

Introduction to Shamatha Meditation

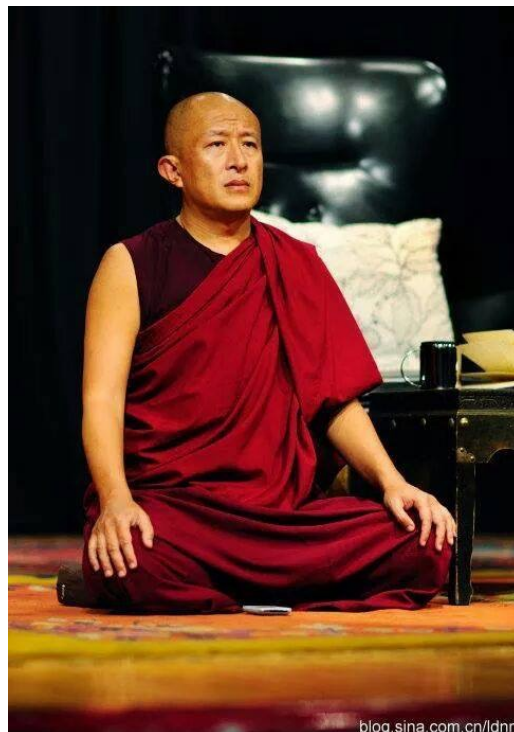
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We will talk a little about shamatha meditation and I thought it might be good to try and actually do the meditation as we go along. So I will talk for a while and then you meditate a little, then I talk some more and you meditate a bit more. If you do that then you know what I'm talking about, the instructions will make more sense. Otherwise perhaps you may not be able to connect the instructions and the meditation

The actual technique is very simple. In general, all the great meditators of the past advised us that we sit up straight when we meditate. When we sit up straight there is a sense of alertness, a sense of importance, it produces the right atmosphere.

In this particular instruction, I'm going to suggest we don't use an external object. Sometimes we hear shamatha instruction using an external object such as a flower, but here we will use the standard Theravada tradition of using our breath as the object. So we concentrate on our breathing, we simply follow our breath in and out. That's it. Our mind is focused on the breathing, our posture is straight, our eyes are open. Let's just do that for a while and then we will talk a little bit more. That's the essential technique, basically doing nothing



(SHORT MEDITATION SESSION)

We simply sit straight and we watch our breathing. We are not concerned with our distractions, all these thoughts that occupy our mind. We just sit. Alone. Just by ourself. No reference at all... Us, the breathing and the concentration, that's all we have.

So we sit, we concentrate on the breathing, nothing else. Then some thoughts may come. When these thoughts come, what do we do? We don't do anything. There's only one method here—one single method to apply to every occasion. That method is concentrating on the breathing, that's all.

Any number of distractions may occur, things that you have talked about yesterday, movies that you have watched last week, a conversation you just had, things you need to do tomorrow, a sudden panic—did I switch off the gas this morning in the kitchen? Stuff like that, all of this will come, and when these things come, go back to the breathing. This is the slogan of the shamatha instruction. Just come back. Every time we notice we got distracted, we remember the instructions and we come back. We come back to the breath. Let's do this for a while.

(SHORT MEDITATION SESSION)

If we have ambitions, we have fixations toward whatever we are aiming for—even if our aim is enlightenment. Then there is no meditation because we are thinking about it, we are craving for it, we are fantasizing about it, imagining things. That is not meditation.

This is why a very, very important characteristic of shamatha meditation is to let go of any goal and simply sit for the sake of sitting. Here we breathe in and out and we just watch that. Nothing else. It doesn't matter if we get enlightenment or not, or if our friends get enlightened faster than us. Who cares? We are just breathing. We just sit straight and watch the breath in and out. Nothing else.

We let go of obsessions toward aims and ambitions. This is a very important aspect. This includes even the perfection of the shamatha meditation, trying to do a perfect shamatha meditation. Even that we should get rid of. Just sit.

