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SEMINARY TRANSCRIPTS
Teachings from the Sutra Tradition ~ Book Two

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MINDFULNESS AND AWARENESS

MINDFULNESS

Three Qualities of Mindfulness

Mindfulness, *trenpa* [dran pa], has three qualities: familiarity, not forgetting and not moving. When all three qualities are present then we can say there is truly mindfulness. If we are missing one of these qualities, our mindfulness is underdeveloped.

Familiarity. There are two parts to familiarity: introduction, *ngo trö* [ngo sprod], and familiarity itself, *kom* [goms], which literally means “getting accustomed to.”

Introduction: ngo trö. What are we being introduced to? First of all, we are being introduced to what calm abiding is. We are also being introduced to the object of meditation. Whatever we are meditating on, we must know what it is. In the case of the breath, when we first begin to meditate, it’s hard just to find the breath. We have a conceptual idea of what the breath is, and we struggle, wondering, “Is the breath a form? Is it a body feeling? Is it something visual? Do we visually see the breath? Where does it actually begin? I was already breathing as I was sitting down—where was the exact beginning of that breath, and where was the end of that breath? How deep does the breathing process go into the abdominal area, or into the lungs?” This is just the basic, almost anatomical, mindfulness of the breath. If we are practicing the four reminders, introduction means we have memorized the four reminders, so we immediately know what they are. If we are doing a yidam practice, then we know what the deity looks like, what is in the right hand and the left hand. It is impossible to develop familiarity with something that we do not know, or someone we have never met. “I’m not familiar with so-and-so because I have never met them.” We first have to be introduced.

Familiarity: kom. Familiarity means being able to recognize the object of meditation immediately. We don’t sit down and say, “Is *this* the breath that I’m supposed to follow or is *that* the breath I’m supposed to follow?” “Is that the deity I am meditating on?” If we are working with two or three deities and we can’t pick them out of a lineup [laughter], then there’s no mindfulness; we do not have familiarity. “It’s the one with four arms. He’s the one.”

Familiarity is a sense of intimacy and knowledge. In this case, the object of meditation is what we are becoming familiar with using mindfulness. We could also eat an apple using mindfulness. Often when we paint, cook, or engage in a sport, familiarity comes out as an aspect of our mindfulness of the experience. All of a sudden we become very, very in tune with whatever we are doing. If we are painting, we look at the brush and the paper, and some kind of unity takes place, a very deep intimacy. If we are meditating, we no longer separate from the mind and we recognize exactly what we are doing. If we are engaged in a sport, it becomes less mechanical.

Sometimes there’s a kind of quietness. When we put on our clothes, the process of dressing becomes almost ceremonial—the whole process is very familiar and there’s almost a spiritual aspect to it. Familiarity means that we have made a very close relationship with whatever we are doing. There’s an intimacy taking place. That is

mindfulness. That is mind knowing the object, knowing what it is doing, and being really familiar with it. Sometimes when we get speedy we are not familiar at all. We are unsure, hesitant. We are speedy because we are not sure what is the right thing to do, or if we are doing it the right way. There's less familiarity and more chaos in our actions.

Familiarity is very much the sense of knowing unquestionably. We *know* that this is the breath, or this is the deity. There is no question about it. Familiarity is a process of intimately knowing and getting to know. It is said that the Polynesians could travel from island to island in their little boats because they were so familiar with the water that they could use it for navigation. They could tell which direction they came from by observing the way the color of the water changed. They could know if a rainstorm was coming by simply putting their hands in the water and feeling its temperature. They knew the weather patterns and where the storms were along their route. They had complete intimacy with the ocean. Obviously, it took generations and generations to develop this. Basically what they developed really is the aspect of mind that is able to be so in tune with phenomena. With that kind of mindfulness, you could put your hand in the water and tell what was going to happen a thousand miles away. It is not completely unreasonable.

We understand at this point, I think, that using the breath as an object is just one of many ways of doing shamatha. The breath is known to be most effective in quelling basic discursiveness. It's also effective in quelling large swings of emotions. We pick this method because we are discursive and our objective is to calm down and practice. So we say, "This going to be the focus of my meditation for now."

Later we may choose another object of meditation. We could choose a mahayana object of meditation such as love, kindness, or compassion. We could meditate on a particular theme, such as compassion, and hold that in the mindstream. It is said that compassion is an innate aspect of the mindstream, so we could ask ourselves, "Am I able to hold my mind and maintain mindfulness on the compassionate aspect of my mind and become familiar with it? How familiar am I with love and compassion?" Again, introduction is important. It is important that we know what we are being introduced to and that we have confidence in it.

We have to move along, obviously, but the more of the picture we paint, the easier it becomes to do this practice—and the more inspiring. Shamatha is always treated as the runt. Everybody thinks, "Oh, it's shamatha—put it in the back." [Laughter] "Vajrakilaya, now *that's* something!" But if Vajrakilaya actually came, he would probably tell you to do more shamatha.

