relaxation in both body and mind. The challenge is to avoid dullness and lethargy, maintaining the clarity of awareness.

Ordinarily when we know something, it's our conceptual mind that knows, and it knows within a conceptual framework. Nevertheless, all of us experience a state of nonconceptual awareness on a daily basis: deep, dreamless sleep. In nonlucid, dreamless sleep, the mind is nonconceptual and we have no explicit knowledge of anything at all. Even the most obvious fact of our experience—that we are asleep—is unknown to us.

In the practice of *śamatha*, we seek to cultivate an ongoing flow of explicit knowing that is simultaneously nonconceptual. Even if this knowing is not absolutely nonconceptual, it is not caught up in explicit thoughts. This capability for perceptual knowledge precedes any conceptual labeling or description. It accords precisely with the Buddha's teaching on mindfulness of breathing:

Breathing in long, one knows, "I breathe in long." Breathing out long, one knows, "I breathe out long." Breathing in short, one knows, "I breathe in short." Breathing out short, one knows, "I breathe out short." One trains thus: "I shall breathe in, experiencing the whole body. I shall breathe out, experiencing the whole body. I shall breathe in, calming the composite of the body. I shall breathe out, calming the composite of the body." Thus, one trains.

There's no need to apply words to this perception. In the early phases of such practice, the duration of the breath may vary considerably during a single [Page 11] session, but as the mind and body settle into a deeper state of equilibrium, the respiration becomes shallow. In my own experience, I have found that it settles into a frequency of fifteen breaths per minute, and over time, the amplitude, or volume, of the breath decreases. Some studies indicate that in deep sleep the respiration occurs at about fifteen breaths per minute, and Vajrayāna Buddhist sources claim that humans experience 21,600 breaths in a twenty-four-hour period, which turns out to be fifteen breaths per minute. It would be interesting to study these parallels more carefully with a combination of contemplative and scientific inquiry.

Scientific studies of lucid dreamers have revealed that the flow of the respiration of the dreamer within the dream corresponds to the flow of the respiration of the dreamer's physical body lying in bed. If, for example, the lucid dreamer holds her breath within the dream, the respiration of her physical body is also suspended for as long as she holds her breath within the dream. This means that by deliberately breathing long and short breaths within the dream, the dreamer can send messages by Morse code to researchers observing the duration of breaths of the dreamer's physical body. It also demonstrates that a lucid dreamer can be aware of the

rhythm of her physical body's breathing even without being aware of any *tactile sensations* within that physical body. At an even deeper level of consciousness, meditators who are adept at becoming lucid while in dreamless sleep report that they are still able to mentally detect the *rhythm* of their respiration even though they are unaware of any *tactile sensations* within their body. This would imply that people who have achieved śamatha and are resting in the substrate consciousness may still be aware of the rhythm of their respiration, and such mindfulness of the respiration could continue even as one fully achieves the first dhyāna and beyond, with one's awareness immersed in the form realm. Such awareness of the respiration could continue until one achieves the fourth dhyāna, when the respiration ceases altogether for as long as one remains in that meditative state.

THE FOUR IMMEASURABLES

Practices to Open the Heart

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Chapter Two **Entering *Śamatha* Practice**

What impedes the flowering of loving-kindness, compassion, and other qualities that move us forward on the spiritual path? I have no simple answer, but something that definitely bears on the issue is the sense of inadequacy with which we engage with other people as we venture into life. We tend to engage with a sense of need: I need a job. I need love. I need affirmation. I need affection. I need respect. I need more money. I need more possessions. I need more happiness. This is the realm of the eight mundane concerns.⁵ There's nothing wrong with needing something, in and of itself, but a sense of inadequacy and incompleteness is not conducive to a heart of loving-kindness. The mind that reaches out to other people, to the environment, to provide what it seems to lack itself, is a mind that is ignorant of its own resources for peace and happiness.

When *śamatha* practice is nested in a proper context, it's possible to recognize through something as simple as the breath that our own minds have an avenue to serenity and peace. And from that peace of mind, that sense of ease and contentment, being simply present with something as frankly uninteresting as the breath, there arises a happiness and satisfaction. The satisfaction comes from a very simple source: a

mind that's not being pummeled to death with afflictions, craving, hostility, and aversion. We just don't normally give ourselves this break. Being endowed with consciousness in this universe, we are like a person sitting on a hill in a little shack, trying to eke out a bare living on the surface, not knowing that six inches underneath the dirt floor of our hut is a treasure, a vein of gold that just goes on and on. It's there already. We have no reason to feel needy. We have all the resources we need.

So discover that. Don't just believe it, but discover it experientially. We can bring forth a sense of serenity and well-being just in being present. Know that that's available. This is not to say that we don't want to have a spouse, or a job, or a car. But it casts them all in a different light. It's like taking the whole planet and shifting it so it's now rotating on a different axis. Everything doesn't fall off the planet, but there is a big shakedown when we recognize for ourselves that we bring enormous resources to every life situation. We bring something to offer, and not just neediness.

Samatha is immensely fertile ground for developing this. It's very useful for the cultivation of loving-kindness and compassion, and for learning to "touch the world lightly." I can't imagine the possibility of touching the world lightly without having recognized your own resources. An example is a true story from one of my teachers who recently passed away, the wonderful Lama, Tara Rinpoche. He was Abbot of the Tantric College in Assam in northeastern India, where some of the monks were quite formidable meditators. One in particular had left the monastery and was living in a little hut in the jungle where there were a lot of cobras. Tara Rinpoche was concerned for his student, so he gathered some sticks from a plant that was known to repel snakes and told him to plant them in the ground around the hut. The monk responded, "It's very gracious of you to give these to me, but I really don't need them. The cobras and I are getting along quite well. There's one living under my bed, and one behind the door." He knew of course that humans are not natural prey for cobras, and the

only business they have with us is fear. But this man was not fearful, so he didn't arouse the aggression of the cobras. Nor did the cobras arouse aggression in him. They were just neighbors, and he felt there was no reason to repel them. He simply watched where he stepped. That indeed is touching the world lightly.

The whole point of *samatha* is to make your mind serviceable. This means that however you wish to put your mind to service, it is now fit for the purpose. Whether it's for teaching, for meditation, for composing music—whatever you need to do—you now have a mind that is really functioning well. Until you have accomplished *samatha*, the mind is said to be "dysfunctional." This dysfunctional mind is heavy, stiff, rigid, dark, and prone to grouchiness. Whatever virtue you wish to cultivate, the mind balks. The serviceable mind, in contrast, is buoyant, light, stable and clear, and ready to devote itself to the cultivation of wholesome qualities.

BEGINNING THE MEDITATION

Release the creations of the imagination and let the conceptual mind come to rest. Bring your awareness into the moment, without slipping off to fantasies about the future or recollections of the past. Let your awareness abide in the moment, in your body, quietly witnessing the tactile sensations throughout the body: the pressure of your legs, thighs, and buttocks against the ground; up through your torso, up through the head; the sense of warmth or coolness; any sensations of tingling or vibration. Let your awareness settle in this field of tactile sensations, resting there like a baby in a cradle.

Passively witness the sensations associated with the in-breath, throughout the entire course of the inhalation. Then follow the sensations associated with the out-breath throughout the entire course of the exhalation. The breath throughout this practice should not be controlled or manipulated, with one stipulation: relax the abdomen, especially the lower abdomen. Soften it so that you can feel the inhalation begin from the lower abdomen. If it's a shallow breath, you feel only the

lower abdomen expand; a deeper breath expands from the lower abdomen upward, and the diaphragm expands; a still deeper breath moves from the abdomen to the diaphragm, and up into the chest. But let it begin from the abdomen, so that you are not breathing just in the chest.

Find the area at the nostrils where you notice the tactile sensations during the inhalation. Then, as the mind becomes attuned to this, note the tactile sensations following the in-breath, and just prior to the out-breath. Then note the sensations at the same spot during the out-breath. Place your mind there, like placing a baby in a cradle. At the beginning, you have a sense of rhythm, the oscillation of in-breath, out-breath, in-breath, out-breath. Let your awareness rest in this soothing place.

RELAXATION, STABILITY, AND VIVIDNESS

There are three points of emphasis in *śamatha* practice—relaxation, stability, and vividness—and it's very important to address them in sequence.

The first emphasis is on inducing a sense of relaxation of the body and mind: a relaxation of the awareness. This is not a forced, tense, or directed concentration, but rather one that allows the awareness to rest in the field of tactile sensations, in the rhythm of the in-breath and the out-breath. Because of its deep habituation and many impulses, it is difficult for the mind to remain at rest for very long. Your attention is bound to be drawn away, propelled into imagination, recollection, some discursive line of thought, desire, or emotion. If you find that your mind has been carried away, see if you can release the effort that is already being exerted in carrying the mind away. Especially on the out-breath, try releasing that effort, as if with a sigh of relief and release. Let go of those mental constructs, and let your awareness once again come to rest in the uncontrived, unconstructed tactile sensations of the moment.

For the first sessions, don't be concerned with stability, which implies continuity of attention. Don't be concerned with clarity, or vividness of attention. These will come in time, but

to begin with, just see if you can respond to mental agitation and distraction not by clamping down but by releasing the effort that is sustaining the agitation. Come back and let the awareness rest in the gentle rhythm of the in-breath and out-breath, and feel the tactile sensations throughout the body.

Let your respiration be unforced and unmanipulated: let the body breathe itself. Especially during exhalation, take the opportunity to release the effort you may be giving to distracted thought or mental wandering. Let these mental constructs blow away like autumn leaves in a breeze, and continue to relax and release right into the end of the exhalation. Continue this right into the beginning of the inhalation. Don't suck the air in, but rather relax into the in-breath, witness it passively, as if the body is "being breathed."

A problem may arise in that, as soon as you focus on your breathing, it seems that you can't avoid manipulating it with effort or will. This raises a very interesting question: Can we attend to something closely without an almost irrepressible urge to control it? Does this have any relationship to our urge to control other areas of our lives? This is not just a little problem, but a challenge that really is mainstream practice. The way you can begin to crack the problem is to relax more into the exhalation. You don't have to blow out. You know perfectly well that exhalation will happen all by itself. When you breathe out, savor that. It feels so nice just to be effortless. Even a dying person can breathe out.

Then, from the out-breath, just melt right into the in-breath. See if you can maintain the same sense of relaxation and release right into the in-breath. Take that surge like a surfer, riding the out-breath right into the in-breath without any padding. The most important point is the turnaround when you just start the in-breath. It can be interesting to note very distinctly the times when you miss and suck in the breath, and compare those to the times when it just flows in. Compare a failure and a success so you know the difference.

Posture is very important. If you are slumped over, compressing your diaphragm, then your abdomen can't expand

very easily. It's crunched like an accordion and you have just a little bit of chest to breathe with. So without exaggerating, sit upright so that your abdomen can expand effortlessly and you can just go along with it.

The supine posture, lying flat on your back, can also be very helpful for this practice. There is a difference between this position and simply lying down as if you were about to take a nap. Most important is that your body should be in a straight line. You can check by bringing your heels together and raising your head to look down and visually align the point between your heels, your navel, sternum, and nose. Let your feet drop out to the sides. If space allows, you can extend your arms at about thirty degrees. Give a gentle extension to your spine by pulling your buttocks down slightly towards your feet. Similarly you can extend the spine by raising your head and drawing your chin down slightly towards your sternum. This should give a slight extension, nothing exaggerated. Experiment for yourself with your eyes. Some people prefer to close their eyes completely, others find it helps to leave the eyes partially open and let in a little bit of light to avoid getting spaced out. Relax the shoulders, relax the muscles of the face, and especially, just as in a sitting posture, let the eyes feel soft. Let your gaze grow still and your eyes rest, not protruding, not tight, but relaxed.

Make it a point to experience each breath as an adventure, an exploration to see whether you can completely relax in a full cycle. A full cycle would be a great accomplishment, from the out-breath all the way through the in-breath. And of course, by the time you've finished the in-breath, you're ready for the next out-breath. Now you're on the downhill slope of the roller coaster, and you can easily do the next stage. See if you can just maintain that continuity.

The next big shift in the practice is to move from relaxation to a sense of continuity, from breath to breath to breath. At this point, gross excitation (*audhātīya*) is the main problem. Gross excitation occurs when, while trying to follow the breath, the mind disengages from the breath and attends to something

else entirely. Then after this little excursion you come back to the breath perhaps seconds or even minutes later. You may attend to the breath for another second, maybe even two seconds, then you're off someplace else. Gross excitation is simply lack of continuity. You've forgotten that you're meditating, and you're just sitting there thinking about something else. Subduing gross excitation entails staying on the object with greater continuity, for longer and longer periods: five, ten, fifteen seconds, and on.

But as you move towards stability, it's important to approach it gently. When I went on my first *śamatha* retreat, I pounded my way through like a pile driver, with no sense of maintaining a sense of ease. I began with a great deal of enthusiasm, but about ten times more determination than was called for, and I didn't even know that relaxation was particularly important. In the long run it was very exhausting. It would have been helpful if someone had said to me, "Oh, and by the way, hang loose."

It is important to sustain a sense of gentleness and ease, especially if you are impatient for results. The Tibetan Buddhist tradition strongly emphasizes the preciousness of a human life in which we have the opportunity and freedom to engage in spiritual practice leading to the elimination of suffering and its sources. It tells us that our present opportunity is incredibly rare and precious beyond all value, so we must take advantage now! This sense of urgency is all very well, as long as you keep a lightness and buoyancy to it. If we start combining the urgency with a grim-faced determination, it's likely to make us sick. Ultimately, the most important thing in practice is the continuity. It is not at all helpful to be marking the clock, thinking: "Can I accomplish *śamatha* in one year or two years, or before I die, or before I get old?"

Of course this is true not only of *śamatha*—of stabilizing awareness and making the mind into a serviceable tool—but of all Dharma practice. If we establish continuity in the main core of our practice—in the cultivation of compassion, of insight, of faith—if we practice these with continuity, we don't

need to worry. Continuity means attending to them like a gardener who has planted a little stand of redwood trees, tending them from day to day, week to week, month to month, year to year. If we make swift progress in the practice, that's great. But even if we don't, it's not that important. If the continuity is established, then the life will run its span. The body will get worn out; the awareness will continue and will become embodied once again. That continuity is the most precious cargo we bring with us, because it will open up opportunities in the next life, and we can continue from there. If we are sporadic in the practice, taking a shotgun approach, blasting away over here and then forgetting about it, then blasting away at something else, who knows what kind of blast we will have in the next life?

In *samatha* practice, once you have established stability within relaxation, then you can apply more concerted effort. This should be a fine-tuned effort, not a gross muscular effort. Aim to sustain somewhat greater continuity, but without the body/mind tightening up. When you're free of gross excitation, even temporarily, there is a calm and stability in your awareness, acting like the ballast of a ship. When you have relatively good continuity, in which you simply don't lose the object perhaps for five, ten, fifteen, twenty minutes, or maybe even longer at a stretch, then it's almost certain that some laxity (*laya*) will set in. It may feel like a complacency, a settling in. It's called sinking, like sinking back into an easy chair, saying "Well, I guess this is what I'm supposed to do." At that point we need to recognize that the task isn't finished yet. There is a third ingredient without which we will never get to *samatha* or open up the full capacity of the mind. Vividness is the final, crucial component.

People develop in *samatha* practice at varying rates, and also in various ways. It's possible to make generalizations, but they may not apply to all individuals. Having said that, as a generalization, there is a strong temptation to seek out vividness too soon. It gives you a *high* in the old-fashioned '60's sense of the term. There is a pleasure in it and everything

becomes extraordinarily interesting. But if the vividness lacks an underlying stability, it is fragile and tends to collapse very easily. And so, because the vividness is so enticing, it is generally sound advice to develop stability first. Likewise, it is usually helpful to emphasize relaxation before stability, because there is a common tendency, especially among Western meditators, to bring a lot of effort to the practice initially. Discipline is valuable, but not if you sacrifice a sense of ease in the practice.

Generalizations aside, not everybody is a beginner, and even those who may be starting fresh in the practice sometimes develop quite quickly. If, in the course of a session, your sense of ease is sustained, you maintain focus on the object with stability, and the continuity is really quite good, you may find yourself beginning to sink into the object. This is a premature phasing out of duality, merging with the object in a way that is not useful, like slipping down into mud. At that point, it's time to exert more effort and increase the vividness. The practice then becomes a dance, enhancing the vividness but not at the cost of the stability; just as it was a dance to bring in greater stability but not at the cost of relaxation. When the continuity is lacking, and you still have to deal with a lot of turbulence, that's not the time to worry much about vividness. If you try to attend to vividness at this stage, it will probably just make the mind even more turbulent, with little flashes of vividness but no foundation.

When continuity is established, sinking into laxity is the main challenge. And if laxity goes farther, it progresses to lethargy (*styāna*), in which you just feel heavy. Beyond lethargy is sleepiness (*middha*), when you begin to nod off. With laxity you have just lost the edge, you're not falling asleep yet. When you find the first trace of laxity setting in, it's time then to attend more closely, to take a greater interest in the object of your meditation. It may also be a time to bring in some outside help, such as imagining flooding your body with light. Or if you find yourself even a little on the warm side, take off a layer of clothing, or drink a glass of cool water, or wash your

face with cold water. Of course, make sure that you have enough sleep. If you're not getting enough sleep at night, it's a no-win situation. Meditation is not a substitute for sleep. You may find that if your meditation is going well you don't need as much sleep, but don't cut off sleep to see if you can meditate a little bit longer. That won't work in the long run.

If laxity or lethargy become chronic, then go back to discursive meditation for a while, and attend to subjects that inspire you, that uplift and invigorate the mind. If you find that none of those techniques work, then you may want to switch objects altogether. Breath awareness is good for a lot of people, but not for everyone. For those who visualize fairly easily, there's another whole route to *sāmātha* through visualization. That's much more common in the Tibetan tradition than breath awareness.⁶ If you are practicing visualization, then the treatment of laxity is straightforward: just put another hundred volts into your visualized object. Brighten up the illumination.

QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES: ON BREATH AWARENESS

Question: I've learned to meditate on the breath with an awareness of the breath moving through the whole torso, rather than just the tactile sensations at the nostrils. Can I practice *sāmātha* with this type of whole-body awareness?

Response: Following the breath in and out through the whole torso, through the rise and fall of the abdomen, is one of various avenues to breath awareness. It's good for stabilizing at the gross level but it probably will not take you all the way to *sāmātha*. It's not ideal for a deeper level of stabilization because there is too much motion, too much vacillation. If it's helpful at the beginning, that's fine, but you don't want to stop there. Focusing on the breath at the nostrils does work, I have confidence in that. Shifting techniques is a question of habituation. I'm not saying, "Now don't pay any attention to that whatsoever. See only this." But make your choice and the rest will take care of itself.

Question: What should we do if we find that at the end of exhalation there tends to be a lag time before inhalation begins, maybe ten or fifteen seconds, maybe more?

Response: As a matter of fact, there is a *prāṇāyāma* technique in which you consciously rest for ten to twenty seconds at the end of each exhalation and also each inhalation. You would do that for a maximum of fifteen minutes as a *prāṇāyāma* technique. Here it's not planned, but it often happens that excess tension in the body and mind percolates out in this way. This is not a problem at all, as long as it occurs only occasionally. But if this happens regularly, and you find at the end of the session that your body-mind feels heavy or sluggish, then it's a fairly clear indication you are doing it too much. You have to judge for yourself. If you find that you just feel very present and grounded, that's fine. But if it causes a lethargic feeling, then ease off.

Your posture can make a difference here. Sitting relatively straight but with a slightly bowed spine compacts the diaphragm ever so slightly. In this casual posture it comes naturally to pause at the end of the out-breath. Then finally, like climbing up hill, the breath comes back into the torso and re-vitalizes the system. Raising the posture slightly to lift the diaphragm can prevent this happening to excess. The breath will flow in more easily and you will find that it invigorates you. When your breath gets into a rhythm and moves like a flower blossoming up into your torso, it's very soothing and invigorating at the same time, even therapeutic for the body and mind.

Question: How do you stop yourself from willfully affecting the breath when you are so aware of it?

Response: If you surrender yourself to the practice, it's not as much of a problem as you might imagine. Otherwise it would be horrendously difficult, because the breath becomes very subtle, which means it also becomes as easy to manipulate as a feather. Although the breath awareness in itself is not strictly a *vipāśyanā* practice, insight does enter into this. If we can

attend so closely to something that is so delicate and yet not manipulate it with our will, but just rest with it; if the attention and breath can move like two dancers, without one grabbing the other and pulling it around, there is not much space left for a gross sense of ego. The fine-tuning of this requires you to be so much in the moment that you are very near insight practice. My teacher Geshe Ngawang Dargyey once told me that if you actually accomplish *samatha*, it's relatively easy to develop radically life-transforming insight.

Question: After just a little while of counting my breath, I fade out and I don't come to until you ring the bell. Is this what you mean by laxity?

Response: It is. If you are simply fatigued, it's better to rest. When you find that regardless of how much you apply yourself, the mind is just not up to the task, the problem may be fatigue. It may also have a lot to do with the degree of interest in the practice. If you are really not very interested, it may be an inappropriate practice. It's worth discussing that with a teacher. A traditional response would be to keep the sessions fairly short. Then, if your interest wanes, you don't simply hang out and waste time. You can waste time very easily in individual practice when you're on your own. Variety is another thing that can be helpful. If you are bored, try breaking up the practice with discursive meditation, alternating the *samatha* with a more active mode of practice.

But in defense of *samatha*, if by any means, whether short sessions or recalling your motivation, you can start to get the taste of vividness along with continuity of attention, the meditation starts to reap its own rewards. The practice itself gives you its own well-being, and you no longer need to look for outside help to motivate you. When the practice is rewarding in itself, you have reached a watershed.

It is also helpful to bring a lot of light into the practice. Meditate in a brighter environment, a place where the light is softly bright. Inside as well, generate light in the practice. With your imagination suffuse your body with light and then let it

spread out from the body. When the mind closes down, it needs to be countered with effort. Rather than relaxing into the problem, bring in some high-voltage awareness.

Question: During the last few sessions I had no awareness of my body at all. I was looking down at it like it wasn't mine. Is that detachment okay, or do you want to feel more connected to the body if, for example, you want to use the body of light technique?

Response: Those are two different questions. The disengagement from the body is just fine. The practice of bringing light into your body of light is a preamble. When the mind starts to enter more deeply into the meditative object, the sense of having a body at all will fall away, in which case you don't need to use the body of light. It has served its purpose, which was to get you to that point. That's one reason why good posture is so important: as you start to disengage from the body, it goes on auto-pilot. If you start it off in the right direction, it will maintain its own posture, taking care of itself into very deep *samādhi*.

Question: My back and my knees are painful from sitting. How should I deal with physical pain during the meditation?

Response: There are different views on how to deal with the pain that arises from sitting. One view, which I respect very highly, teaches that the pain is part of the practice. You will find this a lot in Zen and to varying extents in the Vipassanā tradition. You accept the pain without responding to it. You just let the waves of pain come through, while you maintain the practice. The Tibetan tradition, on the other hand, places little or no value on physical pain in the meditation. They say: If it hurts, move. We've got enough problems in our lives without inviting physical pain in the meditation. Of course, you can go overboard with this approach if you start to fidget at the slightest discomfort and scratch every little itch that comes up. Your awareness just decomposes. I would suggest a middle way, but the middle way that I teach and practice tends to be quite gentle. If you find something is really poking into your

consciousness and nagging at you, then I suggest you move. You might try just a very subtle shift at first, perhaps just rearranging your weight. You may find that refolding your legs helps. If your body is just fatigued, your muscles are stressed, and it doesn't matter much which way you place your legs, the best thing is to move into the supine position. But don't move at the earliest sign of discomfort, because it would be good to be able to increase the bubble of comfort a little bit each time. Stretching that duration will give you more leeway for your practice.

I've been reading the very early literature about *samatha* practice and its relationship to the path as a whole. It is very interesting that, as far back as the Buddha himself, you don't find themes like: "Strive diligently, I know it hurts a lot, but grit your teeth and try anyway." Instead the Buddha says, "And through the *samatha* practice, joy arises, and from the joy, then insight arises..." I found that interesting. We do what we can to create the circumstances for a sense of happiness and well-being to arise in the mind. That's a wave you can ride on. All things being equal, I'd rather be riding a wave of happiness than a wave of physical misery.

Question: How does *samatha* practice differ from breath awareness as taught in Vipassanā or the Theravāda tradition?

Response: First of all, you should note that the contemporary Theravāda tradition uses some terminology very differently from the way it is used in the Tibetan tradition and even in *The Path of Purification* by Buddhaghosa, which is the basis for the present teaching. You may sometimes hear the term *samatha* used to describe a much more elementary state than what we are talking about here.⁷

Vipassanā, as it's currently taught in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka, tends to emphasize simple mindfulness: being thoroughly in the present and letting your awareness be as free as possible from any conceptual overlay, including judgments, classifications, and especially, emotional responses. You simplify your awareness as much as possible, honing

your mindfulness to a fine key. Whatever comes up—be it the birds singing, a thought, an emotion, tactile sensations, pain, pleasure—you watch it without judgment, without grasping on to it, without conceptually elaborating on it. This gives you a much clearer awareness of what is taking place in the moment. It does yield a type of insight, and it's enormously useful. It's also essentially very, very simple.

As one progresses in the practice, you may be encouraged to examine whether there is any "I" present in the phenomena you are observing, whether you find anything static or stable, or whether everything is in a state of flux. This is not analysis or philosophizing, but it is a mode of inquiry. *Vipassanā* is an insight practice, and traditionally it really does entail an inquiry into the nature of reality.

In contrast, *samatha* does not involve inquiry, even though some of the methodology such as breath awareness may be similar. *Samatha* is honing the tool of the attention. You're developing stability and vividness. If your stability or your vividness starts to wane, you apply an antidote. In *vipassanā*, if you find laxity arising, you simply note it. You don't try to counteract it or do anything about it at all. If you find your mind is getting turbulent, you note: "Aha, there are a lot of thoughts." You're succeeding right there, and you are not continually working on an agenda as in *samatha*. That is a distinction in the qualitative experience of the two types of meditation.

There are people who believe, and I think in some ways with good grounds, that if you progress in the practice of *vipassanā*, the mind will become stable and your vividness will be enhanced as a result of the mindfulness and insight practices. *Vipassanā* can be a superb foundation for *samatha*, just as *samatha* can give you the stability and vividness you need to really benefit from insight practice. For some people, it may be more effective to do mindfulness continuously and do very little sitting meditation. If you can develop the kind of mindfulness that blankets the whole day, then you will really have some capital to invest if you choose to do a *samatha* retreat. And then, if you should go into another *vipassanā* retreat with

the tools of *śamatha* already at hand, that's a combination that will be very effective. Obviously, *vipassanā* and *śamatha* are compatible.

THE MASTERY OF ATTENTION: MINDFULNESS AND INTROSPECTION

Much of the time our attention is compulsive. We don't really want to attend to distracting thoughts while we are meditating, and yet we do. The directing of awareness has a lot to do with will, but is not always will-driven. When it is compulsive it is probably object-driven. For example, if we become enraged, we may not want to be focusing on the thing that enrages us and yet that's exactly where the attention goes. It's not because of some external stimulus. We could be sitting alone in a room and yet the mind is compelled to attend to this engaging object. *Samatha* is designed to give us not just control of attention, but freedom of attention. If we wish to attend to the breath, we have the freedom to attend to the breath. If we wish to attend to something else, we have the freedom to attend to that.

Mastery of the attention is an extraordinary feat. I have found William James' writings on attention to be very insightful.⁸ But the Buddhists have a lot to say about it as well. In the Buddhist context the mastery of attention is more than a psychological accomplishment. Not only have you gained mastery in a very significant way over your own mind; mastering your attention starts to influence your environment as well. Śāntideva, for instance, declares that all manner of external dangers can be subdued by mastering one's own mind.⁹

When we find that the mind has become distracted, a traditional, time-tested solution is to simply take a greater interest in the main object. Attend to each breath as something utterly unprecedented: this breath will never come back. There will be another breath, but this one is unique. Attend to it with a playful quality and a light touch: "That was neat—two breaths in a row! How about three?" See if you can maintain this quality of attention without becoming heavy and morose,

mouth grimacing under the discipline. Counting can be fun occasionally. See if you can get all the way to ten without ever falling off the breath. Then, if you've succeeded, go without counting for a while. Play with it, but don't make it conceptually elaborate. Insofar as you can take more interest in each breath, it's preferable to have interest that is uncomplicated rather than interest that is complicated.

There are two distinct qualities of awareness to cultivate in the *śamatha* practice: mindfulness (*smṛti*) and introspection (*samprajanya*). They are defined very specifically in the Tibetan Buddhist context, which is somewhat different from the Theravāda context. Mindfulness is that faculty or mode of awareness that is directly concerned with a familiar object, in this case the tactile sensations associated with the breath. In this practice, mindfulness is a continuum, an unbroken stream, attending to the in-breath, the out-breath, and also those interim moments between the breaths. The sole task of mindfulness is to attend to the object with continuity. It's like the beating of the heart: you always want it to be happening. If it's not there, then try to get it back as quickly as you can.

Introspection has a quite separate task from mindfulness. It serves rather like quality control in a factory. While mindfulness is attending to the meditative object, introspection is attending to the meditating mind, checking on how it's going: "Am I still trying to control the breath? Am I chattering about the breath as I'm watching it? Am I falling asleep? Am I spaced out?" Introspection also has the task of checking up now and again on the body. Check out the posture: the shoulders should be as relaxed as a coat on a hanger. Check that your face has not become tight, with the muscles around your eyes or jaws contracted. If you are accustomed to proper meditation, you may find that you have a reliable posture, and it doesn't need much introspection. In earlier phases of meditation, or if you are experimenting with different postures, attention to the body is more important. But the chief task of introspection is to monitor the mind, because the mind tends to change faster than the posture does.

Note that introspection is not on call all the time. You don't need to have quality control checking every single item that comes off the assembly line, but you do want it poking in intermittently. If the mind has become distracted, then it is the task of introspection to recognize this, and then you must apply your will to restore mindfulness. If you find that you're going into a slump in the meditation, that vividness is gone and you're drifting off, then it's the task of introspection to note that and arouse the will to deal with it. Maybe you're just tired and it's time to end the meditation, go for a walk, or do something entirely different; or maybe you need to pep it up a little bit and bring back the vividness.

Introspection needs to be more frequent in the earlier phases of the practice, both towards the mind and the body. Eventually you will learn to rest in a stable posture, and introspection will no longer be necessary for the body.

As you progress, introspection is not needed so often, but it must become more educated and more acute. The types of problems to attend to become more subtle. If you do the practice with some continuity, there's a possibility of actually getting better at it! After several months you may very well find that gross excitation is not much of a problem any more. Gross excitation or gross agitation occurs when mental distraction causes you to forget about your meditation object altogether. The breath is history and now you're thinking about ice cream, or pizza, or where you need to go at five o'clock.

When you get to a point in your meditation where gross excitation doesn't arise any more, you may still experience subtle excitation. Subtle excitation is the background chatter that appears around the edges of your attention even as you are focused on the object. It may entail mental chit-chat or imagery. Introspection remains intermittent, but it has to be enhanced.

You may continue even further to a point at which both gross and subtle excitation are gone and you can sustain mindfulness with finer and finer tuning. Think of the moments of awareness as a line of dominoes: the space between them gets

narrower and narrower. When the space, which is the space between moments of mindfulness, is quite big, there is room for subtle excitation in between the mindfulness, so you have the sense of doing two things simultaneously. But as you start to close the distance between the dominoes, there is no space for other imagery. The line of dominoes becomes a seemingly smooth, seamless surface of mindfulness on your object. As you develop greater stability, and excitation decreases on both gross and subtle levels, then laxity is almost bound to arise. This feels like complacency. You are resting on the object and the edge of awareness has gone. You may have some semblance of vividness, but it's not that great. You are slacking off. The Tibetan word for laxity (*bying ba*) literally means "sinking." You need introspection to detect this, and the remedy is to give the meditation more intensity. I can only speak in metaphors now, but to counter gross laxity you need to close the ranks a bit more and bring in a greater spark of vividness. There is even a subtle degree of laxity in which the object remains vivid but without full intensity. (The only way to know what I'm talking about is to go ahead and do the practice. Otherwise it's like trying to describe chocolate to somebody who has never tasted it.)

By the time that you've moved through gross and subtle excitation and countered both gross and subtle laxity, you're on easy street. From that point, you no longer need introspection. In fact, introspection then becomes a nuisance and detracts from the meditation. It's not a line that you cross, but a stage you move into gradually. There may be times even relatively soon in your meditation when you can honestly say, "I don't need to do anything here. I don't need introspection. I can just go with the flow." But don't be premature about this.

Note that introspection is auto-referential, a kind of inner monitoring. When introspection is no longer needed because the problems for which it was designed are no longer present, at that point the reified sense of subject-object dichotomy begins to break down. You are left with just the experience, the event of mindfulness taking place with continuity and with

vividness. It's from that space that you move right into the actual accomplishment of *śamatha*. That is an advanced state, but you will almost certainly experience facsimiles of that state prior to achieving it. You get glimpses, or brief tastes, when you know for yourself that, for a while at least, there is no longer a sense of the meditator. The dichotomy between the meditator and meditative object is something that has to be constructed: it's not a given. We construct it by conceptualizing it concretely, patting it into shape: "That's the object, this is the subject, this is the meditation, and I'm doing well—or not." Insofar as you release this ongoing commentary, you also begin to release the more quiet construct of "I am meditating." And you release it by simply attending more closely and with tighter continuity, moving the dominoes closer together, until there is no more space to also say, "And, oh yes, I am meditating."

ŚAMATHA AS A CATALYST FOR MENTAL EVENTS

Eventually you are bound to experience creativity surfacing in *śamatha*. Especially during a relatively stable meditation session, instead of being distracted by a current of rambling thoughts, just a few thoughts will come in that seem to be of real value. They may be innovations concerning something you've been working on, things you don't want to sweep out with the rest of the rubbish.

The very fact that it happens is interesting. When I was studying physics as an undergraduate at Amherst College (after being out of academia for fourteen years), I had been grinding my teeth for three hours on a problem in elementary mechanics, something about a cannonball breaking into three parts in midair, and trying to figure out where each part lands. I was a monk at the time, and the trajectory of cannonball fragments was low on my list of interests. Like a tractor pushing against a granite wall, spewing forth exhaust and fumes, I was getting nowhere at all except to a state of frustration. So I just stopped and went off to meditate. Fifteen minutes later, something surfaced: not a complete solution, but an opening,

like getting a knife into a clamshell. Whether *śamatha* meditation helps us solve a gritty problem, or opens up something very wonderful in a creative field such as music or art, what do we do with it?

You probably won't have a dozen valuable insights per session, so you can probably remember them without jotting them down. In my experience, it's enough to just hold the spark of it. When you come out of the meditation you can let that spark re-ignite. Of course, if it is just too hot to handle, and you are too excited to meditate, then go with it. You may get a full symphony orchestra with all the individual parts clearly audible. Mozart described the experience of composing as writing down what he heard, like a scribe or reporter. Do whatever you like with it and then come back with a sense of completion.

Although breath awareness is not image-oriented, as the mind becomes calm, the practice may catalyze images and memories that are more vivid than any you have ever experienced. It may go beyond the visual to include aural and other sensory impressions. The imagery may even have continuity as well, as events unfold in your mind. You can sustain this material that the meditation catalyzes if you want to. You may even surprise yourself as to how long you can remain in it. You might play with it, exercise it a little bit. But let images come up spontaneously; don't pursue them. And if you are really concerned with *śamatha*, then acknowledge them, and release them on their way.

Some of the material that surfaces is likely to be traumatic and bring a lot of agitation: memories that stir guilt, fear, rage, or some deep resentment. As these memories, images, or emotions come up, they become your challenge. This is a major event in the practice. It should be regarded not as a nuisance or as a problem, but as a crucial and prominent facet of the practice. That means you learn to acknowledge it, confront it, bring understanding to it, accept it, and release it. It doesn't mean that you hold on to it or let it overwhelm you. We don't need to process every bad experience we've had in our life—

we would never finish. Simply releasing is optimal, but at times the experience may be more tenacious than that. If, for example, resentment keeps pounding on the door of your mind, maybe you need to do some loving-kindness practice to clear it out. Or if there is guilt, maybe you need to bring some understanding to unravel it. But if you can deal with it by simply releasing it, great!

DEALING WITH PROBLEMS IN *SĀMATHA* PRACTICE

If your practice is wholesome and enjoyable, maintained with a sense of buoyancy and well-being, the chances are extremely remote that any problems that are catalyzed will become entrenched. I never heard of such a case. Almost every case I have encountered of persistent problems in *sāmatha* practice is characterized by a lack of buoyancy and a reliance on sheer discipline. Typically, when *sāmatha* practice goes wrong, it gets heavy—frustrating and isolated, barren and dark. You may feel you have to muscle your way through, and of course that makes it worse.

Physical tension, aches and pains, are not necessarily indications of a problem. In the early stages especially, tension in the body may be brought on more by the mind than by muscle fatigue, or some other purely physical factor. People's knees may hurt when they are meditating and feel fine at any other time, even if they are sitting motionlessly for long periods of time. Part of the mind wants an excuse. If the pain is caused by this sort of influence from the mind, then make a choice. Recognize that the tension is not really debilitating, and just let it go.

If the problem tends to linger between sessions, and especially if it's conjoined with an array of other symptoms that suggest an imbalance in your nervous system, you should be more careful. Such symptoms include tension, a feeling of darkness or heaviness at the heart that lingers, a gloom in the mind that may slip into depression or irritability, nervousness, and a tendency to weep—not a refreshing, cleansing weeping, but just grief. If you recognize one or more of those

occurring in a chronic fashion, then something has gone wrong. It's time to lighten up, speak with the teacher, and clear it out. If you are on your own, the first thing to do is lighten up the intensity of the practice. Ease off and let yourself be a little bit lazy. You might try some yoga: that what it's for. Above all, bring in a greater sense of buoyancy and find something to restore good cheer and lightness to the mind. If you can do that, in all likelihood, you will knock out the problem. When the mind's joy, its buoyancy and lightness, becomes a distant memory, that's when these symptoms can really set in persistently and become problematic.

If you ever experience a dense, dark, tight, fisty quality, especially in the area of your heart or the center of your chest, back off immediately. Back off just as if you found a snake in your lap. It's really important not to pursue the meditation if this happens, as great damage can be done. Do something cheerful instead. Go eat pizza and ice cream; listen to your favorite music. Do whatever you can to bring lightness back in and get out of that space quickly.

Why would this happen? The heart center is closely connected to mental consciousness. There is a vital energy in the body that you can experience in a tactile way, even though it is not physical in the Western scientific sense. (There is no place for "vital energy" in modern physics. I don't think there ever will be; it's a different type of phenomenon. This is a type of "qualia" that is experienced first-hand, not something existing purely objectively, independently of experience.) But it manifests, among other ways, as the physical sensations at your heart that accompany different emotional states. When you feel buoyant and happy, when you feel excited, when you feel heavy and depressed, when you feel like dirt: check the physical sensations at your heart. For any of the major mind states, you can probably feel the corresponding vital energy if you attend to it.

In *sāmatha* practice, you are doing something very unusual with and to your mind. You're asking it to focus on one thing and stay there. That means you are, in a sense, compacting

your attention. You're channeling and collecting it, gathering it together. As you gather your mind, you also gather your vital energies, drawing them to the heart. If the quality of awareness that you are compacting has negative elements such as resentment, guilt, depression, sadness, or fear, that will also show up in the heart as a sensation of heavy darkness, a feeling like you have just swallowed a rock.

The Tibetans describe this as "bad energy" (*rlung ngan pa*), and of course that is just what it feels like. It is dangerous, because the energy can get lodged in the heart and stay there. That may lead to chronic depression, or worse. It's unfortunate, and it happens unnecessarily to too many meditators. You can work through it but it's difficult, and it's far better not to fall into it in the first place. If it does start, the sooner you deal with it, the easier it will be. How do you address it? You need to bring a lot of buoyancy and light into your life and you probably shouldn't meditate much. If you do meditate, the sessions should be very short and very light; loving-kindness practice is appropriate, but never to the point where it gets oppressive or heavy in any sense. You need to keep a lightness in your life, do things that you enjoy, spend time with people you enjoy. If you have a spiritual teacher, think about him or her a lot. Do whatever you can to introduce a quality of lightness, sweetness, and warmth into your heart and mind. You really have to take major steps to counter the dark, cold, heaviness of this problem, and be very patient about returning to any kind of intensive meditation. You have to take a leave of absence for a while.

It is unusual, but similar problems to those associated with the heart center can sometimes happen when breath awareness with a focus on the nostrils concentrates too much energy in the head. You may find your head feeling full and bloated like a pumpkin on top of your neck. Or you may experience a feeling of pressure in the head, or headaches. If this happens, drop that technique for a while. Bring the awareness down to the abdomen or diffuse it gently throughout the

whole body, but get it out of the head. It's not healthy; if you continued slogging on with that technique, it could become a chronic problem and there is really no reason to let that happen. Headaches should not become common as a result of practice. If they occur once in a while, that's normal. But if you find you're getting headaches from meditation with any degree of regularity at all, then something is wrong and needs to be checked. If headaches become at all consistent, please speak with a qualified teacher.

On the other hand, you may experience many unusual physical sensations in *śamatha* practice that are not at all cause for concern. People commonly report bizarre experiences such as distortions of the sense of physical space, illusions of movement or falling, a sense that the limbs are contorted, or a ringing in the ears. You may feel as if your body is swelling up like the Pillsbury doughboy, or it may feel rooted to the earth. In general, when such experiences involve the whole body, or are peripheral, focused on the limbs, they are not danger signs at all, but quite harmless. The traditional instructions are to ignore such phenomena, hard as that may be. By paying attention to a sensation or becoming fixated on it, you perpetuate it and it can then turn into an obstacle.