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The beautiful thing about having less obsessions and ambitions and just sitting straight and watching the breathing is that nothing will disturb us. Things only disturb us because we have an aim. When we have an aim we become kind of obsessed. Say our aim is to go somewhere, but somebody parked right in front of us, blocking our car. If something gets in the way of our aim, it becomes a terrible thing. If we don't have that aim it doesn't matter—noise, itchy feelings here and there, it doesn't matter.

This is important because meditators often have a strong ambition to achieve something and when they get distracted they go through all kinds of hell, they lose their confidence, they get frustrated, they condemn themselves, they condemn the technique. This is why at least during the few moments of meditation, it doesn't matter whether we are getting enlightenment or not, it doesn't matter whether the hot water is boiling in the kettle or not, it doesn't matter if

the telephone is ringing and it doesn't matter whether it's one of our friends or not—just for a few moments things don't matter, it's only for a few moments



(SHORT MEDITATION SESSION)

Shamatha meditation doesn't have to be for the sake of attaining enlightenment. If you are not interested in enlightenment or nirvana, you can practise shamatha to be natural—to not be swayed so much by circumstances. Most of the time we are not under the control of ourselves. Our mind is always attracted or distracted with something—our enemies, our lovers, our friends, just everything, hope, fear, jealousy, pride, attachment, aggression, all of this. So, in other words, all these objects, these phenomena, the world controls our mind, we have no control over it. Maybe we can control it a little bit for a split second, but if we are in an extreme emotional state we'll lose it.

Now as I was saying earlier, letting go of our ambition is a bit like the renunciation that Buddhists talk about. If you read the Buddha's life, the Buddha renounced his palace, his queen, his son, his parents and went out of the palace in search for enlightenment. Strictly from the shamatha point of view, you can say that Buddha was trying to diminish his ambition, or at least trying to see where he was aiming, what he was trying to achieve. He was trying to see also the futile aspect of whatever he was trying to achieve. So he was managing to let go, to achieve the power of letting go. To summarize, the power of letting go is quite important if you want to become a shamatha practitioner.

We do shamatha meditation so we can achieve this power to let go or understand the downfall of our obsession, the downfall of our fixation.

In fact, as we will find out, this technique is actually giving ourselves some time or the opportunity to undo the knots that we have. This is why some great meditators say that actually a meditation like shamatha is one rare occasion where we are actually not doing anything.

Usually we are always doing something, we are always thinking of something, we are always occupied. As we occupy ourselves so much we get lost in these millions of obsessions or fixations. Here when we meditate, by not doing anything, all these fixations will be revealed. Maybe for beginners it might be a little frightening sometimes but slowly you will gain some kind of inner confidence to face these. And you will notice that automatically these fixations will lessen — without doing anything. The classical meditation instruction texts would say it's like a snake uncoiling itself, our obsessions will undo themselves. You will gain that kind of skill.

(SHORT MEDITATION SESSION)

There is a difficult point here, thoughts are coming and I'm telling you to go back to the breathing, to concentrate on the breathing. You automatically interpret that as, "Oh, this means Rinpoche is saying that we should stop the thoughts and go back to concentrating on our breathing." This is not what I meant. I'm not saying that you should stop thinking about these thoughts. I'm not saying that. All I'm saying is to concentrate on the breathing. That's two different things. When thoughts come, don't stop them, don't increase them, don't encourage them, don't discourage them, nothing. Your job is to concentrate on the breathing. That's it.

It is important we understand the difference. If I were to say, stop these thoughts and then go back to the breathing - that's one thing - but I'm not saying that. When thoughts are coming, what do you do? Go back to the breathing. That's your job. Stopping the thoughts is not your job. It's not part of this teaching. Thoughts are going to come - all you do is just concentrate on the breathing. That's it.

(SHORT MEDITATION SESSION)

Lord Maitreya has some really good advice for shamatha practise. When we are doing shamatha it is important that we remember the antidote. When the mind gets distracted we have to remember the antidote. The antidote here is very simply to go back to the breathing and concentrating on that. That mindfulness has to be there every time we get distracted. We call it applying the antidote. But sometimes we apply the antidote too much. That can cause both dullness and agitation. You got that? If you worry too much, in other words if you keep on applying the antidote— antidote, antidote, antidote—it's almost like applying the antidote when there is no poison and in fact, that becomes a problem. That becomes one cause of dullness or agitation.

