

CALMING THE MIND

*Tibetan Buddhist Teachings on
Cultivating Meditative Quiescence*

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13 *The Mental Powers and Forms of Attention*

ACCOMPLISHING THE SIX MENTAL POWERS

The Six Powers are designated at different stages along the path, but all six are generally relevant throughout the path.

1. *The Power of Hearing*

The first power is based upon hearing the teachings on samatha, and it is with this power that one attains the first mental state.

How does that power arise? It arises through the process of understanding the teachings. Thus, the power of hearing is based on understanding the nature, function and benefits of concentration, as well as the manner of meditating upon the object. It develops and grows stronger through an understanding of the defining characteristics, the functions and the sequence of the obstacles that arise in the course of meditation, as well as the defining characteristics, functions and the sequence of antidotes for these faults.

Listening to the teachings is not sufficient. The power of hearing is mastered not just when the teachings are heard, but when they are both heard and understood.

2. *The Power of Reflection*

It is through the power of reflection that the second mental state is attained.

You develop the power of reflection by accustoming yourself to the practice, engaging in it repeatedly, and returning to the object again and again by implementing the teachings that you have heard. Actually, you have begun to cultivate this power even before engaging in meditation, but it is in the practice that the true power of reflection becomes evident.

3. *The Power of Mindfulness*

The chief function of the power of mindfulness is to prevent the mind from wavering off the object, and it is through this power that the third and fourth mental states are attained.

Unquestionably, the power of mindfulness is needed in the first two states as well, but it is in the third and fourth that it clearly manifests, when the major obstacles, scattering and excitement, are causing you to forget the object. Clearly manifesting at this point, the power of mindfulness counteracts excitement and scattering and brings the mind back to the object.

4. *The Power of Vigilance*

It is said that the fifth and sixth mental states are attained through the power of vigilance.

The chief opponent power for the occurrence of laxity is vigilance. When the mind has become stabilized on the object through the force of mindfulness you will not lose it. And yet, while you are focused on the object, the mind has a tendency to become lax, and to counter this you need vigilance.

In the fifth state, gross laxity is the greatest problem and vigilance is laxity's most effective antidote. In the sixth state, gross laxity has begun to subside and the middle-level excitement and laxity are likely to arise, with excitement being the greater of the two. It is only by refining and sharpening the power of vigilance that either of these two faults can be defeated.

5. *The Power of Effort*

It is said that the seventh and eighth mental states are attained by the power of effort.

By the time you have reached the sixth mental state, you are endowed with the power of vigilance. However, while this power has come into its fullness, it is still possible for a subtle level of excitement and laxity to arise. This can even occur in the seventh mental state. Therefore, having the power of vigilance does not mean that you don't need to implement it any more. On the contrary, it means that you must apply the powers of vigilance and mindfulness you have already perfected, and those powers are implemented through the power of effort.

In the seventh mental state, with a developed and sensitive power of vigilance, you are able to ascertain when either laxity or excitement are on the verge of arising. With the exertion of effort, you are able to apply the antidote instantly, snuffing out the faults before they ever have the chance to manifest. It is through this process that you go on to attain the eighth mental state.

6. *The Power of Familiarization*

By the continual application of effort throughout the eighth mental state, the process of meditation is carried out with less and less expense of energy. Rather than applying a particular antidote, you simply carry on with a diminishing degree of effort, fulfilling the necessity of familiarizing yourself with the practice. Eventually when the meditation becomes totally effortless, you have attained the ninth mental state.

An Exercise

To test your grasp of the six mental powers and nine mental states, work through them from the last to the first. Start with the ninth mental state, where there is equanimity. Recall that this equanimity is attained by the power of familiarization. And how did you get there? This was done by the power of effort. Effort of what type? The effort of the continual application of mindfulness and vigilance applied during the seventh and

eighth mental states. And what is the difference between the seventh and eighth mental states? In the seventh there is the possibility that either excitement or laxity could arise, so as they are on the verge of arising you need to be aware with effort to apply mindfulness and vigilance. Then carry on in reverse order, all the way down to the first mental state.

THE FOUR FORMS OF ATTENTION

1. *Forceful Attention*

This form of attention is the requirement of gross effort at the outset of the practice and the individual sessions. It is a forceful placement, holding, apprehension or maintaining of the object. It is present during the first and second mental states.

2. *Interrupted Attention*

The form of attention that occurs during the middle five mental states is called interrupted attention. From the third to the seventh mental state, the mind is by and large on the object. In contrast to the forceful attention of the first and second mental states, here the attention is only interrupted intermittently by excitement and laxity. Thus, interrupted attention is a less intense form of forceful attention.