The reason behind such experiences is that *śamatha* has a profound effect on the vital energy system in the body. We are doing something the mind is not at all accustomed to, plunking the mind down and saying: Stay! As you concentrate and channel the mind in an unfamiliar way, especially if you go to greater depths than you have previously, this is bound to have an effect on the vital energies. They start to rearrange themselves. This continues all through the course of developing *śamatha*, all the way to its culmination. When you actually attain *śamatha*, there is a radical shift of vital energies. It's like having your whole house rewired: the energies will function differently, and your body will feel extraordinarily light and pliant. From then on, unless you let your *śamatha* deteriorate, that becomes your normal physical state. Prior to the actual

achievement of *samatha* there's a lot of rearranging of the furniture, so to speak, as the energies shift around. And as this takes place, you may feel strange physical sensations, perhaps even as if your body is rotating or turning upside down.

What if you are not sure if something you are experiencing might be problematic? There are two types of teachers: one is your own intuition, the other is an outside source. If you have a very strong sense something is worth exploring, do so. Release yourself into it and experiment. If you have problems, come back and check with an outside source. If you have a recurring problem with headaches or a heaviness of the heart, I suggest you consult a qualified meditation teacher. If you ever start developing a chronic sense of fatigue and tension in the meditation, or a chronic sense of darkness around the mind, that's a time to stop and take appropriate countermeasures. Come and talk to a teacher. Get it early and nip it in the bud. Don't let it linger and become an embedded problem.

Not many people are able to do *samatha* practice exclusively for an extended retreat. At times the mind inevitably gets heavy and needs to be inspired and uplifted. Alternating *samatha* with loving-kindness meditation can help. Sitting back and reflecting on why you are doing this can be very helpful. Find ways of uplifting the mind without drawing it into hindrances. You might find it uplifting to think of a person you find extremely attractive, but then you are bringing desire into the meditation, and that comes with its own bundle of problems. Keep the relief wholesome. You might just take a walk, or talk to some friends once in a while. If they are doing the same practice as you are, it can be really inspiring.

The simple technique of bringing light into the meditation can be extremely helpful. Develop a sense of your own body as a body of light: a very calm, soothing, transparent light. It should be light in every sense of the term, buoyant as well as softly glowing, not at all dense, as if there were extra space between the molecules. Keep that sense of light as your environment, and within that attend to the sensations of the breath

at the nostrils. See if you can relax into it. If you find some tension coming in, then temporarily withdraw a little from the intensity of your focus on the breath; set out into this diffuse lightness again, suffused with a sense of ease. Imagine if you really had a body of light, how comfortable that would be. Remain there for a while, and then keeping with that sense of ease and lightness, come back in to the focus on the breath.

Another very practical suggestion that Tibetan lamas offer, especially for this type of focused, concentrated practice in which the mind is drawn very much inward, is to spend the time between sessions in a place where you can gaze out for a long distance to a very far horizon.

an old friend. Our spouse might be furious at this "proof" of infidelity, the housekeeper might clean up an "accident," and a divorce attorney might label the shattered vase "Exhibit 1."

Even the boundaries between pleasant and unpleasant feelings are quite arbitrary. I am convinced that feelings do not have absolute, inherent tonality. We might think that an arising feeling possesses an intrinsic level of suffering or pleasure, independent of circumstances, but this is clearly false. For example, if a feeling of hunger arises, it exists only relative to past experiences of hunger and to what food we anticipate. Whenever we experience a feeling, it manifests relative to the context of feelings that have preceded it. When we fixate upon a feeling's sign—an object identified within a conceptual framework—we draw upon memory to analyze and classify it as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This reflexive process entails grasping.

The experience of a feeling becomes interesting when you are able to refrain from grasping. Do the boundaries between various feelings begin to fade? Does the distinction between a thought and its tonality become less clear? Is the thought an entity and the tonality its attribute, or is the tonality an entity and the thought its appendage? Does one belong to the other? Does the feeling have a cognitive aspect?

Are thought and feeling in opposition, in the way the Greeks viewed reason and emotion? Should human beings be governed by reason, unlike ignorant animals that are ruled by emotion? Buddhists do not view reason and emotion as opposites but as simultaneous psychological processes. A thought may arise along with a feeling, both focused on the same object. For example, the thought, "That cake looks delicious," may arise together with a feeling of desire—both arising with respect to the cake. There is no absolute demarcation between thoughts and feelings; they arise concomitantly and interdependently. As grasping decreases, what happens to feelings? Do they still arise? How do they arise? These are questions worth investigating empirically.

GROUND STATES

One of the most important questions to be explored, with enormous relevance to our very identity as human beings, is the nature of the

MINDING CLOSELY

The Four Applications of Mindfulness

B. Alan Wallace



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ground state of our feelings. Is there a baseline condition underlying all our experiences of feelings? We can clearly feel pleasure by encountering something pleasant in any of the sense fields, including the mind. Likewise, displeasure or indifference can arise from any of the six sense fields. But in the absence of any stimuli to arouse our feelings, what is their ground state?

Habitual Ground State

The Buddhist assertion is that there is a ground state characterized by habitual afflictions. To conduct a thought experiment in this habitual ground state, put yourself in a neutral environment where nothing is pleasant or unpleasant. The perfect case is to seal yourself in a sensory isolation tank, where you float in body-temperature salt water, and it is pitch black and utterly silent. In such a thought experiment, with no stimulation from the environment, you are an isolated body-mind in a tank. What happens to your mind as you float in this silent, dark, solitary confinement? What feelings arise, hour after hour? Chances are good that after a while you will become unhappy and remain so. This feeling might intensify and create a very deep mental imbalance. When sensory isolation tanks were first popularized, there were reports of people who stayed in too long—the results ranged from disorientation to temporary psychosis. These days, sensory deprivation is most often mentioned as a technique for torture.

The habitual ground state is one in which—without any stimulation or catalyst from the five physical senses—the mental afflictions of grasping, craving, and hostility automatically come to the forefront. They appear like cockroaches in a dark room, making you unhappy; they multiply to keep you unhappy. The habitual ground state is characterized by dissatisfaction and even misery, which is why solitary confinement is considered punishment. A prisoner in solitary confinement is engaged in battle with his or her own mind. For an untrained mind that is strongly habituated to mental afflictions, the habitual ground state in the absence of stimulation will be pervaded by these same afflictions. Boredom becomes restlessness, followed by anxiety, craving, and one

flavor of unhappiness after another, potentially driving a person to mental instability.

Natural Ground State

On the other hand, there are yogis in India, Tibet, and China who voluntarily live in isolated places, under conditions much like solitary confinement. I recently visited the northern Gobi desert, where a monastery was established in the nineteenth century. In a vast expanse of red dirt like the surface of Mars, utterly devoid of vegetation, was a little mound of black volcanic rock. There the yogis had carved out austere caves, some no more than holes in the side of the rock.

Yogis spend days or months in such holes in the rocks in the middle of the Gobi, which is a terribly harsh environment at best. Accomplished yogis live without food or water for sustained periods of intense solitary confinement. In Tibet, it's not uncommon for yogis to seal themselves into a cave with only a slit for food to be passed through, and they live in the dark for many days, weeks, or months. A monastery that I visited in eastern Tibet was home to fifty-five monks engaged in three-year retreats together in a compound. Over the course of their three years, each of them spent forty-nine days in a pitch-black room. They had plenty of time to observe their minds because there was nothing else happening. I spoke with one of the monks who had completed forty-nine days in darkness during his three-year retreat, and he reported that the time was profoundly therapeutic. At first his mind was imbalanced, neurotic, and unhappy, he said, but by the end of the retreat, his mind was balanced, cheerful, and healthy. I found him to be very bright, friendly, and contented.

The habitual ground state makes solitary confinement a cruel punishment of loneliness and unhappiness. On the other hand, the practice of shamatha leads to a different state of mind called the relative ground state. In the practice of settling the mind in its natural state, you simply attend to whatever arises within that space, without specifically ferreting out feelings. As you spend several thousand hours practicing shamatha, for up to twelve hours a day, everything gradually settles like

the flakes in a snow globe. Your attention becomes focused on the mind, your physical senses withdraw, your mind dissolves into the substrate consciousness, and all appearances fade into the empty vacuity of the substrate. This is settling the mind in its natural state—the relative ground state.

Discovering the Substrate

There are two terms that are used to describe the ground of the mind, and I am convinced that they refer to exactly the same experience, although some might debate this. In the Dzogchen tradition, the relative ground state into which the psyche dissolves in shamatha is called the *alayavijñāna*, or substrate consciousness. The term “*alayavijñāna*” does not appear in the Pali Canon or in the Theravadin commentaries; however, another term, *bhavana*, is used instead, which can be translated as “ground of becoming,” where *bhava* means to “become” and *anga* has “basis” as one of its meanings. An excellent, scholarly presentation of the *bhavana* is given by Peter Harvey in his book *The Selfless Mind*.⁷⁷

I find it fascinating to compare the two Buddhist lineages of Theravada and Dzogchen, which experienced very little contact for hundreds of years. Dzogchen originated in India and evolved on the far side of the Himalayas, while Theravada prevailed in Burma, Sri Lanka, and other areas. Since these traditions had no common language, it seems safe to assume that the Dzogchen accounts of the *alayavijñāna* were developed independently of the Theravadin notion of the *bhavana*.

The Theravadin tradition describes two ways in which we access the *bhavana*, the ground of becoming, which is the ground state when all the activities of the mind have subsided. We access it naturally and effortlessly both when we fall into dreamless sleep and when we die. The Tibetan Dzogchen tradition says exactly the same thing about the *alayavijñāna* but also maintains that it can be accessed by means of effort and training: upon achieving shamatha, there is vivid awareness of the substrate. In both traditions, the senses are said to dissolve. I think the similarities are striking; these are independent tracks of contemplative inquiry with different names for the same experience.

One of the greatest discoveries concerning the nature of the mind—

not yet confirmed by modern science—is that its natural ground state is blissful. Having released habitual anger, craving, and neurosis, the mind is settled without being suppressed, manipulated, or contrived; and it naturally dissolves into its ground state. The substrate consciousness is simply aware, luminous, blissful, and nonconceptual.

It is an enormously important insight into human nature that the mind with which we normally operate, the one typically studied by psychologists, is characterized by habitual afflictions. As Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) said, psychoanalysis endeavors to take us from an unbearable state of neurosis to a bearable state of neurosis. I believe Freud’s limited notion of the possibilities for human flourishing and virtue has seriously impoverished the modern psyche. It would be unfortunate to assume that the habitual ground state and the natural ground state are merely religious dogmas. These are extraordinary claims that can be tested empirically—they are either true or false. The nature of the mind when it settles into its ground state should be the subject of scientific as well as contemplative inquiry.

Freud, as a careful inspector of human experience, made a very germane point in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, saying that there are many circumstances to make us unhappy, but relatively few to make us happy:

We are so made that we can derive intense enjoyment only from a contrast and very little from a state of things. Thus our possibilities of happiness are already restricted by our constitution. Unhappiness is much less difficult to experience. We are threatened with suffering from . . . our own body, . . . the external world, . . . [and] our relations to other men.⁷⁸

This is true because our psyches are deeply ingrained with mental afflictions—craving, hostility, envy, pride, and the delusion of reification that grasps on to self and other as being absolutely separate—which take all the fun out of life. When habitual afflictions are operative, a person can be miserable despite having a loving family, abundant wealth, beautiful surroundings, and nonstop sensual pleasures. Depression,

in which they arise. Mental events arising from moment to moment are their own reality—they may not correspond to anything independent of your mind. Attend to them without becoming entangled, slipping into the past, or anticipating the future. Let your awareness hover in the present moment. ❧

RELINQUISHING CONTROL

There is a close relationship between shamatha and vipashyana. Development of the physical and mental relaxation, stability, and vivid attention of shamatha is an essential prerequisite for finely honed, mindful probes of the body, mind, and other phenomena. Attempting to practice vipashyana with a mind that is scattered and dull is unlikely to produce transformative changes. Although this is an important reason for combining shamatha with vipashyana, their relationship is deeper.

Shamatha is indispensable in the investigation of the human need for control. In the practice of vipashyana, a central theme is deeply probing the nature of personal identity: How do we conceive of, grasp on to, and reify our “selves”? Is there any basis in reality for our concepts of identity? In addition to such self-conceptualizing, there is also an active sense of ego that declares: “I am.” This reified sense of self often manifests as the need for control. We exercise control over our body, mind, possessions, and even other people—our reach may be vast. Some people seem intoxicated with power, expressing the drive to validate themselves: “I have control and power over others, extensive wealth, and a large dominion, so I am worthy.” We all would like to think of ourselves as being of value—not worthless. Control is central to this self-concept. Feeling helpless and out of control is most unpleasant.

In the practice of shamatha, especially in mindfulness of the breath and settling the mind in its natural state, we deliberately give up control. It is easy to control the breath to some degree—holding it, breathing deeply or shallowly, or regulating it rhythmically. The breath is quite malleable, and, within certain constraints, our respiration responds to our faintest desires. The human tendency is to control whatever we can,

especially when we are attending closely. Instead, in this practice we are developing a nonfluctuating flow of clear attentiveness to something that is readily controllable—without deliberately influencing it.

The notion that quiet, rhythmic breathing is preferable can very easily affect the breath, even without conscious control. In a recent retreat, having received these same instructions, one person tried to impose regularity on his breath, thinking that correct breathing is rhythmic and deep. When I said, “Breathe as though you’re deep asleep,” another person recalled observing people who were deep asleep, and he tried to duplicate the shallow breathing he noticed. All such forms of control over the breath, no matter how well motivated, are to be avoided in this practice. The instruction is to release all intentions—just let the breath be.

Everyone is gifted in one way or another, with diverse educations and practical skills, but we are all massively overqualified for the practice of following the breath. No problem-solving skills, imagination, or artistic abilities are needed to relax the mind, release thoughts, and attend closely to the breath. Nevertheless, it is quite challenging to release all vestiges of control when full attention is focused on the eminently malleable respiration. The breath is influenced by the subtlest of preferences and expectations.

In the shamatha practice of mindfulness of the breath, we voluntarily relinquish control of the breath. We do not actively probe into our sense of personal identity, challenge the existence of an independent self, or eradicate reification, but our usual sense of being in control is 95 percent unempowered. We could control many things—move about, speak, think various thoughts, and so forth—but we choose not to. In attending to the breath without controlling it, we still control something: we constrain our attention from roving among myriad objects in the other sense fields, anticipating the future, and remembering the past. Control is exercised by focusing the attention on the breath and deliberately releasing thoughts and distractions.

Furthermore, if our faculty of introspection detects that the mind is falling into excitation or laxity, we exert control by taking countermeasures. If the mind is falling into distraction, our first line of defense is to

relax more deeply and then return to the meditative object. When introspection detects dullness, we exert control by arousing fresh attention. The ego's role in this practice is limited to selecting the object of attention, maintaining this selection, and taking countermeasures against excitation and laxity. This is a limited job description because the vast majority of things that we could be doing and controlling have been eliminated.

Ego Unemployment

The practice of mindfulness of the breath is deceptively simple. At first it appears to be flat and uninteresting, but the dimensions and layers of this practice are subtle and nuanced. To a very large extent, we are practicing egolessness by relinquishing control of everything except the focus and quality of our attention. We are deliberately seeking not to influence the object of our attention.

This skill can be useful in daily life, whether we are raising children or engaging professionally, whenever we slip into what Jewish existentialist philosopher Martin Buber (1878–1965) called “I-It” relationships. When we attend to friends, colleagues, or strangers simply because we want something in return, we are manipulating and controlling them for our gratification—as if they were objects. On the other hand, the ability to give someone the full quality of attention that we are cultivating here—close, stable, vivid attention without control—can be very helpful. One of my favorite quotes comes from my dear friend Father Laurence Freeman, who says, “The greatest gift we can give to another person is our attention.”

Of course, if a person is hungry, we should give him or her food not merely our attention. But without first paying attention, the chance that we can provide people with what they truly need, whether it is food, clothing, shelter, or companionship, is almost nil. If we studiously avert our gaze from a homeless person, this lack of attention guarantees we will not help. If we give our attention, there is the possibility of exercising wise judgment. Shall I offer something here? What would be of greatest benefit? These are personal choices that will not even be considered if attention is not given first. When we attend to a person or situation

skillfully and closely, with no urge to control, sustaining awareness of what is actually present with clarity and stability, we can penetrate the reality of the situation. We will not react habitually by thinking of how to benefit ourselves. This very useful skill can be cultivated with a simple practice—mindfulness of the breath.

In the practice of settling the mind in its natural state, the object of attention is also something over which we can exert some control. There are many things we commonly do with our minds that seem almost effortless. If I say, “Please visualize a peach,” or “Remember where you lived when you were ten,” you can do so immediately. The mind really is under our control to a certain extent, at least in terms of thoughts and our focus of attention. When we bring the force of vigilant, clear, unwavering, discerning awareness to the space of the mind and its contents, it is very easy to react by suppressing a thought or diverting the attention. Nevertheless, in this practice we relinquish control over the mind and its contents, just as we did with the breath. We are simply present with whatever appears.

Are we directly challenging the delusional sense of self, the autonomous “I” that’s in charge? Not yet. This is still shamatha, which is being developed as a foundation for efficient and effective vipashyana. Are we exerting any control when we attend to the space of the mind? We are exerting control over our attention, just as we do in selectively attending to the breath. In this case, we are selectively attending to mental events from among the six domains of experience. This is an act of will, so our reified sense of self is still being employed. As we settle the mind in its natural state, observing mental events and the space in which they arise, if attention starts to slip into laxity or excitation, the remedies are the same. The primary remedies for all shamatha practices are to relax when we detect excitation and arouse the attention when we detect laxity. This necessarily entails some exertion of will and effort, which will probably be done with a sense that “I am.” The reified sense of self is exerting itself by selecting a domain or an object of mindfulness. We are exerting our will to balance the attention—but nothing more.

Attending closely to the space of the mind and its contents without preference, even though nothing could be easier than generating or

inhibiting thoughts, is not easily accomplished. The challenge is even subtler than attending closely to the breath without modifying it, allowing the body to breathe itself with no sense of being in charge. Bring to the mental domain this same quality of awareness, utter nonattachment, nongrASPing, and nonpreference, and simply attend to whatever comes up without influencing it in any way. This is a tall order, but it is the quintessence of the practice. Attend luminously and discerningly, recognizing wholesome thoughts, unwholesome thoughts, mental afflictions, emotions, and the gamut of mental events. Observe them with such a loose sense of relaxation that they continue to arise unhindered.

Opening the Pandora's box of your mind and allowing free associations to flow, you do not care whether acrid fumes are billowing or iridescent butterflies are lofting into your field of consciousness. The space of the mind is wide-open, and you are simply present with whatever manifests in this space. It is a demanding challenge to relinquish control and maintain a spacious awareness regardless of what arises. The ego, the reified sense of "I am," is quick to jump in and reassert control, starting with preferences: "This thought needs a little bit of editing, that one's not appropriate, and some thoughts are completely improper—I won't allow those!"

Whatever comes up, whether vulgar or sublime, coarse or subtle, unpleasant or pleasant, observe the complete homogeneity of your thoughts. The Dzogchen literature calls this the view that everything is of one taste (Skt. *ekarasa*). It is certainly possible to actualize this view—it is not an asymptotic progression stretching to infinity. Observation without preference is not achieved by trying harder to eliminate preferences but by releasing more completely and relaxing more deeply, deactivating habitual grasping at progressively subtler levels. Whatever appears has no owner or controller; it simply manifests, plays itself out, and dissolves back into the space of the mind.

Our practice is one of egolessness. Without actively probing into the ego to see whether such a reified entity actually exists, the sense of "I am" has been virtually idled. At the same time, we are developing stability and vividness of attention, along with the enormously important faculty of metacognition. With introspection, we can do more than remember

or deduce the nature of mental events—we can directly observe them as they arise. Relinquishing control is the essence of the practice.

Bashful Maidens and Circling Ravens

When we first attempt to observe the mind, we often find that the sheer act of closely observing mental events causes thoughts, memories, and images to vanish on contact. We try to observe without influencing, but every time we inspect something, it seems to disappear. The problem is that the phenomena we seek to observe are being overcome by the intensity of our inspection.

The classic metaphor used to describe this problem is at least a thousand years old, and it concerns a "bashful maiden" and a "playboy," to update the terms. A bashful maiden strolls in a village courtyard where she is spotted by a playboy on the prowl. His intense, penetrating stare makes the bashful maiden very uncomfortable, and she quickly slips away. The playboy is advised to try a more delicate approach, perusing maidens with a sideways glance rather than a direct gaze. Like the bashful maiden, your thoughts, images, and memories are easily overpowered. The solution is to relax more deeply, like a skillful playboy who avoids frightening maidens with an overbearing manner, charming them instead with nonchalance.

As you become more adept and the practice is going well, the lovely metaphor of the navigator and the raven may apply. In the Book of Genesis, Noah first sends a raven and later sends a dove to determine whether the floodwaters have receded.⁴¹ Navigators in ancient India also brought caged ravens on long sea voyages, releasing them to locate the nearest land. Ravens are smart birds. When released, they circle higher and higher, looking for land, because they cannot survive in the water. If they see land, they head for it. The navigator simply watches the raven circling upward without losing track of it. In this metaphor, the raven flies as high as it can without detecting land in any direction. In order to survive, it has only one choice: to return to the ship from whence it came.

Similarly, when you are settling the mind in its natural state and a discursive thought circles up like a loosed raven, simply observe it passively, without trying to affect it in any way. Watch it carefully and it

present—but without identification, grasping, aversion, suppression, or dissociation. In the process of observing our own mind without grasping, we can actually watch the mind heal itself. The mind's knots and contortions loosen up and dissolve into the space of the mind.

The extraordinary practice of settling the mind in its natural state is both diagnostic and therapeutic. Observing the mind, we sometimes see impulses, desires, emotions, and memories that carry strong emotional charges. Whether they are positive or negative, we allow free association to occur, and we explore deeper and deeper layers with diagnostic detachment. At the same time we can watch the mind heal itself. The mind becomes increasingly balanced as the practice deepens. Dredging the psyche, we shine the light of awareness on subconscious mental processes, memories, desires, and emotions. In free association, that which was suppressed or subconscious becomes conscious—fascinating discoveries await!

SUBSTRATE CONSCIOUSNESS

The bhavanga, in the early Pali literature, or alayavijñāna, in later Sanskrit texts, is translated as the ground of becoming or the substrate consciousness. This is the dimension of consciousness from which the psyche springs each time you awaken, enter the dream state from deep sleep, or emerge from shamatha meditation. If you have been under general anesthesia and it wears off, your psyche emerges from the substrate consciousness. The psyche is an umbrella term referring to the array of mental states and activities we experience whenever the mind is active. When the mind goes quiet, what remains is the substrate consciousness.

Realms Apart

The substrate consciousness underlies the psyche, which is being dredged in this practice. It is deeper than the Freudian notion of the subconscious, which is still within the psyche, but different from the collective unconscious of Jung. Collaborating with quantum physics pioneer Wolfgang Pauli (1900–1958), Jung developed the notion of the *unus mundus*, or one world: a unitary, fundamental reality from which all

formations of mind and matter emerge. Archetypes and synchronicity are cited as evidence that everything springs from this singular source. In Buddhism this is called the form realm (*Skt. rūpadhātu*), and it is not confined to one person's continuum. We each have a psyche and our own substrate consciousness, which is not collective—it is the repository of our individual memories and imprints. However, if we slip into the substrate consciousness by way of shamatha, it is possible to access a deeper dimension of existence that is indeed a collective one.

The form realm is not individuated but collective and archetypal. This domain is more fundamental than our human constructs of mind and matter in the physical world. It is encountered by achieving shamatha, which gives access to the first dhyana: the entrance to the form realm. If you bring your mind to a state of further refinement, you can slip from the first dhyana into the progressively subtler second, third, and fourth dhyanas, still within the form realm.

Roger Penrose, one of the most brilliant mathematicians on the planet, has described the reality of mathematics with tremendous insight. He is very much inspired by Pythagoras and Plato in positing a purely mathematical dimension of reality that may be related to what Buddhists call the formless realm. George Ellis is another fine mathematician who argues that mathematical discoveries are just as real as physical or biological discoveries. Mathematical truths are discovered by using extremely rarefied ideas to venture conceptually into a realm of existence that is purely mathematical.

Consider the notion of the holographic universe that I've written about extensively in my book *Hidden Dimensions*.¹⁹ Mainstream physicists suggest that all our experiences of galaxies and atoms are an illusory holographic display manifesting from an underlying ground. This ground transcends the display, and it holds the seeds of all appearances we can observe. From the Buddhist perspective, the underlying ground is the form realm. In Buddhist cosmogony, our everyday physical world emerges out of the form realm, which in turn emerges out of the formless realm. The form realm is like the domain of geometric forms that Plato theorized, and the formless realm may be associated with pure numbers and algebra.

It is fascinating that first-rate scientists like Pauli, Penrose, and Ellis have arrived at the notion that the more one investigates the nature of physical reality, the more mathematical it appears to be. Probing deeply into the nature of matter, it is not found to exist in and of itself. Instead, there are only mathematical abstractions, such as fields and probabilities, out of which the chunky stuff seems to materialize. Jung and Pauli's elegant theory of the *unus mundus* lies untested after forty years because nobody has a means to test it. On the other hand, Buddhism does offer methods of empirical verification. The form realm, which bears a strong resemblance to the *unus mundus*, can be experienced for yourself.

By achieving shamatha, you have access to the form realm. Pushing further to actual achievement of the first dhyana, your mind dwells there, as the Buddha said of his own experience. You have made your mental home in the form realm. Beyond this first echelon lie increasingly subtle domains of experience. At the limit of the form realm, in the fourth dhyana, it is said that advanced practitioners can remain in samadhi for days without even breathing.

Settling the mind in its natural state begins with the ability to observe the mind with stability and clarity. It's like getting a brand new telescope, which must be mounted solidly and focused accurately to obtain a clear image. Only then can you begin to make reliable observations, such as looking for moons around Jupiter. Our instrument is the practice of observing without distraction, intervention, distortion, preference, or aversion. When this ability becomes stable and clear, we can pose questions about the events arising in the space of the mind. Are they lingering and stable or momentary and effervescent?

Another interesting question is whether the mental events arising in the space of your mind are under your control or not. At first blush, they seem to be. If you want to think of a peach, you can do it in a flash. Clearly, our thoughts are controllable to some extent. On the other hand, can you simply decide that no thought shall arise for the next sixty seconds? Try it. Do your thoughts abide by your decision? If thoughts arose against your will, who was it that generated them? Is that even a meaningful question?

When you seem to be in control of your thoughts, is this simply

an illusion? Are thoughts personal or impersonal? Is there something inherent in your thoughts that makes them intrinsically yours? Can you observe thoughts and mental images without affecting them, or are they inevitably modified, embellished, or destroyed by the sheer act of observing them? These are profound questions. Can you develop a lighter touch, like a biologist who learns to use a microscope very carefully so as not to injure a delicate, living specimen? This would be a handy skill.

Nature of Freedom

While some of these questions might seem esoteric, the question of free will is central to everyday life. Modern writers have produced many tomes on free will, but in the Sanskrit, Pali, and Tibetan literature this is not a fundamental concern—there isn't even a term for it. Free will and moral responsibility are certainly debated by nontheistic philosophers, but these become key issues when you believe in a God that created and governs the universe. Would an omnipotent God preordain some of His creatures to live on Earth for a short time and then sentence them to eternal damnation for actions they were powerless to prevent? If we can be assigned to hell for our sins, the existence of free will is critical. No free will means no responsibility. If your PC crashes, it's silly to punish it. If a robot helps you, it's useless to reward it. You can disassemble, repair, or replace a machine, but you can't punish or reward it. If we are simply programmed biological robots, then the notion of moral responsibility with reward and punishment makes no sense.

Since Buddhism does not operate from a theistic framework, free will does not pose such a dilemma. But even nontheists say we have free will, including prominent philosophers of mind like John Searle, Daniel Dennett, and Owen Flanagan. At the same time, these writers are reductionists, holding that human beings are merely biological organisms, and that mind, will, intention, and consciousness are nothing more than emergent properties of the brain. They assert that free will entails the ability to imagine some fortunate outcome in our future. We set goals to survive, flourish, and lead productive lives. Bearing our goals in mind, and understanding the consequences of our actions, we freely

The Three Natures of the Mind
From *Fathoming the Mind*
Inquiry and Insight in Dūdjom Lingpa's Vajra Essence
Translation and commentary by B. Alan Wallace, Excerpts from Pages 38-52

The Essential Nature of the Mind

To understand what is meant in a Buddhist context by the “essential nature” of the mind, we may contrast this with its “manifest nature.” The practice of *taking the impure mind as the path*, also called *settling the mind in its natural state*, which was introduced earlier, is a sophisticated method for examining the manifest nature of thoughts, memories, desires, emotions, and all manner of mental appearances. From the vantage point of the stillness of awareness, one may observe with an increasingly rigorous “internal objectivity” the circumstances by which mental events arise, how they are present once they have arisen, and how they vanish.

In the classic Buddhist practice of closely applying mindfulness to the mind, one also examines whether mental phenomena are stable or in constant flux, are veritable sources of well-being or fundamentally unsatisfying, and whether they are by their own nature “I” and “mine” or simply events arising in dependence upon prior causes and conditions. Moreover, a central theme in such investigations is to determine which mental factors play crucial roles in afflicting the mind and triggering harmful behavior and which give rise to a genuine sense of well-being for oneself and others. Specifically, one examines the ways in which craving, hostility, and delusion disrupt the equilibrium of the mind and generate unease, anxiety, and unhappiness.

The manifest nature of mind that is scrutinized in such practice does arise in dependence upon brain activity and physical stimuli from the body and environment, as well as on the basis of prior states of consciousness and mental processes. So this mind is strongly configured, or conditioned, by many environmental, physiological, and psychological factors that are uniquely human. In the practice of *settling the mind in its natural state*, one allows this flow of consciousness that is shaped by all such factors to “melt” into a progressively primal flow that is called the “essential nature of the mind.” The relation between the manifest and essential nature of the mind may be likened to that between a specialized cell, such as a neuron, and a stem cell. Just as a stem cell is configured by biological factors to become any one of a wide variety of specialized cells, so this primal flow of consciousness, known as the substrate consciousness, is configured by mental and physical factors to become a wide range of human and nonhuman minds.

To review the method of settling the mind in its natural state: While resting in the stillness of awareness, withdraw the attention from all five domains of sensory experience, and focus single-pointedly on the domain of mental events, observing whatever thoughts arise, without following after those pertaining to the past, and without being drawn into thoughts about the future. Do not try to modify, block, or perpetuate any mental events that arise, but simply observe their nature, without letting your attention be drawn away to any referents of thoughts or images. Sustain the flow of mindfulness without being distracted by any objective appearances to your five physical senses, and without identifying with any subjective mental impulses or processes. Sustain the stillness of your awareness in the midst of the movements of the mind. As the Buddha Samantabhadra explains in the *Vajra Essence*, “Fluctuating thoughts do not cease; however, mindful awareness exposes them, so you don't get lost in them as usual. By applying yourself to this practice continuously at all times, both during and between meditation sessions, eventually all coarse and subtle thoughts will be calmed in the empty expanse of the essential nature of your mind. You will become still, in an unfluctuating state in which you experience bliss like the warmth of a fire, luminosity like the dawn, and nonconceptuality like an ocean unmoved by waves.”

The culmination of this process of settling the mind in its natural, or unconfigured, state occurs, as Samantabhadra comments, when:

“finally the ordinary mind of an ordinary being disappears, as it were. Consequently, compulsive thinking subsides and roving thoughts vanish into the space of awareness. You then slip into the vacuity of the substrate, in which self, others, and objects disappear. By clinging to the experiences of vacuity and luminosity while looking inward, the appearances of self, others, and objects vanish. This is the substrate consciousness...in truth you have come to the essential nature [of the mind].

All sensory and mental appearances are illuminated, or made manifest, by this substrate consciousness, but it does not enter into, or cognitively fuse with, these appearances. They do not arise anywhere in physical space, but rather emerge from, are located in, and eventually dissolve back into the immaterial space of the substrate. The substrate is clearly ascertained when the mind has completely settled into its natural state, but you also enter into this state in deep, dreamless sleep, when you faint, and in the culminating phase of the dying process.

As noted above, the three salient characteristics of the substrate consciousness are bliss, luminosity, and nonconceptuality. When experienced from within the context of

the ordinary mind, the three primary mental afflictions of craving, hostility, and delusion are seen to be highly toxic, disruptive influences on the mind. But when these same mental processes are viewed from the perspective of the substrate consciousness, one recognizes that their essential natures correspond respectively to bliss, luminosity, and nonconceptuality, from which each of those afflictions arises. As these primal qualities of the essential nature of the mind become conditioned and manifest in the ordinary human mind, they become afflictive, but their *essential* nature is not toxic in any way.

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The substrate consciousness is known by various names within the Buddhist and other contemplative traditions. In the *Commentary on Bodhicitta*, attributed to the famed Nāgārjuna, it is stated:

When iron approaches a magnet, it quickly spins into place.
Although it has no mind, it appears as though it did.
In the same way, the substrate consciousness has no true existence,
yet when it comes [from a previous life] and goes [to the next]
it moves just as though it were real.
And so it takes hold of another lifetime in existence.

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, especially as interpreted by the Tibetan master Jé Tsongkhapa (1357–1419), this foundational level of consciousness has also been called the “subtle mind” and the “subtle continuum of mental consciousness.” In Theravāda Buddhism the same phenomenon is known as the *bhavanga*, or “ground of becoming,” and the early Mahāsāṅghika school of Buddhism referred to this as a root- (Skt. *mūla*) consciousness that acts as a support (Skt. *āśraya*) for visual consciousness, etc., just as the root of a tree sustains the leaves, etc. The meditative level at which one has completely settled [Page 44] the mind in its natural state corresponds to the achievement of the proximate meditation, or threshold (Skt. *sāmantaka*) of the first dhyāna.

Theravāda Buddhist contemplatives report that when one gains access to the first dhyāna, one experiences a naturally pure, unencumbered, luminous state of consciousness, which manifests when awareness is withdrawn from the physical senses and when the activities of the mind, such as discursive thoughts and images, have subsided. This happens naturally when one falls into dreamless sleep and in the last moment of one's life. This dimension of consciousness is experienced as an undefiled state of the radiant mind that precedes mental activities (Pāli *javana*) and from which such movements of the mind arise. This is the essential nature of the mind that the Buddha referred to in his declaration:

I know of no other single process which, thus developed and made much of, is pliable and workable as is this mind. Monks, the mind which is thus developed and made much of is pliable and workable. Monks, I know of no other single process so quick to change as is this mind.... Monks, this mind is luminous, but it is defiled by adventitious defilements. Monks, this mind is luminous, but it is free from adventitious defilements.

The defilements are called “adventitious” because they are not intrinsic to the mind itself, but come and go. With their removal, the mind's intrinsic luminosity emerges—or, more precisely, becomes manifest. To unlock the power of this natural purity, the mind must be fully “awakened” by meditative training in samādhi, so that its radiant potential is fully activated. The Buddha further indicated that loving-kindness is an innate quality of the luminous mind, and it acts as a primal drive to develop and refine one's mind. In a similar vein, the Buddha seems to be referring to this luminous nature when he comments on the “sign of the mind,” which is ascertained only when the five obscurations have been dispelled with the achievement of śamatha. This, he says, is an indispensable prerequisite for effectively engaging in the foundational vipaśyanā practices of the four applications of mindfulness.

The Ultimate Nature of the Mind

Once the essential nature of the mind has been experientially identified, one is poised to explore the ultimate nature of the mind. Phenomenologically, [Page 45] contemplatives well trained in settling the mind in its natural state, by closely applying mindfulness to the mind, are able to observe how objective mental appearances emerge from and dissolve back into the substrate; and they can note how subjective mental processes emerge from and dissolve back into the flow of the substrate consciousness. But to identify the ultimate nature of mental events, we return to the question of the relation between the whole and parts, specifically, between mental events and their attributes.

Introspectively, contemplatives identify consciousness by way of its defining characteristics, namely, its luminosity and cognizance. But what is the nature of the “whole,” consciousness, relative to its attributes, “luminosity” and “cognizance”? The same analysis can be applied to all mental processes, including desires, thoughts, emotions, and perceptions. Each mental process has its own qualities by which it is identified. Like all other phenomena, the mind is not identical to its attributes, but neither does it exist independently from them. Immediately after determining the primacy of the mind within the triad of the body, speech, and mind, in its discussion of

establishing the mind as baseless and rootless, the *Vajra Essence* proceeds to analyze the mode of existence of the mind. First asking whether the mind has form, and upon determining that it does not, questions are then raised about the source and location of the mind. Does it arise from the physical elements or from space? Can its size be determined, and are the space of the mind and external space outside the body the same or different? The conclusion drawn is that the mind is of the very nature of space—its luminosity is indivisible from space itself—with no duality between external and internal space.

In the Mahāmudrā (the “Great Seal”) and Dzokchen (“Great Perfection”) traditions of Buddhism in particular, the ultimate mode of existence of the mind is analyzed in terms of the origin, location, and dissolution of the mind. Karma Chagmé (1613-78), a renowned master of both Mahāmudrā and Dzokchen, highlights the unique efficacy of first exploring the ultimate, or actual, nature of the mind as a means for subsequently fathoming the ultimate nature of all other phenomena. The training in probing into the origin, location, and dissolution of the mind, he asserts, “cuts through conceptual elaboration from within, so it is easy to learn, easy to understand, easy to know, and easy to realize. Cutting through conceptual elaboration from the outside is like wanting dried pine wood, and drying it by cutting off the pine needles and branches one by one. So that is difficult. In contrast, cutting [Page 46] through conceptual elaboration from within is easy, for it is like cutting the root of the pine tree so that the branches dry up naturally.”

The Tibetan Dzokchen master Lerab Lingpa (1856–1926), also known as Tertön Sogyal, summarizes how the mind’s nature is ascertained as a result of such investigation: “Therefore, however much mere appearances that are empty of causes, consequences, and an essential nature may arise in the aspects of the birth, cessation, and abiding of a deceptive mind — or else in the aspects of its origin, location, and destination — from the very moment they arise, ultimately such movements and transformations have never existed. Recognition of that is known as *realization of the actual nature of the mind*.” His close disciple, Jé Tsultrim Zangpo (1884–1957), elaborates on this point:

First of all, the creator of the whole of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa is this very mind of yours. This point is made in numerous sutras and commentaries. So if you ascertain this mind of yours as being empty of true existence, simply by extending that reasoning you will ascertain all phenomena to be empty of true existence. Thus the guru will enable the disciple to discover how all phenomena depend on the mind, and consequently, how the mind takes a primary role within the context of the body, speech, and mind. Moreover, a person with sharp

faculties who can determine that this mind, which plays such a dominant role, cannot be established as truly existing from its own side, as something really, substantially existent, is someone who can determine the absence of true existence even with subtle reasoning, simply by having been shown partial reasons for establishing that absence. For such a person, just by force of a revelation as to whether or not the mind has any color or shape, and just by force of being taught the reasons why the mind is devoid of any [true] origin, location, or destination, that person will proceed to establish the fact that the mind lacks true existence, by way of subtle reasoning that refutes a subtle object of negation. Thus, by the extraordinary power of relying on such reasoning, people with superior faculties are able to realize the emptiness of all phenomena.

This concise mode of analysis regarding the origin, location, and destination of the mind is emphasized in the Mahāmudrā and Dzokchen traditions [Page 47] of contemplative inquiry as the most effective first step in realizing the emptiness of inherent nature of all phenomena. While Buddhism as a whole presents a wide variety of methods for refining one's attention skills by means of training in śamatha, the strong emphasis in Mahāmudrā and Dzokchen is the practice of settling the mind in its natural state, which is also known as *śamatha focused on the mind*.

In contrast to the common approach of first studying Madhyamaka treatises on emptiness, based on the Perfection of Wisdom sūtras, and then turning to meditation, the great adepts of Mahāmudrā and Dzokchen encourage us first to achieve śamatha by focusing on the mind, and then to be introduced to the Madhyamaka view of emptiness and the Mahāmudrā and Dzokchen views regarding the transcendent nature of consciousness, known as the indwelling mind of clear light, primordial consciousness, or pristine awareness. When the many veils that obscure the essential nature of the mind have been gradually removed through the process of settling the mind in its natural state, the nature of conditioned consciousness is seen nakedly. While sustaining this immediate awareness of the essential nature of the mind, with relative ease one can recognize that it is devoid of its own intrinsic identity, one that could exist independently of the conceptual framework within which it is identified and demarcated from all other phenomena.

As another close disciple of Lerab Lingpa named Lozang Dongak Chökyi Gyatso Chok (1903–57), also known as Dharmasāra, explains:

When engaging in this kind of Mahāmudrā meditation, śamatha is achieved by focusing on the mind, such that one seeks the view on the basis of meditation. In dependence upon this śamatha, the mind is settled with the aspect of things as

they are, once one has correctly determined the birth, cessation, and abiding of the mind as being without identity.

All Buddhists refute the inherent existence of the “I,” or personal identity, for the self is nowhere to be found among the five psycho-physical aggregates either individually or collectively, and it is not to be found apart from those aggregates. Of course, this does not mean that the self does not exist at all, as is sometimes erroneously claimed. For example, the Buddha declared, “It is by one’s self that one purifies oneself,” “there is such a thing as self-initiative,” and “you must be a refuge unto yourself.” Theravāda Buddhists thus assert “personal identitylessness,” but they generally leave unchallenged the assumption that the aggregates and all other phenomena exist truly, or independently, of any conceptual or verbal designation. From a Mahāyāna perspective, those following the Theravāda tradition are thus said to reject “phenomenal identitylessness.”

However, there are sources in the Pāli canon that question the real existence of phenomena other than the self, suggesting that they, too, have a mere nominal existence. The Buddhist nun Vajirā, for example, declares that just as no “being” can be found among the aggregates, so can no chariot be found among its constituent parts. Both the self and a chariot (and by implication all other phenomena) exist only by convention.

Likewise, the arhat Nāgasena makes this same point, drawing on the analogy of a chariot and its parts, in his famous dialogue with King Menander. Some might argue that the paucity of such references in the Pāli canon regarding the merely conventional nature of all phenomena means that one should not read too much into those passages. But the fact that these narratives are included in the canon suggests that they should not be overlooked, and they do provide a direct link to the teachings of the perfection of wisdom, which emphasize the empty nature of all phenomena, including the mind.

