

## SHAMATHA: THE PRACTICE OF MINDFULNESS

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### *Simplicity*

*Shamatha is both simple and workable. We are not just retelling myths about what somebody did in the past. Just being here without preconceptions is possible. In fact, it is much simpler than having all kinds of adornments and paraphernalia. Mindfulness practice is not particularly religious; it is not even a practice. It is a natural behavior that one begins to develop in a very simple manner.*

SHAMATHA PRACTICE is designed for the mendicant and for the simple life. Vipashyana is the basis for scholarly learning and the communicating of knowledge. Our greatest task in bringing Buddhism to the West is to try to make shamatha simplicity the basis of sophisticated prajna-activity. That could be our contribution to the teachings and to Buddha. If we could do that, we would not have dry professors or bleeding-heart yogis. Instead, precision, mindfulness, and simplicity would become the source of learning. The world may seem complicated, but it could not be complicated unless it had a pattern, and that pattern is simplicity.

I prefer to discuss shamatha practice from the point of view of the contemplative tradition, using instructions given by craftspeople rather than by theologians—instructions you can use on the spot. My conviction is that there is a need to go back to the great contemplative traditions and to the personal experiences they describe. I hope to follow the contemplative

tradition of Jamgön Kongtrül, so that shamatha practice becomes workable, or “practice-able,” so to speak. I would like to make the discussion of shamatha as experiential as I can. Practice is a very personal experience.

The point of shamatha is to free ourselves from ill-birth or distortion. We carry ourselves in the so-called ordinary world in a very distorted manner. These distortions range from large-scale emotional upheavals, the crimes we commit, and the pain that we cause other people, to simply being unaware of what is happening in our everyday life. We have become masters of distortion, we have become unaware personalities, but that doesn’t mean we are stuck with that approach. As long as we can understand that, and as long as there is room for discipline, the practice of shamatha can change our state of being.

Shamatha is geared to the idea of freeing ourselves physically and psychologically from the three lower realms—the hell realm, the hungry ghost realm, and the animal realm\*—by paying attention to what is happening with us both psychologically and physically. Meditation practice at the shamatha level is very definite: we go step-by-step, from the microscopic level to the cosmic level. Shamatha is important so that as we go further on the path into mahayana and vajrayana, we do not collect mahayana neuroses and distortions and vajrayana neuroses and distortions. Shamatha is necessary in order to make the starting point clear and clean.

Unless we are willing to commit ourselves to shamatha practice, there is no way out of ill-birth or distortion. So shamatha is very important. It is purification. Shamatha does not make metaphysical or philosophical demands on our intelligence; it is just being here in the present. In general, unless we are *here*—actually, fully, and truly here—we cannot do anything properly. We are bound to make mistakes. Not only are we bound to make mistakes, but we are bound to mess up our life.

Shamatha practice is based on the three principles of body, speech, and mind. We are developing mindfulness of physical experience; mindfulness of emotions, or speech; and mindfulness of discursive thoughts, or mind. By doing so, we are freeing ourselves from the lower realms.

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\* This is a reference to the six realms of the cycle of rebirth, which are discussed in chapter 9, “The Painful Reality of Samsara”: the higher realms of gods, jealous gods, and humans, and the lower realms of animals, hungry ghosts, and hell beings. The immediate goal is freedom from the lower realms; ultimately, the goal is to be free from rebirth in the higher realms as well.

Body is the most obvious and direct. It is related to the hell realm and anger. In the hell realm, physically you experience hot and cold temperatures, and psychologically you feel separateness between you and the other.

Speech is related to the hungry ghost realm and desire. Speech is like a wind that communicates between the phenomenal world and yourself. In the hungry ghost realm, speech is connected with hunger and the emotion of wanting something. It is related with ego's need for entertainment and continual occupation.

Mind is related to the animal realm and discursive thoughts. In the animal realm, mind is chattering and discursive. This realm is marked by stupidity: the mind is not open and you are in the dark. The three lower realms are bound by their own neuroses, and by our not wanting to relate with them but instead to get away.

At this stage, your understanding of the three lower realms does not have to be precise and clear, and you do not need to spend time sorting them out. The question is, how are you going to free yourself from those realms? The way to do that, always, is to sit and meditate, and through that to develop a state of awareness whether you are meditating or not. That is the only way to free yourself from those realms. You may have fanciful ideas about the transmutation of energies and making use of the manure of experience, but such ideas are premature. They are still concepts, rather than what you can do this very day, this very afternoon, right this moment.

Mindfulness is sometimes referred to as restful or relaxing, but this does not refer to the conventional concept of relaxation. It is not relaxing as in relaxing before you get hypnotized, or the relaxation you feel after intensive hatha yoga. In shamatha, relaxation means being without defense mechanisms, or if defense mechanisms arise, letting them go. Whenever you feel that you should be doing something to get yourself together, there is at the same time a defense mechanism, a quality of uneasiness. In shamatha, the idea is to go along with the uneasiness instead of trying to make everything smooth and ideal. You could use the uneasiness and irritation as part of the practice. But you don't sit on it too long; you just look at it and then let it go, look and let go. If you take the whole thing personally, it is not a problem, but if you take it as a larger threat, an impersonal cosmic plot, it becomes very complicated, and you cannot develop mindfulness of the here and now. However, if you let

the defense mechanisms defend themselves rather than defend you, the defense mechanisms fall apart. If you are tense, for instance, let the tenseness be tense. Then tenseness has no substance. It becomes relaxation.