3. *Uninterrupted Attention*

In the eighth mental state, because the mind is no longer interrupted at all by either laxity or excitement, the form of attention in that state is called uninterrupted attention. It functions only in the eighth mental state.

4. *Spontaneous Attention*

In the ninth mental state no effort whatsoever is required and for that reason the form of attention that occurs here is called spontaneous.

14 *Pliancy*

THE FIRST AND LAST ANTIDOTE

Pliancy is a quality you already have, something that is present as we start the practice, from the very first mental state. It is the first antidote to laziness; however, in the early stages of the practice it exists in such a subtle form that it does not manifest in a recognizable way.

In the ninth mental state, by the process of familiarization over a long period of time, pliancy is fully manifested in a very recognizable way. In this well-developed state, it acts as an antidote to the mental and physical dysfunction that is an obstacle to the practice of meditation.

As we progress through the nine mental states, this dysfunction gradually decreases. Upon the attainment of the ninth mental state it reaches the point at which it is on the verge of disappearing. As those forms of dysfunction have been decreasing in power, pliancy has been increasing in power, and just as the dysfunction is about to disappear, pliancy is about to fully manifest itself.

SIGNS OF PLIANCY

Generally speaking, mental pliancy arises first and is followed by physical pliancy. The first sign of mental pliancy is a spontaneous mental joy. It arises, it increases, and as it continues to grow, the presence of a new form of subtle energy indicates the arising of physical pliancy. One of the first signs of physical pliancy is a sensation comparable to the slight pressure you would feel if someone were to place a warm hand on your freshly shaved head. This subtle energy is unprecedented. As it courses through the body, it creates a sensation of fullness throughout the body.

As the initial joy of physical pliancy increases, it activates a new level of mental bliss. The mental bliss compounds the physical, they influence each other with increasing intensity. As you can see, this is getting rather potent. The pliancy is very dynamic, and gets stronger and stronger, building toward a peak.

Eventually, this dynamic pliancy tapers off, and one attains a subtle pliancy that is called "special pliancy."

At what moment is *śamatha* actually attained? It is attained after the mounting of pliancy has settled. First it swells increasingly as it moves about. Then there is a moment of tapering off, and when that occurs, *śamatha* has been attained.

In this context, we can draw on another etymology of the Tibetan translation of *śamatha*, *zhi gnas*. There is an "abiding" (*gnas*) following the "pacification" (*zhi*) of the movement of pliancy.

The statement that *śamatha* is attained following the attainment of pliancy is firmly based on the Buddha's own teachings in the *Saṃdhirimocanasūtra*. In this sūtra, Maitreya asks Buddha Śākyamuni what he would call the achievement of focused awareness prior to the attainment of mental and physical pliancy. The Buddha replies that this is not called *śamatha*, but is merely a mental factor similar to *śamatha*. It is not the real thing, because, as we can see from the formulation of the question, mental and physical pliancy have not yet been attained.

The need of the ninth mental state as the cause for pliancy is pointed out by Maitreya in his text *The Examination of the Center and the Extremes*:

On the ninth mental state, following the attainment of both physical and mental pliancy, there is a form of attention which is called *śamatha*.

Recognizing that there are two levels of mental and physical pliancy, first the moving form and then the special form, we can pinpoint two elements that make up the criteria of having attained *śamatha*. First, one must have attained the ninth mental state, as a state of concentration in which the application of either mindfulness or vigilance requires no effort. Second, one must have attained the special form of mental and physical pliancy.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q: If one is free of laxity and excitement in both the eighth and the ninth mental states, why do we need continually to maintain mindfulness and vigilance in the eighth?

A: In the eighth mental state there is still a predisposition for their arising. They can be on the verge of arising. You may have gotten rid of the manifestations of laxity and excitement, but you have not cut them at the root. They are still potentially there.

Q: At the sixth mental state, when we succumb to subtle laxity and excitement, is that because it is so subtle that we aren't able to recognize it immediately, or is it because we fail to apply the appropriate antidote?

A: Both can still arise, and at that stage subtle excitement is easier to recognize than subtle laxity. The greatest danger is that you are so involved in concentration that you may simply not care about the arising of subtle laxity. It doesn't appear to be harmful at all. Your concentration is stable, it appears

(a') **A general presentation of objects of meditation**

This has three sections:

1. The objects of meditation themselves
2. Who should meditate on which objects
3. Synonyms of the object of meditation

(1') **The objects of meditation themselves**

The Bhagavan stated that yogis have four types of objects of meditation, these being: (1) universal objects of meditation, (2) objects of meditation for purifying your behavior, (3) objects of meditation for expertise, and (4) objects of meditation for purifying afflictions.