Familiarity involves being introduced to the object of meditation and knowing the object of meditation. When we are doing bodhichitta practice, four reminders practice, three marks of existence practice, or visualization practice, we are bringing something to mind. If our practice is hard to maintain, it is because we are not familiar with the object or with what we are doing. When we have strengthened our mindfulness, objects of meditation do not give us a hard time. It is easy to be with them. The more familiar we are with the object, the stronger and more relaxed the mind becomes; therefore, it is easier to stay on the object of meditation. Familiarity

builds the basis. The basis of what? The basis by which we can remain on the object of meditation.

Often we are not familiar with the notion of death, impermanence, or compassion because how many of us, frankly, sit around and think about this kind of stuff? We're too busy. It strikes us and it's gone. It comes and goes. It's almost embarrassing sometimes. Bringing these thoughts to mind seems too serious. But once we are familiar with death and impermanence, the faults of samsara, compassion, and love, once we are very intimate with these issues, then as soon as we sit down we are able to find them and we are able to remain there.

Not Forgetting. The next quality of mindfulness is not forgetting or remembering. Mindfulness takes place when the mind does not forget. If I'm about to bite an apple, and I have that apple in my mind—it is an apple, not an orange or a banana—then I am mindful of that apple. If someone asks you, “Do you know about the practice of bodhichitta?”—and it takes you a brief second to remember it before you answer and talk about aspiring and entering, and so forth; then you were not mindful of bodhichitta at the point when the question was asked. Why? Because you had forgotten it and you had to bring it to mind—you were not already *in* it. In a sense, it's like looking and not looking. Not forgetting is the second aspect of mindfulness. You already have familiarity with the object, and you don't forget it—it is continuously in the mindstream.

Not forgetting is like love, in that when we are in love, the person or thing we are in love with does not leave our mind. The quality of love is always in our mindstream. There are other levels of this. It could apply to something that we intentionally bring to mind. For example, in visualization practice, not forgetting means that the deity we are visualizing—Buddha, Manjushri, Avalokiteshvara, Vajrapani—and the energy of that particular deity does not leave the mindstream. As soon as the mind goes towards something else, even another deity, we have lost mindfulness of that deity. It's like hunger. When we are hungry the notion of food is continuously in our mindstream. We cannot stop thinking about food. I don't need to go on about this one. [Laughter] We are all very mindful of food. No matter what we are doing, we do not forget about food the entire time. In the midst of having a conversation we are always thinking, “Pizza. Hamburger,” or if we are vegetarian, “Vegetable stir-fry. Special diet.” [Laughter] Then there are those special diet meat-eaters. [Laughter] So we are completely mindful of food. And when we are cold, warmth is always in our mindstream. We are very mindful of warmth.

That sense of the mind being glued to something is an aspect of mindfulness. As soon as we eat something and our hunger is satisfied—then we immediately shift to thinking about being cold. Our mindfulness shifts from food to warmth. We want to be in our little bed with our quilts over our head—now *that* is in our mindstream. Being all warm and toasty inside that little bed becomes the object of our mindfulness. Wherever we go, we're thinking, “Bed, bed, bed. Sleep, sleep, comfortable, rest, get up, not tired, not cold (at first).” [Laughter] We have not forgotten. In meditation, it is the same: the breath is not forgotten.

Not-moving, holding, or nondistracted. The third quality of mindfulness is not-moving, nondistracted, not being scattered. What does that mean? When the

mind has dispersed, left the scene, then it is not mindfulness. The opposite of being distracted or scattered is to be one-pointed: to be on one spot, to be solidly based. Not-moving means that mind holds to the object of meditation without moving. If we are meditating but our mind is all over the place, obviously we are not mindful. If our meditation is such that it is very focused, then that's mindfulness. Specifically, what are we not mindful of, what have we moved or scattered from? It is the object of meditation: the breath, the visualization, the contemplation.

When we have these three—familiarity, not forgetting, and not-moving—then we truly have mindfulness. When we are focused and we are familiar with the object of meditation, it stays in our mindstream and our mind is not scattered. That is mindfulness practice. Those three elements are the rudimentary aspects of mindfulness. They have to happen. Then, within that mindfulness, there is a lot of depth. And the more we practice, the deeper we become.

Conventionally mindfulness is simply a sense of paying attention to what we are doing. In a colloquial sense, it just means paying attention, remembering, not forgetting what we are doing. Mindfulness is the ability or mechanism of the mind that remains and stays focused on something. When we remain and stay focused on something we begin to learn about it. The stronger our mindfulness, the more we are able to learn about whatever our object is. The stronger our mindfulness, the more we are able to contemplate the issue at hand.

If we start out with a visualization of the Buddha or a bodhisattva, and contemplate their compassion, that seems like a very simple thing to do. But it takes a certain amount of mindfulness simply to be able to remain on that basic image, or on a phrase such as, "Death is real, even I will die, not everybody else, but just me." Initially, staying focused on a very simple deity or contemplation takes all the mindfulness we can handle. As our mindfulness grows stronger, we can meditate on Kalachakra with 744 arms, each one representing a different attribute—and we can know exactly what all those attributes are, simultaneously, as well as the color, shape, and form of the whole thing. Our mind is right there, completely familiar with each aspect. That is what we are talking about in terms of degrees of mindfulness.

