

**The Far-reaching Attitude of Meditative Stabilization – Part 1 of 9:
Training in Calm Abiding to Perfect Meditative Stabilization** (lightly edited transcript)
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Now we're going to do the part in your outline*: "How to practice the last two far-reaching attitudes in particular". The first one is "Training in calm abiding in order to perfect meditative stabilization". Meditative stabilization is the far-reaching attitude, and we train in calm abiding in order to perfect it. The second one is "Training in special insight to perfect the wisdom of emptiness". The wisdom is the sixth far-reaching attitude, and we train in special insight to accomplish it.

Sources of the teaching

In the Gelugpa tradition, the teachings on calm abiding combine two major presentations from the Indian commentaries.

One presentation was from Maitreya's *Utanamche* (Sanskrit: *Madhyantavibhanga*), *Separation of the Middle from the Extremes*, which is an incredibly beautiful text. There, Maitreya discusses the five faults or hindrances and the eight antidotes – how to correct the faults in order to develop calm abiding.

The second major Indian presentation was from Asanga's *Hearer Grounds* (Skt: *Sravaka-bhumi*) and *Compendium of Knowledge* (Skt: *Abhidharmasamuchchaya*), and from Maitreya's *Ornament for the Mahayana Sutras* (Skt: *Mahayana-sutralamkara*) where he described the nine mental abidings or the nine states to progress through before one attains calm abiding.

These two presentations from the ancient Indian scriptures were put together by the Kadampa masters. This tradition descended from Atisha when he went from India to Tibet. Material was also taken from Kamalasila's *Stages of Meditation* (Skt: *Bhavanakrama*) and so forth.

The Kadampa geshes emphasized that it is very good for us to study the Indian commentaries on calm abiding or the Tibetan synthesis of these commentaries, because they explain calm abiding in detail. They talk about the different mental factors that we need to abandon to develop calm abiding, and how to abandon them. Also explained are the mental factors that we need to develop, particularly those for cultivating calm abiding and concentrating our mind. If we can understand this material well, then when we sit down to meditate, we will be able to do it quite effectively.

The mental factors point out different aspects of our own mind. When we hear the teachings, we gain a kind of intellectual understanding. But the key is to find these mental factors in our own mind when we sit and meditate, and try and develop some concentration. For example, when it talks about excitement, we check: "What does excitement look like in me? When excitement arises in my mind, what does it feel like? What's going on? And what is mindfulness? When I am mindful, what is my mind doing? What is it that is mindful? When I have introspective alertness, what does it mean? What is my mind doing?" If we learn all these things, and then apply them in our meditation, then it gives us a lot of tools and skills that help us concentrate.

Importance of study

Studying is important to help us in our meditation, as His Holiness is always emphasizing. Some people think meditation and study are two different things: if you study, you become an intellectual and you're dry; if you meditate, you get some experience. But His Holiness emphasizes this: if you study and you

become a dry intellectual, that's your problem – but that's not why you study, that's not the purpose of the study. The purpose is to learn things so that your meditation goes well and is effective.

I think this is very important, especially these days when everybody is meditating. If you ask people what they are meditating on, the response is often: "Well, the guy next door made up a meditation and I'm doing it." Or "I made up a meditation." Or "Meditation means sit and imagine myself being very successful with everything I want around me" – that's meditation on how to increase attachment!
[laughter]

Getting the right instructions on meditation is important. When we do it, we want to do it right. Otherwise, we waste a lot of time. We waste years and lifetimes 'meditating' but not really getting anywhere. I have been reading Genla's (Gen Lamrimpa) book on calm abiding and he emphasizes the very same thing.

Look at Genla. He was no dry intellectual. You can see the teachings in his life and yet he tells his students it is good to study these texts and learn these things. Genla's book: "Calming the Mind: Tibetan Buddhist Teachings on the Cultivation of Meditative Quiescence", by the way, is excellent. Very well done. Really quite wonderful.