(SHORT MEDITATION SESSION)

Always do short shamatha sessions, especially those who are beginners—short but many times. Say if you are going to meditate for fifteen minutes, start fresh at least thirty times. Have a short break in between. Slowly we can do longer sessions maybe in fifteen minutes, we do it fifteen times and have a break in between. And when you have a break, take a real break—walk, stand up, do something else. Don't just linger there half-meditating, half-not meditating. Don't do that. After a while, you can start to do seven times within this fifteen minutes. Keeping it short is

important because if you do too much at the beginning you will get fed up with the technique. We are human beings, we don't like to get bored, we always like to change—changing what we eat, changing our clothes. We like change.

Likewise, the spiritual path is a long process, we need to have a lot of patience. We need to begin to like the path, so keep the meditation short and precise and many times. That way we develop strong habits. Later on it becomes part of us, easy to perform. Like drinking alcohol, when we first start drinking alcohol, we drink a little. We don't drink two or three bottles at one time otherwise we'd get so sick that we'd never touch alcohol again. Do only a short time but many times in many, many different parts. That way you will get habituated and this is necessary. Shamatha should become part of your life and to do that you have to get used to it. To get used to this, do it a little bit, a short time, but many times

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And during the off-sessions also, if it's possible, remember you are breathing. We always forget that we are breathing.

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We should also not limit your meditation schedule. You should not limit it to the morning or only in the evening. You should do it any time, all the time. Practise time is always now—it's never in the future. Don't ever leave your shamatha as if you are going to do it next year or next month or next week-end. You do it now. Anyway, it's just about forty-five seconds, especially for the beginners. Easy, you can do this anywhere. It only requires this, to sit straight. And short sessions are quite good. Before our mind gets distracted, we ourselves decided to stop the meditation and that's good - and then we start again. Again, before the distractions are about to come we stop. We will become comfortable with the technique and there's a sense of victory over the distractions—before the distractions come we already are there. So do short sessions.

Generally, the spiritual path practise should be like that, I think. You shouldn't really make a plan that 'This is my practise time' and then completely lose awareness in the off-time. Of course, it helps a great deal, you should set aside a certain time to practise, like at a certain hour in the morning or in the evening. But on top of that one should do shamatha at times whenever it's possible, for just a minute. That's not so difficult. And then gradually we increase.

(SHORT MEDITATION SESSION)

As we meditate, we simply sit straight and watch the breath. So what does that do? It creates a space. In fact the technique itself is just a trick. The main point is to recognize all these bombarding, constant thoughts and distractions that are coming toward us.

We still get angry but we know we are angry so to speak. When we are angry and we know we are angry, that kind of anger has so much humour. We can actually drive this anger toward certain directions—we have more control. The frustrating thing about our life is that there is no control with these emotions. That's why there's no fun. The whole purpose of Buddhism is to have fun, isn't it? And in order to have this you have to have control. If someone else has control over you, that's it, there's no fun.

(SHORT MEDITATION SESSION)



Shamatha involves a lot of discipline. Especially for the beginners, the discipline is quite necessary. Because of this, lamas often advise us to sometimes do meditation together, in a group. Of course we should practise individually, definitely, but group practise can also help us. Because of course we have so much pride, we have ego, and that pride and ego always tell us to have a competitive mind. So when we are doing meditation in a group, we don't want to fall asleep, we don't want to appear to be a bad meditator. We don't really have that courage to say, 'Oh, well, it doesn't matter even if I'm the worst one'. We want to be the best, we want to be fastest. We have that competitive mind. So since we have this competitiveness anyway, we might as well use it as a tool on the path. So when we can, from time to time doing group meditation can be really good.