When we first start out, we use a rock. [Laughter] We just look at a stone. For five minutes can you think about just the stone? It's not a piece of wood. It's not an apple. It's not a frog. It's a stone. That is a little silly, but we are developing a sense of mindfulness. If we can't even focus on a stone, it will be very hard to do much more. Mindfulness is the ability of the mind to stay focused. In a sense, mindfulness is without personality, it has a mechanical quality—but it does allow the basis for intelligence. It allows introspection to arise. If we have this basis of mindfulness, then our mind is steady enough to see what is going on.

Another analogy is that mindfulness is what calms the water down—and obviously, the water represents our mind. Say the water is all stirred up with mud, that you took a stick and stirred it up. It's muddy and unclear and you want to see to the bottom. Mindfulness is the practice of settling the silt and the dirt, calming the water so that the water is very still and very clear. This is the job of shamatha altogether, but in particular we are talking about the stability, the one-pointedness, of mindfulness.

Once mind is calmed down, though, it is not mindfulness itself which urges us, “Look, look! Look over here.” That is a different aspect of the mind. That aspect is more associated with intelligence. Mindfulness has the unique job of stabilizing and clarifying the mind. When we first meditate it’s hard to contemplate one thing, but actually, the mind is pretty vast. Even this relative mind is vast in that we can visualize all the mandalas, we can keep all the buddhas completely clear. That is the ability of the mind to be with something. Mindfulness doesn’t have any restrictions.

Sometimes we think mindfulness means we’ve got to be mindful of one thing, either this or that: “I can only do one thing at a time. I can’t be mindful of *everything*.” Mindfulness is not, “I’m mindful here, and I’m mindful here, and I’m mindful here.” It is the quality of the mind that remains focused. It can remain focused on quite a variety of things—it is not limited. Sometimes when we talk about mindfulness, it becomes very minute. “I’m mindful of one little thing. I’m very mindful when I sew.” As someone on horseback is tearing across a grassy meadow, you probably wouldn’t say they are very mindful. But you *can* ride on the back of a horse across a mountain and be completely mindful of what’s going on. It depends on what your mind is able to contain, how your mind is able to handle the whole situation. Sometimes everything is very relaxed. People have such experiences when they’re riding. They say, “I was riding my horse and we were completely one. I could see everything as the horse was galloping. Before, it wasn’t like this; I couldn’t see a thing; I could hardly sit down. Now it’s as smooth as silk.” That is also the notion of mindfulness, the ability for the mind not to be distracted. How does that happen? By mind focusing on the action of riding. What are we doing? Riding across the meadow. Probably that’s all that’s happening. Before, when the mind was all over the place, it was not mindful of what it was doing. It was not mindful of riding.

AWARENESS

Awareness vs. Vipashyana

Awareness is *sheshin* [shes bzhin], “presently knowing.” We could say “awareness-introspection” or just “introspection.” We use the term *awareness* to mean different things. In the context of shamatha, when we talk about mindfulness-awareness, it is not the same as talking about shamatha and vipashyana, or shi-ne and lhakthong. Lhakthong, or insight, is sometimes also translated as “awareness.” Shamatha is within the context of the mind, but vipashyana, at the level of the path of seeing, is *sem ledepa* [sems las ’das pa], “beyond the mind.” This is the vipashyana we talk about in the mahayana, at the level of the first bhumi. This kind of insight has transcended the three realms. It no longer adheres to the fifty-one samskaras. It does not pay heed to the five skandhas, eighteen dhatus, and so on. It is beyond that. We call it *naljor ngönsum* [rnal ’byor mngon sum], “yogic direct perception.” That is the mind that sees emptiness, the mind that sees the reality of everything. *That* is the vipashyana of “shamatha and vipashyana.”

The great *dzokchen* [rdzogs chen], maha ati, texts talk about *rikpa* [rig pa], which is also translated as “insight,” but which has nothing to do with what we are talking about here. Often people read a certain text and they say, “Well, this must be

talking about the same thing that I read about in another context.” But it’s not. It’s a different word. However, within the English language we have to reuse words and dress them up in different clothes for different purposes.

Sheshin. What is sheshin, the awareness within shamatha, aware of? The mind is aware of itself. Sheshin is the aspect of the mind that most of us regard as—I don’t want to say “self-consciousness”—but the sense of knowing what we are doing. When we sit down and meditate, if we know that we are following the breath and the posture is right and that we are meditating correctly—that is awareness, sheshin, presently knowing what we are doing. If our mind is distracted, then we don’t have sheshin, and we are not practicing awareness in the context of calm abiding. So the first aspect of this awareness is a sense of knowing and understanding what we are doing. This kind of awareness is a help to meditation. It’s almost a mechanical counterpart to mindfulness, a part of the mind that helps us meditate and continue our meditation, through knowing that we are meditating.

Sheshin does not mean panoramic awareness. We are not necessarily practicing sheshin if we know what is happening all around us. However, this awareness, or presently knowing, would know that we were in a room, or in a tent as opposed to a room. It would know that we’re in a restaurant as opposed to a library. Outside of the context of meditation, awareness is a sense of what is going on. Awareness, or introspection, is an important aspect to develop because it’s the direct way of understanding how we are behaving.