Etymology, definition and explanation of calm abiding

I want to talk about the etymology of calm abiding, how it got that name. I remember when I wrote "Open Hear Clear Mind" and I sent the manuscript in to be edited, the editor kept circling "calm abiding" – "What kind of English is this – 'calm abiding'? This isn't English. This is some weird language!" And I said: "It's a technical term." And she said: "Can't you find another translation?" [laughter]

"Samatha" is the Sanskrit term. The Tibetan term is "zhi-nay". "Zhi" means calm or peace and "nay" means to abide, to stay, to rest or to remain.

The mind is abiding on an internal object of observation, for example, the image of the Buddha or the breath. An internal object is an object of the mental consciousness. The mind is not directed outside towards something. It's not abiding on chocolate cake. It's abiding on an internal object of meditation.

[In response to audience:] The internal object is an object of mental consciousness. We do not develop calm abiding by staring at a candle. For example, if we use the image of the Buddha as the object of meditation, we might look at a picture of the Buddha for quite a long time to learn the details of the Buddha's appearance. But just staring at the picture is not how we're going to get calm abiding. What we have to do is lower the eyes and be able to recreate that image in our mind and hold our mind on the internal object.

The mind is 'calm' because it is calmed down from running to external objects. When you sit and do the breathing meditation, you will find that your mind is "traveling" [laughter] – it is at work; it is at home; it is in Tahiti; it is everywhere else. It is not calm.

[Audience:] What is the difference between using the Buddha image and using other objects as our object of meditation, since they are all empty (of inherent existence) anyway?

When you think of chocolate cake, what effect does it have on your mind? When you think of the Buddha, what is the effect on your mind? Different images have different effects on the mind. If we imagine the figure of the Buddha in our mind's eye, it has a psychological effect of calming the mind down and generating a lot of faith. Like when we are all crazy and going bananas, and we see the Buddha is just sitting there, his long, narrow, compassionate eyes completely still.

On the other hand, the image of chocolate cake in our mind is going to generate a whole lot of energy to get off the meditation cushion and go get it! It is also going to be hard to concentrate on the image of chocolate cake, isn't it? But if you use the figure of the Buddha, the object is very pleasing, and the more you look at it, the more you want to look at it. It is refreshing to sit and concentrate on the Buddha.

To generate calm abiding, it is important to have conducive external and internal conditions during the

beginning, the middle and the end of our practice. If you have these conditions, then developing calm abiding becomes quite easy. Some people say you can even do it within six months. On the other hand, if we do not have these conditions, then even if we try and meditate for years, it is going to be difficult to gain the realizations.

In our normally busy life, it is virtually impossible to have all of the conditions for developing calm abiding, even just the external conditions. For this kind of practice to reach its completion, we need to practice it in a retreat situation, not just in a session before you go to work and a session when you come home. But still, we can do something. There are nine stages you go through before you attain full calm abiding. What we can do, is we can work on the first few of these nine stages. We can work on them even if we are living in the city and have a busy life. We can make progress on these. This is quite valuable. Our mind starts getting calmer and more concentrated. Also later, when we are able to get all the conditions together and go into a retreat, it will be easier as we have had some previous training.

Calm abiding is a type of meditation. It's called "stabilizing" or "absorption meditation." The purpose is to get the mind to stay single-pointedly on an object.

Here is the definition of calm abiding from *Lamrim Chenmo*: It is a samadhi accompanied by a joy of mental and physical pliancy in which the mind abides naturally without effort for as long as one wishes, without fluctuation, on whichever virtuous object it has been placed. (These terms will be explained as we go on.)

"Samadhi" is sometimes translated as "concentration". We usually think of samadhi as being in a state of single-pointed concentration so that even if a canon goes off beside you, you remain undisturbed. Actually, samadhi is one mental factor that we have right now in us. The ability to concentrate. It's not very well-developed in us right now. But we have samadhi now and what we want to do is develop, enrich, and strengthen it till we enter into the state of calm abiding, and even beyond. There are other stages of concentration beyond calm abiding.