The Transcendent Nature of Consciousness

The realization of the emptiness of inherent nature of the mind is common to followers of Sūtrayāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism. By engaging in Sūtrayāna methods of vipaśyanā, on the basis of achieving śamatha, one realizes the empty nature of the mind with respect to the subtle continuum of mental consciousness. But using the extraordinary skillful means of Vajrayāna, particularly those of Mahāmudrā and Dzokchen, one cuts through the conditioned nature of the substrate consciousness and realizes emptiness from the perspective of the transcendent nature of consciousness. The *Vajra Essence* explains:

Previously, your intellect and mentation demarcated outer from inner and grasped at them as being distinct. Now, ascertaining that there is no outer or inner, you come upon the nature of great, all-pervasive openness, which is called *meditation free of the intellect and devoid of activity*. In such a meditative state, motionlessly rest your body without modifying it, like a corpse in a charnel ground. Let your voice rest unmodified, dispensing with all speech and recitations, as if your voice were a lute with its strings cut. Let your mind rest without modification, naturally releasing it in the state of primordial being, without altering it in any way. With these three, dispensing with activities of the body, speech, and mind, you settle in meditative equipoise that is devoid of activity. For that reason, this is called *meditative equipoise*.

In *Buddhahood Without Meditation*, Dūdjom Lingpa clarifies this point:

Although there is no outer or inner with respect to the ground of being and the mind, self-grasping simply superimposes boundaries between outer and inner, and it's no more than that. Just as water in its naturally fluid state freezes solid due to currents of cold wind, likewise the naturally fluid ground of being is thoroughly established as saṃsāra by nothing more than cords of self-grasping.

Recognizing how that is so, relinquish good, bad, and neutral bodily activities, and remain like a corpse in a charnel ground, doing nothing. Likewise, relinquish the three kinds of verbal activity and remain like a mute; and also relinquish the three kinds of mental activity and rest without modification, like the autumn sky free of the three contaminating conditions. This is called *meditative equipoise*. It is also called *transcendence of the intellect*, for by relinquishing the nine kinds of activity, activities are released without doing anything, and nothing is modified by the intellect. In the context of this vital point, you will acquire great confidence within yourself.

In the modern popularization of Dzokchen meditation, many people are introduced to practices called “open presence,” and some teachers misleadingly equate this with other meditative practices variously characterized as “mindfulness,” “bare attention,” “choiceless awareness,” and “open monitoring.” But authentic pith instructions make it perfectly clear that there can be no Dzokchen meditation divorced from Dzokchen view and conduct. This triad of view, meditation, and conduct are inextricably interrelated, so it is impossible to extract any one of these elements of practice from the other [Page 50] two. The practice of cutting through to original pristine awareness, often referred to as “open presence,” entails first cutting through the substrate consciousness to pristine awareness and then sustaining this view of the Great Perfection from that perspective.

This is possible only if one has realized the emptiness of inherent nature of consciousness, and that realization can be robustly sustained only if one has achieved śamatha.

In her commentary to Dūdjom Lingpa's *Buddhahood Without Meditation*, the renowned female Dzokchen adept and treasure-revealer Sera Khandro Dewé Dorjé (1892–1940), spiritual partner of the eldest son of Dūdjom Lingpa, clearly illuminates the view, the meditation, the pristine awareness, and the appearances and mindsets of open presence:

(1) Regarding the view of open presence, the great uniform pervasiveness of the view transcends intellectual grasping at signs, does not succumb to bias or extremes, and realizes unconditioned reality, which is like space. (2) Regarding the meditation of open presence, just as the water of the great ocean is the same above and below, whatever arises is none other than the nature of ultimate reality. Just as water is permeated by lucid clarity, in ultimate reality there is no saṃsāra or nirvāṇa, no joy or sorrow, and so forth, for you realize that everything dissolves into uniform pervasiveness as displays of clear light. (3) Regarding open presence in pristine awareness, just as the supreme mountain in the center of this world system is unmovable, pristine awareness transcends time, without wavering even for an instant from the nature of its own great luminosity. (4) Regarding open presence in appearances and mindsets, all appearing phenomena are naturally empty and self-illuminating. They are not apprehended by the intellect, not grasped by the mind, and not modified by awareness. Rather, they dissolve into great uniform pervasiveness, so they are liberated with no basis for acceptance or rejection, no distinction between luminosity and emptiness, and no room for doubt as to what they are."

While resting in the substrate consciousness, in which thoughts and other activities of the ordinary mind have vanished, one examines the very nature of the mind in which thoughts have ceased, recognizing that it doesn't [Page 51] truly emerge from anywhere, is not truly located anywhere, and it doesn't truly depart to anywhere. It is inherently empty of any real origin, location, and destination. One then examines the nature of the awareness that has come to this realization, recognizing that there is no difference between the awareness *of which* one is aware and the awareness *with which* one is aware. The dichotomy of subject and object melts away. One then rests in open presence, with no striving, no effort, no modification, and no activity of any kind. All the activities of the conditioned mind of a sentient being are suspended, and one cuts through the substrate to realize the emptiness of the open expanse of the space-like nature of awareness.

This is the view of the Great Perfection, in which one experiences the “one taste” of all phenomena of samsāra and nirvāna as equally pure expressions of pristine awareness. The empty essential nature of this awareness is called the *dharmakāya*, its manifest luminous nature is called the *sambhogakāya*, and its spontaneous expressions of limitless compassion are called *nirmānakāyas*. The indivisibility of these three embodiments of the transcendent mind of a buddha is called the *svabhāvikakāya*. The full realization of this transcendent nature of consciousness constitutes the perfect awakening of a buddha, the culmination of all Buddhist practice. One has now fully comprehended the transcendent nature of consciousness, the nature of the mind, and its role in the universe.

The Buddha admonished his followers to put his teachings to the test of reason and experience, rather than simply taking his words on faith: “Monks, just as the wise accept gold after testing it by heating, cutting, and rubbing it, so are my words to be accepted after examining them, but not out of respect [for me].” So rather than regarding the preceding explanation of four aspects of the nature of the mind as matters of religious belief or philosophical speculation, those who are intrigued by this account and are committed to knowing the nature of the mind for themselves should regard this account as a set of hypotheses to be investigated with the utmost rigor. In other words, this account should be viewed as a presentation of Buddhist contemplative science of the mind. It can be tested by anyone with an open mind and sufficient dedication to put these hypotheses to the test of reason and experience, unlike the many materialist speculations about the nature and origins of the mind that are all too often misrepresented as scientific truths.

There are no explicit references in the Pāli canon regarding any unconditioned dimension of consciousness, and with the death of an arhat, the continua of all one's five aggregates, including mental consciousness, are said to [Page 52] cease forever. However, according to these canonical accounts, the Buddha refers to nirvāna as being “unborn, and deathless,” and that it is “peaceful, blissful, auspicious” even beyond death. This implies that there must be a dimension of consciousness that persists after the death of an arhat, and it may be to this that the *Kevaddha Sutta* refers in the following passage:

Where consciousness is signless, boundless, all-luminous,
that's where earth, water, fire, and air have no basis.
There both long and short, small and great, fair and foul—
there “name and form” are wholly destroyed.
With the cessation of consciousness this is all destroyed.

Explanations of pristine awareness in the Great Perfection clearly parallel the teachings on buddha nature in the Mahāyāna canon, specifically those included in the third turning of the wheel of Dharma. The reality of an unconditioned dimension of consciousness is explicitly stated, for example, in the *Mahāparinirvānasūtra*, which states, “The Buddha-Nature of beings is eternal and unchanging.” And the *Śrimaladevisimhanada Sūtra* similarly declares:

The cessation of suffering is not the destruction of a phenomenon. Why? Because the dharmakāya of the Buddha is primordially existent; it is not made, not born, not exhausted, and not to be exhausted. It is permanent, reliable, completely pure by nature, completely liberated from all the sheaths of the mental afflictions...and so it is called the cessation of suffering. This is what is called the *tathāgatagarbha*, dharmakāya freed from the veils of the mental afflictions.

MIND IN THE BALANCE

MEDITATION IN SCIENCE,
BUDDHISM, & CHRISTIANITY

[]

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BUDDHIST

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12 [THEORY]

THE GROUND STATE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

THE GROUND OF BECOMING

According to the earliest accounts of the Buddha's teachings recorded in the Pali language, he said that by focusing awareness upon its own nature, one eventually apprehends the "sign of the mind." The term "sign" in this context refers to the distinguishing characteristics by which one recognizes or remembers something, in this case, the nature of the mind, or consciousness itself.¹ These are the qualities of sheer luminosity and cognance. In order to identify the defining features of consciousness, not just its neural or behavioral correlates, we must treat it like any other natural phenomenon and observe it directly, with clarity and continuity. Historically, scientific inquiry has been based on objective observation, but consciousness cannot be observed objectively or publicly, only in terms of our own subjective experience. As one contemporary philosopher comments, the mistake we must avoid is refusing to take consciousness seriously on its own terms. This may require that we "forget about the history of science and get on with producing what may turn out to be a new phase in that history."²

This new phase may draw heavily on 2,500 years of experiential inquiry into the nature of consciousness in the Buddhist tradition. When one achieves "access concentration" to the first stabilization,

as described in chapter 10, the physical senses become dormant, thoughts and mental images subside, and one's awareness comes to rest in a naturally pure, unencumbered, luminous state known as the *bhavana*, or "ground of becoming." When you identify this relative ground state of consciousness, you come to know the sign of the mind, or the fundamental characteristic by which the mind can be recognized. This ground state is normally inaccessible, as it mainly occurs during deep sleep, so to unlock the power of the *bhavana*, the mind must be fully "woken up" by meditative development, so that its radiant potential may be fully activated.³

The *bhavana* manifests when awareness is withdrawn from the physical senses and the activities of the mind, such as discursive thoughts and images, have subsided. This happens naturally in dreamless sleep and in the last moment of life.⁴ Some early Buddhists regarded the *bhavana* as the root consciousness from which all sensory forms of consciousness and mental activities emerge, much as the branches, leaves, and fruit of a tree grow from its root.⁵

THE DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

According to many advocates of the Mahayana school of Buddhism, consciousness is characterized by two fundamental qualities: luminosity and cognizance.⁶ To get some idea of what is meant by these terms, imagine that you have been immersed in a sensory deprivation tank so efficient that you become entirely unaware of your body and physical environment. Your physical senses pick up nothing. Imagine further that all discursive thoughts, mental images, and other activities of the mind subside. Even in this state of profound inactivity, a kind of vacuity appears to your awareness, and this appearance is produced by the mind's luminous quality. In addition, there is an immediate sense of being aware, and that too is an expression of the mind's luminosity. Consciousness not only *illuminates* this vacuity and its own presence as awareness, it also *knows* that the space of the mind is empty and that there is awareness of that space. That knowing is the cognizance of consciousness, its second defining feature.

Consciousness alone has these two unique qualities. Without it, there are no appearances—no colors, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, or mental images such as dreams. And without it, nothing is known. When the

physical senses are dormant and the activities of the mind are calmed, all that remains is mental awareness, sometimes called introspection. But this term is used in two very different ways: thinking about one's thoughts, emotions, and other mental states and processes, and being aware of the contents of the mind and of awareness itself. Unfortunately, these meanings are often conflated, and this can easily give rise to confusion.

THE SUBSTRATE CONSCIOUSNESS

By engaging in the practice described in the preceding chapter, you may bring previously unconscious memories, fantasies, and emotions of all kinds into the light of awareness. Our common experience of our mental states is heavily edited and processed by the habitual structuring of the mind, so we tend to experience thoughts and emotions that we regard as "normal." But in this training the light of consciousness, like a probe into deep space, illuminates formerly unseen mental processes that seem utterly alien to our past experience and sense of personal identity.

As we consciously expose the deep space of the mind through thousands of hours of observation, we penetrate into normally hidden dimensions that are more chaotic, levels where the order and structure of the human psyche are just beginning to emerge. Strata upon strata of mental processes previously concealed within the subconscious manifest, until finally the mind comes to rest in its natural state, from which both conscious and normally subconscious events arise. This is an exercise in true depth psychology, in which we observe "core samples" of the subconscious mind, cutting across many layers of accumulated conceptual structuring.⁷

The culmination of this meditative process is the experience of the substrate consciousness (*alaya-vijñāna*), which is characterized by three essential traits: bliss, luminosity, and nonconceptuality. Bliss does not arise in response to any sensory stimulus, for the physical senses are withdrawn, as if one were deeply asleep. Nor does it arise in dependence upon pleasant thoughts or mental images, for such mental activities have become dormant. Rather, it appears to be an innate quality of the mind when it has settled in its natural state, beyond the disturbing influences of conscious and unconscious mental activity.⁸ The luminosity of the substrate consciousness is one of the two defining characteristics of consciousness, and it is that which illuminates all the appearances to the mind. Nonconceptuality in this context is experi-

enced as a deep stillness. But it is not absolutely devoid of thoughts, for this dimension of consciousness is subliminally structured by concepts. When you achieve such attentional balance, you have achieved *shamatha*, and you are able to remain there effortlessly for at least four hours, with your physical senses fully withdrawn and your mental awareness highly stable and alert.

The nineteenth-century Tibetan contemplative Dūdjom Lingpa described this process as follows: "Someone with an experience of vacuity and clarity who directs his attention inward may bring a stop to all external appearances and come to a state in which he believes there are no appearances or thoughts. This experience of radiance from which one dares not part is the substrate consciousness."⁹ Tibetan contemplatives believe that the experience of the substrate consciousness yields insights into the birth and evolution of the human psyche. Drawing an analogy from modern biology, this may be portrayed as a kind of "stem consciousness." Much as a stem cell differentiates itself in relation to specific biochemical environments, such as a brain or a liver, the substrate consciousness becomes differentiated with respect to specific species. This is the earliest state of consciousness of a human embryo, and it gradually takes on the distinctive characteristics of a specific human psyche as it is conditioned and structured by a wide range of physiological and, later, cultural influences. The substrate consciousness is not inherently human, for it is also the ground state of consciousness of all other sentient creatures. The human mind emerges from this dimension of awareness, which is prior to and more fundamental than the human, conceptual duality of mind and matter.¹⁰ Both the mind and all experiences of matter are said to come from this luminous space, which is undifferentiated in terms of any distinct sense of subject and object. So the hypothesis of the substrate consciousness rejects both Cartesian dualism, as explained earlier, and the belief that the universe is exclusively physical. Moreover, it may be put to the test of experience, regardless of one's ideological commitments and theoretical assumptions.

A contemplative may deliberately probe this dimension of consciousness through the practice described previously, in which discursive thoughts become dormant and all appearances of oneself, others, one's body, and one's environment vanish. At this point, as in sleeping and dying, the mind is drawn inward and the physical senses become dormant. What remains is a state of radiant, clear consciousness that is the basis for the emergence of all appearances to an individual's mind stream. All phenomena appearing to sensory and mental perception are imbued with this clarity and appear to this empty, luminous substrate consciousness.

Although Buddhism is commonly characterized as refuting the existence of a soul, this description of the substrate consciousness may sound as if the concept of a soul is being reintroduced. Whether or not this is the case depends on how you define the soul. The type of self, or soul, refuted in early Buddhism is characterized as unchanging, unitary, and independent. The substrate consciousness, as described in the Great Perfection tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, consists of a stream of arising and passing moments of consciousness, so it is not unchanging or unitary. Furthermore, it is conditioned by various influences, including preceding moments of awareness within the continuum of the substrate consciousness, so it is not independent. Nor is this dimension of consciousness specifically human; rather, it is the subtle continuum of awareness out of which the human mind emerges during the formation of the embryo and into which the mind dissolves during the dying process. Each time you fall into dreamless sleep, your mind dissolves into the substrate consciousness, which is repeatedly aroused into creating one dream after another, each of which dissolves back into this ground awareness, until eventually you awaken and your waking mind reemerges.

When you first experience this blissful, luminous, conceptually silent state, you may easily conclude that this is nirvana or the ultimate nature of consciousness. But Tibetan contemplatives have been insisting for centuries that it is simply the relative ground state of awareness and experiencing it brings about no permanent liberation of the mind. Panchen Lozang Chökyl Gyaltzen, for instance, comments that the experience of this dimension of consciousness enables one to recognize the phenomenal nature of the mind.¹¹ Dūdjom Lingpa likewise asserts that this experience provides insight into the relative nature of the mind, which is not to be confused with the "clear light awareness" or any other exalted state of realization. Indeed, if you get stuck there, advancing no further in your meditative practice, it will not bring you one step closer to enlightenment.¹²

Understandably, modern scientists have not yet replicated this discovery. As long as methods of investigating the mind are limited to the materialistic approaches of studying the brain and behavior, our understanding of the mind will necessarily be materialistic. And the deeper dimensions of consciousness that become evident only with the achievement of inwardly directed *samadhi* will remain unexplored and unknown. For the materialistic scientist, the existence of the substrate consciousness belongs to the realm of metaphysics. However, for the contemplative adept, it is an empirical fact that can be discovered only with highly refined, stable, vivid attention directed, like a powerful telescope, to the inner space of the mind.

THE SUBSTRATE

When one's mind has settled in its natural state, the empty space of which one is aware is called the substrate (*alaya*).¹³ Describing it is difficult because, at this point, due to the relative absence of thoughts of "I" and "not I," there is no distinct experience of a division between subject and object. You now have a "subjective" awareness of the substrate that appears as your object—a kind of vacuum into which all mental contents have temporarily subsided. The mind may now be likened to a luminously transparent snow globe in which all the agitated particles of mental activities have come to rest.

The substrate is permeated with a field of creative energy known in the Mahayana tradition as the *jiva*, or life force. This energetic continuum, rather than the brain, is considered to be the actual repository of memories, mental traits, behavioral patterns, and even physical marks from one life to the next.¹⁴ All sensory and mental appearances emerge from the space of the substrate, and it has the capacity to generate alternative realities, such as dreamscapes while asleep. When the substrate manifests in dreamless sleep, it is generally unobservable, and its existence can be inferred only on the basis of waking experience. But with thousands of hours of continuous training in developing mental and physical relaxation, together with attentional stability and vividness, it is said that one may directly, vividly ascertain this inner space and observe how mental and sensory phenomena emerge from it in dependence upon a wide range of psychological and physical influences. When the mind of a contemplatively untrained person dissolves into the substrate at death, the person experiences a brief state of oblivion. But a person who has become familiar with the substrate by probing it with samadhi may cross the threshold of death consciously, vividly recognize the substrate for what it is, and thereby die lucidly. Dūdjom Lingpa writes in this regard, "The true substrate is something immaterial, devoid of thought, a space-like vacuity and blankness in which appearances are suspended. Know that you come to that state in deep, dreamless sleep, when you faint, and when you are dead."¹⁵

By carefully examining the substrate with highly focused, sustained attention, one discovers a kind of relativity of space-time pertaining to the observer and the contents of the mind. You begin by examining the "space" between thoughts, which is characterized by the passage of time. That is, the time between mental events is inseparable from the space between them. You may then determine on the basis of your own experience whether this subjective space-time is constant or changes in relation to the flow of contents of the mind. Does the continuum contract and, expand, or remain the

same when thoughts arise? For example, does the space of your mind seem to collapse into thoughts, and does time seem to pass more slowly? If the thoughts have a strong emotional charge, do they influence the space-time of the mind more than thoughts that are emotionally neutral? Do positive thoughts and emotions affect this space-time differently from negative ones, and if so, how?

As you attend to the space of the mind, thoughts and images arise like streams of particles emerging from a vacuum. Fields of positive, negative, and neutral emotions pervade this space, fluctuating from moment to moment, and waves of desire may sweep through, often embedded with thoughts and emotions. The core practice is to observe the arising and passing of all these events, as well as that space-time continuum itself, without letting your awareness collapse.

The Dalai Lama comments on this relativity of space-time,

If you empower your mind by various contemplative practices, a certain realm of reality arises through the maturation of your contemplative insight. Take the example discussed in some Buddhist texts of how meditators in highly evolved states are able to experience eons shrunk into a single instant of time, and also are able to stretch a single instant of time into an eon. From a third person's point of view, what the meditator experiences as an eon is seen only as a single instant. The phenomenon is subjective, unique to the meditator alone.¹⁶

THE CONSERVATION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

The unified dimension of the substrate and substrate consciousness is neither physical space nor the human psyche. Yet all our experiences of objective and subjective phenomena arise from this stratum, and it provides a portal to a subtler dimension of existence at a more fundamental level than our dualistic world of mind and matter.¹⁷ Contemplatives who have explored this immaterial dimension of reality have discovered a principle of conservation of consciousness that manifests in every moment of experience. No constituents of the body—in the brain or elsewhere—transform into mental states and processes. Such subjective experiences do not emerge from the body, but neither do they emerge from nothing. Rather, all objective mental appearances arise from the substrate, and all subjective mental states and processes arise from the substrate consciousness. In the course of a human

life, these mental events are conditioned by the brain and environment, and in turn, they influence the brain, body, and physical environment. But they do not *transform into* those physical phenomena. So contemporary speculations by scientists and philosophers about how the brain produces subjective mental experiences are, from this viewpoint, all based on an unquestioned false assumption: that the brain is solely responsible for the generation of all possible states of consciousness. The explanatory gap in trying to understand how some kinds of neural activity can be equivalent to mental events is unbridgeable, for neural and mental events are never identical.¹⁸

This view is consistent with the hypotheses of Pythagoras, Socrates, Origen, Saint Augustine, and William James, and it is compatible with everything that is currently known about mind-brain interactions. What Buddhism brings to this confrontation between materialistic and contemplative worldviews is a practical way to test this view by first-person experience, namely through the refinement of the attention and the settling of the mind, especially in the samadhi practice of inverting awareness.

William James proposed three different models to account for the correlations between brain processes and subjective experience: the brain produces thoughts, as an electric circuit produces light; the brain releases, or permits, mental events, as the trigger of a crossbow releases an arrow by removing the obstacle that holds the string; and the brain transmits thoughts as a prism transmits light, thereby producing a surprising spectrum of colors.¹⁹ According to the third model, which is the one James advocated, the stream of consciousness may be a different type of phenomenon than the brain that interacts with the brain while we are alive, absorbs and retains the identity, personality, and memories constitutive in this interaction, and can continue without the brain. Contemporary scientific knowledge of the interactions of the mind and brain is compatible with all three hypotheses proposed by James. But neuroscientists, having no experimental methods for investigating this theory, have simply assumed the validity of the first hypothesis, which accords with their materialistic assumptions, which they virtually never question. Buddhist contemplatives have not been constrained by the ideological commitments of materialism. By subjecting consciousness to the most rigorous, experiential scrutiny, they have made discoveries that challenge some of the most fundamental assumptions underlying modern science.

Three Dimensions of Consciousness

Genuine Happiness: Meditation as a Path to Fulfillment

B. Alan Wallace, pp. 164-167

With great compassion we aspire to liberate all beings from suffering and its source, and with the spirit of awakening we seek a way to fulfill this aspiration. In order to give this undertaking a firm footing in reality, we must fathom the nature of awareness. Here is a model of three dimensions of awareness, each of which can be tested through experience. They are:

1. The psyche
2. The substrate consciousness
3. Primordial consciousness

The psyche is the realm of the mind studied by psychologists. It includes the whole range of conscious and unconscious mental processes that are conditioned by the body, especially the brain, in interaction with the environment. These processes are specific to our gender, ethnicity, age, and so on. A major reason for taking an interest in the psyche is to learn to distinguish which of our mental processes are conducive to our well-being and which are not. Buddhist psychology is experiential and pragmatic, encouraging us to answer those questions by observing our own minds and the influences of specific mental states and activities. As our introspective skills improve, we shine a brighter and brighter light on a domain that was previously obscure.

As Buddhist contemplatives have probed the origins of the psyche, they have discovered that it emerges from an underlying dimension called the substrate consciousness, an individual continuum of consciousness that carries on from one lifetime to the next, storing memories and other personal character traits over time. Comparing this view to that of current neuroscience, your psyche is conditioned by brain synapses, neurotransmitters, and other neural processes, but it is not located in the brain, nor is it an emergent property of the brain and its interaction with the environment, as neuroscientists now believe.

The existence of the substrate consciousness is not simply a metaphysical speculation, but a hypothesis that can be put to the test of contemplative experience. This is not an easy task, and it is not a hypothesis that can be tested by studying the brain alone. It is a challenge that can be taken on by seasoned contemplatives who have already achieved meditative quiescence. Through such practice you turn your attention into a powerful beam of refined, focused, luminous awareness, cutting like a laser through the

turbulent, superficial strata of your psyche. As the murkiness and perturbations of discursive thoughts calm, the space of the mind becomes increasingly transparent. Many Buddhist contemplatives of the past and present claim that you can then tap into the substrate, systematically accessing memories of previous lives that have been imprinted on this continuum of consciousness. These may include memories of your home, personal possessions, friends, livelihood, and the manner of your death.

The substrate consciousness can also be indirectly inferred on the basis of research done on children who report valid past-life memories and even show physical characteristics, birthmarks and the like, that trace back to their previous lives. Scientific investigations in this field have been done by the psychiatrist Ian Stevenson, who summed up forty years of research in his recent book, *Where Reincarnation and Biology Intersect*. So, apart from the reports of contemplatives, there seems to be indirect scientific grounds for asserting the existence of an individual substrate consciousness that carries on from one lifetime to the next.

The aspiration of the spirit of awakening begins to look feasible when we consider the possibility of our spiritual maturation continuing from one lifetime to the next. If our existence were confined to this life alone, bodhicitta would be a mere flight of fancy, because in this life alone we have no chance of alleviating the suffering of all beings. If each of us participates in a stream of consciousness that flows to a future without end, however, then there is plenty of time to heal others. The Dalai Lama often quotes this verse from *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*: "For as long as space remains, for as long as sentient beings remain, so long may I remain for the alleviation of the suffering of the world."

Beyond the realm of the substrate consciousness, contemplatives from various traditions around the world and throughout history have discovered a third dimension of awareness, called in Buddhism primordial consciousness. This transcends the conceptual constructs of space and time, subject and object, mind and matter, and even existence and nonexistence. This dimension of consciousness is ineffable and inconceivable, but, as with the psyche and substrate consciousness, it can be experientially explored by means of meditation. Here meditative quiescence alone is not enough. This requires rigorous training in contemplative insight, or vipashyana, by which we break through all conceptual constructs and the "hardening of our categories" to the point that we can settle into the empty and luminous nature of awareness itself.

A couple of years ago, I asked my late friend and colleague Francisco Varela, a distinguished neuroscientist, whether this Buddhist view is compatible with modern scientific understanding of the brain. He jokingly responded that this was a "brutal

Chapter Three
The Path to Śamatha: An Overview

THE FOUR IMMEASURABLES
Practices to Open the Heart

B. Alan Wallace

Edited by
Zara Houshmand

THE NINE STAGES OF THE PATH TO ŚAMATHA

The Tibetan Buddhist tradition presents a very clear map of the path to *śamatha*, going all the way from the beginning of the practice to its culmination. It begins right here where your feet are now—not at the level of a super-monk or an advanced yogi—and it marks out a progression of nine distinct stages prior to the accomplishment of *śamatha*. Knowing the progression is helpful, but not because you should be marking your progress, competing against a standard, even against your own personal best. It is helpful because the problems that arise in each stage are distinct and require different remedies.

1. Mental Placement

Accomplishing the first stage means that you can find your object. You find it, the teachings say, by hearing about it: you hear what you are supposed to do, and then you do it. If you are studying under a traditional Tibetan teacher, you might well be instructed to take a statue of the Buddha, gaze at it, and then visualize it. If you can see the image in your mind's eye, you have accomplished the first stage. Doing breath awareness, you are told to attend to the tactile sensations of the passage of the breath at the apertures of the nostrils or above

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the upper lip. Some people don't get it immediately; they find nothing there. When you can direct your attention there, and feel some sensation—note when the breath is coming in, when the breath is going out—then you have accomplished it.

2. Continual Placement

Continual placement means that you are able to attend to your meditative object, free of gross excitation, for about a minute without forgetting it altogether. The Tibetans measure it as the time it takes to recite OM MANI PADME HŪM once around the rosary, or one hundred and eight times.

There's nothing magical about that duration, but maintaining such a degree of continuity is a signpost. It implies you have some actual continuity in your attention. At the first stage you have virtually no continuity at all. You pop in and out for a second or two at a time, a staccato meditation, and then you're gone for five or ten seconds. The second stage moves towards continuity, although there still can be plenty of peripheral noise. There's probably background chatter in the mind, and your object may not be very clear. It could be extremely fuzzy, but at least you're not losing it.

You accomplish the second stage, it is said, by the power of reflection: the chief element that makes the transition from the first to the second stage possible is mindfulness.

A crucial issue here—I can't emphasize this too strongly—is relaxation. Especially if you tend to become very goal-oriented in the practice (and I must say it practically invites goal-orientation), it is very easy, upon having found the object to grit your teeth and bear down with the resolve: "I'm going to get this continuity if it kills me!" You will get continuity, and it may indeed kill you if you go about with that muscular approach to *samatha*. You've forgotten all about ease and relaxation, forgotten that maybe you should enjoy this practice. It's called *quiescence* for a reason.

The transition from the first to the second stage (or between any two stages on the way to *samatha*) happens gently, gradually. It does not happen overnight, or from one day to

another, but rather as a gradient. You find that, more and more frequently, real periods of continuity become the norm. The way to move from the first attentional state to the second is by sustaining the relaxation and applying a subtle degree of effort to maintaining the attention. The continuity must not be won at the expense of relaxation. If you forget that, you will waste a lot of time, and frankly, the only reason to have a meditation teacher is so you don't waste so much time.

What does the second stage feel like? It feels good. It's not blissful, certainly not continuously, though you may have a little flash of bliss once in a while. But there is a calm soothing quality to it. It's very quietly pleasant and it's not boring any more. You can do it for an hour, even two or three hours, without feeling bored. It's not terrifically high quality, and it's not intensely interesting, but it is just quietly pleasant and that's worth something.

3. Patched Placement

The third attentional state is called patched placement, for the attention is patched like a piece of clothing. It's like having a pair of blue jeans with a hole here and there, but the holes are patched and there is a lot of fabric that doesn't have holes in it. At this point, you can stay on the object by and large for thirty minutes, forty five minutes, an hour. For that length of time you completely lose touch with it or occasionally forget all about it as a result of gross excitation. But you get it back pretty quickly; you are not gone for long periods of time. The object is not perfectly clear, and you have some background chatter at least intermittently, but you don't lose your attention altogether for long

4. Close Placement

With the accomplishment of the fourth attentional state, close placement, your mind is imbued with a deep sense of calm and you don't lose the object any more for hours at a time. You don't lose the object not because you're holding on for

dear life; rather you have too much stability for the boat to rock so far over that your attention slips off and rolls into the ocean of distraction. You have very good ballast.

Once again, you have gained this chiefly by the power of mindfulness, and at this point gross excitation is temporarily overcome. How do you develop the stability and increase the staying power of your mindfulness? Simply by doing it. It takes patience more than any special technique: you go back to it, again and again and again. It is said that, at the fourth stage, the power of mindfulness reaches its fruition and come into its full strength.¹⁰ It is a fairly simple practice up to this point, with the one caveat that you must progress through these stages without loss of relaxation. If you find your face starting to squinch up, your muscles starting to tense or your breath becoming irregular because you're trying too hard, you will only accomplish facsimiles of these stages. They will have no foundation. They will fall apart, and you'll get exhausted in the process.

When you have reached the fourth attentional state and there is a lot of continuity in your mindfulness, you are especially prone to laxity. This is the time when introspection, the monitor of the process of meditation, becomes especially important. You need to watch very closely, though intermittently, to see whether laxity is arising. The chief task at the fourth state, as you orient yourself towards the fifth attentional state, is to get rid of gross laxity. Gross laxity occurs when the vividness of the attention fades out. The remedy is to pay closer attention. You give a little more effort to it, but too much effort will undermine your stability and cause turbulence again. It's a balancing act, and it takes trial and error to master this stage. Give it just the right amount of effort to sustain the stability and improve the vividness. Improving vividness is like focusing more and more finely with the lens of your attention: one of the characteristics of enhanced vividness is that you see greater detail. I think we in the West have a different understanding of the word "effort" than the Tibetan implies. For us effort seems to be such a gross thing, but the intention of this type of effort is to become more and more subtle.

You may find that you still have a considerable amount of mental background noise through the fourth stage. This is not like an ordinary wandering thought, but more like a split focus: you are concentrating on the breath, but you can still hear a conversation going on in your mind at the same time. It's often like overhearing somebody else's conversation in which you have no role whatsoever. Or it may take the form of imagery, a slide show or a movie that appears on the periphery of your awareness.

After some time, when you've achieved good stability, a mental image similar to a spontaneous visualization may appear in the area where you have been attending. Most commonly it takes the form of a little pearl of light, or a small mesh, or cotton ball, or spider web of light. At first it will come just occasionally, and you should not pay much attention: treat it nonchalantly. Gradually it will stabilize and become routine. When it arises regularly of its own accord whenever you sit down to your meditation, then it's time to shift the focus of your attention. You move your focus from the tactile sensations of the breath and place your attention on the image that has arisen. That naturally arisen mental image, or "sign" (*nimitta*), then remains your object up to the time you reach *śamatha*. There is no definite time when that sign will appear, but it may begin to show up occasionally as early as in the third attentional state.

5. *Taming*

At the transition from the fourth state to the fifth, it is particularly important not to lose stability in the move toward greater vividness, just as it was important not to lose relaxation by increasing your stability. The main emphasis of the fifth stage, called taming, is to enhance your vividness. Now you really begin to see the advantages of this attentional training, and you take delight in it. Coming into the fifth stage you are already free of gross excitation, but now your task is to overcome gross laxity. By paying closer attention to the object of meditation, you enhance the vividness of your attention,

thereby achieving a greater “density” of moments of clear mindfulness directed upon the chosen object.

Some of the great commentators on this practice such as Tsongkhapa point out that laxity at this stage has been a real pitfall in the past for many Tibetan contemplatives. Lacking thorough theoretical training in this practice, they achieve this state and mistake it for *samādhi*, because they are not losing the object any more. But they remain in a state of gross laxity, devoid of the potency of vividness. If a dedicated meditator does this for ten or twelve hours a day, and for months at a time, Tsongkhapa and others report that one’s intelligence wanes.¹¹ The long-term, karmic results are even worse. So it is important not to succumb to laxity, but to recognize it and counter it: enhance the vividness of your attention.

6. *Pacification*

The chief agenda going into the sixth state, called pacification, is to get rid of even subtle excitement. By the time you accomplish the sixth state, your senses are pretty much withdrawn and you have very little input, if any, from the external environment. At this point, all emotional resistance to the meditation has vanished, and the continuity of your attention is now very tightly woven.

7. *Complete Pacification*

Having accomplished the sixth stage, there is still room for improvement in terms of vividness and overcoming subtle laxity. When you have subtle laxity, the object is clear, but it could still be clearer: there is room to heighten the pitch of vividness. What you’re looking for now is intense vividness. It’s very easy to be complacent at this point, but there is still ground to be gained. When you have overcome even the most subtle laxity, you have achieved that seventh attentional state, which is called complete pacification. By now you should have moved from the tactile sensations at the nostrils and you are focusing on the mental “sign” of the breath.

You still need introspection, because what you have accomplished at this point is not immutable. Problems could still crop up here and there. Some laxity or some subtle excitement could set in on occasion. The task of introspection now is like the job of attending to a sonar scope. It may not be likely that you are going to see a blip, but if a blip comes up you’ve really got to see it immediately.

8. *Single-Pointed Placement*

When you reach the eighth state, called single-pointed placement, there is virtually no danger of any kind of laxity or excitement arising. You give a little bit of effort at the beginning of the session, and when you get started it goes effortlessly. You are cruising, and you really don’t need introspection much at this point. It’s very, very unlikely that any problems will arise. Your external senses at this time will be shut down; you will not hear anything. You’re locked in, and you just continue with that. Log your hours. You want the mind to get accustomed to this state, creating a deeper and deeper groove.

9. *Balanced Placement*

By the power of familiarity with the eighth attentional state, you attain the ninth, which is called balanced placement. This is more of the same. The only difference is that in the ninth attentional state you don’t need any effort at all. You slip into the meditative state and remain for hours. It’s a breeze. Progress is still happening, however. You may think you’re just biding time, hanging out, although it’s certainly not boring. But just by abiding in this state, transformations are taking place. The energies are moving around, getting readjusted in the body. You are getting a new circuitry, in a sense.

THE ACHIEVEMENT OF ŚAMATHA

The achievement of *śamatha* entails the freedom from both gross and subtle excitement, and gross and subtle laxity. You can enter into the meditation upon your chosen object and

sustain it indefinitely, free of laxity and excitation. Your mind comes to the object and the other senses shut down. You are utterly intent upon the object, but now it becomes effortless, you don't need to hold on tightly. It is effortless because you are now beyond any need for introspection, beyond the need to apply antidotes for problems. It is as effortless as a hockey puck sliding on frictionless ice. This effortlessness comes just prior to *samatha*, but as you become more familiar with this effortless *samādhi*, then *samatha* clicks in.

The actual attainment of *samatha* is an event, and it will not leave you wondering whether or not it happened: it will come in like the Star Spangled Banner, at a specific time—it's that identifiable. Even though prior to that you are totally focused in the mental realm, when *samatha* takes place you feel a radical shift in the physical body. A rush of unprecedented ecstasy arises in the body and mind. You may experience foretastes of it prior to attaining *samatha*, but it comes on in an unprecedented fashion with actual *samatha*. This ecstasy that saturates the entire body and mind is not very useful, but it is a clear marker. It tapers off and the mind settles into a state of very grounded, vivid effortlessness stability, with an echo of that bliss. The body also acquires an unprecedented quality of buoyancy and pliancy. The body and mind are now very fit for service, and the pleasure involved is not so overwhelming that it interferes. And at that point, you have attained *samatha*.

Is achieving *samatha* really possible? It may not be feasible for everyone, but it is generally within reach. The experience of people who did a one-year retreat in 1988 led by the Tibetan contemplative Gen Lamrimpa was very inspiring. It gives me a high degree of confidence that if we approach it very traditionally, if we attend closely to the causes and conditions, the prerequisites and the environment, that we have just as much chance of accomplishing *samatha* now in the modern West as they had in Tibet five hundred years ago, or in India twenty-five hundred years ago. They don't say you have to do the prerequisites *and* be a genius. They just say: Do

the prerequisites, set up the right environment, and here's the technique. It is pretty straightforward.

It is possible if you apply yourself to it earnestly and with perseverance. A brief stab at it does not work. So a lot depends on the individual, and how oriented one is towards it, but if I didn't believe that it was within reach, I wouldn't bother to teach it. I just don't care about things you can only talk about, things you can't practice and achieve.

Even if you never achieve *samatha*, any progress towards that end is valuable. Moreover, any progress towards *samatha* can also be used towards other things: for the cultivation of compassion, or for any other worthwhile venture. Creativity opens up a lot through this process. Tibetans don't have a word for creativity as such, so that was an unannounced bonus from doing this type of practice. The practice also tends to bring a very powerful integrative quality to one's understanding.

If you really want to achieve *samatha*, there is a time-tested prescription: radically simplify your life for a period and practice in such a way that your whole life is focused on *samatha* meditation. It's been done with success many times and people know it works. There is another approach that is not so well proven, but could be very interesting. A Tibetan lama recently said that, in principle, it's possible to attain *samatha* even while leading an active life. But it has to be a very unusual active life. If leading an active life means that your mind is scattered among your activities, turbulent and anxious, moving compulsively to the past and future, then *samatha* is not possible. If you could engage in action with calm and with the presence of mind to simply do what needs to be done, it is possible in principle to achieve *samatha* in an active way of life. You would need to set aside periods throughout the day for *samatha*, and you could not afford to let your activity become compulsive, frenetic, or agitated. As an approach, it's more risky: it has not been proven very often. But for those of you who are more adventurous, accomplishing *samatha* in an active life would be headline news, an important breakthrough

for Dharma in the modern world. Accomplishing *śamatha* even by traditional methods, in solitude, would be fantastic. I would love to see several Westerners do it, because that could bring about a major transformation.

When I first received training in a Tibetan monastery in 1973, the prospects were extremely daunting. We were about to begin learning in detail about the five sequential paths to omniscience. The first path begins when you are a *bodhisattva*; eventually you have your first unmediated experience of ultimate reality, and there are nine stages after that. We were about to embark on a six-year training program to learn in detail about those five paths and ten stages, which start from the time you have an unmediated experience of the ultimate! It was impossible for me to relate to this material experientially. I wanted a practice I could actually do.

Whatever goals one might hope to achieve, it's always good to come back to things that are within reach. Living an active way of life, the demands are sometimes heavy. I confront this a lot in my own life, and especially when I need to travel it's hard to maintain a substantial meditative practice. I like to do three or four hours per day, and it's really hard on jets and with moving around a lot. When I've been traveling a great deal, I begin to wonder if I am really getting anywhere in the meditation. But then I look at what I'm doing, and ask myself if all this activity is worthwhile. And I think, yes, these are all meaningful activities. None of it is trivial. I'm rather keen on meditation, but the bulk of my waking hours per day are not spent in formal meditation, and that time spent actively really is the platform of my life.

THE PREREQUISITES FOR ACHIEVING ŚAMATHA

How do we bridge the gulf between our active lives and the goal of achieving *śamatha*? Addressing the traditional prerequisites for *śamatha* is a very practical start. Even if you are not particularly interested in *śamatha*, the prerequisites are good guidelines for a meaningful grounded, balanced, and vigilant way of life.

1. A Suitable Environment

The first prerequisite is a suitable environment. This is the easiest and most mundane of the six: it merely costs money. A suitable environment is a very straightforward requirement, but upon careful inspection it also turns out to be quite unusual.

