



## Seven points on meditation

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The purpose of meditation is to realize the true nature of mind, the achievement of Buddhahood. Mind is the basis for both our present experiences of conditioned existence and of enlightenment. Enlightenment is realizing mind's true nature, whereas ordinary life is unaware of this nature.

How should we understand everything to be an appearance of mind? Presently we experience confused states of mind which result in disturbing emotions such as anger, attachment, stupidity, jealousy and pride. The true nature of mind is unaffected by disturbing emotions. When we experience disturbing emotions, we tend to act them out. These actions create imprints in our mind, like habits or tendencies (*sanskrit: samskaras*) to experience the world in a particular way. When such a tendency later is activated, it creates the appearance of an illusory world.

Even a tiny imprint in the mind can create a lifetime of illusion. The world we experience now is based on such created by former actions. This is how mind perpetuates illusion. There is no limit to how many imprints can be stored in our mind, each of which will continue to create illusion. Conditioned existence, or the world as we experience it now (*sanskrit: samsara*), is therefore without beginning or end. In this way, everything we experience is a product of our mind.

The point of meditation is to provide skillful means for removing this illusion. When we can eliminate ignorance in one moment, then naturally all of the endless imprints of karma will fall away by themselves.

Different Buddhist lineages emphasize different kinds of meditation. In the Kagyu tradition, it is *Mahamudra*. In the Nyingmapa tradition the main practice is *Maha Ati* (*tibetan: Dzogchen*). In the Gelugpa and Sakyapa traditions, the practice of yidam (*deity*) visualization involves a completion phase of dissolving the wisdom aspect of the yidam into oneself. This is a style of insight meditation, similar to Mahamudra. In the Theravada tradition, the first practice is to rest the mind on the breathing or on a statue of the Buddha, after which is the main practice of contemplation on egolessness.

All of these different kinds of meditation can be summarized into two general categories. The first is resting meditation. In Sanskrit this is called *shamatha* (tibetan: *shi'ney*). The second is insight meditation, or in Sanskrit, *vipashyana* (tibetan: *Ihagthong*). So all Buddhist meditation practices can be grouped into resting and insight, or shamatha and vipashyana. What follows is the general presentation of shamatha and vipashyana, which are explained in seven points.

## 1. The Conditions for Practicing Meditation

The first point is the *outer condition* - the basis for practicing shamatha and vipashyana. This is to have a proper place to meditate, a place without obstacles. For example, in some places people are prejudiced against meditators, which can create problems. The best place for meditation is one that is blessed by great meditators of the past. We also need certain inner conditions to meditate properly. The first quality is to not be too attached to outer sense objects and not so concerned about getting what we want. We simply should have few desires.

The second quality is to be satisfied or content with the situation we have. How to encourage these two qualities can be illustrated by how parents talk to their children about meditation. If the parents are good practitioners, they will encourage their children by saying, "*Try not to be too ambitious. Don't strive too much for outer things. Be content and be satisfied with what you have. In this way you will be able to practice meditation. Otherwise you'll be wasting your time.*" Parents who do not practice meditation give the opposite advice: "*You should strive very hard and be very ambitious. You should try to become very rich and get ahead. Acquire property and hold on to it. Otherwise you'll be wasting your time.*" So we can see here how to encourage these qualities properly.

The third quality is not to be involved in too many activities or responsibilities. If we are too busy, then we will not be able to practice meditation.

The fourth quality is to have good conduct. This means that we avoid negative actions which bring harm to others. All Buddhist vows are concerned with avoiding actions that produce negative karma. There are different kinds of vows, those of a layperson, a novice monk, a fully ordained monk, and a Bodhisattva. When lay people practice meditation, it is good to have taken the five-layperson vows, which in Sanskrit are called the *upasaka* vows. These are

to avoid killing, stealing, lying, harming others sexually, and drinking alcohol and taking drugs.

Since our main practice is the Bodhisattva path, it is important to take the Bodhisattva Vow, which can be practiced as a layperson. Monks and nuns also take the Bodhisattva Vow. Both lay and monastic practitioners can combine the practice of a Bodhisattva with the upasaka vows. For example, Marpa the translator was a lay Bodhisattva, whereas the Indian master Nagarjuna was a monk Bodhisattva. Both were enlightened.