It is like going to a fitness centre, I think. If you buy the machines at your home you do three to four days and then you don't use it any more. The tools end up in the garage, isn't it? But if you go to a fitness centre you see the other beautiful bodies and other people who are diligently doing it and it gives you inspiration. What a wrong motivation! [Rinpoche laughs] But at least it will lead you somewhere. Confusion is accepted as a path so it's okay.

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Keep it simple, don't make it complicated, shamatha is simple. Concentrate on the breathing, sit straight, that's all you do. When we concentrate on the breathing, the breathing happens in the present, at this moment, not the past, not the future... This is why I think using breathing is good.

Our breathing happens moment by moment—when we breathe out, that's gone, finished, that will never come back. Then we breathe again.

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If you can you should perhaps also do a weekend shamatha retreat. In fact, that's good. Every day, you do a few minutes and on top of that do it spontaneously, at different places, not just in front of the shrine but everywhere. Then, when you have time, once a month or once a year, you should do an intensive shamatha retreat. You could take a silent vow and then just do the sitting. In fact, there is a tradition in Tibet called nyinthun or dathun—nyinthun means a day retreat, a day practise. You can take a silent vow, whatever, and then do shamatha that whole day. Maybe break for lunch. You can get used to it. Then you can do dathun, a month long shamatha retreat, so you'll have three sessions of shamatha, just shamatha. That has some effect, at least it will drive you crazy. [laughs]

As I said earlier, shamatha can be done to simply gain some control over our mind. That is already very good. But if you happen to be a Buddhist mahayana practitioner, you should begin your shamatha meditation with taking refuge and arousing bodhicitta and end with the dedication of merit. There's so much merit by doing shamatha meditation, especially if you start with refuge and bodhicitta. In fact, you are saying that, "I will sit here and watch my breathing so that I will not be distracted. If I don't get distracted that means I will become powerful. If I become powerful that means I can help a lot of sentient beings." That's what we are doing. There's so much merit just sitting there. Gaining merit does not always involve a lot of action. Here, just sitting and watching the presentness, the breath, accumulates a lot of merit.

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MEDITATION POSTURE

There are many slight variations on the shamatha posture, but a common format is the 'Seven Points of Vairochana'.

(*Vairochana* means “what illuminates” or “what makes clear”).

Keep the spine straight. (pulling up the hair at the crown of the head aids correct alignment of chin and spine).

Ensure that the body is not tilting to one side.

Place hands on lap in meditation pose or rest palms on the knees, elbows extended slightly outwards. Hands

should be at equal height.

Lower chin slightly so that the neck becomes straight.

Lower the eye lids and keep the eyes focused on a point where the gaze naturally falls. The eyes should be still,

but the gaze relaxed and not forced. .

Raise the tongue to rest against the palate and upper row of teeth. Lips rest naturally without strain. Maintaining a

slight gap between the rows of teeth can prevent tension developing.

Sit in full or half lotus posture.

The posture should be neither too tight nor too loose, and the breath should be natural and not forced. Maintaining these physical alignments stabilizes the bodies' subtle airs (*lung*), and so helps the meditator enter a calm and clear state.

After assuming the correct posture, either focus the eyes on a simple object (like a stone or coin) or maintain awareness of the breath as it enters and leaves the nostrils. When thoughts arise, neither suppress nor continue them. Just return to the object of concentration.

Note on Subtle Airs

The body maintains five kinds of subtle airs (*lung*), which are connected to movements of the body and mind. These airs are stabilized through adopting the seven postures listed above. When this is achieved, the mind becomes still and focused.

The subtle air of earth. This air keeps the body stable and is associated with the posture of keeping the spine straight.

The subtle air of fire. This air generates the body's warmth and is stabilized by slightly lowering the chin.

The subtle air of water. This air prevents the body from dehydrating and is calmed through placing the hands in the lap or on the knees with the elbows slightly extended outwards.

The subtle air or air. This air disperses the warmth throughout the body and is stabilized through stilling the eyes and allowing the lips to rest naturally.

The downward eliminating air. This air aids digestion and is responsible for eliminating waste matter. Keeping the legs in lotus posture stabilizes this air