As traditionally defined (which assumes a retreat situation), a suitable environment is one that is quiet, without the sound of people talking by day or dogs barking at night, for example. It should be safe so you don't need to worry about bandits, muggers, vipers, lions, tigers, or elephants. It should be a clean and healthy environment, one where you feel comfortable. You feel at home and enjoy the place. It should not feel like an alien, let alone a hostile environment. It should be very easy to meet the basic needs for sustenance: food, clothing, and lodging. For people who are starting out as novices in the practice, it's best not to be completely isolated but it's also good not to be with a whole crowd of people. Three or four companions would be optimal. You would not necessarily be meditating in the same room but nearby. The reason for having a few companions is to lighten up, have some friendly conversation during the breaks. Deep solitude can become very heavy and it helps to balance the practice with some warmth of human companionship, a sense of comradeship. This is your Saṅgha, your community. It's very nice for your environment to have a place where you can gaze out over big horizons. That means having not just sky, but also specifically a far distant view you can focus on.

It's interesting to note that Tibet had a wonderfully high percentage of yogis: something about the environment was appropriate there. I can't help but wonder whether the high altitude helped. Some of the yogis from Tibet had a much harder time when they came down to India. But if you should think about going on retreat in Asia, you might want to think again. There are eight hundred million Indians in India, and it's very hard to find a place that's really quiet. Health is always an issue, food is an issue, visas are an issue, the cultural differences are an issue. As the yogi Gen Lamrimpa said,

"You've learned the teaching, why don't you just go back home? It's so much nicer to meditate in North America than it is here." So, it's not that easy to find a really suitable place. But it is feasible if people have the intention and can afford it. And Americans are fortunate in this: we have lots of land. I dream especially of retreats in the great, vast spaces of the Southwest.

Environment is as important to practice in an active life as it is to a retreat. For brief periods I have lived in environments where the problems were bigger than I was, and I could not flourish. I tried and I tried to rise to the challenge, but I found it so hostile, adversarial, and unsupportive, that I couldn't—that was the long and short of it. I found myself unable to control feelings of injustice and resentment. Finally I realized I did not have to stay there. Why not move? A simple shift of environment allowed a happy mind again. It may be a living environment, or an occupation. Perhaps your job is just a rotten place to be, and engaging in that kind of activity eight hours a day will tear you apart. If you are defeated it is better to shift. Of course, there are still issues to deal with, but you don't need to subject yourself to challenges beyond your capacities. The environment has a lot to do with your sense of contentment and satisfaction, and it is important to be easily satisfied.

2. *Contentment*

The second prerequisite is contentment. This simply means being satisfied with the given: attending to what is present, in terms of the quality of your food, clothing, lodging, and so forth, and being content with it. In other words, don't fantasize about all the things you don't have, but look at what you do have and be content with that. This is very specific and not an unreachable ideal.

3. *Having Few Desires*

The flip side of the coin of contentment is having few desires. Of course, you need to have some desires: if you run out of food you need to get some more. But let them be few and simple.

4. *Ethical Discipline*

The fourth prerequisite is pure ethical discipline. This doesn't mean you have to be a saint. "Pure" doesn't necessarily mean you have perfected ethical discipline. The ten precepts are a good framework: avoid killing, sexual misconduct, stealing, lying, slander, idle gossip, malice, avarice, and false views. Attend to these precepts and if you break them, then seek to recognize it as swiftly as possible. Recognize it as harmful, and develop a resolve not to indulge in such injurious activity in the future.

5. *Having Few Concerns*

The fifth prerequisite, having few concerns, really confronts the issue of whether it is possible to achieve *śamatha* in the context of an active way of life. Traditionally, the way to have few concerns would be to radically simplify your lifestyle. That's a tried and tested way. But is it possible to have a more normal life, engaged in an occupation, encountering people, and still keep the mind simple? If one can avoid having the mind compulsively concerned with a whole myriad of details and issues, then in principle it may be possible to develop *śamatha* in the context of an active way of life. At first glance it looks impossible, given my lifestyle. And yet, in my experience, the quantity of activity is not really the main issue here. There are times when I have relatively few things to do and still my mind is unbelievably cluttered with concerns, enmeshed like a fly in a spider's web. There are other times when my mind is healthy and balanced and very peaceful even though I have a lot to do. At these times the mind is simply uncluttered: it moves appropriately from one thing to another, and at the end of the day everything that needed to be done got done. In that sense, the mind never has a lot of activities; it only has one activity: what it's doing right now. When it's finished with that, then it's doing something else. But that's all it's doing. A mind like this does not have a multitude of competing activities; it is just doing what needs to be done. It's a very practical way to live.

6. Avoiding Compulsive Ideation

The sixth prerequisite is to get rid of compulsive ideation completely, especially concerning desires. Such compulsive ideation includes cravings for delicious food, for sex, wealth, fame, and so on. One retreatant described this in a delightful way. He was doing well and had found a lot of serenity in the practice, but compulsive ideation would arise in the form of goofy desires. In the midst of the retreat a spiel started to arise in his mind: "Maybe I'll be the first Westerner to attain *śamatha*. And if I do, I might get on the Johnny Carson Show!" When he told us, of course he was laughing at himself, but that's an example of one form of compulsive ideation.

I find this the hardest prerequisite of all. Getting rid of compulsive ideation completely is a pretty tall order. But so much of the mundane stuff that floods our minds all day long does not really need to be thought. What do you do about it? *Vipassanā*, or mindfulness practice, is especially helpful for this. It doesn't require the iron-clad focus or pinpoint concentration of deep *samādhi*. You do, however, need to become present in your senses, to calm the mind and bring it into the present. It's a fine practice and you can do it anywhere. You can practice while in conversation, while making food, while having a great time. It can even be done in New York City for short periods of time! This type of meditation is not the same as formal sitting. It's a more open-faced presence, open to the world. So often if we try to focus the mind, especially with eyes closed, we just get lost in rambling thoughts: going outside may be the perfect antidote. I was just sitting outside in a chair quietly watching some bees go for the flowers, and I could easily imagine doing that for an hour. But it means paying attention, not becoming bleary-eyed. In fact it means being very, very present. It's a grounded, beneficial practice. It's easy to see that if you get really good at watching bees on flowers, or watching a tree, or just walking quietly, then shifting from that to sitting quietly and being present in your body is a simple matter. And from that you can make a seamless transition to attending quietly to your breath, and proceed into the nondiscursive meditation.

When I look at my present lifestyle, I know that I don't have a lot of time for formal meditation, though I do what I can. But I can cultivate the six prerequisites in an active way of life. If one day I decide to do another traditional *śamatha* retreat, the retreat will go well to the extent that I have already cultivated those prerequisites and made them part of my life. If I still have a lot of homework to do, then I could spend a whole year in a *śamatha* retreat and achieve nothing except frustration. The six prerequisites are not discrete goals, states that you have accomplished or not. Rather, insofar as you bring them into your life, your life is made more meaningful.

FIVE OBSTRUCTIONS TO PROGRESS IN ŚAMATHA

The traditional teachings on *śamatha* define five obstructions, or hindrances, to progress in the practice. It is helpful to know what they are. If you suddenly have a major accident as you cruise down the road to *śamatha*, it's useful to know which brick wall you've just run into.

1. Ill Will

Ill will is the first obstacle, baggage that you cannot take with you into *śamatha*. Ill will simply cannot be sustained at the same time as you progress in the cultivation of *śamatha*. It's very possible that when you sit down to practice you'll say: "No problem; I carry no ill will, I'm happy." But when you descend into the depths of the mind, you start to stir things up like a scuba diver stirring up the mud. If there is a little bit of ill will, some old resentment lingering there, the *śamatha* may well tweak it and say: Are you alive or are you dead? And if it's alive, it will pop up and you have to clear it out. If you become absorbed in it, then you've just dropped your diver's lead belt and you are floating back up to the surface again.

It would be nice if your venture into *śamatha* were as uncomplicated as possible, so you did not repeatedly need to stop and do more homework. That's one of the advantages, one of the purposes in fact, of the loving-kindness and compassion practices: to clear the obstacles as much as possible before your *śamatha* practice.

2. Sensual Desire

The second obstacle is sensual desire. This is not to say that between sessions you should not enjoy the senses, things such as sound, fragrance, vision, the wonderful food you have or the stunning scenery. If, however, during a meditation session you start to crave these things, the craving will stop you in your tracks. I remember a five-week group retreat I did with a number of monks when I was meditating in a monastery. There was one monk in whom intense lust was somehow catalyzed by the meditation, and it was really painful for him. After all, he was a monk and was not going to act on his lust, but it stopped him in his tracks and he had a very hard time.

So, go ahead and enjoy the sensual, but recognize that fine demarcation between enjoying something when it presents itself as opposed to craving it when it's not there. One can simply enjoy a meal, and when it's finished, the meal is completely finished. If one has a sense of contentment and simplicity, that's enough. It's a matter of priorities, of orientation in one's life. If you orient your life such that sensual gratification is a priority—that happiness lies in a better hi-fi, a faster car—then that's your agenda. But that's not the agenda of *sāmatha* and you can't have both simultaneously. It really is a matter of choice, but it's not a matter of tyrannical asceticism. Rather simply, if you are meditating quietly and thoughts of sensual desires come in and grab your mind, then your *sāmatha* just ended. It is something that needs to be released.

3. Lethargy and Sleepiness

The third road block is lethargy and sleepiness. Again, this is not to say you should never feel lethargic or sleepy; that would be silly. But while you are meditating, if these qualities dominate the mind, then your *sāmatha* has just come to an end. So sleep well. Get enough sleep before your meditation. Don't try to deal with them simultaneously, it's much better just to take a nap.

4. Excitation and Anxiety

The fourth hindrance consists of two obstacles. The first, "excitation," is a form of mental turbulence or agitation that has desire at its root. The second obstacle here has the connotation of anxiety, specifically that driven by guilt.

As in the case of sensual desires, this is a matter of priorities, of orientation in life. There are people who simply orient their life around anxiety. If good things happen, they may stop briefly; if bad things happen they get worse. There are always grounds for anxiety. It doesn't matter how much money you have in the bank, if you're afraid you won't have enough. If your life is oriented toward anxiety, the chances are extremely good that it will crop up rather dominantly in the meditation. Hopefully we can reduce this to mere episodes: "Ah, there it is! And there it goes." Clear it out or it will stop your *sāmatha* practice.

5. Skepticism

The final obstacle can be translated as skepticism, but it also has the connotation of perplexity, hesitation, and uncertainty. You probably know people whose lives are oriented around uncertainty, who can't really move in any one direction. Everything is tentative, innately fearful; nothing is quite sure. Again, if that dominates one's life, it is bound to crop up in the meditation and stop it cold. It may be catalyzed through the meditation, or even focus on the practice. You find yourself wondering: "Do I have a chance at this? Is it worthwhile? Is there any point to this?" Such perplexity goes in circles; the only answer is to go back to the practice or give up altogether.

That uncertainty or skepticism is very different from another type of doubt that is enormously helpful, in fact indispensable to the spiritual path: the critical mind. Ideas present themselves that we don't automatically believe—Is there a continuity of consciousness after death? Do we really have the capacity for unlimited compassion? We hear things and test them: What's the evidence? What's the counter-evidence?

Does the theory hold together? Check it out. This type of doubt is not a hindrance at all. It is a vital part of the cultivation of wisdom and insight. If you don't have it, you have nothing but dumb faith. The kind of doubt that is a hindrance just stands there helplessly, without moving forward, saying, "Gee, I don't know. I'm not sure."

The simple answer to dealing with the five obstructions is not to orient one's life around them. Recognize them when they come up. Some we should release altogether: there is no use at all for ill will. Others we put in their place, de-emphasizing them: sensual enjoyment has a valid role to play, but there is no room for sensual craving. Not letting your life rotate around any of these five puts you in a good position to carry through with the *samatha* practice.

Now the good news. The *samatha* practice itself is very helpful for clearing out the five obstacles. The practice develops a progression of five mental qualities that are effectively antidotes to the five obstacles. They are called the five factors of meditative stabilization, and *samatha* is the access, or threshold, to genuine meditative stabilization (*dhyāna*).

THE FIVE FACTORS OF STABILIZATION

1. Applied Attention

Applied attention is very simply the conscious directing of attention, in which you sit down and say to your mind, "This is what I want to attend to: focus here." Applied attention tends to act as a direct remedy for lethargy and sleepiness. With applied attention we now have something to do other than just spacing out.

2. Close Examination

Once you have applied your attention to the object, then you can enhance it by attending more closely. This happens especially when you have some stability and can now move toward greater vividness. Attending more closely acts as an antidote

for skepticism. There's no space for skepticism or uncertainty. The dominos of our moments of attention are spaced too closely. At this point you are doing only one thing: examining closely.

3. Zest

Following the close examination of the object, the next stabilization factor of zest arises. It begins by percolating up as interest: you start attending with a greater sense of interest. It's not something contrived, but rather flows right out of the process itself. The sense of interest mounts. The better your meditation proceeds, the more interesting it gets, until it evolves into zest. The zest increases until it becomes a state of ecstasy, and that acts as an antidote to ill will.

4. Joy

Out of the heightening progression from interest, to zest, to ecstasy, there arises joy—simply a sense of well-being. This joy acts as an antidote to both excitement and anxiety. It sweeps away both the desire-driven turbulence of the mind and remorseful, guilt-driven anxiety.

5. Concentration

The Buddha declared: "For one who is joyful, the mind becomes concentrated." Concentration, or *samādhi*, arises out of joy, when that joy comes not because you are thinking about something nice, not because of a pleasurable stimulus, but rather out of the balanced nature of the mind itself. And concentration finally eliminates the last remaining obstacle, sensual desire. When the mind goes into *samādhi*, sensual desire vanishes. It's not because you've become a great ascetic, but because you've found something so much better than anything sensual pleasure can offer.

So the good news is that if you can at least keep the five hindrances in abeyance so they don't intrude into the *samatha* practice, then the practice itself will eliminate them. When *samatha* is actually accomplished, those five obstacles are gone.

They are not necessarily eradicated forever, but like unwellcome house guests who have been sent on their way, you are free of them for the time being.

ON THE CHOICE OF AN OBJECT IN ŚAMATHA PRACTICE

In the Tibetan tradition, the object of meditation for *śamatha* practice is usually a visualization, for example an image of the Buddha, rather than the tactile sensations of the breath. Tibetan practice is very strong on visualization because almost all of Tibetan practice is directed towards Vajrayāna. Visualization and the creative power of imagination play a very strong role in Vajrayāna and Tibetan practice is gearing up for this right from the beginning. Breath awareness is a technique practiced more commonly in Southeast Asia, where much more emphasis is placed on mindfulness than on imagination.

One of the great advantages of breath awareness as an object for *śamatha*, as opposed to a visualization, is that it is much easier to get started. Most people need an awful lot of effort to get a visualization going. You have to create your object rather than find it. I've hardly met a Westerner who can sustain a visualization for a long period of time and not get exhausted. If you actually attain *śamatha* in a visualization practice, the stability and the vividness are enhanced to such a degree that your visualized object appears as clearly as if it were physically present. Moreover it is self-radiant, and you can maintain it effortlessly for hours on end with no physical discomfort.

Another possible object for *śamatha* meditation is the mind itself, as taught in the Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen traditions.¹² Some people find it discouraging, because the object can be very elusive and yet if one can do it, it can be very, very rewarding. You start with breath awareness, but when the mind becomes very still, you disengage your awareness from the breath and turn it right in on awareness itself. This is not the same as *vipassanā* inquiry, looking for the "I," but rather you are looking into the nature of awareness itself. Awareness is a

phenomenon, an event. What are the salient characteristics of awareness that distinguish it from color, or thought, or emotion, or many other events? It must exist, otherwise, we couldn't hear anything, couldn't see anything. But what is the quality of awareness itself, as opposed to the objects of awareness, or the contents of awareness, thoughts and so forth? The qualities you look for in this type of practice are the experience of the luminosity and transparency of awareness.

Those are just words, of course, but all you can do is start with a few metaphors, because awareness is not like anything else in the universe. Gen Lamrimpa gives as perfect an analogy as I've found: Imagine a spring with a sandy bottom and water utterly pure and clear, lit by radiant sunlight. At high noon the sun beats down through the water, but there is not a thing in that water. Imagine now just a speck of dust floating in the midst of the water. That speck of dust, under those circumstances, appears very brilliantly. Awareness itself is like the pool of water: one of its features is vivid luminosity and another is transparency. The transparency is what makes it so hard to grab on to. But within that transparent domain, should anything appear, it will appear vividly. That quality of luminosity is present even when there's nothing in it, but having some content, like the speck of dust, makes it possible to see the luminosity and transparency. So, continuing the analogy, having begun with the breath awareness and coming to a relative stillness, you may toss up a thought deliberately, like tossing a speck of dust into the pool: "What is the mind?" You could ask anything. You could say: "Pass the popcorn," but then you would probably start thinking about popcorn. So the purpose of tossing up a thought like this is not to start pondering the nature of the mind, but just to direct your awareness to that thought, and note by its presence the luminosity of its environment. You can see the thought. Then it fades out, like the dust dissolving into the water, but the limpidity and luminosity remain. That takes some time, and it takes a very subtle mind to do it. But if you can do it, it will open doors.

This is still *samatha* practice: the first step is *samatha*, and the second step is insight. The problem is that it's so easy just to space out. When you're attending to the breath, you know what your object is, and you know when you've lost it. When you practice *samatha* with the mind itself as your object, it's very easy to just sit there with a blank mind. Sitting with a blank mind is not the same thing as doing *samatha* on the mind, which has an object, but it's an extremely subtle one.

If you have developed *samatha* on one object, say the breath, and then you try to develop it on a different object, it won't be nearly as much work as if you didn't have *samatha* in the first place. If the object you shift to is more subtle than what you first attained *samatha* with, then there is a little bit more work to do. If you want to attend to something else that is of a comparable degree of subtlety, you will be able to do it with little or maybe no effort.

For the actual attainment of *samatha*, it is said on good authority that *samatha* will be achieved only if you're focusing on a mental object. If you attend to a sensory object, like music, or flowers, you may have superb concentration. But your concentration will not reach the same depth as if you're focusing on a mental object. It's for this reason that you transfer focus from the breath to the mental sign that appears as your *samatha* practice progresses.

QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES: ON ACHIEVING ŚĀMATHA

Question: How long does it take for a normal person to achieve *samatha*?

Response: If I could only find a normal person, maybe I could tell you. If one is well prepared, has attended to the necessary prerequisites, and applies oneself to the practice full time, with intelligence and skill, in an environment that is conducive for this practice, then one may attain *samatha* in about six months. Generally speaking, if you really want to achieve *samatha*, then it's best to radically simplify your life, take out a section of time, and just do *samatha*. They say that if you have really

sharp faculties you can achieve *samatha* in three months. Or, if you are well prepared but less capable, it might take as long as a year. Those are ballpark figures, of course. In the same vein, Atiśa mentions that if you have not attended very closely to the prerequisites, but just go off into retreat and try to do it with sheer determination then you can meditate for a thousand years and not accomplish it. So it might be worth your while to take a look at those prerequisites.

There are a lot of variables there. Śāriputra, one of the Buddha's principal disciples, attained not only *samatha* but all four of the meditative stabilizations and the four formless absorptions in a matter of days. There is no way of predicting how long it will take from what you consciously know of yourself. Supposing someone had already become adept in this practice in a previous life, and was then born in California. Instead of being encouraged to develop *samatha*, he or she is just taught how to play football and do math problems, and get very tangled up in a lot of other things that our society encourages us to take seriously. But nevertheless, if that person comes to the practice and engages in it skillfully, with the proper prerequisites, in a conducive environment, then it may take much less than six months.

On what evidence would I make such an outrageous claim, that someone might regain an attainment earned in a past life? Lama Zopa Rinpoche is a well known *tulku*, or incarnate lama who gained a high state of realization in his previous life. It is said that when he was a child of two or three years old, he kept toddling away from home, heading up towards a cave above the village in Nepal where his family lived. His mother would carry him back, but at the next opportunity he would head back up towards the cave. It happened so many times that his family asked a lama who was known for his intuition why this was happening. They were told that the child was trying to return to the cave where he had spent the last forty years of his previous life. So they recognized that this child was a natural born meditator. He became a monk around the age of five and received excellent training.

There are very powerful predilections in some individuals, spontaneous urgings to head for a cave. In his book *The Way of the White Clouds*, the German Lama Govinda writes about the death of his teacher Dromo Geshe Rinpoche. It's a wonderfully inspiring account. Before he passed away he told his students he would be coming back, and to look for him. Following tradition, they let a few years pass by before sending out a search party—time enough for this being to once again become embodied in a mother's womb, be born, and grow for two or three years. The general location of the search is determined by omens or clairvoyance. In this case the search party went south to Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim. The group of monks, travelling incognito as merchants, were walking down the street when a little boy just the right age saw them coming. He took one look, ran home and announced to his mother, "They've come to take me back to my monastery." The monks heard about this and came to question the child, who recognized them. When they brought the boy back to his monastery he recognized changes that had been made to the buildings. It would be no surprise for a person like this to do very well in meditation, because he or she will be catalyzing abilities that have already been well cultivated.

Question: Do you know many people here in the West who have achieved *samatha*?

Response: No, I suspect it is very rare. But let's look at the reasons why, because if I simply told you how rare this is, you might find it depressing. Just for starters, a suitable environment is extremely difficult to find. It's really prosaic, but I speak from a lot of experience here: if you don't have a suitable environment, it's going to be really tough if not simply impossible.

Secondly, it's rare to find a qualified teacher in that suitable environment. To do it entirely on your own with a book would be extremely tough. Another reason it's rare is that hardly anybody tries. The Tibetan meditators I know are practicing *tummo* (psychic heat meditation), or Dzogchen, or

Mahāmudrā, or Lamrim meditations, but hardly any of them do *samatha*. It's bizarre, but it's true. In Southeast Asia, they are all practicing *vipassanā*, and in the East Asian tradition, in Zen, they are also doing practices aimed at insight into the nature of reality. *Samatha* is concerned with a separate agenda, namely to bring about attention, stability, and vividness. So in the three great branches of the Buddhist tradition, hardly anybody does *samatha* now. In Tibet in the past, when the culture was more stable, there were a fair number of people who did it. People were doing a wide variety of meditations, and *samatha* was one of them. Now it's very, very rare, but the Dalai Lama is encouraging monks to start tackling it again.

I don't feel comfortable saying that it's not possible any more simply because so few people are doing it. If you did find a proper environment and a suitable teacher, and got your prerequisites in shape, then maybe it wouldn't be rare at all. The experiment has yet to be done. We made a pioneering attempt at it during the one-year retreat in the Pacific Northwest in 1988. As far as I know, this was the first time such a retreat was ever done in the West. We learned a lot and our mistakes don't need to be repeated. If people really attend to the tradition, which draws on an immense wealth of experience, I think it's very feasible. That's a more useful way to think about it than thinking in terms of how many people in the West have accomplished *samatha* so far.

Even when it is practiced, accomplishing *samatha* is rare. One of the very common problems is that people try too hard. Both Tibetans and Westerners could learn a lot about relaxing more deeply and letting the stability arise from that relaxation. Although it is mentioned in the texts, the Tibetans sometimes do not emphasize this point, but they do emphasize tight attention, not letting your object drop for even a second. If you are coming from a very serene space, and your mind is already very spacious, then that is probably good advice. But otherwise, such attention can be a big problem. You can exhaust yourself and cause nervous fatigue, and if you push it, you can really do yourself some damage. Westerners, Americans

especially, and to a lesser degree Europeans, seem much more likely to do that than Tibetans. And now even modern Asians seem to be having a harder time too.

BEYOND ŚĀMATHA

At the very moment when you actually achieve *śamatha* in the practice of breath awareness, the mental sign of the breath that has been the object of meditation disappears and another, far more subtle, mental sign arises in its place. It arises from the nature of the mind itself, and it is intimately related to the breath. That newly arisen mental sign now becomes your object if you want to go beyond *śamatha* into the states known as the four meditative stabilizations. You attend to that new sign, and there are specific techniques for making the transition into the actual first stabilization and beyond. By the fourth stabilization your breath stops and the mind goes into an utterly profound, virtually limitless serenity. Beyond that, you drop that mental image and go into what is called the formless realm, a dimension of boundless space. Any sense of your body in meditation is long past at this point. Beyond that, you go into a sense of boundless consciousness, and beyond that into a sense of nothingness. Beyond that, you move into a state that is said to entail neither discernment or nondiscernment.

That's a description from the Theravāda tradition. The Tibetans come at it from a different angle. In the first place, it seems their tradition has not taken breath awareness as a vehicle all the way to *śamatha* for a long time. Many Tibetans have attained *śamatha*, but they have used visualization techniques and meditation on awareness instead. Moreover, the Tibetans have not generally been interested in attaining the stabilizations beyond *śamatha*.

In the Tibetan context, in which the emphasis is on Vajrayāna, you don't want to attain the first stabilization. There is a good reason for this. When you move beyond *śamatha* and attain the actual first stabilization, sensual desire—one of the five hindrances to achieving stabilization—is temporarily suppressed altogether. Whether the stimulus is food, music,

sexual, whatever: it's like giving a lion a salad. That's all very well if you're following Theravāda practice. If you want to escape from desire, you're halfway there. Now all you have to do is practice *vipassanā* and you can cut desire right at the root.

In contrast, in Vajrayāna you don't want to totally suppress all of your sensual desires. You certainly don't want to be overwhelmed by them, but you don't want to eliminate them either. You want to be able to beckon desire at will, to elicit it for the purpose of transmuting it. This is thoroughly within formal practice. One generates a sense of bliss in the context of one's sensory experience. For example while eating, or while experiencing sound, or in sexual activity, your transmuted the experience. But rather than coming to it as an unhappy beggar who seeks happiness externally in the sensory experience, in Vajrayāna practice you let the bliss that comes from a much deeper source suffuse and transmuted the pleasure of ordinary sensual experience. This can be misread or trivialized in many different ways, but the point is to bring the bliss of a very, very deep state of consciousness into your sensual experience, so that it takes on a transcendent quality.

It seems that for centuries the Tibetans have not been practicing the higher meditative stabilizations. They are, however, interested in *śamatha*, which takes you to the threshold of the form realm. As long as you are right there on the threshold, you have access to desires but you aren't overwhelmed by them.

What would be the advantage of going into those other realms? It's a matter of exploration, but a purification also takes place. Theravāda Buddhism takes a pretty cut-and-dried approach towards the mind afflicted with delusion, attachment, and hostility. The goal is to totally eradicate these afflictions, sever them from the roots so they never come back again. In other words, it's all-out extermination, and the purification of the meditative stabilizations has a value in this approach.

Another approach, which is common to all Buddhist traditions, is to put the *śamatha* to use in the cultivation of insight; you have earned an absolutely superb tool for investigating the nature of reality. There is a whole array of disciplines,

modes of inquiry and investigation that can optimally be used with *samatha* and they are radically transformative. You can use them without *samatha*, but you just can't do it as well. Or, take that extraordinarily serviceable mind and apply it to the cultivation of loving-kindness and compassion. That would be immensely worthwhile.

Meditative Quiescence

**By B. Alan Wallace from *Buddhism with an Attitude:
The Tibetan Seven-Point Mind-Training, pp. 76-95***

Training the Mind with Mindfulness and Introspection

The second type of stability is meditative quiescence, which is the primary meaning of “stability” in the aphorism: “Once you have achieved stability, reveal the mystery.” Once the mind is stabilized and finely tuned, the mysterious nature of phenomena, both the objective world and the mind, can be investigated and revealed.

It is remarkable that training the attention, a prerequisite for spiritual maturation in Buddhism, is virtually neglected in the modern West. The West has very noble religious, scientific, and philosophical traditions, but one element that has been extraordinarily absent for at least a thousand years is a well-developed, systematic means of training the attention.

If the instrument used in probing reality is mechanical, a telescope for example, it needs to be in excellent working condition. Similarly, if the mind itself is to be the tool for probing reality, the mind should be in excellent working order. This is what is meant by “stability.” Buddhists consider the mind to be in good working order when the mind is balanced and attention is refined.

Techniques for developing the mind’s stability have been created and tested in the Buddhist tradition for 2500 years. These techniques address the basic problem of our minds, lack of balance. The Sanskrit word *klesha*, meaning “mental affliction,” has the connotation of the mind being twisted or distorted. What the Buddhist tradition is telling us, in plain English, is that our minds are normally screwed up! And it's because our minds are screwed up that we experience so much distress in our day-to-day lives. We get wound up about things we are attached to, things we want and are not getting, and things we fear losing. We get twisted about things we don't like, events we didn't want to happen, and about not getting things we do want. The tendency of the mind to become unbalanced and warped is due to such mental afflictions as attachment, anger, and delusion.

The marvelous scientific technology developed in the West over the last four hundred years doesn't help much in exploring the mind directly, in discovering the inner causes of well-being and suffering, or discovering the essential nature of consciousness itself. The only instrument available for probing the nature of consciousness directly is the mind itself. But as we quickly discover from experience in meditation, our minds are

distractible, they get fuzzy, and they fade out. The Second Point of the Mind-Training tells us to refine the mind into a reliable tool by training in stability and vividness, then use the mind to reveal the mystery—the ultimate nature of objective phenomena and mind itself.

Training the attention has two aspects, mindfulness and introspection. Mindfulness is the ability to attend to a chosen object with continuity and without distraction. Mindfulness is different from concentration. Concentration entails condensing the attention to a narrow focus. Mindfulness is a state of stable attention that may be wide open and spacious or tightly focused, as one desires.

Introspection, sometimes called meta-cognition, observes what is happening in the mind, it discerns the quality of the attention. When you are angry, the faculty of introspection observes the anger. When practicing meditative quiescence, if distraction or excitation arises, or the mind starts to fade into laxity, introspection observes these changes. Introspection is the ability to observe the state of one's mind from moment to moment. How is the mind operating? Is it like a car with smoke billowing out from under the hood, or is it cruising smoothly? Do virtues such as compassion and generosity arise easily or do they require a lot of effort? In cultivating sustained attention, if you haven't developed your ability for introspection, then you are not going to notice when you are meditating poorly, and this means you will develop habits of lousy meditation. Habits, good and bad, are hard to break. It is possible to develop a sloppy, lethargic meditation practice with the mind running amuck. To recognize this, and be in a position to remedy it, introspection is crucial.

Compulsive ideation is the mind frothing at the mouth. Stating out loud whatever comes to mind without any social filter could lead to a visit to a mental hospital. But if you can keep the same compulsive thoughts to yourself, this is considered normal. Introspection is the key for harnessing the mind so it can be useful, rather than compulsively spewing random imagery, memories, and ideas. When with introspection you note that the mind is rambling, just draw it back, again and again. If you attend to what is happening in your mind when it is happening, you won't get carried away on the many express trains of imagery and conversation that pass through. The technique is to remain still while your mind is in action. This is very different from the mind burbling on and you burbling along with it. If you notice your meditation fading, from laxity to lethargy to sluggishness to drowsiness, then arouse yourself, even take a break to go out and splash cold water in your face.

Introspection, discerning how the mind is functioning from moment to moment, is crucial in meditation. It is also very important for mental health. In the Tibetan Buddhist approach, the relationship between spiritual awakening and mental health is seamless. Sound mental health is a requirement for spiritual awakening. If you are not in good

mental health, even though you may think you are taking a fast track to enlightenment by practicing very diligently, you can wind up exacerbating your own mental problems.

The importance of introspection is also recognized in the West. A friend of mine named David Galin, a psychiatrist and cognitive neuroscientist, comments: "It is more damaging for a person's integration to be out of touch with the dimensions of personal reality through loss of self-monitoring than to be out of touch with the externals through sensory loss or paralysis." Dr. Galin is saying that a deficit in introspection is worse than any sensory impairment. Sensory impairment does not preclude being an integrated, mentally healthy individual, but a deficiency of self-monitoring, or introspection, does.

Astonishingly, many modern philosophers of mind claim that meta-cognition, the mind's ability to self-monitor, is impossible, it can't be done at all. However, people in the health professions recognize that not only is meta-cognition possible, it is absolutely essential for mental health. When the answer to the question, Is the mind healthy and balanced? is no, it is best to pause. Developing the skill of introspection, increasing the ability to check up on one's state of mind, is a specific goal of meditative stabilization.

William James, one of my intellectual heroes, wrote about the importance of attentional stability in education:

The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention over and over again is the very root of judgment, character, and will . . . An education which would improve this faculty would be the education par excellence. But it is easier to define this ideal than to give practical direction for bringing it about.

James explored the relationship between sustained, voluntary attention, and ethics, mental health, and genius. He wondered if there was a way to improve attention and eventually concluded that he just didn't know. However, simply raising the idea of training the attention made William James exceptional for late nineteenth-century Boston. Had William James lived in Tibet, he would have encountered techniques for training attention everywhere.

The Seven-Point Mind-Training, in agreement with contemplative traditions around the world, tells us that the attention can be trained to exceptional degrees and with remarkable results. The Second Point of the Mind-Training implies that not only can attention be stabilized, but that the potential of the human mind is so great that it can be used as an instrument for investigating the ultimate nature of reality.

More than a century ago, James reported on research indicating that it is possible to focus the attention continuously on an unchanging object for only two to three seconds,

and this continues to be the position of cognitive scientists today. Without further investigation of basic assumptions, one could get the impression that two to three seconds is the hard-wired upper limit of the brain's capacity for attention.

Since our experiential reality is heavily conditioned by what we attend to, as James pointed out, if we had some control over attention, we would implicitly have some control over our experienced reality. The skill of directing and sustaining attention is more than a marvelous ability; it is the cornerstone of understanding and choosing the reality we wish to experience. The focus of the Second Point of the Mind-Training, once again, is training in stability in order to "reveal the mystery" of the ultimate nature of reality, our own and that of other phenomena.

Buddhism offers many methods of training attentional stability that can be categorized into two basic approaches: control and release. The control approach entails being able to focus and sustain attention on a chosen object at will. The goal of the control model is to become master of one's mind. A Tibetan metaphor for the untrained mind is an elephant in rut, rampaging through experience, driven by its own afflictions and causing havoc. In the control model, the out-of-control elephant of the mind is gradually brought to heel. The criterion for success in the control model of training the attention is straightforward. To assess stability of attention, observe whether the chosen object is held in the attention or not. To assess vividness of attention, observe whether the object is clear or not.

The second approach to meditative stabilization is the release model. Let's take the analogy of a polluted river. The previous model of control is like taking active steps to purify the water in the river by filtration and so on. On the other hand, it is known that even if a river is dead due to excessive, prolonged pollution, if one just stops pouring in more pollutants, the purifying elements in the river itself will begin to reassert themselves. Over time, by releasing the river from continued pollution, it purifies itself. The release model when applied to the mind-stream is similar. Instead of applying specific antidotes to all the toxins in the mind, one simply tries to stop polluting one's mind-stream with grasping onto afflictive thoughts and emotions. This can be done quite simply by maintaining one's awareness without distraction and without mental grasping. In this way, even when mental toxins arise, the mind does not cling to them, and they are swept away effortlessly. In the release model, there is no object upon which to focus the attention. Meditative stability in the release model utilizes awareness itself without reference to any specific object. The release model is a "field stability," maintaining awareness in the field of the mind without latching onto any object. The technical term for the release model is "settling the mind in its natural state."

The Control Approach to Meditative Stabilization

The control approach to meditative stabilization is most familiar to Westerners and is most easily understood since science is largely based on a control model. The scientific revolution in the West was motivated in part by a religious belief that the mind of God was inscribed in the laws of nature. Deciphering nature's laws was a way to understand the mind of God. But there was another motivation fueling the scientific revolution—the desire to control nature. In some respects, desire for control over nature is positive. When it rains, we like to have a roof that doesn't leak; when it is cold, we like to keep warm; we like being able to prevent and control disease. Where the control model has failed in science is in its lack of balance. We have learned a great deal about the external world, learned to control it to an impressive extent, yet this ability is not balanced by a corresponding knowledge and ability to control our own minds. Without the counter-balance of control over our own minds, our tremendous technological power will remain on a trajectory toward disaster.

In Buddhism, the control model is applied first to one's own mind with a motivation to help others. A secondary concern is controlling the external world. There are many control model types of meditation in Tibetan Buddhism and here I will now lead you through one practice that is ideally suited to balancing the endemic malady of the Western mind—compulsive ideation. This training in breath awareness can be practiced for an entire meditation session as is often done in the Zen and Theravada Buddhist traditions. Or, as in the Tibetan tradition, breath awareness can be used to calm and stabilize the mind in preparation for other meditations.

The Buddha said of this practice,

“Monks, this concentration through mindfulness of breathing, being cultivated and practiced, tends to the peaceful, the sublime, the sweet and happy: at once it causes every evil thought to disappear and calms the mind.”

This remarkable claim, based upon the Buddha's own experience and corroborated by thousands of contemplatives after him, speaks volumes about the nature of the mind. The breath itself is not a pleasurable object, nor is it a virtuous one. It is simply neutral, like a stream of pure water uncolored by any additives. Yet when the attention is focused on the breath, by the simple fact of the mind abiding in a state of clear awareness, disengaged from perceptual and conceptual stimuli that arouse either craving or aversion, a sense of sweetness and joy begins to bubble up and afflictive thoughts disappear. The mind is indeed being controlled, but, like the polluted river that quickly purifies itself when toxins are no longer introduced into it, the mind quickly reasserts its intrinsic equilibrium, joy, and serenity. This is one of the most astounding and significant discoveries about the mind that anyone has ever made, and it deserves special attention in our society. How remarkable that happiness can be found without

pleasurable sensory and intellectual stimuli, and that the mind can be calmed without drugs.

The Practice of Mindfulness of Breathing

Relaxation When you first sit down to meditate, the mind tends to be rambunctious. The first goal is to somewhat subdue the mind, keeping the body as still as possible. Sit comfortably so that your spine is erect and your abdomen can expand freely during the in-breath. You can sit either on a chair with your feet flat on the ground or on a cushion on the floor. Hands can be in your lap or on your knees. Let your breath move easily. In this meditation, your eyes are open and your gaze is cast down resting in the space in front of you. Let your gaze be vacant without focusing on any visual image. Let the muscles of your face and around the eyes relax. Sit quite erect, and let your shoulders and arms relax.

Three calming breaths. To complete this initial relaxation process, take three slow deep breaths. Breathe first into the abdomen, then expand the diaphragm, and finally breathe up into the chest. Breathe out slowly and gently through the nostrils.

Counting the breaths. Breathe into the abdomen so that the abdomen expands during the in-breath and contracts gently during out-breath. Focus on the sensation of the passage of air around the nostrils or upper lip. At the end of an exhalation, just before inhalation, mentally count "1." After the second exhalation, count "2" and continue counting. The counting is a cue, not a focus of attention. The attention remains on the breath and the sensation of air around the nostrils or upper lip.

An alternative technique while attending to the breath is to bring awareness into the field of the body as a whole. This field includes the tactile sensations of the entire body, where you feel your buttocks against the chair or the ground, your feet, legs, thighs, torso, shoulders, neck, and head. Bring your awareness into the field of tactile sensations, and briefly at the end of the first exhalation and just before you inhale, count "1" mentally. During the entire course of the inhalation and exhalation, simply be present, resting your awareness in your body and on the sensation of breath.

Introspection Add introspection to breath awareness. Introspection is an intermittent, inwardly directed cross-current during mindfulness, which is maintained as constantly as possible. See if you can discern from moment to moment what is going on in your mind: what is the quality of attention? Other than mindfulness of the breath, what is going on?

Remain relaxed, and in this way count the breaths 1 to 21. If you don't make it to 21 with continuity, start again at 1.

Stabilizing the attention by focusing on the breath is an example of the control model meditation practice. The attention is engaged by holding onto an object, and when that object is lost, the attention must be redirected again, over and over. The control model of training the mind is practiced widely in the Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist traditions.

Stabilizing the attention using a mental image. In Tibetan Buddhist practice, breath awareness is frequently used in preparation for other ways of stabilizing the mind. Tibetan Buddhists often train the attention by creating a mental image and attending to it with continuity and clarity. To practice this technique, also a control model, first become familiar with your chosen image by concentrating on a physical representation of that image. Then mentally recreate the image and attend to it.

A metaphor for the mind when you first try to stabilize the attention is a bucking bronco—climb on and two to three seconds later you are thrown off. Focus again and get thrown again. With persistence, continuity develops. The wild stallion can be trained.

When you first try stabilizing the attention, it seems that mental agitation is worse than before you made any effort at all. But the mind was always scattered. You were just not aware of it. If you acknowledge that one of the goals of meditating is to witness the condition of the mind and realize that stability develops gradually, you will not be disappointed.

The control model, fastening your mind onto a chosen object, a mental image, or your breath, has been practiced in the Buddhist tradition for more than 2500 years. Many people using this technique have been monks and nuns. When you live as a monk, as I did for fourteen years, especially in retreat, you can actually control your mind to a considerable extent. During a solitary retreat, you have a lot of control over your environment. You know exactly how much rice you have left. Apart from the rats, nobody takes your food. Living in a monastery, the control model also can work well. Mastery of the control model is a matter of technique and practice.

A common aphorism in the cloistered environment is: “Noise is a thorn to the meditator.” Gen Lamrimpa, a highly accomplished Tibetan meditator, once told me that if he heard a jarring sound while in deep *samadhi*, like cans banging, the first time it happened it would shock him but he could settle back again. But another loud noise would shatter his meditation. He said that when his meditation was shattered by noise, he would diffuse his awareness and start all over again. The cumulative wisdom of centuries of cloistered contemplative practice is that noise disrupts meditation.

The cloistered environment stands in stark contrast to the uncontrolled environment of everyday active life in the modern world. When I was a graduate student living in a family housing unit at Stanford University, I meditated early in the morning. At about 7:00 outside our window, a group of little girls would begin shrieking and driving their plastic tractors and tricycles across the bricks. I was meditating and these girls were disturbing my peace. I got to feeling pretty sorry for myself so I phoned my lama, Gyatrul Rinpoche, and asked for advice. He gave me a one-liner, "Just view it." This was not just Rinpoche's way of telling me to quit whining, but a reminder of the more encompassing teaching to embrace obstacles in practice. And carry on. We can't always control our environment, but we can embrace it, the good, the bad, and the loud, and integrate it into Dharma practice.

The Release Model

The main practice of the release model is called "settling the mind in its natural state." "Natural state," note carefully, does *not* refer to the mind's customary state. There is nothing natural about our ordinary state of mind. The typical state of the mind is distracted, carried away by one thought after another. In this state, when the mind focuses, it is grasping, identified with thoughts, memories, hopes, fears, and emotions. This usual state of our mind is like roaming the six realms of samsara, from anguish to bliss and everything in between. The practice of "settling the mind in its natural state" is a very simple and direct practice to begin to break free from the bondage of this compulsive cycle.