Now we will discuss the requirements for practicing vipashyana. It is essential to follow and rely on a proper teacher, someone who can explain the teachings correctly. In the Theravada tradition a teacher must be able to explain meditation on selflessness from his own experience. In the Mahayana tradition a teacher must have an understanding of emptiness - the *Madhyamaka* or Middle Way teachings - and be able to explain it clearly.

The second quality for practicing vipashyana is to properly analyze the teachings we have received. If we have received Mahayana teachings on emptiness, then we should study different commentaries and receive instructions from our teacher on how to understand them. We then need to analyze and contemplate these teachings and instructions, which will greatly benefit our vipashyana practice.

## 2. Obstacles to Practicing Meditation

The second of the seven main points is an explanation of the eight obstacles or mistaken states of mind that can prevent us from meditating properly.

**Agitation.** The first obstacle is agitation. Here mind becomes very active with wanting or disliking something. The mind then goes on and on thinking about it. Thinking and worrying about other things instead of meditating is called agitation.

**Regret.** The second obstacle is regret. Regret is thinking about something that has already occurred. It has passed and cannot be changed. Still we feel enormous regret.

**Heaviness.** The third obstacle is heaviness, which is connected to karma. Heaviness here means that you want to do something positive such as to meditate, but you feel that you can't. You immediately feel tired and heavy both physically and mentally. But when you want to do something negative, you suddenly become very active and feel very fresh.

**Dullness.** The fourth obstacle is dullness or lack of clarity. Here we should distinguish between feeling heavy and feeling dull. Both are connected to karma, but dullness is more closely related to our health and physical state. An example is eating sugar. Sugar first brings the blood sugar way up and then it drops very low. Then you experience this kind of dullness.

**Doubt.** The fifth obstacle is doubt. This is fundamental problem for practicing both shamatha and vipashyana. Doubt means that we feel uncertain. For example, we may think, "Maybe there is enlightenment, but maybe there isn't." Then you will not meditate properly, because this doubt will drag you down. Sometimes you progress, but then doubt pulls you back. Doubt is a very tenacious obstacle.

**Wishing harm.** The sixth obstacle is to wish (**harm**) to others or to think negatively. This means being ruthless, selfish, or arrogant. You become jealous and start to dislike others intensely. This is also a serious obstacle for meditation.

**Attachment.** The seventh obstacle is not quite as serious, which is to be greedy or attached. This simply means having many desires.

**Drowsiness.** The last obstacle is drowsiness, becoming completely unaware and falling asleep.

For shamatha and vipashyana, there is another set of obstacles. These are called the **five kinds of distraction**. (They are:)

**Engagement.** The first distraction is to abandon the Mahayana. The meditation practices of the Mahayana are extremely vast; hearing about them you might feel discouraged. Receiving teachings on the Hinayana, you mistakenly think you can achieve liberation in this lifetime through Hinayana practices. Thus, even though Hinayana meditations are not as expansive as Mahayana, you are deluded to think that you can achieve results much faster. Abandoning the Mahayana for the Hinayana is a great distraction.

**Outer distraction.** The second is outer distraction, meaning that you are overly concerned with sense pleasures such as wanting to become wealthy, to obtain luxury and so on.

**Inner distraction.** The third is inner distraction, to the different states of mind which disturb meditation. These are especially agitation and dullness. Another inner distraction arises in more advanced practice. Becoming adept in meditation develops a pleasant inner tranquility. This feeling of mental pleasure is one of comfort or relief, since mind has become very tranquil. Attachment to that tranquility is an obstacle.

**Miraculous powers.** The fourth distraction is connected to understanding the nature of things. We could also call it *distraction of miraculous powers*. From accomplishing shamatha, you can concentrate very deeply on the physical nature of things and can manipulate how they appear. It is control through concentration. In Buddhism it is taught that physical things are made up of four elements: earth, water, fire and air.

