

Sravasti Abbey Labor Day Weekend Retreat “Concentration Meditation”

August 31 – September 3, 2018

With Ven. Sangye Khadro and Sravasti Abbey Sangha

Retreat Notes

A. What is concentration? (Skt: *samādhi*, Tib: *ting nge 'dzin*; also translated as stabilization or meditative stabilization.)

It is a mental factor (one of the five object-ascertaining mental factors) that is defined as “a one-pointedness of mind with respect to an imputed object.” It serves as the basis of knowledge, i.e. special insight. Its object is said to be “imputed” because when meditative stabilization is cultivated, the mind is held to a mentally imputed/designated object of observation. This shows that meditative stabilization is generated by a mental consciousness rather than a sensory consciousness. Through continuous cultivation, the object will be perceived clearly and non-conceptually.

Samādhi unifies the primary mind and its associated mental factors in a balanced way on the object so that mindfulness and attention on the object are sustained and the mind is tranquil. This is very different from our usual distracted mind that jumps from one thought to another or is overwhelmed with emotions such as anxiety, craving, or resentment. The scattered mind cannot understand things deeply; it sees only superficially and is often afflictive. Samādhi brings calm and gentleness. It is like a mirror that clearly reflects objects. Such a mind, when combined with wisdom, can bring deep understanding.

B. What is serenity? (Skt: *śamatha*; Tib: *zhi gnas*; also translated as calm abiding or quiescence.)

Serenity is concentration arisen from meditation and accompanied by the bliss of mental and physical pliancy in which the mind abides effortlessly without fluctuation for as long as we wish on whatever virtuous object it has been placed.

C. The place of concentration in Buddhism

1. It is included in the three higher trainings (ethics, concentration, and wisdom), and the eightfold path—two ways of formulating the path leading to liberation, i.e. nirvana.

2. It is one of the six perfections (giving, ethics, patience, joyous effort, concentration, and wisdom), which are the principal practices for attaining Buddhahood (a.k.a. enlightenment or awakening). The union of calm abiding and special insight observing emptiness is essential for both nirvana and Buddhahood.

3. It is important to have concentration while meditating, doing purification, accumulating merit, etc., to be able to gain the full benefit of such practices.

4. Also, western research has shown that “a wandering mind is an unhappy mind,” therefore, concentration is important for happiness and success in the present life. (In this context, “attention” is sometimes used in place of concentration. The neuroscientist Richard Davidson and his colleagues have identified four keys to well-being: resilience, positive outlook, *attention*, and generosity.)

D. The good qualities of concentration, to generate faith in it:

1. With calm abiding, your mind is filled with delight and your body is filled with bliss, so you’re happy in this life.
2. Because of pliancy you can turn your attention to any virtuous object of meditation you choose.
3. You overcome distraction to wrong objects, so you’re not always creating non-virtue, and any virtue you do is very powerful.
4. Based on calm abiding, you can achieve good qualities such as clairvoyance and super-normal powers.
5. Based on calm abiding, you can achieve the realization of insight knowing reality (emptiness), with which you can quickly cut the root of samsara.

E. The six conditions for calm abiding

1. A favorable environment. This has 5 qualities:
 - a. Peaceful and quiet
 - b. Good energy; if possible, blessed by previous meditators
 - c. Necessities are easily obtained
 - d. Conditions are clean and healthy
 - e. Presence of good companions who hold similar views and do similar practices
2. Reducing desires
3. Developing contentment
4. Avoiding other activities
5. Keeping pure morality
6. Rejecting thoughts of desire for sensual objects

F. The two qualities of flawless concentration

1. Vivid intensity: intense mental clarity
2. Non-discursive stability: one-pointedness on the object

G. The first two of the nine stages of serenity (samatha)

1. Mental placement – This involves taking your attention away from external objects and focussing it inwardly on your meditation object (which could be the breath, an image of the Buddha, etc). You first identify the meditation object, focus your mind on it, and try to get at least a rough image of it. Then try to make your mind stable, which means staying on the object as long as possible. This stage is achieved through the *force of hearing*: after having heard or read instructions about focusing the mind, you fix your mind on a meditation object.