The quintessence of the release model for training the attention is to let awareness come to rest without distraction and without grasping. "Without distraction" means not being carried away by whatever drifts through the space of the mind. "Without grasping" means not identifying with or mentally grasping onto any of the events or emotions that come along. Let events arise, play themselves out, and vanish without intervention.

The release model is quite different from the control model that fixes mindfulness with continuity on an object, the breath, or a mental image. In the control model, mindfulness is like a rope that is tied to an object. In the release model of "settling the mind in its natural state," the rope is released and mindfulness settles into the space of mental events. The practice of mindfulness of breathing releases the mind from attractive and unattractive perceptual and conceptual stimuli that arouse craving and aversion; and in so doing, the mind already begins to heal naturally. But in that practice, there is still grasping onto an object, so in that technique, practiced as a means of cultivating quiescence, delusion is not counteracted. In this practice of "settling the mind in its natural state," one releases grasping of all kinds, onto neutral sensations as well as onto negative and positive thoughts and emotions. The self-healing of the mind

goes deeper. In releasing all such dualistic fixation on mental and sensory objects, primordial awareness begins to shine through the veils of obscuration with greater and greater brilliance.

To practice settling the mind in its natural state, sit with your eyes open, your gaze resting in the space in front of you, without being focused on any object, and draw your attention into the field of the mind. The gaze is important. Disengage the attention from external objects and pay attention to your mind. Shapes and colors arise in the field of vision, sounds in the field of hearing, and there is also a field of experience that is accessible only to the mind— thoughts, imagery, feelings, memories, and imagination. Let your awareness come to rest within its own domain, within the field of the mind, without extending itself out to the various sense fields. See if you can draw your awareness into the field in which these mental events emerge, play themselves out, and vanish. Let your body be as still as a mountain and let your awareness be as open and friction-free as space. Let the breath be natural and unforced.

Bring your awareness into the field of the mind and attend closely. Allow the natural limpidity and luminosity of your own awareness to emerge, shining a bright light in the space of your own mind. Let your awareness hover right in the immediacy of the present, without slipping into thoughts concerning the past or speculation about the future. For all manner of mental events that arise, including emotions that we so easily identify with, see if you can let your awareness remain at rest, non-interactive, and non-judgmental, keeping awareness in a state of stillness like empty space. Observe whatever arises. Observe the nature of each of the phenomena—emotions, imagery, memories, thoughts—without grasping onto their referents. Attend fully to the very nature of the mental phenomena without giving any effort to creating, sustaining, or stopping these events. Let them be, arising, playing themselves out, and dissolving of their own accord. See if you can perceive the origin, duration, and mode of disappearance of mental events without conceptual elaboration. The crucial point is to perceive the mental events without grasping or identifying with them any more than space identifies with the birds and insects that fly through it. Let your awareness be completely at rest even when your mind is in motion.

The pragmatic benefits of developing attention, cultivating the ability to direct attention at will and focus on what is constructive and helpful, are easily appreciated. A few years ago, I heard a woman diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer speak about the devastating effect she experienced upon reading about her prognosis in a magazine. She said she couldn't get the statistics out of her mind. All hope she had of overcoming her disease by positive thinking, diet, and behavior had vanished. This is a classic and tragic example of being tortured by one's own mind. Her final comment was, "I wish I knew how to meditate," and my immediate, silent response was, "I wish you had started

earlier.” A Buddhist aphorism is, “Your mind can be your greatest friend or your greatest enemy.” Unfortunately, in her case, it was an enemy.

I’ll use an analogy to compare the release model of settling the mind in its natural state to the control model of meditation. If seismologists could figure out a way to release tectonic tension through a lot of little earthquakes and thus prevent a large sudden one, we would all be grateful. That would be good control. The control model in science has proved beneficial for controlling certain natural disasters, epidemics for example. Descartes expressed this model for science when he predicted that by knowing the forces and the actions of material bodies, we could “make ourselves the masters and possessors of nature.” But the release model is equally valuable. Recall Henry David Thoreau’s famous statement, “In wildness is the preservation of the world,” and John Muir’s remark, “In God’s wildness lies the hope of the world—the great fresh unblighted, unredeemed wilderness.” Nature, powerful, majestic and beautiful, works well all by itself; don’t try to fix it. The preservation of wildness is analogous to the release model. How impoverished we would become if we tried to control everything and how vulnerable we would be if we had only wildness.

Conclusion

Both the control and release models develop attention. The control model utilizes grasping; the release model entails letting go from the core of awareness. In the release model, thoughts, ideation, imagery, memories, are not a problem to be controlled or snuffed out. The gushing fountain of thought is not the problem. The problem is grasping. This is a more subtle practice than the control model. Is it really possible to attend to something without latching onto it? Settling the mind in its natural state requires a light touch, like a bee just barely touching the flower while it drinks its nectar. The bee does not control the flower. The great benefit of the release model is that it is an ideal practice for an actively engaged life in which there is little control over the environment.

One of the metaphors Tibetans use for the technique of practicing “without distraction and without grasping” is of an unhurried grandpa at a park watching other people’s children play. The mothers hover over the kids. The grandpa watches closely but does not intervene. Not intervening while observing vigilantly is the crux of the practice. An excellent word for this quality of awareness is “limpidity.” Limpidity has the dual connotation of complete transparency, like air or glass, and also luminosity or brightness. Limpidity describes a pool of water in the desert emerging from a spring in the fine sand, the bright sun shining through the water. The pool is limpid, completely transparent and luminous. Anything that appears in the water, even a speck of dust, becomes brightly illuminated. This is the defining characteristic of the natural state of awareness—it is limpid, clear and luminous and, like space itself, not the least bit sticky.

There are profound reasons for engaging in attentional practices. Buddhists regard ignorance as the root of suffering, and ignorance has two parts. One type of ignorance is failure to attend to our actual nature, the nature of our own awareness. Not attending to who we actually are is a form of ignorance. A second kind of ignorance is identifying with things that we are *not*. We mistake as “I” and “mine” things that in fact do not have a self in them, cannot be an “I” or “mine.” These two errors are the essence of ignorance, the root of samsara, the source of suffering.

Buddhism offers a working hypothesis: the myriad of thoughts and emotions that arise in the mind, the entire array of mental phenomena that we habitually identify with so strongly, is not our true identity. Identifying with these phenomena is what is meant by ignorance. In the quiescence meditation practices I have described, identification is arrested and replaced by a limpid, vigilant awareness, and the habitual tendency to grasp onto “I” and “mine” is arrested.

Dismantling ignorance by overcoming the identification habit with awareness—is this all there is to spiritual practice? No, this is not enough. There is a complementary practice that I will mention briefly here and describe in more detail later. The corollary practice to attending vigilantly without identification to our own body, feelings, and mind is attending frequently and closely to the minds, bodies, feelings, and experiences of others. This is the basis of compassion. What we attend to becomes our experienced reality, and as we attend to the situations of other people, this will expand the scope of our own reality. As we start to diminish our fixation on our own concerns and attend more to other people, balance is achieved.

It is said that the awareness of a buddha is completely even, like the ocean, taking in equally the joys and sorrows of all people, friends, loved ones, relatives, and those never met. This is the meaning of a statement made by so many of the world's great spiritual teachers, “Love your enemy.” It doesn't mean love the person you hate. You can't do that. Love those who hate you.

Meditative quiescence, with its two qualities, stability and vividness, is attainable. You can get there. There are many plateaus of development, but once true quiescence is achieved, the mind can be focused on a chosen topic effortlessly, without distraction, for at least four hours. Once quiescence is attained, you can create a mental image and sustain it with a clarity virtually equivalent to seeing it with your eyes. At this stage of attainment, the attention remains in the mental realm, not seeping out into the physical senses. In the deepest stage of quiescence training, the senses go dormant while the mind continues in a high state of stable vigilance.

Buddhist descriptions of attaining meditative stabilization are very precise. The achievement of quiescence entails an experience of bliss throughout the body and mind, an extraordinary lightness, as well as a dexterity of the mind. When mental and physical bliss subside a bit, there is a state of clear, serene awareness. Buddhists say that the quiescent mind is attentive, aware, and in excellent working condition. From the Buddhist perspective the undisciplined mind, prone to laxity, excitation, and distraction, is dysfunctional.

The Tibetan lama Geshe Rabten, under whom I trained for years in India and Switzerland, said that before his monastic training his mind was like a stag with a great rack of antlers trying to make its way through a dense forest. He would struggle, get stuck, struggle again, one hindrance after another. Over the course of his formal twenty-four-year monastic training, he said his mind became progressively less like an entangled deer and more like a monkey gliding through the jungle from one vine to another. When this buoyancy and malleability arise, the mind is ready for anything. It slips skillfully through previous hindrances.

Tibetan contemplatives report that a finely honed mind can probe the nature of awareness directly; you recognize it. As you probe deeper, you see for yourself that this phenomenon of consciousness is not reducible, not a mere epiphenomenon of matter. Consciousness has the nature of luminosity, emptiness, and cognizance. The cumulative experiential finding of the Buddhist contemplative tradition is that consciousness is a fundamental constituent of reality that maintains its own unbroken continuum.

Achieving quiescence does not take the same amount of time for everyone. Tibetans describe a superior, middling, and inferior ability for quiescence. A person of superior abilities, after becoming well-grounded in the preliminaries, might require three months of intensive effort under skillful guidance. For people of middling abilities, six months is average. For people of inferior abilities, about one year of intensive effort is necessary. If quiescence isn't achieved in one year, Buddhist contemplatives recommend returning to the preliminary practices, with a special emphasis on the cultivation of compassion.

The centuries-long Buddhist tradition of investigating the nature of consciousness is summed up in a statement from *The Cloud of Jewels Sutra*:

All phenomena are preceded by the mind. When the mind is comprehended, all phenomena are comprehended. . . . By bringing the mind under control, all things are brought under control.

These words present us with a challenge, not a dogma. The extraordinary hypothesis of Buddhism is that the refined mind can fathom the nature of reality and consciousness itself, with the most extraordinary results.

Shamatha and Vipashyana in the Indian Buddhist Tradition
From *Meditations of a Buddhist Skeptic*
By B. Alan Wallace

SHAMATHA

[Page 194] As a result of the genocide perpetrated against Buddhist cultures throughout Asia during the twentieth century at the hands of various communist regimes, all waving the ideological banner of scientific materialism, the very survival of Mahayana Buddhism in particular has been imperiled. Thus, for many of its followers, the preservation of the vitality of the Mahayana tradition in the modern world is of the highest priority. Outwardly, the creation of images of the Buddha, translations and publications of Buddhist teachings, and the building of stupas are ways of preserving representations of the Buddha's body, speech, and mind. All such efforts are expressions of sincere devotion. On one occasion, Dromtönpa (1005-64), the principal Tibetan disciple of the great Indian Buddhist master Atisha, encountered a man engaging in various devotional practices. He responded, "It is very good to apply yourself to devotional practices, but it is even better to practice Dharma:"

To preserve their tradition, many Buddhists nowadays place their highest priority on teaching and studying Buddhist texts. When Dromtönpa next met with this same practitioner, he found him studiously learning Buddhist scriptures, to which Dromtönpa responded, "It is very good to study texts, but it is even better to practice Dharma."

[Page 195] In order to preserve the true meaning of Buddhism, many sincere practitioners commit themselves to months or even years of meditation, practicing mindfulness many hours a day or engaging in three-year retreats in which they practice a wide variety of Vajrayana meditations. When Dromtönpa came across the above practitioner for a third time, he found him immersed in meditation, to which Dromtönpa replied, "It is very good to practice meditation, but it is even better to practice Dharma." When the meditator finally asked how to do this, he responded, "Give up attachment to this life and let your mind become Dharma."

The essential way to let one's mind become Dharma is to realize authentic *bodhichitta*, the Sanskrit term for a bodhisattva's altruistic aspiration to achieve perfect enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. Bodhichitta becomes irreversible in this and all future lifetimes when it is supported by the insights gained from the *vipashyana* practice of the four close applications of mindfulness, thus transforming "earthlike bodhichitta" into "goldlike bodhichitta." With a foundation in *shamatha*, bodhichitta, and insight, Vajrayana practice may indeed lead to the realization of perfect enlightenment in one lifetime. But without such a basis in mental stability, compassion, and wisdom, the idea of buddhahood in this or any other lifetime is nothing more than wishful thinking.

To realize authentic bodhichitta and become a bodhisattva, many of the greatest scholars in the Buddhist tradition have taught, the mind must first be made thoroughly serviceable for spiritual practice by achieving shamatha, specifically access to the first *dhyana*. Although there isn't full consensus on this point, all agree that a mind heavily prone to the attentional imbalances of excitation and laxity is unfit to realize the sublime states of bodhichitta and vipashyana. So at least partial development of shamatha is essential for developing both.

The fundamental structure of Buddhist practice, common to all schools of Buddhism, consists of the three sequential phases of ethics, *samadhi*, and wisdom. Within the context of these "three higher trainings," *samadhi* refers not only to the development of single-pointed attention but also to other aspects of mental development, including the four immeasurables, renunciation, and, in the Mahayana context, bodhichitta.

Among the Buddha's teachings recorded in the Pali canon, the shamatha practice most commonly emphasized is mindfulness of the breath, particularly for people whose minds are heavily agitated by involuntary [Page 196] thoughts. Compared to Indians living at the time of the Buddha or nomadic Tibetans living today, most of us can greatly benefit from such practice, which is specifically designed for people like us! The Buddha said:

Just as in the last month of the hot season, when a mass of dust and dirt has swirled up and a great rain cloud out of season disperses it and quells it on the spot, so too concentration by mindfulness of the breath, when developed and cultivated, is peaceful and sublime, an ambrosial dwelling, and it disperses and quells on the spot unwholesome states whenever they arise.

The very nature of such practice not only helps to bring calm and joy to the mind but also helps to bolster our "psychological immune system," making the mind less vulnerable to mental afflictions.

Shamatha practice that is not motivated by renunciation and bodhichitta may result in nothing more than a temporary alleviation of stress and agitation, and may even lead to self-centered complacency and unfortunate rebirths. With an authentic motivation, shamatha may actually enhance one's renunciation and bodhichitta, kindling great inspiration for spiritual practice. Well-motivated practice that is focused on external activities of the body and speech, including prostrations, circumambulations, and recitation of mantras and liturgies, will have little benefit if the mind is distracted. As Bodhisattva Shantideva wrote, "The Omniscient One stated that all recitations and austerities, even though performed for a long time, are actually useless if the mind is on something else or is dull."

The structure of the Mahayana path consists of the six perfections of generosity, ethics, patience, enthusiasm, *dhyana*, and wisdom. The practice of shamatha is included in the cultivation of *dhyana*, and it is based on the prior development of the first four perfections. This highlights the importance of cultivating an ethical basis for practice and wholesome states of mind before seeking to achieve single-pointed concentration.

Roughly 1,500 years after the Buddha's time, Atisha composed the first teachings on the stages of the path (Tib. *lamrim*), specifically for Tibetans. This structure, which was subsequently adopted by all schools of Tibetan Buddhism, begins with devotion to one's spiritual mentor (Skt. *guru yoga*) and culminates in the practice of vipashyana. For traditional Tibetans, [Page 197] raised in a Buddhist culture, with deep faith and a sound understanding of Buddhism, guru yoga may well be practiced at the outset of the path for the sake of the many blessings such authentic practice brings. But in the modern secular world, an initial focus on guru yoga, especially with emphasis on the perfect qualities of the guru, can lead to many problems, a point that has been discussed frequently by H. H. the Dalai Lama. For people with little faith or understanding or those new to Buddhism, it may be best initially to focus upon the guru simply as a representative or emissary of the Buddha. As one ventures further in Mahayana practice, one may view one's guru *as if* he or she were a buddha. Finally, on the basis of deep faith and understanding of the teachings on buddha nature and emptiness, one may focus on the Vajrayana practice of viewing one's guru as an actual buddha, while simultaneously developing divine pride and pure perception of all phenomena.

While there are many methods for developing shamatha, each with its special advantages, two are particularly emphasized in the Mahamudra tradition because of their great advantages for fathoming the nature of consciousness. The teacher of the Tibetan translator and founder of the Kagyü lineage, Marpa (1012-97), was the eleventh-century Indian mahasiddha Maitripa; he describes the first method, which focuses on thoughts, as follows:

In relation to the excessive proliferation of conceptualization, including afflictions such as the five poisons or the three poisons, thoughts that revolve in subject-object duality, thoughts such as those of the ten virtues, the six perfections, or the ten perfections—whatever wholesome and unwholesome thoughts arise—steadily and nonconceptually observe their nature. By so doing, they are calmed in nongrasping; clear and empty awareness vividly arises, without grasping; and it arises in the nature of self-liberation, in which it recognizes itself. Again, direct the attention to whatever thoughts arise, and without acceptance or rejection, let it recognize its own nature. In this way, implement the practical instructions on transforming ideation into the path.

Here are Maitripa's instructions on the second method, which focuses on the absence of thoughts:

[Page 198] With the body possessing the seven attributes of Vairochana, sit upon a soft cushion in a solitary, darkened room. Vacantly direct the eyes into the intervening vacuity in front of you. See that the three conceptualizations of the past, future, and present, as well as wholesome, unwholesome, and ethically neutral thoughts, together with all the causes, assemblies, and dissolutions of thoughts of the three times are completely cut off. Bring no thoughts to mind. Let the mind, like a cloudless sky, be clear, empty, and evenly devoid of grasping, and settle it in utter vacuity. By doing so, the shamatha of joy, clarity, and non-conceptuality arises. Examine whether or not this

entails attachment, hatred, clinging, grasping, laxity, or excitation, and recognize the difference between virtues and vices.

There are two traditional approaches to the path. One entails first gaining a thorough understanding of Buddhist doctrine, including the view of emptiness, and devoting oneself to meditation on that basis. According to this tradition, one practices shamatha only after studying Maitreya's treatise revealed to Asanga, the *Ornament for Clear Realization*, and practices vipashyana only after a careful study of Chandrakirti's (fl. seventh c. C.E.) *Supplement to the Middle Way*. According to the second tradition, one may seek the view of emptiness on the basis of first achieving shamatha. In his text *The Highway of the Jinās: A Root Text on the Precious Geluk-Kagyü Mahamudra Tradition*, Panchen Lozang Chökyi Gyaltzen, tutor to the fifth Dalai Lama, exemplifies the latter tradition when he gives the following quintessential shamatha teachings, in which he synthesizes the two methods cited by Maitripa:

Of the two approaches of seeking to meditate on the basis of the view and seeking the view on the basis of meditation, the following accords with the latter approach. On a comfortable cushion for the cultivation of meditative stabilization, assume the sevenfold posture and with the ninefold breathing clear out stale vital energies. Carefully distinguish between the radiant purity of awareness and its defilements, and with a pristinely virtuous mind begin by taking refuge and cultivating bodhichitta. Meditate on the profound path of guru yoga, and after making hundreds of heartfelt supplications, let the guru dissolve into yourself.

[Page 199] Do not modify the nature of evanescent appearances with thoughts such as hopes and fears, but rest for a while in unwavering meditative equipoise. This is not a state in which your attention is blanked out, as if you had fainted or fallen asleep. Rather, post the sentry of undistracted mindfulness and focus introspection on the movements of awareness. Focus closely on its nature of cognizance and luminosity, observing it nakedly. Whatever thoughts arise, recognize each one. Alternatively, like a participant in a duel, completely cut off any thoughts that arise; when there is stillness after they are banished, relax loosely, but without losing mindfulness. As it is said, "focus closely and loosely relax—it is there that the mind is settled." Relax without wandering, as the saying goes, "When the mind that is tangled up in busyness loosens up, it undoubtedly frees itself."

Whenever thoughts arise, if their nature is observed, they naturally disappear and a clear vacuity arises. Likewise, if the mind is examined when it is still, a vivid, unobscured, luminous vacuity is perceived, and this is known as "the fusion of stillness and motion." Whatever thoughts arise, do not block them, but recognizing their movements, focus on their nature—like a caged bird on a ship. Sustain your awareness as in the saying, "Like a raven that flies from a ship, circles around, and alights aboard once again." The nature of meditative equipoise is not obscured by anything, but is limpid and clear. Not established as anything physical, it is a clear vacuity like space. Allowing anything to arise, it is vividly awake. Such is the nature of the mind. This is superbly witnessed with

direct perception, yet it cannot be grasped as "this" or demonstrated with words. "Whatever arises, rest loosely, without grasping": nowadays, for the most part, contemplatives of Tibet uniformly proclaim this as practical advice for achieving enlightenment. However, I, Chökyi Gyaltzen, declare this to be an exceptionally skillful method for novices to achieve mental stability and to identify the relative nature of the mind.

The relative nature of the mind is sheer luminosity and cognizance, which are the defining characteristics of consciousness. The Buddha also referred to this as the sign (Pali *nimitta*) of the mind. He declared that if one cultivates the four close applications of mindfulness without the [Page 200] mind being concentrated and without having abandoned the impurities, one will not apprehend this essential nature of the mind. These teachings on shamatha provide a basis not only for the cultivation of the four immeasurables and bodhichitta but also for the cultivation of insight through the fundamental vipashyana practices of the four close applications of mindfulness.

VIPASHYANA

The achievement of shamatha is the direct means for penetrating, or acquiring, the sign of the mind, which the Buddha declared was necessary for overcoming various mental obscurations—the central purpose of vipashyana meditation. Although the Buddha taught dozens of kinds of shamatha practices, he most frequently taught mindfulness of breathing, which he presented in four tetrads comprising sixteen phases. The methods explained in the first tetrad are for the sake of achieving dhyana; the final three tetrads consist of vipashyana practices entailing the close inspection of feelings, the mind, and phenomena at large. These three are intended for those who have already achieved the first dhyana. The Buddha's discourse on the four close applications of mindfulness, the *Satipatthana Sutta*, likewise begins with the first tetrad on mindfulness of breathing, clearly indicating the necessity of achieving at least the first dhyana in order to fully realize the benefits of vipashyana meditation.

The Buddha declared that the four close applications of mindfulness directed toward the body, feelings, the mind, and phenomena lead to an undistorted, direct experience of things as they are, independent of oral tradition and reasoning. This matrix of meditations, as presented in the *Satipatthana Sutta*, figures very prominently in Theravadin Buddhism. In the Mahayana discourses attributed to the Buddha, the most elaborate accounts of this practice are found in the one-hundred-thousand-line and the twenty-five-thousand-line versions of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*. In addition, many of the greatest Mahayana scholars and contemplatives of India, including Asanga, Vasubandhu, Sthiramati (fl. sixth c. C.E.), and Shantideva, composed extensive commentaries on these practices.

[Page 201] Such insight practices constitute the very foundation of the Buddhist science of mind. Their purpose is to gain freedom from all mental afflictions by knowing the nature of the mind and its relation to the rest of the natural world. There is no division in Buddhism between cognitive psychology and clinical psychology—we seek to know the mind in order to heal it.

The progression of the four close applications of mindfulness begins with the relatively coarse, easily apprehended nature of the body, and continues by attending to a continuum of increasingly subtle phenomena, including feelings, mental states and processes, and finally the very subtle interrelationships among all kinds of phenomena. We inspect each of these entities and processes, examining whether they are truly permanent or impermanent, satisfying or unsatisfying, and whether or not they constitute a real self.

Mindfulness of the Body

We begin with the body, which is commonly regarded as the physical location or basis of the self and mistakenly regarded as intrinsically "mine." By closely observing each of the constituents of the body—tissue, blood, bone, brain, and so on—we see that none of these body parts is a self, nor does any of them inherently belong to a self. They are simply impersonal physical entities. Such mindfulness of anatomical components entails not bare attention but recollection, which highlights the primary meaning of the Pali term *sati*. Our close identification with the body lies at the root of the "ubiquitous suffering of conditioned existence," the third level of suffering explained earlier. Because our experience of the body is tainted by mental afflictions, it is said to be "impure," and all impure phenomena are found to be unsatisfying in nature. In this way, the close application of mindfulness to the body leads to direct insight into the first noble truth. Moreover, one of sentient beings' fundamental delusions is misapprehending that which is impure as being pure, and this practice serves as a direct antidote.

While inspecting the four elements of the body—earth (solidity), water (fluidity), fire (warmth), and air (motility)—attention is directed not only internally to our own body but externally to others' bodies and to physical [Page 202] phenomena throughout the inanimate world. By closely examining all kinds of physical phenomena, including visual forms, sounds, scents, tastes, and tactile sensations, we see that none of them is intrinsically attractive. Beauty is not an absolutely objective quality, nor does it reside solely in the eye of the beholder. The experience of beauty arises in the interrelationship between subject and object. Realizing this helps us to overcome craving for beautiful objects, by recognizing that their attractiveness is not inherent in the objects themselves but is related to how we perceive and conceptually designate them.

When we fathom the nature of our own body firsthand, we gain insight into the nature of others' bodies and the rest of the physical universe. Perhaps this is what the Buddha had in mind when he declared, "It is in this fathom-long body, with its perceptions and its mind, that I describe the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the way leading to the cessation of the world." According to the Perfection of Wisdom teachings of the Mahayana tradition, all phenomena are empty of inherent nature, and physical phenomena are in reality insubstantial—they are of the nature of space. This is illustrated in the Mahayana discourse known as the *Dharma Recitation Sutra*, which states, "While addressing the question, 'What is this body?' one considers, 'This body is like space.' Thus one contemplates the body like space, perceiving the entire body as space."

Mindfulness of feelings

The second of the four close applications of mindfulness focuses on feelings of pleasure, pain, and indifference, which are mistakenly regarded as experiences undergone by a real self. Rather than the various mental phenomena associated with the English term "feeling," Buddhism defines feeling (Skt. *vedana*) as the faculty that experiences phenomena simply as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Such feelings are direct catalysts for craving, the ardent desire that pleasant feelings may continue and painful feelings cease. By examining the essential nature, causes, results, and impermanence of our feelings, we gain direct insight into the second noble truth, the reality of the source of suffering. In particular, by recognizing [Page 203] the momentary, fleeting nature of all kinds of mundane feelings, we realize that they are all tainted by mental afflictions and unsatisfying. Because feelings are momentary in nature and sooner or later vanish entirely, all craving and clinging to them inevitably leads to suffering. Feelings are classified as "corporeal" and "mental." The former includes all feelings that are aroused by stimulation of the five physical senses, whereas mental feelings do not depend upon such physical inputs. They can be generated internally, in dependence upon the body, but are not directly catalyzed by influences from the physical environment. Thoughts, memories, and dreams, for example, may arouse all kinds of mental feelings, but they are not composed of atoms and have no physical qualities, such as mass or location.

In the close application of mindfulness to feelings, we learn to recognize when pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings occur and to know them for what they are. Then we experientially distinguish between "worldly" and "unworldly" feelings that are pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. The former correspond closely to what are commonly called "hedonic" feelings aroused by pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral stimuli. Unworldly feelings correspond to experiences associated with spiritual practice. More specifically, the Buddha made three distinctions, characterizing worldly happiness as that which arises by way of the physical senses, unworldly happiness as arising from the achievement of dhyana, and completely unworldly happiness as resulting from insight into the nature of reality. While craving for hedonic pleasures is invariably unsatisfying and eventually leads to blatant suffering, the Buddha encouraged his followers not to fear happiness that has nothing to do with sensuality and unwholesome states of mind.

This practice plays a crucial role in discovering what constitutes true happiness and, based on this understanding, pursuing it. This is a central aim of the Buddha's teachings in general. In terms of the kinds of genuine happiness resulting from authentic spiritual practice, the Buddha spoke of successive degrees of well-being gained by maintaining pure ethical conduct, restraining the senses, and achieving dhyana, as well as the ultimate joy of realizing nirvana. Mahayana discussions of mindfulness of feelings not only focus on one's own achievement of genuine happiness but also extend this practice [Page 204] to arouse great compassion for all sentient beings. *The Sutra Requested by Ratnachuda* explains:

O son of good family, the Bodhisattva who closely applies mindfulness to feelings develops great compassion toward those beings who are experiencing pleasurable feelings.... No matter what feelings he experiences, he experiences them all in a manner that is embraced by great compassion. Whenever he experiences a pleasurable feeling, he develops great compassion toward those beings who experience craving, and he abandons his own mental affliction of craving. Whenever he experiences a painful feeling, he develops great compassion toward those beings who experience hatred, and he abandons his own mental affliction of hatred. Whenever he experiences a feeling that is neither painful nor pleasurable, he develops great compassion toward those beings who experience ignorance, and he abandons his own mental affliction of ignorance.

Mindfulness of the Mind

The close application of mindfulness to the mind strikes at the root of clinging to the mind as constituting our real identity. When we closely examine the wide range of discursive thoughts, mental images, emotions, desires, and other mental impulses and states of consciousness that arise and pass moment by moment, we come to see that none of them, individually or collectively, constitutes a real self. They are simply mental events emerging in dependence upon prior causes and conditions. With the insight thus gained into the impersonal nature of the mind, we overcome the fear that our real self will be annihilated. This leads to an understanding of the third noble truth, the reality of the cessation of suffering and its source. Such practice also overcomes the deeply rooted tendency to view what is impermanent as being permanent, a fundamental delusion that gives rise to many other mental afflictions. Thoughts and all other mental events come and go from moment to moment, and our awareness of them also arises and passes in flickering moments of luminosity. Nowhere in this effervescent flow of mental events is there anything stable or abiding, anything constituting a self, or anything intrinsically "mine."

[Page 205] This practice involves taking note of our state of mind when it is conditioned by such mental afflictions as craving, anger, and delusion as well as when it is not, when it is focused as well as when it is distracted, and when it is spacious as well as when it is narrow. The Buddha likened mindfulness of the mind to the use of a mirror to see one's reflection, for this is an unparalleled method for knowing one's own mind and the true nature of mental events and consciousness itself. This method entails not only noticing mental events in the present but also observing the causal sequences of mental processes. These sequences, from the initial contact with the object of awareness to feeling, recognition, and thought, may in turn lead to an elaborate growth of conceptual proliferation, or rumination, in which we are passively carried along in a stream of compulsive ideation. In this way, we become the helpless prey of our own thoughts, memories, and associations. Ultimately, it may be less accurate to say that we have a mind than to say that our mind has us!

This raises the practical question of what to do when we see that we have become victims of our own minds. First of all, it takes more than bare, nonjudgmental attention to discern which

mental states and processes are afflictive and nonafflictive, or beneficial and unbeneficial. We must learn about the nature of mental afflictions and then intelligently draw from our memory to recognize them when they occur. We experience a great deal of misery when our mind helplessly falls into compulsive rumination. The first line of defense is to stop grasping at the "signs" and "secondary marks" associated with the objects of the five physical senses and the mind. From moment to moment, appearances to these six senses arise, and grasping at their "signs" occurs when we conceptually impute objects on the basis of such appearances and reify them as being independently, objectively real. The alternative is simply to be nonreactively present with these appearances to awareness, without reifying them as inherently existent objects. If reification sets in despite our best efforts, the mind may then grasp onto the "secondary marks" of the reified object, giving rise to further mental afflictions, such as craving and hostility. The best antidote at this point is to divert the attention elsewhere or simply to suppress such afflictive rumination so that it stops poisoning the mind.

In short, when the mind is sickened by the influence of these internal toxins, the Buddha's advice is to respond in the same way that we react [Page 206] when the body is poisoned: strive to immediately expel the toxins to prevent further damage. This is quite different from the advice commonly given by modern, secular mindfulness teachers, which is to equally embrace everything that arises in the mind. On numerous occasions, the Buddha emphasized the importance of bringing the mind under control so that one can think what one wishes to think and direct the attention at will. Like a mahout controlling a rutting elephant, one must learn to control one's mind instead of being controlled by it.

The Mahayana sutras in particular employ mindfulness of the mind to fathom the very nature of mind. *The Sutra Requested by Ratnachuda* goes beyond the investigation of the mind as it is influenced by craving, hostility, and delusion to probe the nature of mental events as they arise in the past, present, and future: "Now what is past has vanished, what is future has not yet come into being, and what is present is fleeting." Moreover, the mind is "formless, invisible, insubstantial, unknowable, unstable, and baseless. Mind...is like an illusion...like the stream of a river, unsettled, breaking and dissolving as soon as it is produced." In short, through such investigation, we come to recognize not only that the mind is not a true self and is not truly "ours," but also that it has no inherent nature of its own. It is not identical to any one of the myriad impulses and states of consciousness that arise from moment to moment, nor is it the same as the composite of all those events. We may conceptually designate "mind" upon a particular moment of awareness or upon a stream of mental processes. but such a unitary "mind" does not exist apart from the label we impose upon those appearances. According to the Buddha, these various modes of empirical inquiry into the nature of the mind and its relation to sensory experience lead to authentic discoveries that are valid regardless of faith, personal preferences, oral tradition, reasoning, and acceptance of any particular belief system. This constitutes a true science of mind and its relation to the natural world, not confined to empirical observation of behavioral expressions and neural correlates of subjective experience.

Mindfulness of Phenomena

Finally, the close application of mindfulness to phenomena is designed to yield insight into the nature and origins of all kinds of experiential phenomena, revealing the disadvantages and antidotes for those subject to [Page 207] mental afflictions. In the first three practices of mindfulness, we focused primarily on the nature of each of the respective objects, but in this phase we attend especially to the dependent origination of all physical and mental events. The close inspection of the body, feelings, and mind demonstrates that none of these constitutes a real self; nevertheless, one might still hold to the belief that one is a discrete, unitary self that is an unmoved mover, existing beyond the veil of appearances to the senses. But this final mode of investigation shows that all physical and mental events occur naturally, in dependence upon prior causes and conditions, with no direct or indirect evidence for a self that controls the body and mind from behind the scenes. Just as the Buddha rejected the macrocosmic notion of an invisible, independent God who created and runs the universe, so he also rejected the microcosmic notion of an invisible, independent self that generates thoughts and controls the behavior of body, speech, and mind. In this way, mindfulness of phenomena leads to experiential insight into the nonexistence of such a self.

Analyo Bhikkhu elaborates on this point:

At the time of the Buddha,...some teachings claimed that the universe was controlled by an external power, either an omnipotent god or a principle inherent in nature. Some took man to be the independent doer and enjoyer of action. Some favored determinism, while others completely rejected any kind of causality. Despite their differences, all these positions concurred in recognizing an absolute principle, formulated in terms of the existence (or absence) of a single or first cause. The Buddha, on the other hand, proposed dependent coarising [Skt. *pratitya-samutpada*, or dependent origination] as his "middle way" explanation of causality. His conception of dependent coarising was so decisive a departure from existing conceptions of causality that he came to reject all of the four prevalent ways of formulating causality.

Mindfulness of phenomena includes close inspection of all the mental and physical things and events we normally identify with as "I" or "mine," recognizing their arising, their presence, and their passing away. More broadly, we attend to all objects of the physical senses and the mind, recognizing when our experience of them is contaminated by the five obscurations: sensual craving, malice, laxity and dullness, excitation and guilt, and uncertainty. Furthermore, we note how an unarisen obscuration can [Page 208] arise, how it can be dispelled, and how it can be prevented. In a similar fashion, we mindfully focus on the mental factors that lead to freedom from suffering, known as the seven factors of enlightenment (Pali *bojjhanga*): mindfulness, investigation of phenomena, effort, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. Again we note when they are present, how they arise, and how they can be perfected in the future. In so doing, we gain clarity regarding what contaminates the mind and what purifies it, and in this way we come to an understanding of the fourth noble truth, the reality of the path to the cessation of suffering. Habitually, we tend to regard these obscurations and virtues as processes that cause a real self either to remain afflicted or to become spiritually purified. But

the insights resulting from this practice show that they have no such influence on a real self, for no such personal identity exists.

The practice of the four applications of mindfulness results in insights beyond the mere absence of an unchanging, unitary, autonomous self. In fact, on one occasion when the Buddha was directly questioned about the existence of a self, he refused to give either an affirmative or a negative answer, explaining later that if he had simply denied the existence of a self, this might have been mistaken for a form of nihilism, which he thoroughly rejected. It's not that the self doesn't exist at all—that would absurdly imply that there is no one who writes or reads these words—but rather that each of us arises in dependence upon verbal and conceptual designation. Our existence is nominal, with each self being imputed upon mental and physical events that are not a self. But once we have been designated as a person, each of us performs the functions of a person and causally engages with the world. This conceptually designated, nominal existence equally characterizes all other phenomena. Recalling the earlier example of a chariot, the term "chariot" is simply a conventional label superimposed upon appearances that are not inherently a chariot. Likewise, the four elements of earth, water, fire, and air that constitute the physical world are devoid of their own inherent nature, as is the rest of the world at large.

Although references to the empty, illusory nature of all phenomena appear in the discourses of the Buddha recorded in the Pali canon, far more extensive explanations are found in the Mahayana sutras. The *Lokanathavyakarana Sutra*, for example, declares:

Nameless are all conditions, but illuminated by name; nevertheless, that which is of the nature of a name has been neither seen nor heard, is neither [Page 209] arisen nor disappeared. Of what do you ask the name? Name is a matter of habit: declarations are made by name. This man is Ratnachitra by name; that other man is Ratnottama.

Likewise, the *Sutra Requested by Ratnachuda* states:

Nothing but the elements arises when the elements arise; when they are observed, only the elements are observed. But in them there is no substance, there is no being, or living thing, or creature, or human being.... If they are brought about, they arise; but if they are not brought about, they do not arise. Whatever kind they are when brought about, of that kind they arise, good or bad or indifferent. There is nothing that can cause the elements to come into existence, nor can they arise without any cause at all.

Theravada and Mahayana treatises alike challenge the assumption that anything truly comes into existence either by itself, in dependence upon other factors, by both, or by neither. Nothing objectively comes into existence by its own nature; it emerges only conventionally in dependence upon verbal labeling and conceptual designation. Neither the self nor anything else is utterly nonexistent, nor is it inherently existent. The existence of all things is conventional and relative to the apprehending mind.

If this is so, we may probe further and ask: Is there nothing to the whole of reality apart from these conventions brought into nominal existence by the thoughts of sentient beings? In fact, the Buddha spoke of an unborn, undying dimension of reality, namely nirvana, and the timeless, "nonmanifesting" consciousness that experiences it, even after the death of one who has achieved such liberation. In the *Kevaddha Sutta*, the Buddha raises the question:

"Where do earth, water, fire and air no footing find?
Where are long and short, small and great, fair and foul—
Where are 'name and form' wholly destroyed?"

And the answer is:

"When consciousness is signless, boundless, all-luminous,
That's where earth, water, fire, and air find no footing.
[Page 210] There both long and short, small and great, fair and foul—
There 'name and form' are wholly destroyed.
With the cessation of consciousness this is all destroyed."

Nyananada Bhikkhu explains that in nirvana, the four elements have no basis, for the familiar categories of "name and form," subject and object, mind and matter vanish with the disappearance of ordinary, conceptually conditioned consciousness. This, he adds, is a corrective to the common notion that the four elements can cease altogether somewhere—which has its roots in the popular conception of self-existing material elements. The Buddha's formulation of the question and the concluding line are meant to combat this misconception.

There are relatively few references in the Pali canon to this ultimate, nonmanifesting dimension of consciousness, but it figures very prominently in Mahayana Buddhism and is central to the Mahamudra tradition of Indian Buddhism. It is a vital element of Vajrayana Buddhism, maintained by all schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Panchen Lozang Chökyi Gyaltsen, for instance, gives the following quintessential instructions on vipashyana in his text *Highway of the Jinās: A Root Text on the Precious Geluk-Kagyü Mahamudra Tradition*:

While in a state of meditative equipoise as before, like a tiny fish darting about in a still, limpid pond, with subtle consciousness intelligently examine the nature of the person who is meditating. The noble protector Nagarjuna wrote, "A person is not earth, nor water, nor fire, nor air, nor space, nor consciousness, nor all of them. But apart from them, what person is there? A person is not truly a composite of those six constituents, nor is a person truly any one of them individually." Accordingly, when sought out in that way, not even an atom of meditative equipoise or of the person resting in such a state is to be found. Then single-pointedly and without distraction cultivate space-like meditative equipoise.

Alternatively, continuously place your mind in an unimpeded, luminous, and cognizant flow, one of sheer emptiness, without form and without obscuration, which manifests

and emanates in various ways. As for objects of clinging, which appear and are grasped as if they were autonomous, the protector Shantideva declared, "A 'continuum' and an 'assembly,' like a rosary, an army and the like, are unreal." Using textual sources [Page 211] and reasoning, single-pointedly rest in meditative equipoise with the awareness that nothing exists as it appears.

In short, in the words of my spiritual mentor Sangye Yeshe, who was truly all-knowing, "if you thoroughly recognize everything that arises as being grasped by discursive thoughts, the ultimate, absolute space of phenomena (Skt. *dharmadhatu*) will arise without reliance on anything else. How wondrous to rest single-pointedly in meditative equipoise with your awareness immersed in appearances!" In a similar vein, Padampa Sangye expressed this same idea when he wrote, "Twirl the spear of awareness in the nature of emptiness. This view cannot be impeded or obstructed, O people of Dingri!" At the conclusion of your meditation session, dedicate whatever virtues that have emerged from your meditation on Mahamudra, as well as your ocean-like virtues in the past, present, and future, to the great, peerless state of enlightenment. By well acquainting yourself with such practice, whatever appearances arise as objects to your six senses, carefully examine how they manifest, and their mode of existence will suddenly and nakedly become evident. The essential point of the view is to recognize whatever arises.

In short, whatever arises, including your own mind, do not grasp onto its referent, but ascertain how each one exists, and sustain that awareness continually. By knowing this, all phenomena of samsara and nirvana are united in one nature. Aryadeva echoed this point when he wrote, "The observer of one entity is said to be the observer of everything. The emptiness of one thing is the emptiness of everything."

While resting in authentic meditative equipoise in ultimate reality, there is freedom from the extremes of conceptual elaborations of samsara and nirvana, such as existence and nonexistence. Nevertheless, after arising from meditation, upon examination, dependently related events, each performing its own function, have only a nominal, imputed existence. Undeniably, they naturally arise like dreams, mirages, reflections of the moon in water, and apparitions. "When emptiness is not obscured by appearances, and appearances are not impeded by emptiness—when emptiness and dependent origination are perceived as synonymous—the sublime path has been reached," so says the learned renunciate known as Lozang Chökyi Gyaltzen. By this virtue, may all beings swiftly triumph by this path, for there is no other entrance to nirvana.