It’s helpful on the mahayana and hinayana path to have introspection, the ability to see clearly and really understand what is happening to us. Within the context of the world, introspection comes in when, for example, we are not being very nice to somebody and we notice it, thinking, “You know, I was being sort of a jerk. I should have been kinder.” There’s a sense that we know what we are doing. The quality of developing awareness is in really knowing our behavior and how we conduct ourselves—not in a disciplinarian sense, but in the sense of being aware of what we are doing.

Sheshin works in a very straightforward way. We know when we are scared or fearful and we know when we are *fearless*. In the context of Shambhala, warriors know what they are doing in the world. We are moving through life, we are walking, we are eating, we are sleeping, we are talking with people—who is paying attention to all that while we are thinking about something else? *Sheshin!* [Laughter] Mr. Sheshin or Miss Sheshin. [Laughter] Introspection is kind of an awkward word.

The mind has the ability to know what it is doing all the time. Somewhere underneath everything else is that aspect of sheshin, presently knowing, and it can be activated. It’s there, dormant; and it can be brought forth and become a power. Later in the nine stages, awareness becomes a full power. This awareness doesn’t mean that we are continuously paranoid, that we feel we are bugged or that a video camera is on us. It is simply the aspect of the mind that is keeping track of what is happening in our own mind, whether we have lost the object of meditation or become too lax or too elated.

Sheshin is the particular aspect of the mind that is capable of being present and knowing what it is doing all the time, because we are engaging. Obviously, the extent that we know what we are doing is dependent upon the depth of our understanding. Sheshin does not mean that when we're talking to a bunch of people we know what kind of effect we're having by what we're saying and doing. It is more basic. During the time period of twenty minutes to one hour that we are meditating, do we know what we are doing when we are meditating? Are we correctly meditating? In fact, it is much easier to be aware when we are meditating because we are not moving our body; there's not a whole lot of action going on; and we aren't talking to anyone. So we can remain aware of what we are doing throughout the period of meditation. Once that is happening, then we can say we have awareness. And once our mind remains on the object of meditation, then we have both mindfulness and awareness, or introspection. We have to realize that we are very capable of developing these two aspects of mind.

Three Qualities of Awareness

There are three qualities of awareness: one is the ability to see the meditator in the context of meditation. The second quality of awareness is that it notifies the mind if our attention has left the object. The third quality is the ability to detect obstacles in meditation.

Seeing the meditator in context of meditation

The first quality of awareness is that, in the context of meditation, it sees the meditator. The analogy is that awareness is like a spy. We have two minds: one mind is meditating and the other mind is spying on it. Sheshin is like a spy, spying on us while we meditate. It is "the watcher." [Pause] It is the aspect of our mind that knows what we are doing. In a sense, sheshin is like a messenger. It does not have a lot of power, but it gets very clever and good at detecting movement.

Notifying the mind when attention leaves the object

Another analogy is that our meditation is like a house, and sheshin is the ability to detect if a thief comes into this house. If we do not have sheshin, then if a thief suddenly comes and steals our meditation, we don't even know it. We need the awareness of the mind to be able to handle this situation. Awareness comes to us and says, "Meditation has been disturbed," or "You are not paying attention, you're not being mindful." Then mindfulness comes in and says, "Okay, I'll get back on it." Sheshin reports to us. This is the second aspect of awareness. The spy has given us valid, extremely important information—but *we* are the general, so it is up to us to react. We are the meditator, and sheshin comes to us and says, "There is disturbance on the border, troops. The enemy is getting more power. They are going to attack." The general has a choice either to go out and do something about it, or not. We can try to quell what is happening.

Sheshin has the qualities of reporting, spying, watching and being observant. We are focused and we are here. These aspects of mind may seem sort of tedious, "You mean I'm going to have to pay attention *and* be aware?" It seems like a lot to do, but again, we have to come back to the power of hearing and realize that these elements

are innate aspects of the mind—they *can* be developed. If we develop them, they begin to take on their own power and in a sense, they begin to do the practice. Awareness could say, “The visualization is getting very hazy and dark. You left out a few arms. [Laughter] You dropped the skullcup, or the khatvanga. Go pick it up.” And you say, “I’m too tired. Two arms are good enough. [Laughter] I’ve had enough blood today, I don’t need any more.” So there is a quality of really knowing what is going on with the whole situation.

Detecting present and future obstacles to meditation

The third aspect of awareness is the ability to detect obstacles to meditation. The analogy for the first two qualities is that of a spy; the third quality is more like a sheriff—I’m trying to make it as entertaining as possible because this is pretty dry stuff; however, if we want to meditate, we have to know this stuff. The third quality of sheshin is that it is also able to detect what is going to happen in the future. The first quality of sheshin is knowing how the meditation is going right now. It is the aspect of sheshin that knows what is happening during our meditation: as we are straightening our posture, working with the breath, working with thoughts, and so forth.

All the qualities of awareness obviously develop as we meditate more. It’s like working in a store. You come into the store, and at first you don’t know where anything is. But you learn where to put everything, and after a while you know exactly when things are out of order. There is just a sense of knowing what to do and what is going on. So, in this sense, sheshin knows how the meditation is supposed to go. It knows if you are breathing too hard or too lightly. It knows if your meditation needs to be more focused or less focused: “It’s getting too loose, you’re beginning to lose it,” or “It’s getting too tight, you are becoming too tense.” Awareness has a sense of the whole picture.