(a'') **Universal objects of meditation**

Universal objects of meditation are of four types: (a) discursive images, (b) non-discursive images, (c) the limits of existence, and (d) achievement of your purpose. [491]

The two types of images (*discursive* and *non-discursive*) are posited in terms of the observer: the first is the object of insight, and the second is the object of meditative serenity. The image is not the actual specifically characterized object upon which your mind is focused, but rather the appearance of that object's aspect to your mind. When you carry out analysis while observing an object, then the image is discursive since analytical thinking is present. When you stabilize your mind without analysis while observing an object, the image is said to be non-discursive since analytical thinking is absent. As for these images, what objects of meditation are they images of? They are the images, or aspects, of the five objects of meditation for purifying behavior, the five objects of meditation for expertise, and the two objects of meditation for purifying afflictions.

The *limits of existence* are posited with reference to the observed object. There are two: The limits of existence for the diversity of phenomena, which are expressed in the statement, "Just this is all there is; there is nothing more"; and the limits of existence for the real nature, expressed in the statement, "This alone is how things exist; they do not exist in any other way." In the case of the diversity of phenomena, this means that the five aggregates include all composite phenomena; the eighteen constituents and twelve sources include all phenomena; and the four truths include everything there is to know; there is nothing else beyond this.⁶⁰ In the case of the nature, this means that reason establishes the truth or reality of those objects of meditation.

**THE GREAT TREATISE
ON THE STAGES OF THE PATH
TO ENLIGHTENMENT**

by
Tsong-kha-pa

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Achievement of purpose is posited in terms of the result. With either serenity or insight you direct your attention to the images of those objects of meditation. Then you stabilize on them, become accustomed to them, and, by virtue of repeated practice, you become free from your dysfunctional tendencies, undergoing a fundamental transformation. [492]

(b'') Objects of meditation for purifying your behavior

Objects of meditation for purifying behavior are objects that purify behavior in which attachment or the like [hatred, delusion, pride, or discursiveness] is predominant. There are five such objects of meditation. Respectively they are: (a) ugliness, (b) love, (c) dependent-arising, (d) differentiation of constituents, and (e) inhalation and exhalation. (a) Of these, the *objects of meditation on ugliness* consist of the thirty-six uglinesses pertaining to the body,⁶¹ such as head and body hair, and external uglinesses such as a corpse's turning blue.⁶² When an aspect of impurity and ugliness arises in your mind, you keep your attention on it. (b) *Love* involves focusing on friends, enemies, and persons toward whom you have neutral feelings, and having an attitude—at the level of meditative equipoise—of providing them with help and happiness. Keeping your attention on these objects of meditation with a loving attitude is called "meditation on love"; love refers both to the subjective attitude and to the object. (c) Regarding the *object of meditation on dependent-arising*: All there is in the past, the present, and the future is dependent-arising in which effects that are mere phenomenal factors simply arise based on mere phenomenal factors. Apart from these, there is no performer of actions or experiencer of their effects. You focus your attention on this fact, and hold it there. (d) As for the *object of meditation on the differentiation of the constituents*: You differentiate the factors of the six constituents—earth, water, fire, air, space, and consciousness. You focus your attention on them and hold it there. (e) Regarding the *object of meditation on inhalation and exhalation*: You focus your attention without distraction by counting and watching the breath move in and out.

(c'') Objects of meditation for expertise

There are also five objects of meditation for expertise, namely expertise in (a) the aggregates, (b) the constituents, (c) the sources, (d) dependent-arising, and (e) what is and is not possible. (a) The *aggregates* are the five aggregates of form and the others [feeling,

discrimination, compositional factors, and consciousness]. Expertise in these is knowing that, apart from these aggregates, the self and what pertains to the self do not exist. (b) The *constituents* are the eye and the others of the eighteen constituents. Expertise in them is knowing the causal conditions by which those constituents arise from their own seeds. [493] (c) The *sources* are the eye and the others of the twelve sources. Expertise in these is knowing that the six internal sources are the dominant conditions for the six consciousnesses, that the six external sources are the object-conditions, and that the mind which has just ceased is the immediately preceding condition. (d) *Dependent-arising* is the twelve factors.⁶³ Expertise in them is knowing that they are impermanent, suffering, and devoid of self. (e) *What is and is not possible* refers to such things as it being possible for a pleasant fruition to arise from a virtuous action, but not possible for a pleasant fruition to arise from a non-virtuous action. Expertise in this is knowing that things are this way. This is a particular case of expertise in dependent-arising: the difference is that you understand diverse causes.⁶⁴

When you use these as objects of meditation for cultivating serenity, you keep your attention on just one of the perspectives in which the aggregates, etc. may be known.