[Page 212] Once one has fathomed the empty nature of all subjective and objective phenomena, as well as the very nonduality of the two, one is poised to realize the ultimate dimension of consciousness. This is described by the Indian mahasiddha Maitripa as follows:

The ultimate reality of the mind is free of the three extremes of birth, cessation, and abiding. It is released from the dualistic grasping onto "I" and "mine," its essence is

empty, its nature is luminous, and its character is unceasing awareness that is without an object, yet appearing in numerous ways. This luminosity transcends objects that are grasped as the seen and the seer. It is released from things that are objectified as the topic of meditation and the meditator. Without bringing anything to mind, that very freedom from mental engagement is inactivity free of all action, set at ease and unstructured. There is no grasping, for whatever appears is not recognized. One is mentally vacant, for one is free of the structured contamination of the consciousness of meditative equipoise. There is pristine emptiness, for there is no grasping onto signs. It is luminous, for it is by nature clear light. It is unmediated, for it is not contaminated by the dualistic grasping of discursive thoughts. It is vivid, for it knows its own nature. Appearances and the mind are indivisibly, unimpededly homogenous, for grasping onto subject and object has dissolved. It is ordinary consciousness, for awareness is settled in its own unstructured nature. It is "fresh awareness," for the stream of discursive thoughts does not enter the heart, and this is the real essence of the practice of insight.

Realization of the ultimate nature of consciousness, indivisible from the absolute space of phenomena, from which all phenomena arise, is the ultimate reason for first achieving shamatha, then proceeding to the mindful investigation of the body, feelings, mind, and phenomena, and finally ascertaining the empty, relative nature of all things. The path to the cessation of suffering has come to completion. That which was to be accomplished has been accomplished, and all that remains to be done is to liberate all other sentient beings from suffering and bring them to a lasting state of genuine happiness through ultimate freedom.

End Notes

1. *Ānāpānasamṃyutta* [Connected Discourses on Breathing, SN V, 321–22], cf. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*, 2 vols. (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2000), 2:1774.
2. Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, chap. V, v. 16, cf. Śāntideva, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*, trans. Vesna A. Wallace and B. Alan Wallace (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 1997), 49.
3. Karma Chagmé, *A Spacious Path to Freedom: Practical Instructions on the Union of Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga*, commentary by Gyatrul Rinpoche, trans. B. Alan Wallace (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2009), 80.
4. These are seven aspects of physical posture during meditation: legs crossed; hands in fists, or right over left, or on the knees; shoulders raised and slightly forward; spine straight; chin tucked slightly toward throat; tongue tip touching palate; and eyes unblinking and unwavering, gently directed downward.
5. Karma Chagmé, *A Spacious Path to Freedom*, 80.
6. Asaṅga, Maitreyaṅgāthā, *Abhisamayālaṅkāra: Introduction and Translation from Original Text with Sanskrit-Tibetan Index*, trans. Edward Conze (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed. Estremo Oriente, 1954).
7. Chandrakīrti, *Introduction to the Middle Way: Chandrakīrti's Madhyamakavatara with Commentary by Jamgön Mipham*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala, 2005).
8. *Collected Works of Paṅchen blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan*, 5 vols., trans. B. Alan Wallace (New Delhi: Mongolian Lama Gurudeva, 1973), 4:84–86.
9. *Satipaṭṭhānasamṃyutta* [Connected Discourses on the Establishments of Mindfulness, SN V 150–52], cf. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*, 2 vols. (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2000), 2:1635–36.
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13. *Saḷāyatanaṃsaṃyutta* [Connected Discourses on the Six Sense Bases, SN IV 138–39], cf. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*, 2 vols. (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2000), 2:1214–15.

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17. *Rohitassa Sutta* [Connected Discourses with Young Devas, SN I 62], cf. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*, 2 vols. (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2000), 1:158.
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21. *Araṇavibhanga Sutta* [The Exposition of Non-Conflict, MN III 230], cf. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 1995), 1080.
22. *Ratnacūḍasūtra*, quoted in Śāntideva, *Śikṣa-samuccaya*, trans. Bendall and Rouse, 219; cf. Engle, *The Inner Science of Buddhist Practice*, 222.
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24. Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna*, 222.
25. *Vitakkasaṭṭhāna* [The Removal of Distracting Thoughts, MN I 119–22], cf. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 1995), 211–14; Engle, *The Inner Science of Buddhist Practice*, 187.
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 30. *Abyākatasaṃyutta* [Connected Discourses on the Undeclared, SN IV 400], cf. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*, 2 vols. (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2000), 2:1393–94.
 31. *Chabbisodhana Sutta* [The Sixfold Purity, MN III 31], cf. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 1995), 904–5.
 32. Quoted in Śāntideva, *Śikṣa-samuccaya*, trans. Bendall and Rouse, 224, with modification of the original translation.
 33. Quoted in Śāntideva, *Śikṣa-samuccaya*, trans. Bendall and Rouse, 222, with modification of the original translation.
 34. Jay L. Garfield, trans., *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), chaps. I, XVII.
 35. *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* [The Noble Search, MN I 162–63], cf. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 1995), 254–56.
 36. *Kevaddha Sutta* [About Kevaddha, DN I 223], cf. Maurice Walshe, trans., *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 1995), 179–80.
 37. Ven. Ñāṇanada, *Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1971), 59.
 38. Abhayadatta, *Masters of Mahāmudrā: Songs and Histories of the Eighty-Four Buddhist Siddhas*, trans. Keith Dowman and Hugh R. Downs (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985).
 39. The absolute space of phenomena (Skt. *dharmadhātu*) is the ultimate dimension of reality out of which relative space, time, and the phenomenal world emerges, and is identical to nirvana.
 40. *Collected Works of Pa ṅ chen blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan*, trans. B. Alan Wallace (New Delhi: Mongolian Lama Gurudeva, 1973), 4:86–88.
 41. Karma Chagmé, *A Spacious Path to Freedom: Practical Instructions on the Union of Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga*, commentary by Gyatrul Rinpoche, trans. B. Alan Wallace (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2009), 114.

Shamatha and Vipashyana in the Dzogchen Tradition

B. Alan Wallace

Chapter Thirteen from *Meditations of A Buddhist Skeptic:
A Manifesto for the Mind Sciences and Contemplative Practice*

CUTTING THROUGH TO THE SUBSTRATE

In today's fast-paced world, with so many demands on our time and so little leisure, it is understandable that we seek shortcuts to fulfill our desires, including the goal of spiritual liberation. If time and resources limit us to a daily practice punctuated by occasional retreats, common sense suggests that we should focus on the most profound methods available. Consequently, Theravadin Buddhists tend to emphasize insight meditation and Tibetan Buddhists focus on the practices of Vajrayana, including Dzogchen, or the Great Perfection. But in our haste to ascend to the summits of Buddhist meditation, we are prone to overlook the importance of establishing a base camp on the way up. In particular, many modern followers of Dzogchen have gotten the idea that on the fast track to enlightenment, there is no need for the practices of *shamatha* and *vipashyana*. All that is needed is "open presence," or simply resting in "not-doing." Nothing could be further from the truth.

The necessary base for the effective practice of Dzogchen that is commonly neglected is the experience of the substrate consciousness. The meditative experience of this dimension of consciousness plays a crucial role in the practice of Dzogchen. This is indicated in the writings of Prahevajra, the first teacher of Dzogchen in our historical era, who summarized the Buddha's teachings in three points: first, cut through to the very root of the substrate (Skt. *alaya*); second, investigate the source of samsara; and third, rest naturally in pristine awareness (Tib. *rigpa*).¹

The meaning of the substrate is explored in *The Vajra Essence*, revealed to the eminent master Dūdjom Lingpa, who is said to have been an incarnation of Drogpen Kyeuchung Lotsawa, one of the twenty-five disciples of Padmasambhava. His subsequent incarnations included H. H. Dudjom Rinpoche (1904–87), the late supreme head of the Nyingma order of Tibetan Buddhism. The true substrate, he writes, is an immaterial, spacelike vacuity, devoid of thought, in which sensory and mental appearances cease.² This state is spontaneously accessed when one falls into deep, dreamless sleep, when one faints, and when one dies, but then one normally loses consciousness. However, it is possible to vividly experience the substrate by achieving the state of meditative quiescence, or shamatha.

From the substrate arises a radiant, clear state of awareness, the substrate consciousness, which illuminates all sensory and mental appearances. Dūdjom Lingpa describes the result of accessing the substrate by settling the mind in its natural state:

You will become still in an unfluctuating state, in which you experience joy like the warmth of a fire, luminosity like the dawn, and nonconceptuality like an ocean unmoved by waves.

Yearning for this and believing in it, you will not be able to bear being separated from it, and you will hold fast to it. . . . That is called *ordinary shamatha of the path*, and if you achieve stability in it for a long time, you will have achieved the critical feature of stability in your mind-stream.³

While dwelling in shamatha, he explains, the ordinary mind of a sentient being disappears, as it were, and roving thoughts vanish into the substrate, along with oneself, others, and objects. “Someone with an experience of vacuity and luminosity who directs his attention inward may bring a stop to all external appearances and come to a state in which he believes there are no appearances and no thoughts. This experience of brilliance from which one dares not part is the substrate consciousness.”⁴ Dūdjom Lingpa warns against the danger of mistaking this meditative state for pristine awareness. By getting stuck here, one will not come the slightest bit closer to liberation, for this is an ethically neutral state in which mental afflictions and obscurations are merely muted, not eradicated at the root.

The Vajra Essence presents the entire path to enlightenment, beginning with the common and uncommon preliminary practices, followed by the practices of shamatha, vipashyana, classic stages of Vajrayana practice, and finally the two stages of the Great Perfection, the breakthrough (Tib. *trekchö*) and the direct crossing-over (Tib. *tögal*), culminating in three levels of achievement of the rainbow body (Tib. *jalü*). While insisting on the indispensability of dissolving the ordinary mind into the substrate consciousness by achieving shamatha, Dūdjom Lingpa acknowledges that “among unrefined people in this degenerate era, very few appear to achieve more than fleeting stability.”⁵ It is said that thirteen of his disciples achieved rainbow body and a thousand achieved direct realization of pristine awareness. Though many teachers nowadays find reasons to deemphasize shamatha, none has achieved comparable successes in leading their disciples to such high stages of realization.

Returning to the writings of Prahevajra, once one has settled in this “natural state” of the mind, the first step is to investigate where the mind comes from, where it dwells in the present, and where it finally departs. By means of such vipashyana, or contemplative insight meditation, one realizes that the mind does not truly emerge from anywhere, is not located anywhere once it has arisen, and does not go anywhere when it vanishes. Having no shape, form, or color, it is a luminous emptiness that transcends every mental construct. In this way, by means of vipashyana, one cuts through the substrate. It is hard to imagine how one could cut through the substrate without first experientially realizing it—which must be done through the practice of shamatha.

On this basis, again with the practice of vipashyana, we investigate the root of samsara by experientially seeking the location of our self among mental states and processes, our body, sensory appearances, and the external environment. In this way we discover that the “I” doesn’t truly exist anywhere—in the body, mind, or elsewhere—as we generally assume it does. Following this second stage of practice, we naturally enter the state of pristine awareness, effortlessly relaxing the mind in the very state of not finding, without grasping onto the self or any other object. Such contemplative insight is said to have the potential to fully eradicate the deeply ingrained, habitual tendency of grasping onto the self, but only when it is

supported with the mental stability of shamatha.

The indispensability of shamatha within the Dzogchen tradition is clearly stated by many of the greatest masters of India and Tibet, but this leaves open the question of where such practice fits on the path. In the “earth treasure” called *Natural Liberation*, revealed in the fourteenth century by Karma Lingpa, Padmasambhava presents the entire path to enlightenment in a sequence of practices beginning with meditations on the nature of suffering, the preciousness of human life, impermanence, taking refuge, bodhichitta, and the four immeasurables; Vajrasattva meditation; mandala offering; prayers to the guru lineage; and receipt of the four empowerments. With this foundation in the preliminary practices, he proceeds directly to shamatha, presenting a series of practices, including settling the mind in its natural state, which was described previously. His presentation culminates with these quintessential instructions for the practice of “shamatha without a sign”:

Cast your gaze downward, gently release your mind, and without having anything on which to meditate, gently release both your body and mind into their natural state. Having nothing on which to meditate, and without any modification or adulteration, place your attention simply without wavering, in its own natural state, its natural limpidity, its own character, just as it is. Remain in clarity, and rest the mind so that it is loose and free. Alternate between observing who is concentrating inwardly and who is releasing. If it is the mind, ask, “What is that very agent that releases the mind and concentrates the mind?” Steadily observe yourself, and then release again. By so doing, fine stability will arise, and you may even identify awareness.⁶

Padmasambhava concludes his explanation of the nature and significance of shamatha for the practice of Dzogchen as follows:

Flawless shamatha is like an oil lamp that is unmoved by wind. Wherever the awareness is placed, it is unwaveringly present; awareness is vividly clear, without being sullied by laxity, lethargy, or dimness; wherever the awareness is directed, it is steady and sharply pointed; and unmoved by adventitious thoughts, it is straight. Thus, a flawless meditative state arises in one’s mind-stream; and until this happens, it is important that the mind is settled in its natural state.⁷

These teachings on shamatha are followed by Padmasambhava’s instructions on vipashyana, dream yoga, the breakthrough, transference of consciousness (Tib. *phowa*), the direct crossing-over, and practices for gaining a fortunate rebirth from within the intermediate state (Tib. *bardo*; Skt. *antarabhava*). Clearly, he considered shamatha to be a necessary foundation for these more advanced practices.

The treasure revealer (Tib. *tertön*) Lerab Lingpa similarly highlights the importance of shamatha in his oral commentary to the *Profound Heart Essence of the Great Chetsün Vimalamitra*, which consists of three parts: the preliminaries to the profound practical instructions, the main practice, and the concluding instructions. The preliminaries, once one has made the mind stream a suitable

vessel, are of two kinds: the common preliminaries, consisting of the sevenfold mental training, and the uncommon preliminaries, consisting of the five special accumulations and purifications. Tertön Lerab Lingpa comments, “The sevenfold methods of training the mind are the indispensable crown jewel of all spiritual people and do not pertain solely to this practice.” They are:

1. Meditation on impermanence;
2. Meditation on the way even the pleasures of samsara are causes leading to unhappiness;
3. Meditation on the way there is no closure, no matter how much we strive for favorable circumstances in samsara;
4. Meditation on the futility of all good and bad illusory human pursuits;
5. Meditation on the benefits of liberation;
6. Meditation on the importance of the guru’s practical instructions; and
7. The crucial way to maintain the mind in its natural state.

The seventh of these methods concerns the cultivation of shamatha, which is presented here in full:

Simply hearing your spiritual mentor’s practical instructions and knowing how to explain them to others does not liberate your own mind-stream, so you must meditate. Even if you spend your whole life practicing a mere semblance of meditation—meditating in a stupor, cluttering the mind with fantasies, and taking many breaks during your sessions due to being unable to control mental scattering—no good experiences or realizations will arise. So it is important during each session to meditate according to your mentor’s oral instructions.

In solitude, sit upright on a comfortable cushion. Gently hold the “pot breath” until the vital energies converge naturally. Let your gaze be vacant. With your body and mind inwardly relaxed, and without allowing the continuum of your consciousness to fade from a state of limpidity and vivid clarity, sustain it naturally and radiantly. Do not clutter your mind with many critical judgments. Do not take a shortsighted view of meditation, and avoid great hopes and fears that your meditation will turn out one way and not another. At the beginning, have many daily sessions, each of them of brief duration, and focus well in each one. Whenever you meditate, bear in mind the phrase “without distraction and without grasping,” and put this into practice.

As you gradually familiarize yourself with the meditation, increase the duration of your sessions. If dullness sets in, arouse your awareness. If there is excessive scattering and excitation, loosen up. Determine in terms of your own experience the optimal degree of mental arousal, as well as the healthiest diet and behavior.

Excessive, imprisoning constriction of the mind, loss of clarity due to lassitude, and excessive relaxation resulting in involuntary vocalization and eye movement are to be avoided. It does only harm to talk a lot about such things as extrasensory perception and

random dreams or to claim, “I saw a deity; I saw a ghost; I know this; I’ve realized that,” and so on. The presence or absence of any kind of pleasure or displeasure, such as a sensation of motion, is not uniform, for there are great differences in the dispositions and faculties from one individual to another.

Due to maintaining the mind in its natural state, there may arise sensations such as physical and mental bliss, a sense of lucid consciousness, the appearance of empty forms, and a nonconceptual sense that nothing can harm the mind, regardless of whether or not thoughts have ceased. Whatever kinds of mental events occur—be they gentle or violent, subtle or gross, of long or short duration, strong or weak, good or bad—observe their nature, and avoid any obsessive evaluation of them as being one thing and not another. Let the heart of your practice be consciousness in its natural state, limpid and vivid. Acting as your own mentor, if you can bring the essential points to perfection, as if you were threading a needle, the afflictions of your own mind-stream will subside, you will gain the autonomy of not succumbing to them, and your mind will constantly be calm and composed. This is a sound basis for the arising of all samadhis of the stages of generation and completion.

This is like tilling the soil of a field. So from the outset, avoid making a lot of great, exalted, and pointless proclamations. Rather, it is crucial to do all you can to refine your mind and establish a foundation for contemplative practice.⁸

Immediately following the teachings on the seven common preliminaries, Lerab Lingpa teaches the uncommon preliminaries: going for refuge, the cultivation of bodhichitta, purifying obscurations through the practice of Vajrasattva meditation, accumulating merit by offering the mandala, and guru yoga. Finally, the main practice consists of the stages of generation and completion, followed by the two phases of Dzogchen practice, namely the breakthrough and the direct crossing-over. In this way, he emphasizes the importance of achieving shamatha by settling the mind in its natural state as an essential foundation for all Vajrayana practices, including Dzogchen.

Without achieving such an experience of stable and vivid *samadhi* through the achievement of shamatha, we may catch fleeting glimpses of pristine awareness, but we are unlikely to sustain it or readily access it again. Consequently, such breakthrough experiences may soon disappear, leaving only a fading memory and a lingering sense of nostalgia.

According to these eminent Dzogchen masters, the authentic path of the Great Perfection requires that we first dissolve our ordinary mind and physical senses into the substrate consciousness through the practice of shamatha, such that all appearances vanish into the substrate. This is like a base camp allowing us to climb the heights of vipashyana, resulting in a direct experience of the empty nature of the self and all other phenomena. Finally, we ascend to the summit of pristine awareness, realizing the ultimate ground of all phenomena and the ultimate nature of our own mind. There may be no shortcut to the Great Perfection, but this is a direct path to spiritual awakening.

INVESTIGATING THE SOURCE OF SAMBARA

Having explored the nature and significance of achieving shamatha by cutting through to the substrate, let us now turn to the second phase of practice according to the teachings of Prahevajra: investigating the source of samsara. As noted earlier, according to all schools of Buddhism, the root of suffering is the delusion of grasping onto our own identity as inherently existent and absolutely separate from all other sentient beings and the rest of the universe. Consequently, vipashyana meditation often begins with an investigation into the nature of our own identity and then gradually proceeds outward to the examination of all other phenomena. The following account of vipashyana as it is taught in the Dzogchen tradition is drawn from notes taken by the students of Dūdjom Lingpa on the basis of his oral commentaries to his own mind treasure entitled *Buddhahood Without Meditation*.⁹ These notes were compiled and published as *A Garland for the Delight of the Fortunate: A Clear Elucidation of Words and Their Meaning, an Explication of the Oral Transmission of the Glorious Guru, as Notes on the Nature of Reality, the Great Perfection, Buddhahood Without Meditation*.¹⁰

According to the Dzogchen view, even when one is resting in the substrate, there is a dormant proclivity for self-grasping that does not fade away, no matter how long one remains in this state. This latent consciousness of the mere appearance of a real self—although none in fact exists—persists when awake, while dreaming, and when the mind dissolves into the substrate, during dreamless sleep and even more deeply at death; and it continues during the intermediate state and on into future lifetimes. It is called “the causal ignorance of oneself alone.” Once this consciousness is catalyzed by appearances into grasping onto that which is not an “I” as being “I,” subsequent states of consciousness arise together with discursive thoughts that clarify, stabilize, and fortify this sense of self. This delusional process is called “grasping onto personal identity,” and it is the reification of the self as something inherently existent.

As soon as one grasps onto oneself as a real, separate entity, all that is not “I” is simultaneously excluded as separate from oneself, and thus the duality between oneself as a subject and everything else as objects is reified. Buddhist tradition declares that there are two fundamental kinds of delusion: instinctual delusion that is innate in all sentient beings and acquired delusion that is developed over the course of a lifetime. The reification of the duality of subjects and objects is a fundamental instinctual delusion. On the basis of grasping onto appearances so that they appear to be discrete objects, inherently separate from everything else, the conceptual mind individually designates objects in the surrounding inanimate environment and its sentient inhabitants. This occurs in preverbal infants, even in embryos, as well as in other species that make little or no use of language. There is great variation, however, in the ways that diverse individuals, let alone different species, reify objects and substantiate them as separate entities. These phenomena do not define or demarcate themselves; rather, the conceptual minds of various beings dissect the flow of appearances in myriad ways, resulting in many different experiential worlds. Each world of experience of the past, present, and future arises relative to the modes of perception and conceptual frameworks of those who experience it. None is absolutely, objectively real. This delusional reification and fortification of the distinct referents

of thoughts is acquired delusion. The sequence of the causal ignorance of oneself alone, followed by the instinctual delusion of reifying the duality of subject and object, followed by the learned ignorance of reifying and fortifying the distinct referents of thoughts, gives rise to all worlds of experience, both human and nonhuman. Such delusion lies at the root of all suffering.

To penetrate the delusion of grasping onto our personal identity, we experientially investigate the origin, location, and destination of the self. Following Padmasambhava's instructions for the practice of shamatha without a sign, described earlier in this chapter, we introspectively probe into the nature of the self that controls the mind by alternately concentrating and releasing the attention. As a result of such practice, the conscious sense of "I am" dissolves, and eventually all thoughts dissolve into the substrate. In contrast, in the vipashyana investigation of the self, we arouse the sense of personal identity and examine it carefully, like a physicist who uses a magnetic field to suspend an atom in a vacuum for close inspection. Here we are investigating the reified referent of the label "I," and the method is very similar to that described in the previous chapter, highlighting the common ground between Indian Buddhism as a whole and the Dzogchen tradition.

First we investigate the source of the self, clearly detecting our lived sense of being a person and an agent and then inquiring whether this "I" emerges from any of the physical elements of earth, water, fire, air, or space. Immediately we confront the radical disparity between the materiality of these elements and the insubstantial "I." If the self is truly an emergent property of matter, such as the electrochemical events in the brain, it should display physical qualities, like its source. Scientists have identified many kinds of properties that emerge from configurations of mass-energy, and all of them can be detected physically and have physical attributes. The self, in contrast, is undetectable to all physical systems of measurement, and it exhibits no physical qualities. Moreover, when each of the constituents of the body is examined, from the brain down to the toes, no objective "I" is anywhere to be found. So there is no good reason to believe that the self emerges from physical phenomena either inside or outside the body. The self doesn't really originate from anything, anywhere.

Next we examine the location of this real self with which we so strongly identify. Objectively, once the self has come into existence, it is nowhere to be found among any of the physical elements either inside or outside the body. One by one, we attend to each of the anatomical parts of our body, noting that each has its own name, such as "brain," "neuron," "synapse," and so on, and none of them is called "I." The self has no real location.

Since the self has no real origin in the past and no location in the present, it is implausible that it could really go anywhere in the future. And yet, the sense of self repeatedly manifests, both in the waking and dreaming states. If there is a real self that exists while we are awake, we check to see whether this self is identical to the self that appears while dreaming. If they were truly identical, then if we were injured in a dream last night, those injuries should carry over into waking experience today. But they don't. The person we identify with in a dream seems to vanish upon awakening, just as the waking self vanishes when we fall asleep and begin dreaming. Every night there arises a new self in each dream, and every day another self emerges; if all of them

were real, there would be hundreds of selves arising within a single continuum of consciousness each year. And with the birth of each such self, there must be a death of a self, implying that our living space must be littered with hundreds of dead selves. This doesn't appear to be the case.

However, with the passing of these waking and dreaming states of consciousness, if each self becomes utterly nonexistent, more problems arise. If the self is nonexistent to begin with, then it can't freshly become nonexistent. If it really existed, it should be detectable somewhere. But it isn't. Therefore, the self is neither truly existent nor truly nonexistent. It doesn't go anywhere, and there is no one who is really there in the first place.

By investigating the origins, location, and destination of the self, we find that even though there is a persistent, robust sense of a real "I," this appearance is misleading. It's like an optical illusion, and all references to a real self are fictitious, for there is no real referent of the label "I." Through this meditative process, we strike at the root of delusion by recognizing the error of reifying our own personal identity.

Having examined the subjective referent of the word "I," we now turn to the objective referents of all other labels of phenomena. Appearances arise to our six senses, and the conceptual mind selects particular segments and superimposes objects onto these appearances, with each object "possessing" various parts and attributes. Appearances, parts, and attributes constitute the basis upon which the labels of objects are designated, and in the next phase of vipashyana meditation, we inspect these bases of designation. The central question to be explored is whether or not the bases of designation are identical to the labeled objects that are imputed upon them. The Buddhist hypothesis is that the imputed objects do not objectively exist anywhere among their bases of designation. These bases are in fact "empty" of the objects projected upon them.

Like the Buddha's example of closely inspecting a chariot to investigate the nature of phenomena, Dūdjom Lingpa suggests beginning the examination of the nature of the "I" by closely inspecting what we call a "head." This label may be designated on the face, hair, ears, skull, or brain, for example, but none of these is identical to a head. Each component has its own label. Each of the many components of the head has its own distinct parts and qualities, while the head has its own parts and qualities that are not identical to any of its parts. Moreover, the mere assembly of all the so-called components of the head does not constitute a head. There is no time at which the many distinct entities that are said to "belong" to a head objectively unite into a single entity known as a head. The label "head" is imputed upon many appearances, parts, and qualities, none of which is a head. Furthermore, the head is not always designated in the same way. Sometimes this label is designated on the face, some times on the hair, sometimes on the skull, sometimes on the brain, and so on. But the face, hair, skull, and brain are not a head, nor do they inherently belong to a head. All the bases of designation of a head are devoid of a head. Apart from the process of conceptual designation, there is nothing that is objectively a head, ready to serve as its basis of designation.

Just as the label "head" is designated upon component parts that are not a head, so each of those parts has its own label that is designated upon other parts. The label "brain," for instance, is

imputed upon the cerebral cortex, brain stem, neurons, synapses, glial cells, and so on, but none of these individually or collectively constitute a brain. Some parts of a person's brain might be missing, but we would still say that this person has a brain. How many parts need to be present before the label "brain" can be imputed, and how many parts need to be missing before that label is withdrawn? The answers to these questions depend on the conventional usage of our human term "brain," which also varies from one language and culture to another. There is nothing that is objectively, independently an a priori brain, waiting to be correctly labeled. A "brain" conventionally comes into existence when the label is designated upon parts and qualities that are not brains.

The same is true of all phenomena in the external environment. For example, the label "mountain" may be imputed on soil, rocks, shrubs, and trees, but each of these many things has its own label, and none of them is a mountain. Furthermore, at no point in time do these separate things objectively congeal into one thing—a mountain—which then objectively possesses them as its parts. The whole mountain is conceptually projected onto its parts, such as soil, rocks, and trees. The whole does not come into existence until that conceptual designation takes place, and it does not pass from existence until that label is removed. In short, the basis of designation of any entity is always empty of that entity. Nothing inherently exists, with its own parts and attributes, independently of our conceptual designation.

Even though all phenomena—subjective ones, like the conceptual mind that designates objects, as well as objective ones, including all conceivable things—are empty of their own inherent nature, they do arise as dependently related events or appearances from emptiness. All conditioned phenomena arise as dependently related events, each one existing relative to the causes and conditions that gave rise to it and relative to the means by which it is apprehended. Sensory objects exist relative to the sensory faculties by which they are perceived, and conceptual objects exist relative to the minds that conceive them. But this is not how either subjects or objects appear. To the deluded mind, each one appears as if it has its own inherent identity, independent of the way it is perceived or conceived. In this way, the appearances of all phenomena are misleading and illusory.

Düdjom Lingpa explains the emergence of dependently related events by way of the interaction of the ground and contributing conditions. The ground of all appearances is the luminous, transparent, absolute space of phenomena, from which all appearances of the universe emerge. The consciousness that grasps onto the "I," together with its assemblies of thoughts, serves as the contributing condition. When the ground and this condition are conjoined, appearances arise as dependently related events. All appearances are composed of *events* that are *dependent* on the ground, and they are *related* to the nondual union of the absolute space of phenomena and the myriad appearances of the world. For these reasons they are called "dependently related events," which appear subjectively and objectively, even though they don't really exist by their own nature.^{[12](#)}

Because of this fundamental discrepancy between the way phenomena appear and the way they exist, appearances are said to be illusory and dreamlike. The subjective and objective

appearances in a dream are also dependently related events emerging from a confluence of causes and conditions. Their cause, or ground, is the limpid, luminous substrate, which can display all kinds of appearances. The consciousness and experiences of the person who is asleep serve as the contributing conditions. When those two are conjoined, the dependently related appearances of a dream emerge, even though they don't really exist. The things we perceptually experience and conceptually identify in a dream are events that arise in dependence upon the substrate, in relation to the nondual union of the substrate and dream appearances.

Düdjom Lingpa explains the similarity between the ways we reify phenomena during a dream and during the waking state:

During a dream, regarding the vast environment of the outer, inanimate universe, the many inner sentient beings who inhabit the world, and all the beautiful, intervening objective appearances of the five senses, instead of thinking "This is a dream, and I exist in some other world," you reify it. Likewise, regarding your constructed house, plowed fields, and all your accumulated wealth and enjoyments, you think these all existed since the times of your forebears. Moreover, just as you think of your enemies and friends and the owners of this place and that place, getting bound up in reifying and fixating on objects in a dream, so do you become confused by reifying and fixating on all the appearances of the waking state, dreams, the intermediate state, and thereafter, which are like the appearances of a dream, which don't actually exist.¹³

When you "wake up" within the dream and recognize the dream state for what it is, you recognize that nothing in the dream—neither yourself, nor other people, nor the surrounding environment—really exists independently of the dreaming mind. Everything that objectively appears to be solid and tangible and everything that subjectively appears to be "me" and "mine" is empty of its own intrinsic nature. Realizing the emptiness of all dream phenomena results in great bliss, fearlessness, and freedom. You become lucid during the dream state by coming to know its true nature, free of reification. Likewise, by truly "waking up" during waking experience, you recognize that nothing in the world—neither yourself, nor other people, nor the surrounding environment—really exists independently of the mind that designates it. You become lucid during the waking state by correctly distinguishing between appearances and reality, free of reification. This realization of emptiness is the great liberation that eradicates the very root of instinctual delusion.

RESTING NATURALLY IN PRISTINE AWARENESS

Once we have thoroughly investigated the root of cyclic existence, we are ready to progress to the culminating phase of Dzogchen practice, which Prahevajra calls "resting naturally in pristine awareness." Düdjom Lingpa describes this practice in terms of three kinds of space: external, internal, and secret. All the phenomena of the external, inanimate universe, all sentient beings, their sensory appearances, mental states, and processes are called "external" space. The realization of all phenomena as being devoid of true existence, having no inherent reality of their own, is called "internal" space. The realization of the indivisibility of external space and internal

space as being of the one nature of your own pristine awareness, in which luminosity and emptiness are indivisible, is the inconceivable “secret” space. All phenomena are thus displays of the ground of being, the absolute space of phenomena, indivisible from pristine awareness.

Pristine awareness eternally pervades the mind streams of all sentient beings. However, due to our reifying external objects and our own internal mind, pristine awareness is shrouded by ignorance. To recognize it, we must first realize the manner in which all phenomena that appear to the mind are not inherently existent. Then we must recognize that our own awareness is equally devoid of inherent nature. Dūdjom Lingpa explains the practice of open presence:

Do not follow after past thoughts, do not anticipate future thoughts, and do not fall under the influence of present thoughts. Rather, rest in meditative equipoise in the nature of spontaneously settled, great clear light. You must recognize that there is nothing else for you to meditate on. . . . In general, the minds of sentient beings are an expanse of emptiness and luminosity, in which all kinds of thoughts can arise. So as you let your mind illuminate them like a candle, the appearances of various thoughts emerge from the domain of afflictive cognition, like sparks emerging from fire. When waves emerge from water, even though the water and the waves appear to be separate, they are of one taste in the nature of water, without one being worse or better than the other. Likewise, from the very moment that thoughts arise, the ground of their arising is the absolute space of ultimate reality; and the thoughts and the one to whom they appear are not really different but are rather of the same taste. You must know how this is so.¹⁴

Dūdjom Lingpa describes four aspects in the practice of open presence. First, the view of open presence transcends intellectual grasping onto signs, does not succumb to conceptual biases or extremes, and realizes unconditioned reality, which is like space. Second, in the meditation of open presence, one perceives everything that arises as being none other than the absolute space of phenomena. In this ultimate reality, there are no dualities of samsara or nirvana, no joy or sorrow, and so forth, for one realizes that everything dissolves into even pervasiveness as displays of the luminosity of pristine awareness. Third, the pristine awareness of open presence transcends time, without wavering even for an instant from the nature of its own great luminosity. Finally, Dūdjom Lingpa explains the appearances and mind of open presence:

All appearing phenomena are seen to be naturally empty and luminous. They are not apprehended by the intellect, nor grasped by the ordinary mind, nor subdued by awareness. Rather, they dissolve into great, even pervasiveness, so they are liberated, with no basis for acceptance or rejection, no distinction between luminosity and emptiness, and with no ambivalence.¹⁵

In this way, one rests naturally in pristine awareness.

The way to this fruitional state of Dzogchen practice is first to rely upon the guidance of a qualified spiritual mentor and acquire sound understanding by listening to his or her instructions. Then, as one carefully investigates and analyzes the teachings, fresh experiences arise in the mind

stream, and realization is achieved by way of the wisdom gained through reflection. Finally, one devotes oneself to meditation until unshakable confidence arises. This is the role of continuous practice, supported by shamatha. Liberation is not gained simply by acquiring intellectual knowledge and fleeting glimpses of emptiness and pristine awareness. Rather, there must come a time when one retreats into solitude and devotes oneself to sustained, single-pointed meditation. Dūdjom Lingpa explains: “Once one has given up all kinds of activities, gaining confidence within oneself as a result of the power of the wisdom of meditation is like darkness being banished once dawn has broken. When there is no fragmentation of the panoramic sweep of pristine awareness, confidence is gained within one’s own awareness.”¹⁶

Dūdjom Lingpa declares that even such confidence, by itself, will not bring one to enlightenment. One must continue practicing until all appearances have transformed into the nature of ultimate reality, the root of cyclic existence is cut, dualistic fixations are immediately released, and appearances of self and others dissolve into the absolute space of phenomena. Then grasping onto attachments and aversions, hopes and fears, is vanquished, ignorance is dispelled in the ground of being, and one experiences the vision of ultimate reality. By cutting the root of self-grasping, the grasping mind is extinguished. With the extinction of dualistic concepts, one expands into the purity and equality of samsara and nirvana. This is the culmination of the path of the Great Perfection.

End Notes

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3. Dūdjom Lingpa, *The Vajra Essence*, 20.
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11. Dūdjom Lingpa, *A Garland for the Delight of the Fortunate*, 45.
12. Dūdjom Lingpa, *A Garland for the Delight of the Fortunate*, 71.
13. Dūdjom Lingpa, *A Garland for the Delight of the Fortunate*, 73–74.
14. Dūdjom Lingpa, *A Garland for the Delight of the Fortunate*, 289.
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16. Dūdjom Lingpa, *A Garland for the Delight of the Fortunate*, 321.

Quiescence & Insight

Natural Liberation: Padmasambhava's Teachings on the Six Bardos

By Padmasambhava; Translated by B. Alan Wallace, pp. 90-

Quiescence

Settling the Body, Speech, and Mind in Their Natural States

For the practice of the instructions on the transitional process of living (practical instructions that are like a dove entering its nest, which are for cutting through outer and inner superimpositions), there is an establishment of the foundation consciousness, and the first of three parts is the settling of the body in its natural state.

Settling the body in its natural state. If you do not know how to place your body in a good posture, the genuine meditative state will not arise in your mind-stream, or even if it does, it will run into problems; so the posture is important. When the body is straight and erect, the channels are straight; when the channels are straight, the vital energies are straight; when the vital energies remain straight, awareness settles in its natural state; and the meditative state occurs naturally.

Thus, to settle the body in its natural state in terms of physical activity, novices or beginners should completely dispense with all external, mundane activities, such as farming. Inwardly, also suspend spiritual practices such as prostrations and circumambulations. Secretly, meditate firmly and unwaveringly in the appropriate posture, without any bodily movement at all. That is because the meditative state must arise once the body is settled in its natural state.

The actual *adhisāra* of the body is imbued with the seven physical attributes of Vairocana: the legs are placed in the *vajrāsana*, the hands are positioned beneath the navel in the *mudrā* of meditative equipoise, the spine is straight like an arrow, the abdomen is pressed against the spine, the neck is slightly inclined, the tip of the tongue is pressed against the palate, and without meditating on anything, the eyes gaze fixedly in the space at the level of the tip of the nose. Position your body faultlessly with these seven attributes. If you know how to establish the *adhisāra* naturally, the meditative state will naturally happen.

Settling the speech in its natural state. In settling the speech in its natural state, there are also three parts: outwardly, dispense completely with all conversation and idle,

confusing speech and remain silent; inwardly, suspend dispersive movement and spiritual activities and remain silent; secretly, stop the activities of recitations and mantras. Settle your speech naturally in silence, like a lute with its strings cut.

Settling the mind in its natural state. In settling the mind in its natural state, there are also three parts: while keeping the body and speech as they were before, let your mind be lucid, without engaging any thoughts concerning earlier or later deceptive appearances of the three times; inwardly, settle the mind evenly without engaging in any good thoughts, such as deity meditation; secretly, settle the mind in its natural state by letting it be just as it is, steadily, clearly, and lucidly in the space in front of you, in the mind's own mode of existence, without bringing to mind any of the mentally engaging thoughts of the view and meditation which entail mental grasping. Do that for three days.

Our so-called mind, which is continually aware, busy, and recalling all kinds of things, acts as the basis of the whole of samsāra and nirvāna; so it is given the name foundation. The root of all joy and sorrow is your own mind, so it is important first of all to establish this. The mind of a novice is like a wild horse. To illustrate this, to catch a wild horse, if you chase after it aggressively, it will be frightened and will not be caught. So by enticing it in various ways and gently holding it, it will be caught and can be put to work. Likewise, if this wild mind is controlled aggressively, more and more thoughts will flow out, and obstacles will arise that produce numerous problems such as an imbalance of the heart vital energy. By gently settling the mind in its natural state, using various techniques, genuine quiescence will arise in your mind-stream.

The Actual Practice of Quiescence

Instructions on quiescence with signs.

First cultivate your motivation by thinking, “May all sentient beings throughout space achieve perfect awakening. In order that this may happen, in this very life, at this very time, and upon this very cushion, may I achieve this precious, unsurpassable state. In order to fulfill the needs of beings, however they may be trained, I shall cultivate the Mahāyāna Dharma.” In conjunction with guru yoga, settle your body, speech, and mind in their natural states. Know that positioning the body with the seven attributes of Vairocana serves as the basis for all meditative objects. While maintaining them, place in front of you a small object such as a stick or pebble. Gaze at it steadily without closing your eyes, and at the same time place your attention upon it steadily, clearly, and lucidly, without being distracted by anything else. Do not strenuously thrust your attention at it. Vividly settle your awareness simply on the unwavering meditative

support without succumbing to any ordinary distractions. Remain clear, gently release into a sense of comfort, and relax a bit. Meanwhile, rest the mind naturally, unwaveringly, and steadily upon that meditative support, without entering into the dispersal of thoughts. The text *Transforming Compassion into the Path* states, "Meditate in clarity and joy, cutting off mental dispersion, during many short sessions."

By having short sessions, you do not succumb to the problems of laxity and excitation; and by having many sessions, a faultless meditative state arises, so train in that way.

When bringing the session to a close, do not rise from it abruptly; rather, with a sense of conscientiousness, gently integrate it with your behavior and transform this into the path. Let all your conduct be like that of a person with a concussion who is afraid of getting bumped, and conscientiously lead your life in a meditative fashion. Do that for three days.

Next, place your body in the proper posture and so on, like before. For your meditative object, vividly direct your attention simply, without wavering, to a white, radiant, clear, limpid bindu at the point between your eyebrows. About the size of a white pea, it appears but is without an inherent nature. Gently release in clarity and joy, and settle your mind in its natural state. Do not be interrupted by thoughts. Meditate just like that, with many sessions of short duration, as before. Engage in that meditation for three days or as your own experience dictates. Whatever experiences occur from time to time, examine them.

Next, practice the other points as previously stated. Then clearly and vividly visualize your own body as hollow, like an inflated balloon. At the level of your heart visualize a radiant bindu the size of an average butter lamp of the nature of unified vital energy and mind. Its color is blue and clear, and its feel is hot. It does not touch the back and it does not touch the chest; rather imagine it at the position of the heart. Instantly, direct your consciousness at that. Clearly and joyfully cut off mental dispersion. When there is distraction, visualize the meditative object.

If your consciousness becomes agitated and the meditative object is not maintained, the element of the vital energy has become dominant; so eat nutritious food, release the meditative object a little bit, and relax. Meanwhile, moment by moment maintain mindfulness and conscientiousness, without being distracted toward ordinary things. On the whole, releasing is most important, so naturally release your mind and see that there is simply no wavering.