Concentrating in the way of shamatha, you change the elements. Water becomes fire; fire becomes air, and so on. In our present state of development, we cannot understand how such a power could function. It is not something to be explained through the laws of physics. If you become attached to this miraculous power, this becomes an obstacle.

**Negative state of mind.** The fifth distraction is that of a negative state of mind. When one accomplishes shamatha it becomes very deep and stable. But shamatha is limited to resting the mind; ego clinging is actually still present. It is only through practicing vipashyana that ego clinging is eliminated. Therefore, continuing to practice shamatha, making it deeper and vaster, without applying vipashyana, brings the distraction of a negative state of mind.

At the present time, we have been reborn as humans and our bodies have been produced by actions from previous lives. When the karma for a human being is exhausted, we die and are reborn elsewhere in a state determined by our previous actions. If in this life we only practice shamatha without vipashyana, this creates the karma of being reborn in a state similar to deep meditation, which is still within samsara. Such a state of meditation can last a very long time. It is very peaceful, but it is not liberation. So when the karma for being in that state is exhausted, you will again fall back into the other realms of samsara. This distraction is described as a negative state of mind because meditation that is misused in this way does not lead to liberation but leads to rebirth within conditioned existence.

There are four meditation states that are fixated on tranquility. The first is an experience of endless space, the second is to experience mind as infinite, the third is an experience of nothing at all, and the fourth is an experience that

things are neither there nor not there. But this is still not liberation, only experiences arising from mind. One can remain in these absorptions for millions of years. In one way this is of course pleasant, but it is not of any benefit, because eventually one can fall out of this state back into other realms of samsara.

## The Remedies

The first obstacle is *agitation*. Why does agitation occur? It comes from ordinary attachment to this life. We are born with a human body, we are naturally attached to that and concerned about it. Due to the habit of attachment we start to worry about it. However, in this human life there is nothing we can really achieve. Once we are dead, our likes and dislikes do not exist. Remembering this, there is no reason to grasp or to be so irritated with what happens. Therefore, the remedy is to contemplate impermanence. Understanding this calms agitation.

We can contemplate impermanence both during meditation and during daily life. This can be done on a coarse level by meditating on the impermanence of the world and on the beings who live there. To contemplate the impermanence of the world, think about how the world changes over time. The years pass, and every year consists of different seasons: winter, spring, summer and autumn. The seasons consist of months. The months consist of days. The days consist of hours. The hours consist of minutes. The minutes consist of seconds, and so on. Every moment the world changes.

We can also contemplate the impermanence of beings who live in this world. Here we can think that we and all other beings constantly grow older, and we are all going to die. First comes childhood, then adulthood, then old age, and finally death. No one has escaped death so far.

You can also contemplate impermanence on a more subtle level. If we consider physical matter, it consists of tiny particles or atoms. These particles never remain the same but move around constantly. As they change all the time, each moment the particles cease in order to produce new particles in other combinations. Every moment of matter is therefore new, because its particles have changed since the previous moment.

The meaning of shamatha is to concentrate. The result of shamatha is to produce tranquillity of the mind. Although concentrating on impermanence is not the main shamatha practice, it also results in tranquillity.

In our daily life we can also contemplate impermanence to decrease our attachment, by training ourselves to consider impermanence. Whatever happens, do not feel hurt or find things sensational. No matter what the problem, it helps to contemplate impermanence. Otherwise, you might be shocked when sudden obstacles arise. The problem itself may not change, but understanding impermanence softens your reaction to it.

When feeling *regret* we should simply understand that it is a pointless feeling, because the past is already gone. We cannot change it even if we think a great deal about it. Therefore, we should just let it go and forget about it.

The best way to overcome *physical and mental heaviness* is to develop strong confidence and trust in the qualities of the Three jewels. Contemplate the superior qualities of the Buddha. Consider the qualities of the teachings that bring us to realization, the profound methods. The teachings are true; they actually work. Finally, we consider the qualities of the practitioners, the sangha. Here, sangha does not refer to ordinary monks or lay people, but to practitioners who have achieved realization. Through developing trust and confidence in the Three jewels we can overcome the obstacle of heaviness.