(d'') Objects of meditation for purifying afflictions

Purifying afflictions means either merely reducing the strength of the seeds of the afflictions or else utterly eradicating the seeds. In the former case, the objects of meditation are the comparative coarseness of each lower stage and comparative calmness of each higher stage, proceeding from the level of the desire realm up to the level of Nothingness.⁶⁵ In the latter case, the objects of meditation are impermanence and the other of the sixteen aspects of the four noble truths.⁶⁶ When you use these as objects of meditation for cultivating serenity, you do not analyze, but instead keep your attention on any one cognition of an aspect of those objects that appears to it.

Kamalaśīla's second *Stages of Meditation*⁶⁷ states that objects of meditation are three. (1) After you have brought together everything that all twelve branches of scripture say about determining, settling into, and having settled into reality, you stabilize your mind upon it. (2) You observe the aggregates, etc., which include phenomena to some extent. (3) You stabilize your mind on the physical form of the Buddha, which you have seen and heard about.

How do you stabilize your mind on things such as the aggregates? [494] When you understand how all compositional things can be included within the five aggregates, you mentally collect them, gradually, into these five aggregates. Then you observe them and keep your attention on them. Just as discerning wisdom develops when you cultivate differentiation, so when you cultivate collectedness you develop concentration wherein your attention is brought together on the object of meditation without moving toward other objects. This is a personal instruction of the knowledge tradition. Likewise, when you understand how all phenomena can be included within the constituents and sources, you mentally collect them into these categories and keep your attention on this.

Among these four types of objects of meditation, objects of meditation for purifying behavior, as explained, facilitate the stopping of attachment and such in those whose behavior is dominated by attachment and such. They are special objects of meditation because you may readily attain concentration based upon them. Objects of meditation for expertise are conducive to the development of the insight that knows emptiness inasmuch as they refute a personal self that is not included among those phenomena. Therefore, they are excellent objects of meditation for cultivating serenity. Objects of meditation for dispelling afflictions serve as general antidotes to the afflictions, so they have great significance. The universal objects of meditation are not distinct from the aforementioned three.⁶⁸ Therefore, since you must achieve concentration using an object of meditative serenity that has a particular purpose, those who achieve concentration using things like pebbles and twigs for objects of meditation are clearly ignorant of the teachings on objects of concentration.

There are those who suppose that if you focus on an object of meditation and keep your attention on it, this is an apprehension of signs. They claim that meditation on emptiness means just stabilizing your mind without any basis, without focusing on any object of meditation. This is a total misunderstanding of how to meditate on emptiness. If you have no consciousness at that time, then neither will you have a concentration that cultivates emptiness. [495] On the other hand, if you have consciousness, then you are conscious of something, so you have to accept that there is an object of consciousness in terms of which consciousness is posited. If there is an object of consciousness, then precisely that is the object of meditation of that mind, because "object," "object of meditation,"

and "object of consciousness" have the same meaning. In that case, they would have to accept that even their method of concentration would apprehend signs. Thus, their approach is not correct.

Furthermore, whether something constitutes meditation on emptiness is determined by whether it is meditation founded upon the view that knows the way things are; it is not determined by whether there is any conceptualization vis-à-vis the object. This will be demonstrated at length below.⁶⁹ Even those who claim to stabilize their minds without an object of meditation must think first, "I will keep my attention such that it does not stray toward any object whatsoever," and then keep their attention in that way. After they have focused like that on the mind itself as an object of meditation, they must be certain to fix on this object without straying in any way. Thus, their own experience contradicts their claim that they have no object of meditation.

In this way, the classic texts on achieving concentration explain that there are many objects of meditation. The purposes of these meditative bases for stabilizing your mind are as explained above, so you should gain expertise in them. Kamalaśīla's *Stages of Meditation* explains that the object of meditation of serenity is indeterminate,⁷⁰ and Atisha's *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* says, "[It is] whatever object or objects of meditation that are appropriate."⁷¹ These statements mean that you are not required to stick with one particular object of meditation; they do not show how to define the range of existing objects of meditation.

(2') Who should meditate on which objects

As there are various kinds of people, from those with a preponderance of attachment to those with a preponderance of discursiveness, Asaṅga's *Śrāvaka Levels* cites an answer to a question of Revata:⁷²

Revata, if attachment uniquely dominates the behavior of a monk-yogi, a practitioner of yoga, then he focuses his mind on the object of meditation of ugliness. [496] If hatred dominates his behavior, he meditates on love; if ignorance dominates his behavior, then he meditates on the dependent-arising of this condition; if pride dominates his behavior, he focuses his mind on the differentiation of the constituents.⁷³

And:

If discursiveness uniquely dominates his behavior, then he focuses his mind on an awareness of the exhalation and inhalation of the