The more we meditate, the more we bring in awareness, the more it knows and the stronger it becomes. This means that we receive pertinent information sooner and that it is more subtle. At first awareness just comes rushing up to us and says, “Hey! You’ve lost the object of meditation!” It’s jumping up and down trying to get our attention, to tell us to go back to the breath. Later, once we are able to maintain mindfulness throughout the whole meditation period without a problem, awareness becomes subtler. It begins to detect that there might be a problem approaching, that some obstacles are coming. “Psst, in about twenty minutes something is going to happen. I don’t know what.” Even later it can say, “I *know* what is going to happen,” and it tells us what is going to happen.

Another way of looking at awareness is as a sheriff keeping watch over a calm town. He goes all over the place looking to make sure there is no trouble happening. This kind of awareness is possible because our meditation is going pretty well now. At first, the sheriff is more like the police chief in New York City, lots of problems everywhere. Later, he is like a sheriff in a small town, in the Midwest someplace. Here, the sheriff simply stands up and the town quiets down. If a stranger comes into town, the sheriff is already alerted to it. He is already alerted to any potential problems. So sheshin here is a sense of awareness of the problems that might arise.

Why am I mentioning this? Because when we engage in meditation, at a certain point, we can maintain mindfulness and become very steady in meditation. We can prolong our meditation if our awareness is strong. We can go from one hour to four hours. We are able to remain on the object of meditation. Sheshin, or awareness, begins to extend that process of mindfulness. How does that work? When we are meditating, through awareness, we can simultaneously deal with whatever obstacle arises and still continue to meditate on our object of meditation. Usually the way this happens is that as we are meditating, as soon as we detect any foreseeable obstacle, we relax the technique or intensity of the practice a little bit. We loosen our focus on the object of meditation. It's still there, but it may not be as clear, crisp, or tight as before. Nonetheless, it is there. The visualization, the breath—whatever our object is—still remains present, familiar, and undistracted in the mind. At the same time, simultaneously, we are able to go off and deal with whatever trouble might arise.

In this way, the meditation continues without being broken. It's not as if we stop, deal with the obstacle, and come back. This is how you get long sessions of meditation that are uninterrupted. I'm sure there will be no questions about that. [Laughter] The combination of mindfulness and awareness here is like the analogy of the spoon and the egg. You might have heard about walking across the room holding an egg in a spoon, or walking across the room holding a cup of water. Mindfulness is holding the cup using the proper degree of pressure. Awareness, having that sense of everything, makes sure that it doesn't spill. That's a general discussion of these two topics: mindfulness and awareness.

FIVE OBSTACLES AND EIGHT ANTIDOTES

[see appendix]

We can see on our chart that we have nine stages, which describe how we progress along the path. There are many ways we could look at this, but we will start with the five obstacles, or faults. These faults are known as *nyepa* [nyes pa], which means "faulty," "flawed." The Tibetan carries a sense of harming the meditation. Obviously there are many obstacles to overcome, but these particular obstacles have the quality of causing harm to our meditation. Why? They decrease the intensity, profundity, and duration of our meditation. You can call them faults or problems within our meditation, or, dangers that might harm it.

The Five Obstacles

The **five obstacles** are **laziness**, **forgetting the instructions**, **laxity and elation** (or wildness and drowsiness), **not applying the antidote**, and **over application of the antidote**. There are three basic ways to look at these obstacles: those that affect the preparation for meditation, those that affect the meditation itself, and those that affect the increasing of meditation. All five obstacles fit within those three categories. Laziness and forgetting the instructions are what bring harm to the preparation of meditation; what hinders meditation itself are laxity and elation; what hurts the increase or further development of meditation is the under application and

over application of the antidotes. We will focus on laziness, forgetting the instruction, and laxity and elation.

The Eight Antidotes

Then we have the **eight antidotes**. Because laziness is a very strong obstacle, it takes four antidotes to overcome it: **faith; aspiration; effort; and pliancy**, also translated as “thoroughly processed.” The antidote to the second obstacle, forgetting the instructions, is **mindfulness**. To laxity and elation, the antidote is awareness, or **introspection**. The antidote to not applying the antidote is **applying the antidote**. [Laughter] Someone very clever came up with that one. [Laughter] And finally, the antidote for over application of the antidote is **resting in equanimity**.

Nine Stages, Six Powers, Five Experiences, Four Applications

In terms of the actual path, we have the **nine stages: placement, continual placement, repeated placement, close placement, taming, pacifying, thoroughly pacifying, making one-pointed, and placement in evenness** or equality. Then we have the **six powers: hearing, contemplating, mindfulness, awareness, exertion, and thorough familiarity**. We have the **five experiences: movement, attainment, familiarity, stability, and perfection**. And then we have the **four mental applications** or ways of engaging mentally: **engaging through concentration, interruptedly engaging, uninterruptedly engaging, and effortlessly engaging**. So that’s my explanation of the nine stages. [Laughter] It’s a little complicated at first, but it’s relatively straightforward. We have obstacles and antidotes; we have the stages that we go through; we have degrees of engaging our mind; we have the powers that develop as we meditate; and then we have the experiences. So it’s all straightforward in that way.