The next obstacle is *dullness* or *lack of clarity*. The way to work with this is to refresh yourself by encouragement and stimulation. When a general prepares for war, he begins by building up the morale of his people. If the soldiers hesitate, they could become fearful and petrified. But when properly encouraged they become quite brave, and can attack effectively. Dullness is a very subtle enemy arising in meditation, so you have to encourage yourself to defeat it.

The remedy for *doubt* is simply concentration. Initially it is better not to follow your doubts, but to just continue to practice. Another way to remove doubt is to use logic. For example, if we doubt whether there actually is a path towards enlightenment, we should ask ourselves what does such a path consist of? The path is to remove ignorance. What is ignorance? Ignorance is a product of mind and is caused by clinging to an ego. By continuing to analyze in this way, you can clarify doubts and finally eliminate them. This is precisely the purpose of study. Not everyone has time to study, but then those who have studied a lot can help others by explaining things to them in a simple way.

For the problem of *wishing harm to others* you should contemplate kindness, which can be done in two ways. One way is to look for the true nature of kindness. Kindness is not something solid. Even though it is empty in essence, a feeling of kindness arises. Another way is to generate kindness, first toward those you like, such as parents, children or friends. Gradually, extend this feeling out to more and more beings. These meditations on kindness are very powerful practices. Accomplishing them, you can even affect others. If a meditator practices alone in a cave, he could affect all the beings living in that area. People and even animals could naturally start to feel kindness also.

*Attachment or having many desires* can be remedied by considering problems involved with having wealth and possessions, by contemplating cause and effect. If you are attached to your possessions, you have to put in a lot of hard work to preserve them. When you see how much effort this takes, your greed will naturally decrease. Another method is to contemplate the feeling of contentment, to understand how much freedom there is when you are content with what you have.

The next obstacle is *drowsiness*. Here it helps to imagine light, like the red autumn sky at sunset. It is a clear, soft, red light. Do not imagine light which is strong and direct like sunlight; this doesn't help.

Actually, once you get used to meditating and it has become completely natural for you, you are no longer bothered by all of these problems and obstacles. Meditation has become a part of you. When the mind has achieved this level, it also affects the body.

All the energies in the body become peaceful and tranquil; you feel very comfortable meditating. Normally we think that the body controls the mind, but at a deeper level, the mind really controls the body. Therefore, when meditation has become natural, the tranquil mind takes over our system and makes the body fit for meditation.

To develop natural meditation, we need two qualities: *mindfulness* and *remembrance*. Mindfulness is to be aware of what occurs in the mind, not missing anything. Through mindfulness, when you notice a problem in meditation such as agitation, then you must remember which remedy to apply. Mindfulness and remembrance always go together; they are essential in making meditation a part of you. When you become adept at meditating, you will understand how they work together.

Generally, all obstacles fall into two categories: *agitation* and *dullness*. As protection from these two obstacles some general advice is useful. Avoid having addictions to smoking, drinking, etc. Avoid eating too much, which develops dullness. People who work of course have to eat, but you can be aware of what you eat. Serious practitioners who sit a lot do not need as much to eat. That is why during the time of the Buddha, monks would not eat after one p.m. This brings success for shamatha practice and helps the mind. At this level, to forgo dinner does not affect your sleep. Normally monks are forbidden to drink alcohol, but vipashyana meditators are advised to drink a little. Of course you cannot get drunk. Vipashyana develops a lot of energy, and that energy can cause insomnia, which does not occur in other practices. Another piece of advice is to sleep at the proper time: go to bed after ten in the evening and get up at five. If you go to bed after midnight, although you may sleep eight hours, it is not really of benefit. So go to sleep before midnight.



### 3. The Essence of Shamatha and Vipashyana

The third point is a concise explanation of how shamatha and vipashyana become natural. In the beginning stages of shamatha and vipashyana, our meditation is not natural. It is somewhat contrived. Meditation is only completely real when it is natural, as I explained briefly in point two.

What is meant by genuine shamatha? In the beginning of shamatha practice, the mind is directed on the object of meditation which is to keep the mind concentrated, rather than following thoughts. When meditation is natural, in true shamatha, effort is no longer required to keep the mind concentrated. At first one has to apply effort, but later it becomes completely natural.