Calm abiding is a type of meditation and it can be a prerequisite for other types of meditation, and they can all be done in combination. For example, after you have calm abiding and you meditate on love with calm abiding, then your meditation on love becomes very powerful. Your mind has the ability to stay on the virtuous object for as long as it wants to.

When you use your calm abiding to meditate on emptiness, you will be able to stay on the object of emptiness. When you turn your mind of calm abiding to the relative nature of the mind, the clear-knowing quality of mind, it is able to remain there. Calm abiding is like a talent or a skill that you can use in many, many different ways. You can use it together with many different things.

Calm abiding is something that is also found in non-Buddhist traditions. In other words, it is not a quality or an ability that only the Buddhists have. I think the Hindus practice it. I think some Christians also achieve it. Anybody can have it as long as they have the method and the technique to develop it. In fact, in the Buddhist scriptures, it is mentioned that many Hindu sages developed very strong calm abiding, but they mistook that for liberation from cyclic existence. In Buddhism, it has been made very clear that calm abiding alone is not what liberates one. We need to conjoin it with the wisdom that realizes emptiness. Otherwise we can't get liberated. But so many people mistake calm abiding for liberation, because it is so blissful when you develop calm abiding.

Calm abiding is something done in common with non-Buddhist traditions, but there is still a difference when a Buddhist does it and when a non-Buddhist does it. When a Buddhist does this practice, it is conjoined with refuge in the Triple Gem. It is conjoined with the determination to free ourselves from cyclic existence. When somebody on the Mahayana path practices it, it is conjoined with the wish to become a Buddha for the benefit of others. If you have firm refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha and you develop calm abiding, you're going to do something completely different with it than if you don't have refuge.

The same happens if you have the determination to be free while developing calm abiding. The determination to be free also gives you the strength of mind to do the meditation to develop calm abiding. It is going to be much easier to get yourself to the cushion to meditate if you have it than if you don't have it.

It is the same with bodhicitta. If we have at least some feeling for bodhicitta, this motivation is going to help us attain calm abiding more easily. After we have attained calm abiding, we will use it in accordance with the motivation of bodhicitta. It is going to be used in a different way than if we do not have the bodhicitta motivation. It is actually quite interesting, and it is an important difference. It is like two people who both have credit cards, but depending upon each person's motivation, the credit card will be used very differently.

The Tibetan approach to meditation

[Audience:] The Tibetan masters seem to emphasize the analytic meditation much more than the calm abiding meditation. Why is that?

Especially for those of us beginners, the Tibetan masters do not emphasize that we develop calm abiding right away. They feel that it is more useful for us to first get a general understanding of the path and a philosophy that applies to our lives. This is why they emphasize the analytic meditation.

This doesn't mean we neglect the development of calm abiding. It is very good if we develop some ability to concentrate. But in order to actualize calm abiding, you have to do just calm abiding meditation and nothing else. You cannot watch TV. You cannot go to work. Therefore, to do it requires a lot of purification and a great collection of merit. If we don't have that, we're going to run into all sorts of obstacles when we try to meditate on calm abiding.

This is why the Tibetan lamas emphasize that we do a lot of purification and other practices to collect positive potential. It is also important to hear the teachings and reflect and meditate on them. It is good to try and develop some determination to be free, an understanding of refuge, bodhicitta, and some understanding of emptiness. If you have a good overview of the *lamrim*, then you will know how to put your life together. When things happen in your life, you have a way to understand them.

If you don't have this broad understanding of the path, and you just go for one particular kind of meditation right away, then you tend to see a big gap between your meditation and your life. When things happen in your life, you will not know how to put it together. All you know is how to sit on your cushion, which has nothing to do with your life.