In Tibetan, the word for relaxation is *bakpheppa*. *Bak* means a kind of “sensory awareness feeling,” a “twinkling in the nervous system,” *phep* means “relaxed,” and *pa* makes it a noun; so *bakpheppa* means the “relaxation of your quivering nervous system.” That can only be done by relating with the tension itself. There is no other way. If you are trying to relax, you end up with so many reference points of relaxation that you cannot actually relax. It’s like being on a vacation when you’ve got a television, a sauna, a swimming pool, a tennis court, and a restaurant: you have so many places to relax that you are too busy to really relax. In shamatha, relaxation is one-pointed. It is just to *be*, in a very simple manner.

In pure shamatha you are just being there constantly, haunted by your mindfulness. Mindfulness comes up as the constant sense that you are actually there. It could start in the context of the teachings, in connection with your own pain, or in connection with recollection. Mindfulness should be taking place all the time. On the whole, in order to understand buddhadharma, you have to *be* there; otherwise, buddhadharma cannot be grasped. Being there does not mean holding back or sitting still. You could go along with what’s happening and still be there. As an example, His Holiness the sixteenth Gyalwa Karmapa,\* the supreme head of the Kagyü lineage, could be there with the audience—with businesspeople, politicians, scholars, and all kinds of people. He was always there, always present. When he blessed three thousand people lined up in San Francisco, it took almost two hours for everybody to go through. But as he blessed them individually, he was there for each person. You could do the same thing. It is possible. It’s a question of attitude. With shamatha, you are there; you are *always* there.

Being there requires loosening up, but as you loosen up, you discipline yourself more. So looseness and discipline operate simultaneously. Sometimes when you loosen up, you become silly or absurd, and when you hold back, you become spaced-out, noncommunicative, and statuelike. That is a problem. The idea of shamatha is that you can loosen up and be aware

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\* Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche was instrumental in inviting the sixteenth Gyalwa Karmapa (1924–1981) to teach in the West. The current Kagyü lineage holder, the seventeenth Karmapa (b. 1985), has also begun to teach in the West.

at the same time. That is what is called *samyakshamatha*: “complete,” or “perfect,” mindfulness. It is not one-sided.

In shamatha, you are present. At the same time, your mind becomes so transparent, so penetrating and loose, that it becomes like a sieve. You think you are pouring teachings into it, but end up with nothing at all. If the buddhadharma were a theistic religion, based on the worship of a deity or savior, and if you thought you knew perfectly what you were doing, your mind would cease to be a sieve and instead become a cast-iron cauldron. That model seems very sympathetic, because one would like to have something very solid and definite to hold on to as opposed to becoming a sieve. But in the nontheistic tradition, your state of being becomes a sieve with which it is difficult to catch or to hold on to anything. Therefore, in order to understand the essence of the teachings, it is necessary to develop constant awareness.

The development of awareness is based on simple mindfulness-practice. Whether you are sitting on your meditation cushion or not, awareness should take place constantly. In Tibetan contemplative traditions, I don’t think anybody feels that they can take time off. There’s no room for that. It is a blanket approach, full-time work, twenty-four hours a day. Post-meditation practice in Tibetan is *jethop*. *Je* means “after,” and *thop* means “receiving”; so *jethop* means “receiving after.” In fact, a lot of teachers have said that it is much more important to experience *jethop* than to be too concentrated on formal sitting practice. Sitting practice provides a kind of anchor to start with, and in postmeditation that experience becomes real. So you don’t just sit and then think you are finished. When you are done with your sitting practice, there is still the postmeditation experience.

On the whole, there are a lot of demands on students, as well as on the teacher, to be here, to be present. We should be present, not with a certain concept in mind, but simply being. We are simply being here. It is much easier in theistic traditions, because you always have something to do. For instance, with the Prayer of the Heart in the Greek Orthodox tradition,\* you say the Jesus Prayer constantly until it begins to repeat itself, so you are not lost. In the nontheistic tradition, it is much looser and

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\* Repetition of the Prayer of the Heart, also known as the Jesus Prayer, was the central practice of the thirteenth-century mystical movement known as Hesychasm. The most frequently used form is “Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

more complicated, so in a sense it is more difficult. It is difficult to be here, but at the same time, *not* to be here is very difficult!

It is very important to try to develop your shamatha and to understand it. Shamatha is the point where you begin to behave like a buddha—a real one, not a fake one. Once this kind of unconditioned mindfulness happens, you are here and you are automatically sane. You do not need to try to do anything in particular. You are here, ready for anything the other yanas might suggest or demand. It is very important to be Buddha-like and to understand that to be so is very simple and easy.

Shamatha is both simple and workable. We are not just retelling myths about what somebody did in the past. Just being here without preconceptions is possible. In fact, it is much simpler than having all kinds of adornments and paraphernalia. Mindfulness is not particularly religious; it is not even a practice. It is a natural behavior that one begins to develop in a very simple manner. At the beginning, you may feel it is somewhat false or that you are making it up. However, as you go on, mindfulness becomes natural and real, and at the same time very personal.