I will give an example which illustrates the difference between contrived and genuine shamatha. There is a special kind of meditation which results in very clear recollection of the past, even to the extent of remembering previous lives. Mind never stays the same. It only exists moment to moment. The mind constantly changes. If we look at one moment, it first comes into existence, then stays, and finally disappears. It consists of past, present and future in this way. One moment arises, then it ceases in order to create space for another moment to come into existence, and so on. In this way, mind goes on as a continuous stream of moments of awareness. In this type of shamatha, the practice is to remain aware of each moment as it arises. Do not analyze, just focus and observe the moments arising, one at a time. Without missing any or mixing up their order, simply observe them passing by. Concentrate completely; stay focused on that. Again, this is how we could meditate now, in the fashion of contrived shamatha.

This becomes genuine shamatha when it becomes natural, when we no longer apply effort to keep the mind focused. There will simply be a natural awareness of the moments passing by. You become so used to it that once you focus on that awareness, it continues automatically, without the need to apply force. It just continues naturally.

When we achieve this level, a special kind of memory appears. We can remember the past and even former lives, the same extent that meditation has become natural. Memory expands in this way: first you remember everything in childhood, then the experience of being in the mother's womb, and after that, past lives. Since you have experienced all this before, it is possible to remember

it, just as you remember what you did yesterday. When shamatha has become natural, this memory arises automatically.

What then is meant by true vipashyana? To continue with the same example, where you focus on each moment, vipashyana means to analyze the nature of each moment. During shamatha you only observed the moments without analyzing them, but now you examine them analytically. Vipashyana becomes natural when the analysis stops being intellectual. You have a direct experience of the nature of each moment, an experience where names and ideas do not apply.

When you look at something, in the very first moment there is a direct experience of it and *only afterward do you name it*. The Buddhist teachings distinguish between different kinds of direct experience. For example, right now we also have direct experiences, but we immediately project our ideas onto things, even though these ideas are not real. For example, in seeing a white piece of paper, we mix up that direct experience with our concept of whiteness. The concept white is a general one that applies to many other things such as white cloth, white flowers, etc. The direct experience is much more complete than this. In real vipashyana, you have direct experience, of the world, you see the true nature of things. This is also called *yogic direct experience*.

To put it very simply, true shamatha and vipashyana are related to the removal of the meditation obstacles discussed in point two. Shamatha becomes genuine when heaviness, dullness and sleep have completely disappeared from meditation. Real vipashyana develops when agitation, regret and doubt have been completely neutralized. They then never arise during meditation. In post-meditation they still may occur, since you are not yet enlightened, and there still is a difference between meditating and not meditating. But when you experience the mature fruition of shamatha and vipashyana, meditation is free from these obstacles. This concludes the third point, the essence of shamatha and vipashyana.

## 4. The Levels of Shamatha and Vipassana

This point will only be touched upon here, as it is explained completely in the detailed explanations which follow. There are nine levels of shamatha and four levels of vipashyana, which describe the stages of meditation.

The nine levels of shamatha are:

1. to settle the mind inwardly
2. to settle the mind continuously
3. to settle the mind intactly
4. to settle the mind intensely
5. to tame the mind
6. to pacify the mind
7. to pacify the mind completely
8. to make the mind one-pointed
9. to settle the mind in equanimity.



< 9 levels of shi'nay,  
mural in Lumbhini

The four levels of vipashyana are:

1. to distinguish phenomena
2. to distinguish completely
3. complete examination
4. complete analysis.

In Tibetan there are two different words for examination and analysis, where *examination* means a coarse examination and *analysis* implies a more profound and detailed analysis. So there is a difference between these two words in Tibetan which does not come across in English, that one is more subtle than the other. When shamatha has become natural, you can accomplish the four levels of vipashyana.