During the first three stages of calm abiding, the main obstructions are laziness & forgetfulness (see chart below). In this first stage, you are able to keep your mind on the object only for short periods of time, e.g. one minute or less. But most of the time during the session, your mind will be on other things, not your meditation object. It might seem as though your mind is even more busy than usual; that you have more thoughts than usual. However, this is not the case; you are simply becoming aware of how busy your mind is normally, and you just aren't aware of it.

2. Continuous placement – On this stage, you are able to have somewhat longer periods of focus on the object without losing it. In other words, there are times when the mind is free of interruptions, and times when it's not. During this stage, there are more distractions than concentration, but there are short periods of stillness. You can sometimes keep your mind on the object continuously for 2-5 minutes. However, you still have the problems of laziness and forgetfulness, so you need to apply the appropriate antidotes to those, especially confidence, aspiration, joyous effort, and mindfulness.

H. The Five Hindrances to Concentration and their Antidotes

Hindrances	Antidotes
<p>1. Sense desire/attachment to sense objects (finding sense objects attractive, and exaggerating their qualities or projecting extra qualities on to them, to the extent that it no longer relates to reality)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contemplate impermanence • Contemplate the disadvantages of sense objects, and the limited satisfaction they can give you.
<p>2. Malice/Ill-will (wishing to cause harm to someone; feeling aversion, irritation, or criticalness; finding faults in yourself, others, the things around you, etc.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contemplate the faults of malice and anger • Meditate on loving-kindness • Cultivate patience and forgiveness
<p>3. Lethargy/Dullness and sleepiness (lethargy can manifest <i>physically</i> as a lack of energy and stamina, or <i>mentally</i> as a dull, unclear state of mind; a sense of heaviness; or boredom/lack of interest in anything)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open your eyes, sit up straight • Concentrate on light • Think about the preciousness of your human life, or about the qualities of the Buddha • Stand up, wash your face with cold water
<p>4. Restlessness and regret (<i>Restlessness</i> is mental agitation, such as the mind jumping from one thing to another, anxiety, apprehension, fear, excitement, etc. <i>Regret</i> is remembering things from the past that you feel bad about.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on the breath, or on sensations in the body. • Contemplate impermanence, and the fact that the past is over and the future is not yet here. • For regret about past mistakes, you can remember that the past is

	over and cannot be changed, so it's better to let go it, and try to improve yourself now and in the future. You can do practices to purify negative karma that you created.
5. Deluded doubt (for example, wondering: is there really such a thing as karma, or enlightenment, or nirvana, or reincarnation, etc., or not? Or: is it really useful to meditate? Maybe I am wasting my time.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand that doubt is just a mental factor that comes and goes in the mind and arises due to past karma and conditioning. • Think about how the self exists: we are a collection of parts (body and mind), constantly changing, and dependent on many causes and conditions.

I. The Five Faults and their Eight Antidotes

FAULT	ANTIDOTES
1. laziness	1. confidence/faith in the good qualities of concentration 2. aspiration to attain those qualities 3. joyous effort : taking delight in meditation 4. pliancy
2. forgetfulness	5. mindfulness
3. excitement/restlessness & laxity	6. introspective awareness/vigilance
4. non-application (of antidotes)	7. application (of antidotes)
5. over-application	8. equanimity

1. Laziness here means not wanting to meditate. It manifests as lethargy, boredom, disinterest, and dullness before and during our practice. There are four antidotes to laziness:

- confidence/faith** in the good qualities of concentration (see section D above)
- aspiration**: by seeing the good qualities of concentration, we will wish to attain it
- joyous effort**: after having confidence and aspiration, we will be enthusiastic to practice meditation in order to attain calm abiding and its good qualities.
- pliancy**: this is the actual antidote to laziness. When we attain calm abiding, we feel relaxed and blissful in body and mind, so we really enjoy meditating and no longer have trouble with laziness.

2. Forgetfulness—this means not remembering the meditation object or the instructions on how to meditate.

The antidote to forgetfulness is **mindfulness**. This is a mental factor that has three features: 1) its object is something familiar; 2) its subjective aspect is not forgetting the object; 3) its function is not allowing the mind to be distracted to other objects. So mindfulness is what enables our mind to not forget a familiar object (in this case, our meditation object), and stops our mind getting distracted away from that object.