I’d like to talk now about a couple of key themes in this chart. One of them is the third obstacle, laxity and elation, or in Tibetan, *chingwa* [bying ba] and *göpa* [rgod pa]. This is the primary obstacle to meditation: laxity and elation. The way this obstacle appears is that the mind becomes either too lax, or it becomes too titillated or excited. The mind is either withdrawn, or the mind comes out of itself. At this point, I have to talk about the mind and the qualities of the mind within shamatha. When we say the mind is becoming too tight or too loose, that is a general description of what is happening—very general. In this case, too tight or too loose means that the quality of the mind we are experiencing is deluded in various ways. We are not seeing or experiencing the true quality of the mind.

Three Qualities: Stability, Vividness-clarity, and Strength

What kind of mind do we develop by the end of the ninth stage? What are its qualities? What does it feel like? What does it look like, so to speak? That mind has three qualities: stability; vividness-clarity; and strength, or intensity. In Tibetan, we say *necha* [gnas cha], *selcha* [gsal cha], and *ngar* [ngar]: *necha* is “stability”; *selcha* is “clarity” or “vividness”; and *ngar* is “strength.” If you study the meditation texts, you will come across these particular words. Sometimes *selcha* has different divisions and

things like that, but we won't get into all that. Knowing the three qualities of mind is fundamental in understanding the basic quality of where we are going.

As before, we are talking about the kind of mind we are trying to develop. In fact, the whole teaching of the nine stages revolves around how we can bring these innate qualities of mind into perfection. As I mentioned, when we do shamatha, we are not developing a dull mind, a stupid mind, a thick mind, or a distant mind. Sometimes we say, "I just want to be calm," because when we hear about calm abiding, it just sounds like a very calm thing to do. But the great meditators of the past didn't have a problem being calm. They probably weren't that irritated or stressed out. What *they* were interested in was getting at the real nature of the mind, the innate quality of the mind. Their question was, "This mind, this sixth consciousness, what is it made of, and which qualities of it are useful on the path of liberation?"

The analogy is finding a horse and thinking, "This horse can go on the journey, it can take us across the country." From a meditative point of view, we say, "This horse, this mind, can go on the journey." But in order for the horse to go on the journey, we need to bring out its best qualities. Right now, this horse is wild and not very useful, so we need to bring out its useful qualities. From that point of view we can ask, "What qualities do *we* have?" Well, we have a precious human birth with certain basic characteristics that enable us to travel the path of dharma.

If the nature of the mind were other than these three qualities—if it were fundamentally discursive, weak, and without strength—than that is all we could experience once we were in tune with the nature of the mind. If the nature of the mind is weak, distracted, and thick, that's how we would feel when we meditated. If that were the case, then this horse could not make the journey, because there would be no journey to be made. If this were the fruition of the mind, there would be no point in meditating—we are already experiencing it! Meditators of the past asked, "What are the qualities of the mind? What aspect of this mind is most useful? How can we get to the basis of the mind and bring out the best aspect of it, the real, intrinsic aspect of the mind?"

Developing calm abiding may sound as if we are looking for nirvana, or looking for an escape. It may seem that we are looking for peace, that since things are distracted and confusing, we want to shut everything down and remain very quiet. In a sense, that is our first reaction—but there's much more to this journey, once we get beyond that basic experience. We all go through a period of trying to meditate and just settle down our very confusing life. But being here at seminary, or doing a retreat, at a certain point we begin to see that underneath the distraction, underneath the external and internal confusion, something else is going on. There is intelligence; there is some kind of stability; there is some kind of strength; there is compassion. All these elements are there. Where are they coming from? What is generating them? When we begin to look at the mind, what we see are these three qualities: stability, vividness and strength. When we are fully matured in meditation, this is how it feels. It feels stable, vivid, and strong.

Stability. Stability, the first one, is the quality of being unmovable. The mind does not have even a memory of distraction. It is just *completely there*, like a

mountain. The mind has the quality of being able to remain. It abides just as a mountain abides, or the ocean abides. The mind itself is not jumping.

We might think that if the mind is abiding and stable, it must get heavier, somehow; otherwise it would still be fluttering away as before. However, the nature of the mind is actually very, very stable. The continuum or frequency of the mind is completely even, and there is an immovable quality to the whole experience.

First, we want stability; then we want clarity, or vividness; then we want strength. And that's usually how it unfolds when we meditate. Why? Because at first, stability is the thing that is most obviously missing. If we had no stability, and all of a sudden we had *ngar*, intensity and power, we'd be blown off our cushion. [Laughter] We'd have no way of handling it. Clarity and power, *selcha* and *ngar*, are not talked about as much as *necha*, because usually lack of stability is the problem. All the shamatha texts talk about *necha*, basically saying, "You need stability."