Moreover, if depression or sadness arises, your consciousness has become distorted, so

meditate on the disadvantages of samsāra, the difficulty of obtaining a human life of leisure and endowment, and impermanence, and cultivate reverence and devotion for your spiritual mentor or your lama. Take satisfaction, thinking, “Now I have obtained a human life of leisure and endowment, I have met with the precious teaching, and I have come upon such a profound path.” Consider, “If I do not strive now, I shall slip up, and I hate to think what would follow after that.” Cultivate enthusiasm and delight. Those who do so will find that quiescence arises in their mind-streams.

If it does not arise in that way, vividly imagine in the space in front of you the body of Vajrasattva, about one hand-span in height. Although he appears, he is without an inherent nature. Like a polished crystal, he is white, clear, and of the nature of light. Focus your awareness at his heart, and visualize clearly and vividly, with many short sessions as before. Regarding this, the *Sūtra Synthesizing the Contemplations of the Buddha* says there are inexpressible benefits simply from recalling Vajrasattva. Alternatively, focus your awareness in the space in front of you on the body of Bhagavan Śākyamuni, shimmering with golden light. The *King of Samādhi Sūtra* says that there are also incalculable benefits in this meditative object. Or you may lucidly direct your attention, simply without wavering, in the space in front of you on the white syllable HRIH with a *visarga*, at the heart of clear, shimmering white Ārya Avalokiteśvara. The *Sūtra of Basket Weaving* says that this, too, has incalculable benefits.

With those meditative objects, thoughts will evenly decrease. At first thoughts will increase, and there will be more coming and going in excitation. That is a sign that the meditative state has begun to arise. At that time, you may become disgruntled with the meditation and succumb to lassitude. There is also a danger that you may give up, thinking, “The meditation isn't coming along for me. Thoughts in the meditation have just gotten more and more coarse!” Without getting frustrated, gently engage in applying the instructions. That increase of thoughts is the beginning of meditation. Previously, even though thoughts were spinning on unceasingly, there was no sentry of mindfulness, so they naturally flowed out. As their increase is detected by the sentry of mindfulness, they are recognized. This is a desirable sign that the meditative state is arising, so gently recognize the thoughts. Even if you impede them, they will not stop. Without following after them, focus on the meditative object. By so doing, thoughts will become more and more subtle, and they will decrease in number.

Even though you are meditating on the object as before, if detrimental habitual thoughts suddenly pop up, focus right on that compulsive ideation as your meditative support. Whatever detrimental, habitual propensities of attachment and hatred arise, recognize them; and in a relaxed way release the mind right upon them. Each time a thought arises, recognize it immediately and release it so that it naturally vanishes. If

two thoughts arise, recognize them. Do not follow after anything that appears, but let it arise and be released. At times, focus on the meditative object; and at times, let thoughts arise and vanish. While not fabricating anything in their wake, relax and release. By alternately practicing like that, the chain of compulsive ideation will become disconnected, and thoughts will become fragmented. Thus, detrimental thoughts will become fewer and fewer, and fine stability will arise. Meditate in that way for three days or as your experience dictates. If genuine quiescence with those objects arises in your mind-stream, train in seeking out awareness. On the whole, since it is difficult to subdue this harmful habituation to latent propensities, it is important to use numerous methods to settle the mind in its natural state.

The training in the vital energies.

Maintaining the body in the posture bearing the seven attributes of Vairocana, let the spine be erect and straight, and press the hands against the ground. While so doing, completely exhale three times, once through the right nostril, once through the left, and once from the middle. Simultaneously imagine that sins and obscurations are purified, and that the sins are discharged from your nostrils in the form of scorpions and are then incinerated in the roaring flames of the fire of primordial wisdom in the space in front of you. This expels the toxins of the vital energies. Then together with your inhalation, while swallowing your saliva once, scrunch down beneath the navel; and without thinking of any meditative object, rest your awareness in clarity. When you can do so no more, completely exhale. Do that for three days.

Training in the unborn vajra-recitation of the three syllables.

Expel the residual vital energy and position your body as before. Now when you inhale, imagine the physical blessings of all the buddhas of the three times being drawn in in the form of a white syllable OM. Then push the upper vital energy down, draw the lower vital energy up, and gather them together beneath the navel.

In the midst of the “closed amulet” of the upper and lower vital energies, imagine the essence of the speech of all the buddhas of the three times in the nature of a clear, empty, vivid red syllable ĀH, which appears but is without an inherent nature. Place your awareness there as long as you can.

When you can do so no longer, exhale and simultaneously imagine the essence of the mind of all the buddhas of the three times issuing forth in the form of a blue syllable HŪM, and think of them as a continuous stream of emanations of Nirmānakāyas for the sake of the world.

In that way, sustain your attention, with unwavering awareness, on the inhalation in the nature of OM, holding the breath in the nature of ĀH, and exhalation in the nature of HŪM. Doing this at all times is called the unborn vajra-recitation. Each day there are twenty-one thousand six hundred movements of the vital energy. Inexpressible virtues result from having a complete series of the same number of unborn vajra-recitations of the three syllables, so practice it continuously. Do that for three days, then do it constantly. All that has been discussed thus far concerns the achievement of quiescence with signs.

Training in quiescence without signs.

Position your body as before. Then, while steadily gazing into the space in front of you, without meditating on anything, steadily concentrate your consciousness, without wavering, in the space in front of you. Increase the stability and then relax again. Occasionally check out, “What is that consciousness that is concentrating?” Steadily concentrate again, and then check it out again. Do that in an alternating fashion. Even if there are problems of laxity and lethargy, that will dispel them. In all your activities, rely upon unwavering mindfulness. Do that for one day.

Then position your body as before. Cast your gaze downward, gently release your mind, and without having anything on which to meditate, gently release both your body and mind into their natural state. Having nothing on which to meditate, and without any modification or adulteration, place your attention simply without wavering, in its own natural state, its natural limpidity, its own character, just as it is. Remain in clarity, and rest the mind so that it is loose and free. Alternate between observing who is concentrating inwardly and who is releasing. If it is the mind, ask, “What is that very agent that releases the mind and concentrates the mind?” Steadily observe yourself, and then release again. By so doing, fine stability will arise, and you may even identify awareness. Do that, too, for one day.

Then do as before. Now, alternately concentrate your consciousness tightly, wholly concentrating it without wavering, and then gently release it, evenly resting it in openness. Again concentrate, and again release. In that way, meditate with alternating constriction and release. At times, steadily direct your gaze up into the sky. Steadily focus your awareness with the desire to be without anything on which to meditate. Relax again. At times, steadily, unwaveringly, direct your awareness into the space on your right; at times, direct it to the left; and at times, direct it downward. During each session, rotate the gaze around in those directions.

Occasionally inquire, “What is that awareness of the one who is focusing the interest?” Let the awareness itself steadily observe itself. At times, let your mind come to rest in the center of your heart, and evenly leave it there. At times, evenly focus it in the expanse of the sky and leave it there. Thus, by shifting the gaze in various, alternating ways, the mind settles in its natural state. As an indication of this, if awareness remains evenly, lucidly, and steadily wherever it is placed, quiescence has arisen.

If awareness becomes muddled and unmindful, that is the problem of laxity, or dimness; so clear it up, inspire it, and shift your gaze. If it becomes distracted and excited, it is important that you lower your gaze and release your awareness. If *samādhi* arises in which there is nothing of which you can say, “This is meditation,” and “This is conceptualization,” this is the problem of oblivion. So meditate with alternating concentration and release, and recognize who is meditating. Recognize the flaws of quiescence, and eliminate them right away.

Flawless quiescence is like an oil lamp that is unmoved by wind. Wherever the awareness is placed, it is unwaveringly present; awareness is vividly clear, without being sullied by laxity, lethargy, or dimness; wherever the awareness is directed, it is steady and sharply pointed; unmoved by adventitious thoughts, it is straight. Thus, a flawless meditative state arises in one's mind-stream; and until this happens, it is important that the mind is settled in its natural state. Without genuine quiescence arising in one's mind-stream, even if awareness is pointed out, it becomes nothing more than an object of intellectual understanding; one is left simply giving lip-service to the view, and there is the danger that one may succumb to dogmatism. Thus, the root of all meditative states depends upon this. For this reason, do not be introduced to awareness too soon, but practice until there occurs a fine experience of stability. Up to this point, the instructions have concerned the practice of quiescence with and without signs. Samaya.

The Essential Instructions of the Mahasiddha Maitripa

A Spacious Path to Freedom

Practical Instructions on the Union of Mahamudra and Atiyoga

By Karma Chagme with commentary by Gyatrul Rinpoche

Translated by B. Alan Wallace, pp. 78-80

First there are three types of quiescence: quiescence that depends on signs, quiescence focused on conceptualization, and quiescence that is settled in nonconceptualization.

Quiescence that Depends on Signs

In the first there are two types: maintaining the attention outwards, and maintaining the attention inwards.

Maintaining the Attention Outwards

Outwardly there are two types: impure and pure.

Impure Outward Attention

With the posture endowed with the seven attributes of Vairocana, adopt the gaze. Maintain your attention without distraction upon a pillar, a pot, a stick, or a pebble, etc., together with the posture and the gaze. Do this without indulging in distraction elsewhere and without the dispersion of conceptualization. While so doing, settle in relaxation. Moreover, if laxity or excitation arises, recognize whether the attention is being maintained above, below, to the right or to the left.

Pure Outward Attention

In the pure type, maintain the attention upon the Jina's body. In front of you place an image of Lord Amitabha, or if you do not have one, imagine it. Do not let thoughts proliferate away from it or indulge in distractions. While so doing, settle [the mind] while relaxing in simple nondistractedness. This is maintaining the attention upon the pure body of the Jina.

In the practice of focusing on the Buddha's body, place before you a statue or some other representation of the Buddha's body. It may be large or small; it may be any manifestation of the Buddha, such as Sakyamuni, Amitabha, or any other embodiment.

Gaze upon this image for a while. Then, without looking at it, create a mental image of it. Scan this mental image from top to bottom, examining the details from the top of the head, to the face, and so on to the bottom of the body. Then scan again upwards. There are great benefits in attending to the Buddha's body in this meditative context: by doing so, you store karmic seeds for attaining a Buddha's body yourself. There are various ways in which you might practice visualizing the Buddha. You could visualize the Buddha stupendously large like a galaxy, or you could imagine it being microscopic in size. You could imagine it being single or multiple. The point of the training is to master this untamed mind, which is rigid and inflexible, so that it can become flexible and pliant, and can be applied to whatever you wish. At the end of the session, whatever the size of the image, you can gradually shrink it down to a single point; then allow that point itself to vanish into nothing. Finally, dwell in that nothingness for a while.

The real point of all this is to bring about the inner balance and serenity of your mind. That is the crux of the matter. It's important not to get into a great deal of conceptualization as to whether this is a Mahayana or Hinayana practice, or what sect it might be from—none of this is necessary. Don't be too clever. Just keep it simple and train the mind in this way, knowing that the real point is inner serenity, maintaining quiescence in the mind. If you make it too complicated, you simply create unnecessary obstacles for yourself in the practice of Dharma.

One way to focus on the Buddha's speech in the cultivation of quiescence is to focus on the syllable A or HUM. You can imagine the syllable as large or small, as one or many; and you can imagine them dissolving into emptiness. There are various valid approaches. The direct benefits of this practice are that you sow the karmic seeds for your own accomplishment of a Buddha's speech, and you purify unwholesome influences and imprints due to your own nonvirtuous speech in the past.

Maintaining the Attention Inwards

In terms of maintaining the attention inwardly there are two types: impure and pure.

Impure Inward Attention

Maintaining the attention upon an impure bindu: Maintain your attention on a white bindu, about the size of a pea, emitting rays of light, upon a lotus and moon-disk at your heart. Do not let thoughts proliferate away from it, or indulge in distractions. These are practical instructions on transforming ideation into the path without abandoning it. Quiescence that is of the [nature of the] spiritual path transforms ideation into the path, and attention is maintained by focusing on the ideation of the path. These are the practical instructions.

Instead of trying to stifle your thoughts, in this practice you transform them into the very path itself. The thought that is being transformed into the path is the visualization of the white bindu.

Pure Inward Attention

Maintaining the attention on the pure body of the Jina: maintain your attention on Avalokitesvara upon a lotus and moon-disk at your heart, his body the size of the outer thumb joint, and radiant with light. Do not let thoughts disperse away from it, or indulge in distractions. If laxity or excitation arises, for both the impure and pure methods maintain the attention by meditating on the forehead or the navel.

That is quiescence that is dependent upon signs.

Quiescence Focused on Conceptualization

Quiescence in which the attention is focused on conceptualization: In relation to the excessive proliferation of conceptualization, including such afflictions as the five poisons or the three poisons, thoughts that revolve in duality, thoughts such as those of the ten virtues, the Six Perfections or the Ten Perfections whatever virtuous and nonvirtuous thoughts arise—steadily and nonconceptually observe their nature. By so doing, they are calmed in nongrasping; awareness vividly arises clear and empty, with no object of grasping; and it is sustained in the nature of self-liberation, in which it recognizes itself. Again, direct the mind to whatever thoughts arise, and without acceptance or rejection, you will recognize your own nature. Thus implement the practical instructions on transforming ideation into the path.

Quiescence that is Settled in Nonconceptualization

The ultimate quiescence of maintaining the attention upon nonconceptualization: With the body possessing the seven attributes of Vairocana, sit upon a soft cushion in a solitary, darkened room. Vacantly direct the eyes into the intervening vacuity. See that the three conceptualizations of the past, future, and present, as well as virtuous, nonvirtuous, and ethically neutral thoughts, together with all the causes, assembly, and dispersal of thoughts of the three times are completely cut off. Bring no thoughts to mind. Let the mind, like a cloudless sky, be clear, empty, and evenly devoid of grasping, and settle it in utter vacuity. By so doing you will experience the quiescence of joy, clarity, and nonconceptuality. Examine whether or not attachment, hatred, clinging, grasping, laxity, or excitation enter into that, and recognize the difference between virtues and vices.

How to Settle the Mind in Its Natural State

By Lerab Lingpa

Open Mind: View and meditation in the Lineage of Lerab Lingpa

Translated By B. Alan Wallace, Edited by Eva Natanya, pp. 31-33

Since This Method Is So Crucially Important

Simply hearing the guru's practical instructions and understanding the explanation does not liberate your own mindstream, so you must meditate. Even if you spend your whole life practicing what is a mere semblance of meditation — meditating in a stupor, contaminated with compulsive ideation, and taking many breaks during your sessions because you are unable to control mental scattering — no good experiences or realizations will arise. So it is important during each session to meditate according to the guru's oral guidance.

In solitude, sit upright on a comfortable cushion. Gently hold the vase breath until the vital energies settle in their natural flow. Let your gaze be vacant. With your body and mind inwardly relaxed, and without allowing the continuum of your consciousness to fade from a state of lucidity and vivid clarity, sustain it naturally and radiantly. Do not contaminate it with many critical judgments. Do not be impatient with your meditation, and avoid great hopes and fears that your meditation will turn out in one way and not another. At the beginning you should have many daily sessions, each of them of brief duration, and focus well in each one. Whenever you meditate, bear in mind the words "no distraction and no grasping," and put this into practice.

As you gradually familiarize yourself with the meditation, increase the duration of your sessions. If dullness sets in, arouse your awareness. If there is excessive scattering and excitation, loosen up. Determine in terms of your own experience the optimal degree of mental intensity as well as the healthiest diet and behavior.

Excessive, imprisoning constriction of the mind, loss of lucidity due to lassitude, and excessive relaxation resulting in involuntary vocalization and eye movement are faults. It is a hindrance to talk a lot about such things as extrasensory perception and miscellaneous dreams, or to claim, "I saw a deity. I saw a ghost. I know this. I've realized that," and so on. The presence or absence of any variety of pleasure or displeasure, such as a sensation of motion, is not uniform, for there are great differences in the dispositions and faculties from one individual to another.

By settling the mind in its natural state, sensations of bliss may arise, such as pleasant physical and mental sensations, experiences of luminosity, such as the clarity of

consciousness, and experiences of nonconceptuality, such as the appearance of empty forms, as well as a nonconceptual sense that nothing can harm your mind, regardless of whether or not thoughts have ceased. Whatever kinds of experiences and visions arise — be they gentle or violent, subtle or gross, of long or short duration, strong or weak, good or bad — observe their nature and avoid any obsessive evaluation of them as being one thing and not another. Let the heart of your practice be consciousness, naturally at rest, lucid and clear. Acting as your own mentor, if you can bring the crucial points to perfection, as if you were threading a needle, the afflictions of your own mindstream will be subdued, you will gain the autonomy of not succumbing to them, and your mind will constantly be calm and composed. This is a sound basis for the arising of all samādhis of the stages of generation and completion.

This is like tilling the soil of a field. So from the outset avoid making a lot of great, exalted, and pointless proclamations. Rather, it is crucial to do all you can to refine your mind and establish a foundation for contemplative practice.

Thus, for each of those seven mind trainings, cultivate bodhicitta at the beginning of each meditation session and conclude with pure prayers of dedication. Between sessions make sure that you unceasingly apply the elixir of each of these practices to your own mindstream.

Shamatha Meditation
From *Dreaming Yourself Awake:*
Lucid Dreaming and Tibetan Dream Yoga for Insight and Transformation
By B. Alan Wallace, pp. 3-17; 48-51; 59-61; 70-73; 107-108

Shamatha In Theory, pp. 3-17

The overall framework for shamatha training presented here is drawn from *Stages of Meditation*, by the eighth-century Indian Buddhist contemplative Kamalashila. There are ten stages, beginning with the coarsest of attentional states and leading up to the most subtle--the achievement of shamatha itself. With the achievement of shamatha, the practitioner will be able to concentrate effortlessly on a chosen object continuously for at least four hours. The achievement of shamatha is a rarity these days, even among dedicated contemplatives. There are two major reasons for this: In the rush to enter into and complete the "higher" practices and realizations, shamatha--even though it has been considered a requirement for such achievements--has been de-emphasized in many contemporary contemplative traditions. Second, unless one already has an extremely relaxed and balanced mind, full achievement of shamatha may require many months or even a couple of years of concentrated solitary practice. At one time, in calm, pastoral societies such as Tibet's, well-balanced minds were more common, making the achievement of shamatha possible in a shorter time span. But in today's speedy and agitated global civilization, such minds are exceedingly rare.

Although training in shamatha is not absolutely required for successful dream practice, I highly recommend it. At a minimum, the achievement of the first two of the ten stages listed below would greatly improve one's attentional stability, not only in this practice but for just about any endeavor. Accomplishing the more advanced stages, not to mention achieving shamatha itself, will make dream practice relatively quick and easy.

The Ten Stages in the Development of Shamatha:

1. *Directed Attention*--One develops the ability to focus on a chosen object.
2. *Continuous Attention*--One can maintain continuous attention on the object for up to a minute.
3. *Resurgent Attention*--One recovers swiftly when distracted from the object.
4. *Close Attention*--The object of attention is no longer completely forgotten.
5. *Tamed Attention*--One takes satisfaction in samadhi or "single-pointed concentration."

6. [Page 5] *Pacified Attention*--There is no longer resistance to attentional training.
7. *Fully Pacified Attention*--Attachment, melancholy, and lethargy are pacified.
8. *Single-Pointed Attention*--Samadhi is sustained without excitation or laxity.
9. *Attentional Balance*--Flawless, effortlessly sustained samadhi.
10. *Shamatha*--One can effortlessly maintain concentration on an object for at least four hours; this is accompanied by greatly increased mental and physical pliancy and other positive side effects.

The main metaphor applied to these ten successive stages is the relative turbulence of a river. In the beginning, thoughts, emotions, images, and so forth course through the mind with the power of a cascading waterfall. In later stages, these mental phenomena appear with diminished force and frequency--more like a broad, calm river--until they are finally pacified completely as in a placid sea.

Three Sequential Practices on the Path of Shamatha

I have found these three practices to be the most effective ones for modern people engaged in shamatha training. The first is *mindfulness of breathing*. Here one develops one's attention by observing the inhalations and exhalations, passively witnessing the tactile sensations throughout the body associated with natural breathing. The experience of the breath provides an excellent grounding, allowing physical and mental relaxation to become the basis of the practice from the very beginning. For those committed to the full shamatha training described above, I recommend that mindfulness of breathing be practiced in stages one through four.

For the next three stages--five through seven--I recommend *settling the mind in the natural state*. In this practice, attention to mental phenomena replaces focus on the breath. One observes all appearing mental events-- thoughts, mental images, and emotions--neutrally, objectively, without any involvement. These events--which usually draw us in--are allowed to pass before the window of the mind like clouds blown across the sky.

From stage eight onward one practices *shamatha without a sign*, also called *awareness of awareness*. Previously we have been focusing on an object, that is, a *sign*. Here attention is placed on awareness itself. Whereas the breath and mental phenomena are objects identified within a conceptual framework--awareness focused on an object other than itself--here awareness simply rests within itself, luminous and cognizant.

Settling the mind in its natural state and awareness of awareness, along with other shamatha-related meditation techniques, are extremely useful for dream practice whether or not the student intends to go on to the more refined, later stages of shamatha training. I will introduce these techniques at appropriate junctures in subsequent chapters.

The instructions given in this chapter, if followed diligently, will allow the meditator to accomplish the first three stages of shamatha training. If one is inspired to go further, practice in long, solitary retreats is usually necessary. For a detailed explanation of the entire path of shamatha, see my book *The Attention Revolution*.

Shamatha on the Breath

Session One: Relaxing

Here we provide a basic meditation sequence for mindfulness of the tactile sensations of the body, which promotes relaxation--the key ingredient in shamatha practice--and is also a useful prelude for getting a good night's sleep, without which successful dream practice is difficult if not impossible. We will begin this and future sessions by *settling the body in its natural state*. Then, cultivating a quality of quiet, mindful presence, we will allow awareness to permeate the field of tactile sensations--those sensations arising on both the interior and the periphery of the body.

Once you have found a **comfortable posture**, do your best to remain still, apart from the movement of the breath. If sitting (on a chair or cross-legged on the floor), see that your spine is straight and your sternum uplifted just enough so that there is no pressure on your abdomen that would prevent it from expanding freely as you breathe in. Keep your abdominal muscles loose, feeling your belly expand with each inhalation. Wherever you find tension or tightness in the body, breathe into that area and, especially when you breathe out, release the muscular tension. Pay particular attention to the muscles of the face--the jaw, the eyes. Round off this initial settling of the body by taking **three slow, deep, luxurious breaths**, breathing through the nostrils, down into the belly, expanding the diaphragm, and finally breathing into the chest, breathing in almost to full capacity and then releasing the breath effortlessly, mindfully attentive to the sensations correlated with the breath as they manifest throughout the entire body.

Next, **settle your respiration in its natural rhythm**, noting how easy it is to influence the breath with your preferences. To the best of your ability, withdraw your control and

allow the respiration to flow of its own accord, with no intervention, as effortlessly as possible.

When we begin learning meditation, we quickly discover just how agitated and cluttered our minds are. We are sometimes inundated with a cascading flow of thoughts and emotions. Cultivate a **positive attitude**, one of patience, when you encounter these distractions. Rather than reacting by trying to clamp down and force the mind to be still, **relax and let go** of the pent-up, turbulent energy of the body-mind. Take advantage of each exhalation--a natural moment to relax and let go. With every exhalation feel a progressive sense of melting in the body, a softening, a loosening of the body. With each exhalation, as soon as you know that any involuntary thought or image has arisen, just release it without a second thought, and immediately upon release let your awareness descend quietly once again into the field of the body, simply taking note of whatever tactile sensations arise within this field, especially attending to those sensations correlated with the breath. Give yourself permission to release thoughts and to cultivate another quality of awareness that is clear, bright, intelligent, attentive, and silent.

Whenever you discover that you have become caught up in thoughts--that **your mind has been carried away**--rather than being frustrated or judgmental toward yourself, let your simple, first response be to relax more deeply, let go of the thought, and happily return your awareness to this quiet field of tactile experience. Keep the **length** of your practice session to twenty-four minutes (called, in Sanskrit, a *ghatika*, which was considered the ideal length for beginning meditation training in ancient India). Continue with the **intention** of maintaining your attention on the field of tactile sensations associated with the breath, and when you find that you have strayed, relax more deeply, abandoning distractions and returning to the body.

This practice sequence is now given in outline form so that you can dispense with the distractions caused by reading from the book as you practice. Simply take a moment to familiarize yourself with the instructions, memorize the outline, then begin.

Outline of the Practice:

- Posture: supine (*shavasana*, or corpse pose) or seated
- Breathing: in a natural rhythm
- Positive attitude: cultivating relaxation
- [Page 9] Attention: on the field of tactile sensations
- When distracted: gently return attention to the tactile field of sensations
- Length: one *ghatika* (twenty-four minutes)
- Intention: to observe tactile sensations, relax and return to them when distracted

Commentary

The basic technique of shamatha involves the interaction of two mental faculties: mindfulness and introspection. *Mindfulness* can be defined as continuous attention to a chosen object, which requires that one remember what the task is and not become distracted by other phenomena. *Introspection* (as the eighth-century Indian Buddhist adept Shantideva defined it) is “the repeated examination of the state of one’s body and mind.” Therefore introspection allows for a kind of quality control, recognizing when one’s attention strays and alerting mindfulness to reassert itself. One focuses one’s mind using mindfulness to remember the task, and when attention strays introspection takes notice so that one can guide oneself back to the object of attention. *Remember* your intention and *check* to see that you are accomplishing it moment-by-moment.

I have a strong hunch that the manner of our breathing when we are in dreamless sleep is very restorative for the mind and body. When we are dreaming, our thoughts and emotions can interfere with our breathing. Most of us have awakened from a nightmare--perhaps one where we are being chased by something frightening--to find ourselves breathing laboriously. In dreamless sleep our compulsive thinking--hopes and fears, grasping and anticipation, and emotional activity--is dormant. Using the practice above, we can induce this restorative breathing by relaxing through the entire exhalation and then--rather than sucking in--simply allowing the inhalation to flow in passively. We gently surrender all control of the [10] breath, unconcerned with the relative length of the inhalations and exhalations, breathing effortlessly.

The attention is allowed to be diffuse, scanning the tactile sensations associated with the breath and also the sensations emanating from the lower part of the body--the legs and lower trunk. This draws our energy and attention away from the head, grounding us and lessening interference from thoughts. At bed-time, try this practice in the supine position for a short time--five, ten, twenty minutes, or more if you like--before you go into your normal sleeping position. On the initial exhalations release first all muscular tension in the body, and once you are thoroughly relaxed physically, also release all thoughts that appear--slowly breathing out . . . out . . . out . . .--and then allow the inhalation to flow in of its own accord. Before long you will find yourself in a deep, relaxing rhythm. This will not only contribute to a good night’s sleep, but is a useful prelude to lucid dreaming.

Session Two: Stabilizing the Attention

Here, after relaxing, with the attention on the tactile sensations of the body, we enter a second phase, narrowing our focus to the rise and fall of the abdomen as we breathe, promoting stability of attention.

Having settled into a comfortable posture, begin by **settling the body in its natural state**, imbued with the three qualities of relaxation, stillness, and vigilance. Having done so, round this off by taking three slow, deep breaths. Next, **settle your breathing in its natural rhythm** and then, as before, let your awareness **permeate the entire field of tactile sensations** while attending especially to those sensations correlated with the breath, wherever they arise within the field of the body. Within this field, let your awareness be diffuse.

In this first phase of mindfulness of breathing, the primary emphasis is on allowing a sense of ease, comfort, and relaxation to arise in the body and the mind. We facilitate this especially by relaxing with each exhalation, letting go of excess muscular tension, immediately releasing any involuntary thoughts or images that arise in the mind--releasing them and immediately letting the awareness descend back into the field of tactile sensations.

A sense of ease and relaxation is indispensable for cultivating attention skills and for dream practice. But by itself it's not enough. We need to also introduce the **element of stability**--the voluntary continuity of attention. So let's step up this practice now by narrowing the focus of attention. Instead of focusing on the whole body or letting the attention rove within the body, now zero in more steadily on the tactile sensations of the rise and fall of the abdomen with each inhalation and exhalation. Narrow your focus. Continue to let the breath flow unimpeded, without constraint or effort, and with bare attention simply attend to the sensations themselves, with no conceptual overlay, no cogitation--just the sensations in the area of the abdomen corresponding to the flow of the breath.

Note the duration of each inhalation and exhalation, whether it is short or long. Continue relaxing with each exhalation, thereby **overcoming the agitation**, the excitation of the mind. But with each inhalation **arouse your attention**, thereby overcoming laxity and dullness. So in this way each full cycle of the breath is like a complete meditation session in itself, designed to overcome excitation and laxity and to cultivate stability and vividness. As the mind becomes calm, the attention more and more stabilized, you may find this enhances the degree of relaxation and looseness in the body and mind. At the same time, the greater the sense of relaxation in the body and mind, the easier it is to stabilize the attention. There is a synergy between these

two qualities. Continue alternating relaxation and arousal of attention on the exhalations and inhalations.

And now, to help stem the flow of obsessive thinking, of being compulsively carried away by thoughts, you may find it helpful, at least occasionally, to count the breaths--to substitute many rambling thoughts for a few regular thoughts, the thoughts of counting. There are various methods; here is one: Breathe in, allowing the breath to flow in quite effortlessly, all the way to the end of the inhalation. Just before the exhalation begins, mentally, and very briefly, count "one." Then breathe out, relaxing, letting go of thoughts all the way through the exhalation. Quietly arouse your attention during the next inhalation all the way to the end, where you count mentally, very briefly, "two." So there is one count at the end of each inhalation. You may count over and over one through ten, or one through twenty-one, or you may just continue counting as you wish. Let the counting be very succinct, very brief, simply as a reminder to maintain to the best of your ability an ongoing flow of awareness of the continuous flow of sensations of the inhalation and exhalation in the area of the abdomen.

Bring the session to a close.

Outline of the Practice:

- Settle the body in its natural state
- Breathe in a natural rhythm
- Phase one: attention on the field of tactile sensations (training relaxation)
- Phase two: attention on the rise and fall of the abdomen (training stability)
- Alternate overcoming agitation (on exhalation) and arousing attention (inhalation)
- Count the breaths
- Length: one ghatika (twenty-four minutes)
- Intention: training in stability

Commentary

Although the technique seems simple and straightforward, the mind that we are training--conditioned by our life experiences and cultural background--is not. The first shock beginners usually encounter is the sheer volume of mental "noise" that clutters awareness when one begins to meditate. Although it may appear that the practice itself has introduced these distractions, they have been there all along, taken for granted as part of the normal functioning of our minds. Soon we discover there are two major types of distraction that cause us to forget our task: *agitation* and *dullness*. For most of us, agitation is our biggest initial problem in focusing on a chosen object. We are in the habit of thinking rapidly, flitting among a variety of subjects-- answering phone calls,

chatting, surfing the internet, multi- tasking. We have developed a craving for objects and experiences that demands a lot of activity. Asking ourselves to suddenly slow down and focus on our breath is asking a lot.

When we are not agitated, we are often dull--fatigued from the fast, stressful pace of modern life. At these times, when we try to meditate, we find our focus hazy. The object of attention lacks vividness. We tune out, surfacing minutes later from daydreams or sleep. What we must seek then is a middle ground between agitation and dullness. To prepare this middle ground, from the start we foster the attitudes of relaxation, stillness, and vigilance. Relaxation and stillness counter agitation, while vigilance counteracts dullness. With these in mind, we are gradually able to experience moments of clarity--a respite from our normal mental flow of alternating agitation and dullness.

Session Three: Vividness of Attention

Here we will pass through the first two phases of attention on the tactile field of sensations of the body and attention on the rise and fall of the abdomen, and enter phase three--the development of vividness of attention.

Settle the body once again in its natural state, letting awareness permeate the whole field of the body, setting the body at ease, in stillness, in a posture of vigilance. If you find it helpful, take three slow, deep breaths to round off this initial settling of the body. **Settle your breathing in its natural rhythm**, an effortless flow. For a little while let your awareness continue to be diffuse, **filling the whole tactile field of the body**, letting your attention move at will within this field, attending to whatever sensations arise--especially those correlated with the breath. Keep the attention within the field of the body, without getting caught up in thoughts or carried away to other sensory fields. Continue relaxing and letting go with every exhalation.

We shift now to the second phase, where--as in the previous practice--we more narrowly focus the attention on the rise and fall of the abdomen, introducing the element of **stabilizing the attention**, deliberately cultivating a continuity of unwavering mindfulness that does not get caught up in thoughts or carried away to other sense fields. Engage with the continuous flow of sensation of the rise and fall of the abdomen with each inhalation and exhalation. Relax, let go of each exhalation as you did before, immediately releasing any involuntary thoughts or images. With each inhalation, arouse your attention, and to the best of your ability maintain a continuous flow of mindfulness on the tactile sensations corresponding to the inhalation and exhalation as they manifest at the abdomen. Let this be a full-time job. There is always something to do.

Remain engaged. Sustain the focus. Relaxing with each exhalation, arousing your attention with each inhalation.

And finally, let's now introduce the element of **vividness**. We move into the third phase of mindfulness of breathing by elevating the focus of attention to the apertures of the nostrils or the area just above the upper lip, wherever you most distinctly discern the sensations of the breath flowing in and out. You are focusing your mental awareness on these tactile sensations of the breath, not your visual awareness. Keep the muscles of the face relaxed, the eyes soft, the forehead spacious. See that you are not directing your eyes to the tip of your nose, which will just give rise to tension, perhaps even headaches. So keep all of the face soft, relaxed, and focus just your mental awareness on the sensations of the in- and outflow of the breath at the apertures of the nostrils. Focus your attention on the difference in temperature between the sensations of the inhalation at the nostrils and the warmer exhalation. As your breathing becomes quieter and more refined, this difference will become more and more subtle, challenging you to become more vividly aware.

Out of sheer habit, involuntary thoughts are bound to come tumbling out one after another; the mind will keep rambling on. Again, in order to stem this involuntary flow of thoughts, images, and memories, you may find it helpful again to count the breaths, to break up the involuntary flow of thoughts. With one count at the end of each inhalation, just before the exhalation begins, crystallize your attention, and then mindfully attend to the sensations of the breath throughout the whole course of the exhalation. Even if there is a pause at the end of the exhalation, you may still detect sensations there at the apertures of the nostrils. Continue attending to them and then to the sensations of the whole course of the inhalation, followed by a brief count. To the best of your ability, maintain a continuous flow of mindfulness; engage with the ongoing flow of sensations at the apertures of the nostrils. In this way you exercise and enhance the faculty of mindfulness.

In the practice of shamatha we **enhance and develop the faculty of mindfulness, and also that of introspection**--our ability to monitor the state of the mind, to monitor the meditative process so that we quickly recognize when the mind has been caught up in thoughts and carried away or when the mind is simply slipping into dullness or laxity, perhaps on the way to falling asleep. As soon as you recognize with your faculty of introspection that your attention has become agitated, carried away, caught up in thoughts, let your first response be to relax deeply, release the thought, and immediately re-engage with the sensations of the breath. But first of all relax--loosen up.

And as soon as you recognize with your faculty of introspection that your mind is losing its clarity, falling into laxity or dullness, let your first response in this situation be to arouse your attention and take a fresh interest in training the mind. Refocus on the sensations of the breath. In this way balance your attention, overcoming your proclivities toward an attention deficit, as in dullness, and attentional hyperactivity, as in agitation or excitation.

After twenty-four minutes, bring the session to a close.

Outline of the Practice:

- Settle the body in its natural state
- Breathe in a natural rhythm
- Attention on the tactile field of the body (phase one--relaxation)
- Attention on rise and fall of the abdomen (phase two--stability of attention)
- Attention on apertures of the nostrils (phase three--cultivating vividness of attention)
- Count your breaths
- Enhance mindfulness with introspection

Commentary

The three phases we have developed to this point--relaxation, stability, and vividness--can be likened to the structure of a tree. The root of the whole practice is relaxation. The trunk is stability. Just as the roots of a tree support the trunk, so relaxation supports the stability of attention. And likewise, without the stability of the trunk, the foliage--the vividness of shamatha--is unsupported. You need all three qualities, and they should be in synergistic balance. If relaxation is too strong, you are likely to become dull and sleepy. If vividness is too bright and energetic, you may become agitated.

If you want to develop shamatha efficiently, don't pass over the initial development of relaxation. Try the supine position and delve deeply into that softness, looseness, and relaxation. Observe then how stability can emerge out of that great sense of ease. You can remain quite centered and focused without clamping down with tighter and tighter concentration. So relaxation and stability balance each other. Most people, when they have their first lucid dream, notice some anomaly, some odd object or event in their dream that catalyzes the awareness that they are dreaming. Then they become so excited that two seconds later they are awake. Stability born of relaxation will enable you to be grounded rather than overexcited, prolonging lucid dreams.

The second balancing act is between stability and vividness. Just as it is important that stability not be gained at the expense of relaxation, increased vividness must not weaken stability. Here you increase the clarity, luminosity, and brightness but without giving rise to agitation that would cause you to lose your coherence. The technique for increasing vividness is to focus your attention on a subtler object, such as the sensations of the breath in the area of the nostrils. It takes greater attention to follow these sensations than the relatively coarser movement of the abdomen during respiration. If introspection signals that your level of vividness is causing agitation, back off, relax, and increase stability. The overall strategy, then, is to allow stability to develop from relaxation and vividness to emerge from stability.

Naturally, each meditator's approach to these three shamatha techniques will vary according to the degree of attentiveness, agitation, and laxity we bring initially to the practice. These are qualities of our minds at present--the product of our mental habits and experience. By trying each of these techniques, alternating them, and so forth, you will gradually gain insight into your strengths and weaknesses and will refine your meditation routine appropriately, using the suggestions above as your guide. Later in the book, I will introduce other practices that will further refine your ability to accomplish the tasks required for lucid dreaming and dream yoga.

Shamatha Settling the Mind in Its Natural State, pp. 48-51

In this practice one's attention is placed neither on the tactile sensations of the body nor on the breath but on the phenomena of the mind itself. That means that your object of attention will be the space of the mind and whatever thoughts, emotions, images, and other kinds of mental phenomena arise in that domain of experience. The goal is to simply observe this passing parade without becoming involved--without cultivating, investigating, being attracted to, encouraging, or rejecting any mental phenomena that appear in your mind. You maintain an even, calm presence whether those phenomena come fast and furious or few and far between. You have no preference as to what might appear. Just attend to whatever arises.

Using this practice as a complement to lucid dreaming makes perfect sense. Settling the mind in its natural state closely parallels the act of lucid dreaming. When you practice settling the mind in its natural state, you are becoming lucid to the mental activity of the waking state. You recognize these mental events as mental events, not mistaking them for events in the outer, intersubjective world. Normally we are as caught up in and carried away by our mental activities in the daytime as we are in the nocturnal mental activity we call dreaming. Rarely do we step back and simply observe our minds in

action, becoming cognizant of the nature of the reality we are experiencing in the present moment. It makes sense, then, that if you can become lucid in your daytime experience, this will greatly facilitate lucidity when you're dreaming. Settling the mind in its natural state can also be effective for reentering dreams when you awaken at night.

Meditation Session for Settling the Mind in Its Natural State

Begin by settling the body in its natural state and the respiration in its natural rhythm as described in the first shamatha session in chapter one. Choose any comfortable posture--supine, seated cross-legged, or seated on a chair. If you are seated, be sure that your spine is straight and that your sternum is slightly uplifted so as [page 50] to prevent any pressure on your abdomen that might keep the breath from moving freely. If you find any areas of muscular tension, breathe into them and then allow that tension to disperse on the exhalation. Finally, round off this initial settling of the body by taking three long, deep, refreshing breaths. Breathe down into the abdomen and expand upward through the diaphragm and chest. When your lungs are almost full, release your breath and let it flow out effortlessly.

Now scan your body from the crown of your head down to the tips of your toes with your attention not on any visual representation of your body but on the sensations experienced in each area. Then rest for a moment in the global experience of your body as a whole--as a **field of tactile sensations**. Next, concentrate on those areas of this field that are correlated with the breath--the rise and fall of the abdomen, diaphragm, chest, and any other movements associated with your breathing. Allow the breath to flow naturally, with your attention maintained throughout the entire inflow and outflow. Feel the release after the inhalation and the sensations as the air floods back into the body after the exhalation. Then **count twenty-one breaths**, concentrating not on the counting itself but on the sensations correlated with your breathing. This is a preliminary exercise for stabilizing and calming the mind.

Now open your eyes and let them remain at least partially open with your **gaze resting vacantly** in the space in front of you, and direct your attention to the space of the mind and whatever arises within that space. To facilitate this practice, at first you might generate a mental event or object, a thought or image, like that of a piece of fruit or the face of a relative--something familiar. Generate that image, focus single-pointedly upon that image, allow it to fade, then keep your attention right where it was, ready to detect the next image, thought, or mental event of any kind that arises within this space.

This practice is very simple: you do your best to **maintain an unwavering flow of mindfulness directed to the space of the mind**, attending to whatever arises therein without reactivity, without judgment, without distraction or grasping.

You may experience intervals in which you are unable to detect any thought, image, or other mental event. Yet you still have an object of meditation: during those intervals between thoughts simply attend to--with discerning mindfulness--the vacuity of the space of the mind. You are attending both to the stage and to the players on the stage. So when there are no players, attend to the stage.

When you notice that you have become distracted--falling into the habits of becoming involved with thoughts, encouraging new thoughts, emotions, or images, reacting to mental phenomena--step back gently into the mindful and passive observation of the mental flow.

After twenty-four minutes, bring the practice to a close.

Outline of the Practice:

- Posture: your choice (supine, seated cross-legged, seated on a chair)
- Body: settled in its natural state
- Breathing: settled in its natural state
- Attention: on the space of the mind and whatever mental events that arise in that domain of experience
- When distracted: relax, release whatever captivated your attention, then return your awareness to the space of the mind and its contents
- Length: one ghatika (twenty-four minutes)
- Intention: to attend to mental phenomena with lucidity as a preparation for lucid dreaming; to develop concentration using mental phenomena as the object of attention

Shamatha on the Awareness of Awareness (Or Shamatha without a Sign), pp. 59-61

One way to directly enter lucid dreamless sleep is to close one's eyes during the activities of normal lucid dreaming. This brings one immediately to the vacuity of the substrate. Another method, found in dream yoga, is to concentrate on a visualized image at the heart chakra. Below I will give a method from the practice of shamatha called awareness of awareness, which allows the meditator to gently sink into dreamless sleep lucidly at bedtime.