## 5. The Order for Practicing Shamatha and Vipashyana

Generally, first you practice shamatha and after that you practice vipashyana. That is according to the Theravada tradition. But in the Mahayana, Vajrayana or Mahamudra tradition, it is not always the case. Sometimes they can be practiced simultaneously depending upon the individual practitioner. Your teacher should decide what is best for you, as long as the teacher is qualified in meditation.

One result of accomplishing shamatha is to know the minds of other beings. An accomplished teacher uses this ability to see what is best for their students. The method for doing this is the same as remembering the past, but here the teacher concentrates on the minds of others instead of on themselves. This is of course easy to say, but not so easy to do.

The normal order is to practice shamatha first then vipashyana, and it is best to do it this way.

## 6. The Union of Shamatha and Vipashyana

**H**ow to unite shamatha and vipashyana? It is possible to practice vipashyana without shamatha, but it is not advisable. You can go to a teacher and receive vipashyana instructions, and use your confidence and intelligence to accomplish the practice. Even though you can have direct experience of the nature of things, this experience will not become stable without first accomplishing shamatha. This is also true for practicing vipashyana without a shamatha practice that has become natural. It is comparable to a candle in the wind; although it provides light, it is very unstable. Similarly, you can have a direct experience through vipashyana, but without shamatha it remains unstable.

On the other hand, if you practice only shamatha without ever practicing vipashyana, you cannot become liberated from samsara. This was explained before, in the obstacles to meditation. Accomplish shamatha without practicing vipashyana carries the risk of being reborn in long-lasting meditation states, which are still in the domain of ego. In the final achievement of shamatha, mind is in a profound rest. It is deeply relaxed, beyond what we can now imagine. But ignorance, the root of illusion, has not yet been removed. That explains the necessity for practicing both shamatha and vipashyana.

How can we unite them into one practice? This is not something we can accomplish yet. You can work with them in certain ways, but it is only when you have achieved the highest level of shamatha, that you can unite them completely. The ninth level is to rest the mind in equanimity. At that point, vipashyana develops naturally, and the two practices become one.

## 7. The Result of Shamatha and Vipashyana

**T**he result of accomplishing shamatha is that mind becomes completely pure, that all the gross disturbing emotions are subdued and purified. The result of accomplishing vipashyana is that wisdom becomes completely pure. This means that basic ignorance is purified and removed, and disturbing emotions are also removed.

Another way to express the results of these two practices is by the removal of the *two kinds of bondage or veils*. One veil is to be trapped by concepts or neuroses. The other is to be trapped by ignorance or illusion, and therefore continuing to be reborn in samsara. Shamatha releases the veil of concepts and vipashyana liberates from the veil of ignorance. Another result is that shamatha removes attachment to phenomena. It overcomes hopes, doubts and worries. We hope to get what we want, but when we don't get it, we worry. This comes from desire and attachment. The result of shamatha is that even if you try to achieve something, you never need to hope, doubt or worry, because attachment and desire have been overcome.

When you achieve true shamatha, there is also all the extraordinary play. From shamatha you achieve clairvoyance. You can see past lives and know the minds of others. But advanced meditators discourage us from playing with that, because there is a great risk of becoming attached to shamatha, and then our problems will increase. But if someone is strong enough, they can control it without attachment.

Devadatta was a cousin of the Buddha, and he was very wicked. He wanted to compete with Buddha, so he went to an advanced student of Buddha, an Arhat named Kashyapa, to learn shamatha. Arhats have the fault that they cannot use their powers except while they actually meditate. In his post meditation he could not see Devadatta's negative motivation. So he thought, "Before this man was very evil. Now he wants to learn meditation. I should teach him properly, so he may change." So he taught him shamatha, and Devadatta learned it very well. He achieved a powerful level of shamatha, and then used his powers against Buddha. First he deceived the king of that area, and then split the sangha into two, taking the old king on his side. Then he encouraged the young prince to revolt against his father, and with his monks he attacked Buddha. He did all this because he was jealous of Buddha, and he used powers accomplished through shamatha. That is why teachers encourage their students to do shamatha for liberation, but then discourage them from going too far. Special disciples such as Bodhisattvas with pure motivation will not misuse these powers.

The result of vipashyana is quite straightforward: It is liberation and enlightenment.

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