True shamatha is a perfect combination of stability, clarity, and strength; but obviously, if we don't have the first one, stability, it's pointless to have the second and third. We are talking about stability here because we are distracted. The mind is excited. The mind is elated. The mind is withdrawn. The mind goes all over the place. So, obviously, the first thing is to develop some stability. That is the aspect of the mind we are developing. That is what we are drawing out. We are trying to get stability to rise to the top.

The quality of stability comes when we develop the focus of mindfulness and awareness-introspection. At some point the mind becomes very steady: it doesn't want to go, it stays. It doesn't feel the need to go, it's content being there. In a sense, there is a kind of maturity taking place. When you are young you want to run all over; when you are older you don't want to move around too much. On the one hand, you are getting old; on the other hand, maybe that comes with a sense of contentment. Maybe not. But anyway—[Laughter] we're talking about the notion of contentment and stability.

The mind becomes stable in many different ways. One way is that we feel no urge to move. We may hear something or see something, yet our mind does not go out towards it. The mind has calmed down, so it doesn't go out to those objects. Stability means that it *stays*. Once it's in meditation, once it's on the breath, once it's on the visualization, it's just a completely hunky-dory situation. It stays. That tendency to fly out—like jumping off a trampoline or like a horse out of the gate or chasing after a sound or sight is gone. The mind is totally stable. This doesn't mean that we don't hear the sound or see the object, but the mind doesn't take off after it. That is the notion of stability.

When we begin to practice meditation, how do we develop stability? The way we develop stability is by continuously working with mindfulness and awareness. Stability comes from confidence. First we need some basic faith or understanding that this is possible. We gain that by experiencing bits and pieces of stability. We do experience basic stability at times, and when we practice more and we apply ourselves to meditation, we develop confidence in that. It's really important to develop this kind of confidence in our meditation. We don't go to the cushion thinking maybe it is possible

to develop stability and maybe it isn't. We *know* that it is, because we've experienced it to a certain degree, and come away with some confidence. This is not arrogance or pride, but confidence in that basic quality of the mind. We are able to sit down and know that basic stability will be there. It's the same with visualization: the first and the most important aspect of a visualization practice is developing confidence. If we don't have confidence, it's never going to get any better. It's never going to become bright or clear.

We are developing confidence. How does confidence develop? Obviously it develops through the powers of hearing and contemplating. It develops through understanding more, gaining more faith, and incorporating it through practicing. Stability is the sense of confidence in our mind's innate strength or innate immovability. It's hard to think of the mind as a physical thing, so we can think of it as like a waterfall. When we are distracted (and there are distractions in the beginning), the mind is like rushing water. It continuously moves. When we are practicing, there's a tendency for most of us (especially in the beginning) to wonder, "If there were no thoughts, seemingly no thoughts, if the mind was still and I was not thinking, then what would happen? Who's there and what's happening?" We can't conceive of having an experience without thinking or analysis going on. That is because we are so used to the movement of the mind that we associate movement with the mind as if they were the same thing. We associate thoughts with movement and emotions with movement.

We associate movement with the mind. We think of mind as being like the ocean. If the ocean were completely still, we'd say that it was not the ocean, because the ocean tosses and turns. "When the waves are happening, *that's* the mind." We're so used to the turbulent ocean that we can't quite imagine it being the same thing when it's still. From the mahayana point of view, we realize that thoughts do not exist inherently. But before that, we are talking about the mind in a very relative sense. In that sense, the movement of the mind is very distracting and therefore we make this association. It's similar to thinking that if nothing is happening in our life and we are bored, then we are not really living. We need some drama in our life: "Nothing much has happened to me." Likewise, because nothing much really happened, sometimes we wonder if someone lived a "full life." Say one person did nothing his whole life, whereas someone else did everything. They both lived a life; but in some people's eyes, if nothing much happened, that's not really living. In a sense we're saying, "You're not really being human unless you have all these thoughts and emotions."

This is really about defining what we mean by mind. We begin to realize that there is an innate quality of mind that understands and can contemplate. You might wonder how we can contemplate if we are not thinking. But the way we think while we are contemplating is different than the kind of thinking that results from being distracted, and having weak mindfulness and awareness. We still think, but we are more in control, instead of being at the whim of thoughts and discursiveness. We are talking about stability, and stability means that everything is very solid. We might wonder, if we have stability, there is no movement, no thoughts, so then who's there? What is there is a quality of being very stable, abiding—the mind abides naturally.

Vividness or Clarity. The second quality of the mind of shamatha is vividness, or clarity. This vividness/clarity is a very important aspect of the mind. There's no

heaviness or thickness in the mind, so the mind becomes very buoyant. It is able to become translucent. This quality allows meditators to meditate for a long time, because it feels good—it is clear, stable, and powerful. If the mind were in turmoil, then we wouldn't meditate for very long.

I was thinking of various ways of trying to draw analogies and I thought of scuba diving. I don't know how many people scuba dive. I've only been snorkeling. You go into the water and if the water's clear, it is a very vivid experience. Your body is very light and there's a clarity and vividness to the light coming down over the fish and the coral and so forth. This quality of the mind is able to really penetrate. It's like when you are in the water swimming around, just seeing. The whole thing is very, very straightforward. You don't feel any distance. It is vibrant and vivid.