3. Excitement/restlessness & laxity

Excitement is a mental factor that makes the mind restless and unpeaceful, and causes the mind to be distracted to attractive, pleasant objects it is attached to. There are two levels of excitement:

- Gross: this is when the mind completely loses the meditation object and is distracted to objects of attachment.
- Subtle: this is when we remain focussed on our meditation object, but a subtle part of our mind, below the level of conceptual thought, moves toward an attractive object.

Laxity is a lack of clarity and/or vivid intensity in the way that the mind apprehends the object. It is described as an internal distraction.

- Gross: your mind is stable on the object, but there's a lack of clarity, as if you have walked into a dark room, and cannot see things clearly.
- Subtle: there's stability and clarity, but a lack of vivid intensity. Concentration is strong, the mind stays on the object, and the object is clear, but the focus is not fine. It happens because the mind has lost a little of its energy and thus has relaxed the strength of its hold on the object. When there is no subtle laxity, the mind adheres to its object but remains fresh, sharp, and energetic, and retains the fine focus which gives intense clarity.

The antidote to both excitement and laxity is introspective awareness (also translated as introspection, or vigilance). This is a mental factor that watches the mind and checks to see if it has lost its focus on the object, or if it has come under the influence of a fault such as excitement or laxity. It can be compared to a security guard whose job is to look out for robbers, etc. and stop them from making trouble. When introspective awareness becomes aware of one of these faults, one needs to apply remedies, which are listed below, under 4. Non-application.

4. Non-application

This is when we fail to apply the appropriate remedies when excitement or laxity (or other faults) occur in our meditation. It can be compared to a mother failing to correct mistakes her child is making, such as playing computer games when he should be doing his homework. Just as this can lead to the child developing bad habits, non-application can lead to bad meditation habits.

The antidote to non-application is **application**, which means engaging in a virtuous object to overcome excitement and laxity. When vigilance identifies either of these, you must be quick to deal with them, using the following remedies:

Remedies for excitement: excitement can be caused by trying too hard, or being too tight, so first loosen your concentration a little bit—relax! If this doesn't work you can reflect on topics that will make the mind more sober, e.g impermanence, death, karma, or suffering. Another remedy is to count your breaths for a while. If none of these work, you can take a break, do something physical, relax a while, then try again.

Remedies for laxity: first, try to tighten your concentration. But if you make it too tight, excitement will occur, so then you have to loosen it again. So you need to balance tightening and loosening your concentration while holding the object strongly. This can be compared to adjusting the strings of a guitar, to get just the right sound.

If this doesn't work, you can meditate on something uplifting, e.g. the good qualities of concentration, or the good qualities of the Buddha, or visualizing light. If these don't work, you may need to take a break, splash your face with cold water, look into the distance or the sky, etc. and then sit down and try again.

5. Over-application

This is when we continue to apply antidotes or remedies even when our concentration is free of faults such as excitement or laxity. It can be compared to the mother continuing to scold her child even after the child has stopped playing computer games and is now doing his homework. Over-application is an obstacle to effortless concentration.

The antidote is **equanimity**: letting the mind be, without applying antidotes.

J. The third and fourth of the nine stages of serenity

3. Patched placement – Here, when your attention is drawn away by forgetfulness & distracted outward, you recognize this and re-focus it on the meditation object. This is why it is called “patched placement”—when there is a break in your concentration, you quickly notice it and patch it up by returning your attention to the object. On this stage, you are able to remain on the object longer than before, but you still have to deal with laziness and forgetfulness.

4. Close placement – At this stage, you no longer forget the object for the duration of the session. The force of mindfulness has been brought to completion, such that forgetfulness is no longer an obstacle. You have overcome the fault of gross excitement, but still have subtle excitement, as well as strong laxity. Laziness and forgetfulness may arise, but your mindfulness is very strong so you can immediately get rid of them.

The 3rd and 4th stages are achieved through the force of mindfulness. On the 3rd stage, mindfulness remembers the object when it has been forgotten, and on the 4th stage, mindfulness prevents distraction happening in the first place.

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Notes compiled by Sangye Khadro from various sources including Vol. 3 of Lama Tsong Khapa's Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment, Vol. 4 of The Library of Wisdom and Compassion, and Meditation on Emptiness by Jeffrey Hopkins.