A Session of Awareness of Awareness: Begin as in previous shamatha sessions by settling the body in its natural state. Find a comfortable posture-either sitting or lying in the supine position. Then, after taking three deep, luxuriant breaths, settle your breathing in its natural rhythm. As you practice mindfulness of breathing, let your eyes be at least partially open and rest your gaze in the space before you, paying no attention to objects near or far. Continue breathing comfortably and gently attune yourself to the qualities of relaxation, stillness, and vigilance. Be peripherally aware of any mental phenomena that pass through your mind's eye.

Once you have attained a state that is relaxed and even, release your attention to all objects-any and all mental and physical appearances-and settle your awareness in the very state of being aware. Your awareness is not directed anywhere, neither inward nor outward, but rests naturally in its own nature. Whatever thoughts arise, release them immediately. You are allowing your awareness to settle naturally into its own nature. As you maintain this relaxed, easy vigilance, simply release any phenomena that obscure the clarity of your awareness. What's left over is the sheer event of knowing. From time to time, check to see that you are not straining and that your breathing remains deeply relaxed. Rest in this state of utter simplicity.

After one ghatika, bring the session to a close. (If you are using this meditation as a dream practice at bedtime, start in the supine position. Then, once you have achieved stability, roll over and allow yourself to fall asleep while maintaining your attention on awareness alone.)

Outline of the Practice:

- Settle your body in its natural state
- Settle your breathing in its natural rhythm
- Rest evenly-relaxed, still, and vigilant
- Release any thoughts that come to mind
- Settle awareness on awareness alone
- Length: one ghatika (or the time it takes to fall asleep lucidly)
- Intention: to explore the limpid clarity of the substrate consciousness, possibly as a prelude to a breakthrough to pristine awareness; or to enter into lucid dreamless sleep

Commentary

This practice is utterly simple. The attention must be maintained in a very quiet and subtle manner, especially if your intention is to fall asleep lucidly. Once you have gained

some mastery of this practice, the substrate consciousness is experienced directly, imbued with the qualities of bliss, luminosity, and nonconceptuality. Awareness of awareness provides a shortcut to this experience, which is achieved more gradually over time through the practice of settling the mind in its natural state.

Given that this practice is so subtle, how can you be sure you are maintaining awareness of awareness? It is helpful for any kind of practice to know what the extremes are so you can cleave a middle path between them. For this one, if you try too hard this gives rise to agitation and if you don't try hard enough you fall into dullness. Once you recognize the two extremes, you want to do something in between, which means bouncing off of those extremes more and more lightly. If you are focusing on any object, a thought or an image, this is one extreme, on the agitation side. The other extreme, which is more elusive, is sitting there with a blank mind not aware of anything. You are not attending to any object-just vegetating. What is in between is a quality of freshness because you are located in the present moment and vividly aware. You are not attending to any object at all but are aware that awareness is happening. It is wonderfully simple but subtle. It is like slipping into an old pair of shoes. When you are in it, you really know you are there. You need to develop a confidence that you know when you are doing it correctly. This is how it is done.

The Substrate Consciousness, pp. 70-72

Dream yoga seeks to go beyond the psyche, eventually to *primordial consciousness*, which, when fully realized, is synonymous with the ultimate goal of Buddhism itself-enlightenment. Before one arrives there, however, we encounter a state of consciousness more subtle than the psyche, though not as transcendent as primordial consciousness. This second mental field, the *substrate consciousness* (Sanskrit: *alaya vijfiana*), is different from the subconscious of Freud and the collective consciousness of Jung. It is prior to and more fundamental than the subconscious-a sub-subconscious. As such, it is considered to be the source of the entire psyche, including what we Westerners call the subconscious. Therefore there is some overlap between the psyche and the substrate consciousness, although the latter concept presents a deeper and more detailed picture of what Western psychologists call the unconscious. This is why lucid dreamers may benefit from the theory and practice of dream yoga.

Although the substrate consciousness is unique to the individual-distinguishing it from Jung's collective unconscious-for Buddhism it is the basis for subsequent incarnations. It could be said that it is not the individual that reincarnates but successive expressions of an individual continuum of a substrate consciousness. This mental stream begins to become configured at conception and is then modified by the thinking, emotions,

behavior, and experiences of the individual being throughout one's life. Roughly speaking, these behaviors are stored in the substrate consciousness as karmic imprints that condition the life of the individual as well as future incarnations. Wholesome behavior imprints positive karma leading to a more positive future and possible evolution toward enlightenment. Nonvirtuous activities imprint negative karma-seeds that result in negative outcomes in the future. Therefore, the substrate consciousness is similar to a computer memory chip, where previous inputs constantly modify the present and condition the future operation of the computer. Just as the software and hardware of a computer constantly interact with and influence each other, so do the substrate consciousness and its emergent psyche causally interact with each other throughout the course of a lifetime.

The relevance of the substrate consciousness for dream yoga is its power over our understanding. As the source of all ordinary mental phenomena, ignorance of its operation prevents us from seeing how we stand in our own way, blocking our own progress, in our quest for wisdom, virtue, and happiness. Penetration of the substrate consciousness reveals the inner terrain that must be transformed in the process of spiritual maturation. Our fears, misconceptions, memories, latent tendencies, and so forth are all stored in the substrate consciousness. When phobias and neuroses, delusions and misinterpretations arise, they emanate from this same source. Furthermore, the *qualia* that we perceive by way of our senses actually emerge from the substrate, the empty, luminous space of experience that is directly perceived by the substrate consciousness. This space is vividly cognized when one experiences deep, dreamless sleep lucidly, that is, recognizing this state for what it is while one is fast asleep. Explored wisely, the substrate and substrate consciousness become the gateway to wisdom and to enlightenment. Dream yoga provides direct access to this realm and a means of transforming it.

Primordial Consciousness, pp. 72-73

A thorough exploration of the substrate consciousness, together with the psyche it subsumes, provides a "launching pad" for probing the deepest space of awareness, primordial consciousness. Primordial consciousness transcends all concepts, including those of subject and object, existence and nonexistence. It is timeless and "unborn" into the relative universe we conceive of as "existence." It is the source of virtues such as compassion, creativity, and wisdom, which emanate from it spontaneously. The full realization of primordial consciousness is the achievement of total freedom, enlightenment-the final victory. This is the ultimate aim of dream yoga and of all genuine Buddhist practice.

The substrate consciousness is highly conditioned, a repository of innate tendencies, karmic propensities-the basis of samsara. In contrast, primordial consciousness represents total freedom from such mental afflictions. Primordial consciousness, or ultimate *bodhichitta*, is nondual from relative bodhichitta- the wish to achieve buddhahood in order to bring all other sentient beings to enlightenment. In the traditional Mahayana practice of relative bodhichitta, one gradually develops great love and compassion for all sentient beings. This can be achieved through exercises that lead one to first see other sentient beings as equal in value to ourselves (a big step beyond our normally self-centered viewpoint), and finally to view other sentient beings collectively as of greater value than ourselves. Our orientation becomes one of helping others to the greatest extent possible based on the recognition of their suffering and of their potential for happiness. This training is largely conceptual. However, through the realization of primordial consciousness, great compassion and relative bodhichitta-the aspiration to achieve perfect enlightenment for the sake of all beings arise spontaneously. You don't need to look elsewhere, outside of ultimate bodhichitta, to find relative bodhichitta.

Breaking Through to Primordial Consciousness, pp. 107-108

In *Natural Liberation*, Padmasambhava presents an advanced practice for recognizing pristine awareness in the dream state. Utilizing this, students who have already fully accomplished shamatha and *vipashyana* may be able dwell in *rigpa*, or pristine awareness, in the dream state. However, a person lacking these prerequisites may also attain glimpses of primordial consciousness by allowing awareness to descend into the substrate consciousness, using the methods presented in chapter 4 (closing one's eyes during a lucid dream, falling asleep while meditating on a visualization at the heart chakra, and practicing awareness of awareness). When you release the dream but sustain your lucidity and your awareness dissolves from the psyche of the dream consciousness into the substrate consciousness, obviously that is an opportunity for directly realizing the substrate consciousness. But you may, in that state, practice Dzogchen in the lucid dreamless state. And by releasing all grasping in this panoramic, 360-degree open awareness, your awareness may break through the substrate consciousness and be realized as pristine awareness. It is clear from some of the earliest teachings by Prahevajra on the Dzogchen practice of *trekcho*, of "breakthrough," what you are actually breaking through is your substrate consciousness.

The authentic practice of Dzogchen, however, entails much more than simply resting in "choiceless awareness" or "open presence." These practices are not even genuine shamatha practices, for shamatha always involves selective attention, not openness

to all appearances. Moreover, if you're still attending to sensory appearances, your mind will never withdraw into the substrate consciousness, so you'll never achieve shamatha. Choiceless awareness and open presence are also not really vipashyana practices, for true vipashyana always involves some degree of inquiry, which those practices lack. And finally neither of those two practices by themselves constitute Dzogchen meditation, for genuine Dzogchen involves a thorough immersion into the view, meditation, and way of life of Dzogchen. Without coming to view reality from the perspective of pristine awareness, open presence is nothing more than resting in one's ordinary, dualistic mind. The classic sequence of practice in the Dzogchen tradition consists of settling the mind in the substrate consciousness through the practice of shamatha, exploring the ultimate nature of the mind through the practice of vipashyana, and finally penetrating through the conventional mind, namely the substrate consciousness, to pristine awareness through the practice of *trekcho* meditation.

So, with the substrate consciousness as a platform, one may break through to pristine awareness.

The Sharp Vajra of Conscious Awareness Tantra
From *Heart of the Great Perfection*:
Dudjom Lingpa's Visions of the Great Perfection, Volume I
By Dūdjom Lingpa, Translated by B. Alan Wallace, pp. 29-31

From the Matrix of Pure Appearances and Primordial Consciousness, The Quintessence of the Great Mystery of the Mantra[yāna], The Primordially Pure Absolute Space of Samantabhadri, The Spontaneously Actualized Treasury of the Great Perfection

Dedication

To the supreme Omnipresent Lord of all the buddha families and maṇḍalas—to the sugatagarbha—I bow with unwavering faith.
In the equality of saṃsāra, nirvāṇa, and the path, the pervasive emptiness of pristine space,
I, the great yogin of the dharmakāya, free of conceptual elaboration, arose as an apparitional display of primordial consciousness.

The ground dharmakāya, the sugatagarbha, free of conceptual elaboration and imbued with the three doors of liberation, is primordially enlightened.
As spontaneously actualized displays of the union of the three kāyas in absolute space, the teacher and his circle of disciples appeared, their minds indivisible.

This arose as the splendor of my fine karma, prayers, and merit and that of some individuals with fortune equal to my own.
Those people who lack the karmic momentum of this path will get no more from this than from a drawing of food and wealth.
This space treasury of ultimate reality is granted as an inheritance to people of good fortune.

Phase 1: Taking the Impure Mind as the Path

For the satisfaction of the apparitional display of his circle of disciples, the supreme teacher, Samantabhadra, Omnipresent Lord Vajra, declared,
“Listen!” to his circle of disciples, who were the nondual display of his own creative power.

Examine the body, speech, and mind, and among them recognize the one that is primary as the all-creating sovereign.
The shape and color of the all-creating sovereign, as well as its origin, location, and

destination, are objectless openness.

This is the spontaneous actualization of the essential nature of the path of cutting through.

Simultaneous individuals enter the path with no basis and no root.

Others should come to rest in space, and within three weeks they will certainly awaken and enter the path.

Those of the class with inferior faculties identify stillness and movement, and by taking the mind as the path, they are led to the absolute space of pristine awareness.

First is single-pointed unification of the two.

Then by resting without observing, its natural power manifests.

Abide loosely without mindfulness in a vacuous, wide-open clarity.

And resting in a luminous vacuity is called self-illuminating mindfulness.

For everyone the various experiences of bliss, vacuity, and luminosity become objects of craving and attachment; and meditative experiences of illnesses and discomfort in the body, speech, and mind sporadically arise over time.

Whenever you proudly hope for good things and cling to them, and fear bad things and reify inflictors of harm, you have stumbled upon a dangerous juncture that can lead you astray.

The general synthesis that is the sole, vital point of the path is ascertaining all experiences of pleasure, pain, and indifference as false impressions of unreal meditative experiences.

By releasing them, without blocking or embracing them, you bring an end to deviations and losses, and this is the one eye of wisdom.

Those who have become distant from sublime spiritual mentors should cherish the five topics as the sublimity of the path.

If you strive too hard in practicing single-pointedness, the power of your mind will decline; and with stagnant mindfulness, although your body is human, your mind becomes that of an animal.

Some people may stray into delirium; so devote yourself to a spiritual mentor, without ever being separated from him.

In short, even if you strive diligently in this phase of these practices for a long time, taking the mind as the path does not bring you even a hair's breadth closer to the paths of liberation and omniscience, and your life will certainly have been spent in vain!

So understand this, you fortunate people.

MIND IN THE BALANCE

MEDITATION IN SCIENCE,
BUDDHISM, & CHRISTIANITY

[]

B. Alan Wallace

BUDDHIST

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5 [PRACTICE]

ATTENDING TO THE BREATH OF LIFE

Find a quiet room where you can sit alone without being disturbed. Soften the lighting and find a comfortable place to sit for twenty-five minutes—on a chair or, if you're comfortable, sitting cross-legged on a cushion. You can also lie on your back on your bed, for instance, with your head resting on a pillow, your legs straight, your arms out to the sides, palms up, and your eyes either shut or partly open. Whatever your position, see that your back is straight and that you feel physically at ease.

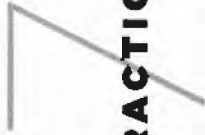
Now focus your attention on your body, experiencing the sensations from the soles of your feet up to the top of your head, both within your body and on its surfaces. Be totally present in your body, and if you note any areas that feel tight, breathe into them (at least in your imagination), and as you exhale, breathe out that tension. Be aware of the sensations in the muscles of your face—your jaws, mouth, and forehead—and relax them, letting your face be as relaxed as a baby's when it's fast asleep. Especially be aware of your eyes. The poets tell us the eyes are windows of the soul. When we're upset, the eyes tend to feel hard and piercing, as if they're bulging from their sockets. Not only do our mental states influence our eyes, but we can also influence our minds by softening the eyes. Let them

be soft and relaxed, with no contraction between the eyebrows or in the forehead. Set your whole body at ease.

For the duration of these twenty-five minutes, apart from the natural movement of respiration, let your body be as still as possible. This will help to stabilize your mind and enable you to focus your attention with greater continuity. If you're sitting on a chair or cross-legged, slightly raise your sternum and keep your abdominal muscles soft and relaxed, so that when you breathe in, you feel the sensations of the breath go right down to your belly. If your breath is shallow, you'll feel just the abdomen expand. If you inhale more deeply, first the abdomen, then the diaphragm will expand. And if you take a very deep breath, first the belly, then the diaphragm, and finally the chest will expand. Try taking three slow, deep breaths, feeling the sensations of respiration throughout your body, inhaling almost to full capacity, then releasing the breath effortlessly.

Then return to normal, unforced respiration, mindfully attending to the sensations of the breath wherever they arise in the body. Breathe as effortlessly as possible, as if you were deeply asleep. And with each exhalation, think of releasing excess tension in your body, and let go of any clinging to involuntary thoughts that have arisen in your mind. Continue relaxing all the way through the end of the out-breath until the in-breath flows in spontaneously like the tide.

As you attend to the gentle rhythm of your respiration, you may hear your neighbor's dog barking, the sounds of traffic, or the voices of other people. Take note of whatever arises to your five physical senses, moment by moment, and let it be. Notice also what goes on in your mind, including thoughts and emotions that arise in response to stimuli from your environment. Each time your attention gets caught up in sensory stimuli or thoughts and memories, breathe out, release your mind from these preoccupations, and gently return to your breath. Let your attention remain within the field of sensations of your body, and let the world and the activities of your mind flow around you unimpeded, without trying to control or influence them in any way.



[PRACTICE]

THE UNION OF STILLNESS AND MOTION

Rest your body in a comfortable posture, whether sitting in a chair, sitting cross-legged, or lying on your back. Begin by “settling your body in its natural state,”²¹ so that it is imbued with three qualities. The first quality is a physical sense of relaxation, ease, and comfort, which should persist throughout this entire twenty-five-minute session. The meditative practice itself is challenging enough, so it's important that you don't put yourself through any undue physical discomfort. Second, let your body be as still as possible, avoiding any unnecessary movement, such as fidgeting and scratching. Move only if your legs or back start to ache. Third, assume a posture of vigilance. If you are sitting upright, keep your back straight and slightly raise your sternum so that you can effortlessly breathe into your abdomen. If you are lying on your back, straighten your body, with your arms stretched out about thirty degrees from your torso. Let your eyes be partly open, but let your gaze be vacant.

Now “settle your speech in its natural state,” which is effortless silence, and at the same time settle your respiration in its natural rhythm, as you did in the first meditation. With each exhalation, release any residual tightness in your body and continue relaxing and letting go all the way through the out-breath, until the in-breath flows in naturally and spontaneously. Breathe as effortlessly as if you were deeply asleep, but be clearly mindful of the sensations of the

respiration throughout your body through the full course of the breathing cycle. At this point, as a preliminary exercise, for a few minutes you may deliberately calm your mind by counting your breaths, with one brief count at the very end of each inhalation. Alternatively, you may mentally recite “Jesus,” the short version of the Jesus prayer, or the three syllables “Om Ah Hum” with each breath.

During the in-breath attend closely to the sensations of respiration wherever they arise in your body, and during the out-breath release any involuntary thoughts that may have arisen. Just let them go, as if they were leaves blown away by the breeze of your exhalation. Likewise, if your attention is caught by visual impressions or sounds from your environment, let them go, without trying to suppress them, and return your attention to the field of sensations within your body. You may count twenty-one breaths to help stabilize your mind.

Now proceed to the main practice for this session, which is called “settling the mind in its natural state.” In the preliminary stage you withdrew your attention from your surroundings and practiced mindfulness of breathing within the field of your body. Now withdraw your attention from your body into the field of your mind, where you experience mental images, thoughts, emotions, desires, memories, and fantasies. You will still experience visual impressions, sounds, and tactile sensations, but focus your interest and attention on the mind alone. To help you identify this domain of experience, deliberately generate a mental image, which may be mundane, such as an apple or an orange, or sacred, like Jesus or Buddha. Focus your attention on that image until it vanishes. You have now placed your attention in the domain of the mind. Keep it there and wait for the next mental image to arise of its own accord. As soon as it appears, simply be aware of it, without grasping onto it or pushing it away.

Engaging in this practice is like occupying a front-row seat in the theater of your mind. You are not the director, trying to control who appears on the stage or what they do there. Nor are you an actor who gets up there and takes on various roles. You are a keen observer, but you watch passively without interacting with the things, people, and events that occur onstage. And you never know what’s coming up next. When you first do this practice, you may find that your mind suddenly goes blank. Be patient and continue watching. After a while, images are bound to arise, and when they do, simply observe them without getting caught up in them or identifying with them. Simply be present with them, observing their every move, noting how they first arise, how they move and change over time, and how they eventually vanish.

Be aware too of discursive thoughts, or mental chitchat. You may begin by deliberately generating an ordinary thought, such as “this is the mind,” or by mentally reciting a mantra or prayer such as the Jesus prayer. As that thought arises, observe it closely and note how it vanishes, whether all of a sudden or by gradually fading out. As soon as it’s gone, keep your attention focused right where it was, for you are now observing the space of the mind, and that’s where the next mental event will occur.

After you have grown familiar with observing mental images and thoughts—first by intentionally creating them and then by letting them arise of their own accord—continue observing the space of your mind and anything that arises within it. This mental space is not located in any specific physical region, and it doesn’t have a center, a periphery, a size, or borders. When you begin to observe thoughts and images, you may find that they disappear as soon as you notice them. Be patient and relax more deeply. Then you will begin to discover a place of stillness within the motion of your mind. When we begin this practice, the normally agitated mind is like a snow globe that has just been shaken, and a flurry of memories and fantasies swirl around, swiftly emerging and disappearing. Settling the mind in its natural state involves letting all these mental activities arise without inhibiting, controlling, or modifying them in any way.

Throughout the course of daily life, many kinds of thoughts, emotions, and desires arise, and when our attention is focused outward to the world around us, our sensory experiences often obscure our inner life, just as the sun outshines the stars during the daytime. Those mental activities continue subconsciously even when we’re not attending to them, and they exert a powerful influence on our lives. In this practice we open the Pandora’s box of our minds and focus our full attention on whatever emerges from that inner space. Time and again when thoughts arise, you will immediately be swept up by them, and your attention will be carried away to the referents of those thoughts. For example, if a memory of a personal encounter from this morning arises, your attention will be focused on the people and circumstances involved. That’s called daydreaming. In this practice, observe the thoughts and images of that memory as events in their own right—occurring here and now in the space of your mind—without letting your attention be carried back into the past. Likewise, when fantasies, worries, or expectations about the future arise, simply be aware of them in the present moment.

The mind is constantly in motion, but in the midst of the movements of thoughts and images there is a still space of awareness in which you can rest in the present moment, without being jerked around through space and

time by the contents of your mind. This is the union of stillness and motion. Whatever events arise in your mind—be they pleasant or unpleasant, gentle or harsh, good or bad, long or short—just let them be. Observe them without distraction and without mentally grasping at them, pushing them away, identifying with them, or preferring for them to continue or disappear. Let your awareness be as neutral as space and as bright as a well-polished mirror. You are observing the face of your own mind, with all its blemishes, scars, and beauty marks. This is a direct path to self-knowledge.

At times you may begin to feel spaced out and unfocused. When that happens, revive your awareness by refocusing on the practice, training your attention clearly on the space of your mind and its contents. You may be peripherally aware of your breathing, and if so, let the in-breath be an occasion for focusing more intently on your mind. At other moments, you may find that you have been distracted and carried away by the contents of your mind. It's as if the space of your awareness had collapsed to the size of your thoughts and memories. As soon as you note that you are distracted, loosen up your body and mind and release your grasp on the thoughts that have captured your attention. This doesn't mean expelling the thoughts themselves. On the contrary, let them continue of their own accord for as long as they persist. But release the effort of identifying with them. It's especially easy to do this during the exhalation, a natural occasion for relaxing.

The kind of awareness we are bringing to the mind is discerning and intelligent, but also nonjudgmental. We are not evaluating one thought as being better or worse than another. You may find at times that you are compulsively engaging in a kind of internal commentary, as if you were the director trying to control what's happening, or at least a critic judging the performances of each of the actors. Give it a rest, and simply observe what's happening on the stage of your mind without commentary. And if internal judgments arise anyway, simply observe them; they too are contents of the mind and therefore grist for the mill.

As you continue settling the mind in its natural state, gradually the quantity of thoughts and images will subside. On occasion, you may not notice any contents at all. When that happens, closely observe the background of the empty space in which thoughts and images appear. Note whether it is a sheer nothingness or has any characteristics of its own. As you do so, you may begin to detect very subtle mental events that had previously escaped your notice. Because they are so subtle, they slip under the radar of ordinary consciousness. But now as the vividness and acuity of your attention are heightened, you may become aware of mental processes that had previ-

ously been locked within your subconscious. Some may persist for seconds at a time, barely crossing the threshold of consciousness because of their subtlety; others may flit across the space of your mind for only a fraction of a second. As your mindfulness become more and more continuous, you may detect these microevents for the first time.

You have now set out on one of the greatest expeditions as you explore the hidden recesses of your mind. Long-forgotten memories will emerge out of the blue, strange fantasies may haunt you, and the most bizarre thoughts and desires may lurch up and take you by surprise. Whatever thoughts and images arise, simply be aware of them, recognizing that they are only appearances to the mind. Observe them without being sucked into them. Passively but vigilantly let them arise from the space of your mind, and let them dissolve back into that space. Like reflections in a mirror, these thoughts and images have no power of their own to harm you or to help you. They are as insubstantial as mirages and rainbows, yet they have their own reality, as they causally interact among themselves and with your body. As you discover the luminous, still space of awareness in which the movements of the mind occur, you will begin to discover an inner freedom and place of rest even when the storms of turbulent emotions and desires sweep through this inner domain.


formal meditation and ordinary activities throughout the day begins to fade. Even in the midst of an active way of life we may discover an inner silence, and this deepens our sense of the union of stillness and motion.

REFLECTIONS OF THE MIND

As we venture into the practice of settling the mind in its natural state, we may wonder: what is the nature of these appearances that arise in the space of the mind, and what do they tell us about the nature of the mind itself? The best way to gain insight into these appearances is to observe them carefully. Astronomers have learned about the stars and planets by careful observation, and biologists have learned about plants and animals the same way. Thoughts, mental images, desires, and emotions arise from the hidden recesses of the mind, influenced by physiological processes in our bodies and experiences in this lifetime and possibly past lifetimes. When we identify with them, they have a powerful influence on our bodies, minds, and behavior. However, when we simply observe them, as taught in the last practice, we can learn from them without falling under their domination. These appearances can tell us about our unconscious hopes and fears, and they reveal the creative potentials of the luminous space of the mind from which they arise.

Although many people believe that subjective experience must be equivalent to brain activity, this has never been demonstrated scientifically, and there are good reasons to doubt this assumption. Imagine, for example, that you have just spoken gently to someone who was very upset, and you were able to calm this person by speaking with sensitivity and kindness. Afterward you may feel glad that you were able to help them. When that experience of gladness arises, specific configurations of neural activity are certainly taking place in your brain. But if that brain activity were artificially induced with drugs, for instance, it wouldn't correspond to the same mental state. For the emotion you felt after helping someone would be more *meaningful* than a similar emotion generated chemically. Brain activity provides only a partial explanation for the kinds of subjective experiences we have from moment to moment, and any attempt to reduce mental processes to brain activity always leaves out something crucial: the *mental* processes themselves!

Descartes maintained that the primary quality of physical entities is that they are extended in space, that is, they have definite locations and spatial dimensions. Many people think that thoughts are actually inside our heads, because that's where their neural correlates are located. But we know that phys-



[PRACTICE]

BEHOLD THE LIGHT OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Settle your body in a comfortable position, sitting on a chair, sitting cross-legged, or lying down. Be still and vigilant, and take three slow, deep breaths, experiencing the sensations of the breath throughout your body. Then settle your respiration in its natural rhythm, letting your body determine whether your breathing is deep or shallow, slow or fast, regular or irregular. Now rest your mind in open, choiceless awareness, letting your attention roam to any of your six senses (the five physical senses and the mind) without trying to control it in any way. If a sound catches your attention, let your awareness rest on that, without fixating on it or withdrawing from it. Likewise, if some visual impression or bodily sensation arises to your awareness, simply be present with it, without getting caught up in or identifying with it. When you notice thoughts, memories, or other mental events, let your attention alight on them like a butterfly touching down on a flower, without clinging to them. For a few minutes, rest in this spacious sense of awareness in which you give up all sense of controlling your mind.

Now begin to withdraw your attention by focusing exclusively on the space of your body, noticing any kind of sensation that arises there, from the tips of your toes to the crown of your head. Instead of letting the wild steed of your mind roam at will through all the six sense fields (including the mental domain), corral it within the

confines of your body. But within that space, continue to let your mind come to rest on any sensation that catches your attention. And simply be present with it, without getting caught up in or trying to control it in any way.

After a few minutes, withdraw your attention even further, into the space of your mind (as in the last practice) taking note of the mental events that arise and pass away there. Observe the contents of your mind, such as discursive thoughts and images, as they objectively arise to your awareness from moment to moment. Be aware too of impulses such as emotions and desires that you experience subjectively, and continue to rest in the open space of your awareness without identifying with them. Just be aware of them, not trying to modify or react to them.

By attending to these objective contents and subjective impulses, you have focused on the “foreground” of your mind. Now shift your attention to the “background,” from which these mental events emerge, in which they play themselves out, and into which they finally dissolve. Carefully observe this mental space and note whether it has any characteristics of its own or is simply nothingness.

Now for the final step in this meditation: in all the previous exercises, you have focused your attention on some *thing*, either in one of your five physical sense fields or in your mind. Your attention has been like a laser pointer directed at the screens of your fields of experience, illuminating them. Now retract that laser pointer into itself. Withdraw your attention into its own nature without taking an interest in anything else, not even the space of the mind or its contents. Let your awareness rest in its own space, and simply be aware of being aware. Whatever objects appear to your consciousness, let them be, without trying to shut them out. Just don't take an interest in them. As soon as they tug your attention outward, release them and let your awareness rest in its own nature. Whenever a thought arises, release it immediately and let your mind settle in a nonconceptual mode of quiet, still awareness.

As simple as this practice sounds, at the beginning you may find it a bit difficult. If so, you may conjoin this practice with your breath. During each inhalation, draw your awareness in upon itself and simply experience the present moment of consciousness. With each out-breath, immediately release any thoughts or other distractions that may have caught your attention while continuing to be aware of the experience of being aware. With each in-breath, arouse your attention, overcoming laxity and dullness, and with each out-breath, relax your attention, overcoming excitation and agitation.

Your knowledge of being aware may be the most certain knowledge you have. It is the knowing of knowing, the awareness that awareness is happen-

ing, right here, right now. Maintain a close, vigilant awareness of awareness and see if you can discern its qualities. Is it still or flowing? Does it have spatial dimensions, large or small? Does it have a shape, a center, or boundaries? If it does have a size or shape, does that change or remain constant? Finally, can you identify unique characteristics of consciousness that belong to nothing else?

In this practice, you sustain mindfulness of awareness itself, but it is also important to exercise your faculty of introspection, monitoring the quality of your attention. With introspection you note whether your mind has fallen into laxity, and as soon as that happens, you may counteract it—arousing your attention by taking a renewed interest in awareness. When through introspection you notice that your mind has become caught up in distracting thoughts or other stimuli, immediately relax and let go of those objects of the mind. It takes effort to maintain your grip on those distractions, so release that effort as well as the objects that distract you, and let your awareness return home. This is like settling into a deep, dreamless sleep. But instead of gradually losing the clarity of awareness as you normally do when you fall asleep, you maintain a high level of vigilance. As you become more and more familiar with this practice, you may gradually unveil the stillness and luminosity that are intrinsic to awareness. Then you will no longer need to remedy agitation or dullness, for you will no longer be caught up in mental states that obscure the underlying nature of consciousness.

Continue for twenty-five minutes, then bring the session to a close. As you become more and more familiar with this practice, you may gradually increase the duration of your sessions, but don't let them last so long that the quality of your meditation decreases. It's helpful to have a meditation timer that lets you know when your session is over, so you don't need to interrupt your practice by glancing at a clock. For as long as you are meditating, do your best to maintain clear, unwavering mindfulness.



[PRACTICE]

PROBING THE NATURE OF THE OBSERVER

Settle your body in its natural state, either sitting or lying down, and then, while mindfully attending to the tactile sensations throughout your body, let your respiration settle in its natural rhythm. Breathe effortlessly, as if you were deeply asleep, without intentionally trying to modify your respiration in any way.

With your eyes at least partly open, rest your gaze vacantly in the space in front of you. During the in-breath, draw your awareness in upon itself, illuminating its own nature. During the out-breath, release your awareness, letting go of all thoughts and objects of the mind. As you invert your awareness on the inhalation, there is no point at which you detect a real subject, and when you release your awareness during the exhalation, you let go of all contents of the mind, so there is no object to latch onto. With each inhalation, override the flow of obsessive thoughts and images by drawing your awareness in upon the source of these contents of the mind. And with each exhalation, override the compulsive tendency to identify with involuntary thoughts, emotions, and desires by releasing all the contents of the mind. Throughout the whole course of each in-breath and out-breath, gently sustain the awareness of awareness.

As your mind calms, your breathing will become more and more subtle, and when this happens, disengage your awareness from the breath and rest in the ongoing flow of awareness of awareness. Now

direct your attention downward, gently release your mind, and without anything on which to meditate, rest both your body and mind in their natural state. Having nothing on which to meditate, and without any modification or adulteration, rest your awareness without wavering, in its own natural state, its natural limpidity, just as it is. Remain in this luminous state, resting the mind so that it is loose and free.

Then, on occasion, pose the question, “What is the consciousness that is concentrating?” Steadily focus your attention, and then raise this question again. Keep doing that in an alternating fashion. This alternation between raising the question and focusing the attention inward is an effective method for dispelling problems of laxity and lethargy. Whenever you are distracted by a noise or some other sensations from your environment, let that serve as a reminder to bring your wandering mind back to the present moment.¹

Do this practice for twenty-five minutes; then as you rise from meditation, continue to recognize all appearances for what they are: appearances. Don’t objectify anything outside, and don’t “subjectify” anything inside. View everything as appearances to awareness, with no absolute objects “out there” or subjects “in here.” The appearances to your physical senses do not exist independent of your mind, any more than the reflections in a pool of water exist independent of the water. Your thoughts and mental images are simply reflections on your perception. They too do not “re-present” anything already existing out there, independent of your mind. They are simply the contents of your mind, and nothing else.

Whenever you become upset, recognize that nothing out there is the true source of your distress. Nor is the source of suffering in the pure, luminous nature of your own awareness. The fundamental source of your problems is the delusional tendency to reify subjects and objects, grasping onto them as if they are real and concrete, existing by their own nature.

In all your activities maintain unwavering mindfulness, resting as continually as you can in a state of luminous awareness, without grasping onto the inherent existence of objects or subjects. Remain engaged with reality, mindfully present with the events arising around you in the environment and within your mind, without falling back into obsessive thoughts and compulsive grasping. Live as if you were in a lucid dream (recognizing that you are dreaming while you are dreaming), and experiment with shifting your experience of reality by changing the way you view it. This is the road to freedom.

13

[PRACTICE]

OSCILLATING AWARENESS

Settle your body in its natural state, imbued with the qualities of relaxation, stillness, and vigilance. Then, while mindfully attending to the sensations throughout your body, let your breathing settle in its natural rhythm, breathing as effortlessly as if you were fast asleep.

With your eyes at least partly open and your gaze resting vacantly in the space in front of you, alternate between drawing your attention inward upon yourself as the observer and releasing your awareness into space, not focusing on any object. Follow that by alternating between releasing your awareness and focusing inwardly on that which is controlling the mind, rhythmically releasing and concentration the attention. Pose the question, "What is the agent that releases and concentrates the mind?" Steadily focus your attention upon yourself, then release again. Continue alternating between firmly concentrating your awareness without wavering and gently releasing it, evenly resting it in a state of openness.

15

[PRACTICE]

RESTING IN THE STILLNESS OF AWARENESS

Settle your body in its natural state and your breathing in its natural rhythm, and then with your gaze resting vacantly in the space in front of you, steadily focus your attention up into the space above you, without desire and without bringing any object to mind. Relax again. Then steadily, unwaveringly direct your awareness into the space on your right, then on your left, and then downward. In this way, begin to explore the space of awareness, noting whether it has any center or periphery.

At times, let your awareness come to rest in the center of your chest and evenly leave it there. At other times, evenly focus it in the expanse of the sky and leave it there. By shifting your attention in this way, you will allow your mind to gradually settle in its natural state. Following this practice, your awareness will remain evenly, lucidly, and steadily wherever it is placed. Due to the force of the attention being focused single-pointedly inward, the physical senses become dormant, and with the settling down of involuntary thoughts, the mind dissolves into the substrate consciousness. Your consciousness now rests in peace, pervaded by a sense of luminous wakefulness and an even sense of well-being.¹

Does the mind have any spatial dimensions, a center or a periphery? In terms of your own immediate experience, see if it is located anywhere, either inside or outside of your body. What is the nature of the mind as an entity existing in its own right? If you can't identify its own inherent nature, then observe that emptiness. If the mind doesn't exist as an entity in its own right, how could it be meditating right now? Who or what is it that isn't finding the mind? Look right at that, steadily. If you don't discover what it is it like, carefully check to see whether this awareness of not finding is itself the mind. If so, what is it like? What are its intrinsic characteristics? If you conclude that it has no qualities of its own apart from appearances, examine the nature of that which has drawn this conclusion. See how your experience of the mind fits into the categories of existence or nonexistence.

You may discover that when seeking out the nature of the mind, you cannot identify it as either existent or nonexistent. If so, carefully examine that which comes to this conclusion. Is it imbued with a quality of stillness? Is it luminous? Is it empty? Investigate the mind until you achieve decisive insight into its nature.¹



[PRACTICE]

THE EMPTINESS OF MIND

Rest your body, speech, and mind in their natural state, as in the preceding sessions; then steadily rest your awareness unwaveringly, clearly, without any conceptual elaborations, in the space in front of you. When your awareness settles and your mind becomes calm, examine that which has become stable. Gently release your awareness and relax, then once again observe your consciousness in the present moment. Ask yourself: what is the nature of that mind? Let your mind steadily observe itself. Is this mind something that is luminous and still, or when seeking to observe it, do you find nothing?

Closely inspect the nature of your mind that you have now brought into focus. Are there two entities here—you, who have settled your mind, and your mind that has stabilized—two distinct things? If so, examine the nature of each one to see how they differ. But if there is only one entity here—your mind—identify its characteristics. Is this one thing, “the mind,” to be found in any one or more of the mental events arising from moment to moment? Or does it exist independently of each of these mind-moments, overseeing and possibly controlling them? If the mind is not to be found in any of the objects that arise to awareness, probe into the nature of that which is observing the objects and see what qualities it has apart from these appearances.

finally left with a “not-found,” an emptiness of the body, in which not even its label remains?

Consider all the elements of your immediate experience of the physical world: things that are solid, fluid, warm, or cold, and things that are in motion. When you seek out their real, inherent nature, can you find it among their constituent parts or separate from them? Does anything bear its own intrinsic qualities, or are they all simply labels projected upon illusory appearances? Even the category of “appearances” is a human construct. Likewise, the categories of “subject” and “object” and even “existence” and “non-existence” are creations of the conceptual mind, and they have no existence apart from the mind that conceives them.

Even if you conclude that all these appearances are unsubstantial and empty, consider whether this label of “emptiness” is anything more than a word, a concept. In the formation of the world of experience, we first grasp onto our own self-existence, and on that basis we identify other things as existing apart from ourselves. They are brought into existence by the process of conceptually identifying objects on the basis of mere appearances to awareness. Once we have bracketed an object with our thoughts by labeling, it seems to exist independently of our thought processes. Then, when appearances change and we withdraw our conceptual projection of an object, it seems to vanish. All phenomena are mere appearances arising from dependently related events, and nothing more. Upon careful examination, we find nothing whatever that is truly existent from its own side.

Moreover, when you fall asleep, all objective appearances of waking reality—including the appearances of the inanimate world, the beings who inhabit the world, and all the objects that manifest to the five senses—dissolve into the vacuity of the substrate. Then, when you wake up, the sense of “I am” reasserts itself, and from the appearance of the self, as before, all inner and outer appearances—including those of the inanimate and animate world and sensory objects—emerge like a dream from the substrate. In the midst of these inner and outer appearances, we identify with some as “I” and “mine” and grasp onto others as existing by their own nature. In this way, we perpetuate the delusion of the inherent nature of all phenomena. Only with the recognition of the empty, luminous nature of the mind and all appearances do we find release from that delusion and come to see reality as it is.¹

10 [PRACTICE]

THE EMPTINESS OF MATTER

Rest your body, speech, and mind in their natural state, then place your awareness in repose—unwaveringly, clearly, without any conceptual elaborations, without having anything on which to meditate—in the space in front of you.

Now direct your attention to an object in the physical world, such as your own body. Examine the appearances you designate as “body.” Directly, with as little conceptual overlay as possible, observe the visual appearances of the body and the tactile sensations inside and on the surface of your body. Is any of these individual appearances actually your body? Or are they simply appearances, each having its own name? The visual appearance of the arm is just a visual appearance of an arm, not a body. Likewise, the tactile sensations of solidity, warmth, and movement within the body are simply tactile sensations, not a body. If you examine the individual constituents of the body, you will find that each one has its own name, yet none of them is your body. Apart from all those constituent parts and qualities, apart from those individual appearances, can you identify your body as a distinct entity that *has* those attributes and *displays* those appearances? What is the nature of the body as a real thing, existing on its own? Is that anywhere to be found, either among its parts or separate from them? Or, in the process of this investigation, are you

tine awareness, and its essence is the indivisibility of sheer emptiness, not established as anything, and its unceasing, brilliant, vivid luster! For some people, it may take years of dedicated meditative practice before such a realization occurs. But for others it may arise quite soon. This all depends on our degree of spiritual maturity.

When you bring your meditation session to an end, without grasping, view all appearances as being clear and empty like apparitions or the appearances of a dream. This will help to break down the barriers between your meditative experience and the way you view the world between sessions. In this way, all appearances of thoughts and of the sensory world may arise as aids to meditation. Whatever thoughts arise, direct your full attention to them, and you will find that they vanish without a trace, like wisps of fog vanishing in the warmth of sunlight. Know that these thoughts have no intrinsic reality of their own, and you will no longer be troubled by them. During all your activities, never let your awareness slip back into its previous habit of grasping, but maintain mindfulness, as continuous and unwavering as a broad, rolling river.

21 [PRACTICE]

RESTING IN TIMELESS CONSCIOUSNESS

As always, begin your meditation session by settling your body, speech, and mind in their natural states. Once you have gained some experiential insight into the empty nature of objects appearing to your mind, of your mind itself, and of the duality between objective appearances and your subjective awareness, simply rest your awareness without grasping onto any object or subject. This phase of practice is sometimes called “nonmeditation,” for you are not meditating on anything. Simply place your awareness in the space in front of you and maintain unwavering mindfulness without taking anything as your meditative object.

In this practice of “not doing,” you may simply experience a deep inner stillness. Beyond this, you may break through your psyche and even transcend the substrate consciousness, as your awareness settles in its ultimate ground, known as primordial consciousness (*jñāna*). At this time you may nondually realize a steady, luminous emptiness that is the very nature of awareness, beyond all conceptual constructs. Appearances and the mind will merge, so that there is no longer any sense of “inside” and “outside,” and you will experience a most profound sense of equality, sometimes called the “one taste” of all of reality.

The luster of this emptiness is unceasing, clear, immaculate, soothing, and luminous. It is called the “luminous nature” of pris-