What hides that vividness and clarity is discursiveness, or thoughts. In practice, we begin the process of letting thoughts go and calming our mind down; and thereby, vividness has more and more space to arise. Clarity is a sense of intelligence that is able to perceive phenomena in a very direct way. We can experience this same clarity in very mundane situations. If we go hiking up here and it rains for a while and then stops—and then the sun comes out—we feel invigorated and the mind is very clear. If we take a sauna and then go out in the snow, our mind also becomes very clear and vivid. In Tibet, they say that vividness is like taking a bath in milk. That is supposed to be a really good thing. In Tibet, milk is one of the most precious things, so if you take a bath in it, that's pretty luxurious. But I think people don't take baths, so it's probably just that they finally took a bath and it happened to be in milk. [Laughter]

The quality of vividness here is that there are certain points in our life when somehow, all of a sudden, we feel the sense of form—our body and the environmental experience—to be almost like rice paper. There's no thickness to the environment. Our mind is very clear, there's not a lot of thought going on, and we perceive very clearly what is happening. Traditionally, they say that physical joy, enjoyment of the body, creates enjoyment of the mind. If there is physical pleasure, then some kind of mental pleasure will take place. If we are able to sleep or to shower, for instance, we feel some kind of mental pleasure. Through the process of the nine stages both the body and the mind are developing. In this process, what begins to happen at a certain point is that the mind itself, without being ignorant of the body, is able to experience joy—which translates into the body experiencing joy, too. So the second quality of mind is selcha: the clarity, vividness, and precision of the mind.

Strength. The third quality of the mind is strength, intensity, or ngar. We now have stability, but if stability were all we had, then there would be a kind of depressed, stagnant quality. We also have the quality of clarity, or vividness. That makes the whole thing both stable and vivid. By the latter part of the meditative journey, we also develop strength. Strength is the intensity and potency of the mind. The mind becomes very potent and very powerful. It's like being in Africa. We come over a hill and a huge bull elephant comes charging towards us—it's twenty feet tall—and we are standing there, totally freaked out. We feel the awesome power of this creature, very precise and very potent. When we have ngar, we have this kind of experience.

Another analogy is that clarity is like the blade of a sword, and *ngar* is like the back of the sword, the heaviness, the weight. If you just have clarity, there's a flimsy quality to the whole thing. In a sense, you can get too tripped out in it, just spending your time in it. With *ngar*, the mind is potent. It is strong, it is vibrant—it can do things. This is the strength we are talking about. It takes a strong mind to go on the journey of the bodhisattva, even before we get into the experience of vipashyana. Holding all sentient beings in mind, really working toward the development of bodhichitta for the benefit of all sentient beings, takes a very courageous mind. We need to develop this kind of inner strength, the inner ability to go on this journey.

We are purifying the mind now, developing it more and more. We're cleansing it and developing it. This process of developing these (and other) qualities goes all the way up to the form realms. We have to process the mind this way in order to get it finer and finer—and stronger, like the sword. Why? I'll tell you. [Laughter] I'm mostly seeing the tops of people's heads, so I feel as if I'm talking to myself here. [Laughter] Currently our mind is too coarse to see emptiness and have the experience of *lhakthong* [lhag mthong] at the first bhumi. It's too coarse, too laden. It doesn't have the ability to glimpse emptiness. It takes a processed mind for that. So the bodhisattva also goes along this path and develops these qualities of mind.

As we know, sentient beings migrate through the six realms. There are four form realms, which have the first, second, third, and fourth meditative concentrations. When you get to the fourth meditative concentration of the fourth form realm, the mind is finally subtle enough to have the basis by which an *inferential* experience of emptiness is possible. So a bodhisattva has to go on the shamatha journey as well, there's no other choice. Why? Because the mind is too coarse without this.

The qualities I'm talking about are intrinsic qualities that we all have, but which we need to bring out. If we have a mind that is disturbed, it does not yet have the ability to see emptiness. It does not have the strength, first of all—it couldn't handle it, it would just get freaked out. It doesn't have the subtlety necessary even to understand the *conceptual* level of emptiness. It doesn't have the stability to maintain the exertion necessary to see that kind of situation. In this way, shamatha is an elemental part of the bodhisattva journey. The bodhisattva is trying to develop a mind that is not coarse, but subtle.

Shamatha plays a critical role in passing the baton off to vipashyana. What's interesting here is that there is a process: we have worked with the mind and developed it, so that now we are talking about the very subtle mind. These teachings are very basic in the sense that if we are crazed and running around while someone tries to explain something very subtle, if we can't sit still long enough for the words to come out, and we don't really care, either—it is not going to work. It's on that level. In order to have a mind that can stay with the message of the Buddha, and with the bodhisattvas' teaching on emptiness—just to stay long enough to hear the words, something has to happen. Otherwise, we are like children running around, unable or unwilling to listen. We have to be willing to develop and mature, to sit down and come to the point where we can understand the mind and emotions, understand the path. "Now I am able to listen. You know, I wasn't ready to hear that before now, but now I am able to hear it." Unless they're at this kind of subtle level, maybe bodhisattvas are not actually bodhisattvas yet—but they are getting there.