That is why the lamas do a lot of the analytic meditation with us. They want us to have a broad encompassing life view. I know for me personally, I really needed that. If I had been told to just watch my breath in meditation when I first came into Buddhism, I would probably have left after a couple of days. What I needed at that time was to learn how to put my life together, to understand what was happening in my mind. This is the beauty of the *lamrim* teaching.

That is the Tibetan approach. Other traditions do it quite differently.

[Audience: Inaudible]

We prepared the meditation outlines* to help people do the analytic meditations. The outline* lists the points to think about. The key is to think about them in relationship to your own life. It is a meditation where you are thinking or contemplating, and there are a few ways to do it.

One way is to mull over each point in your mind. For example, if we do the death meditation, the first point is: death is definite. Mull this over in your mind. Or, think of many examples of it. Or, as one person told me, pretend you are trying to describe the point to your mother. How do you describe that to your friend, or to your mother? In the process of explaining, you come to understand the point in a deeper way. You understand what it is all about. It is not just saying the words; it is making examples.

All the analytic meditations are designed to help us gain some kind of conclusion or some kind of experience. The conclusion is not just [regurgitating the main points]: "Oh yes, death is definite. Time of death is indefinite. Only the Dharma is important. When you die, you dedicate all the merits..." [laughter]. It's not like that.

It is more of a feeling like: “Death is definite. I’m going to die. I’m going to leave this body! What does it feel like to know that some day I’m going to leave this body? What does it feel like to know that some day, people will talk about Thubten Chodron but I won’t be around? My mind will be born somewhere else. Or that I’m going to leave all these. Here I create this wonderful, fantastic ego-identity, only to see that one day it will be gone. I’m not going to be American anymore. I’m not going to be a woman. I’m not going to be five foot four. I’m not going to be this or that. It’s all going to go! What does that make me feel inside? What’s my understanding?” The conclusion is not just a dry intellectual one. Some change of feeling in your heart happens. When that happens, you stay single-pointed on that.

Or, you meditate on the precious human life: “I could have been born as an animal. What would that be like? What would it be like to be Achala [the kitten]? If I were born as Achala, how could I practice the Dharma? He is in this incredible Dharma environment. But what is going on in his mind all day?”

[Audience: Inaudible]

That’s why it can be very helpful before you do the analytic meditation, to do some prayers and breathing meditation. When you do the breathing meditation, you start to let go of the jabbering mind, so that then when you do the analytic meditation, you are not jabbering the points to yourself. There is some kind of deliberateness to the way you’re thinking about it.

[Audience:] What’s the benefit of doing it on your cushion versus doing it on the highway or in the gym or something like that?

Well, I think sometimes when you are on your cushion, you can concentrate better. This isn’t to say don’t think about these things on the highway. Think about them on the highway as much as you can. Think about them wherever you go. But the thing is, when you are on the highway, you also have to pay attention to the cars. Your mind cannot be as concentrated on the analysis. That is why we try and do it on the cushion too.

[Audience:] How do we do the meditation in the car?

American meditation [laughter]. This is what Cindy does. She puts the tape in and she listens to it on her way to work. She tells me she turns the tape off and she’ll sit and think about the thing for a while, and then she will turn the tape on and continue. This is very good. Remember we talked about the three steps: hearing, reflection and meditation? This comes under reflection. Hearing the teaching, and then turning the tape off to think about it for a while, even while you’re driving the car – that is okay. Or you talk about it with friends.

Sometimes our meditation is more a reflection than real meditation. We are trying to understand the contents rather than meditating on them. What we should do is to make sure we get the concept right, to get some general understanding first. Meditation is when we begin to sink the mind into it and the experience starts to come.

*This teaching is based on the *Lamrim* or *The Gradual Path to Enlightenment*. Please refer to the following web-page for its outline and other transcripts or to listen to the audio recording of these talks: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/GradualPathToEnlightenment/outline.html>