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Restricted Dzogchen Teachings, Part 1: The Foolish Dharma of an Idiot Clothed in Mud and Feathers

B. ALAN WALLACE

Lesson 4:
Ways of Knowing the Nature of the Mind

Reading:
Tibetan Buddhism from the Ground Up
“Stabilizing the Mind,” pages 105–118

TIBETAN BUDDHISM

FROM THE GROUND UP

*A Practical Approach
for Modern Life*



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Stabilizing the Mind

THE PURPOSE OF MEDITATIVE QUIESCENCE

Suppose that each of us wore a device that picked up all our thoughts, even the most subtle, unintentional ones, and immediately blared them out through loudspeakers strapped to the tops of our heads. As long as these thoughts remain hidden, often even from ourselves, we are able to present a fine semblance of sanity to those around us. But for most of us this veneer would swiftly vanish if others could hear the chaotic turbulence of our minds.

The whole of spiritual practice can be seen as cultivation of deeper and deeper sanity. In Buddhism this path of making the mind sane is a gradual one, beginning with relatively easy practices that bring about obvious, tangible benefits. The first stage of practice is ethical discipline, discussed in the previous chapter. The direct, manifest result of a life focused on these ethical principles is a greater state of well-being for ourselves and for those around us. Even without deep study or meditation, this brings about greater sanity and contentment.

As a result of this foundation of spiritual practice, our thoughts will be more wholesome, but our minds may still be scattered, unstable, and unclear. It is helpful to reinforce this foundation further by stabilizing our minds in meditation. In Buddhism the result of this practice is called *meditative quiescence*, or *tranquillity*. One contemplative of the Kagyüpa order of Tibetan Buddhism sums up tranquillity practice as follows:

Tranquillity is achieved by focusing the mind on an object and maintaining it in that state until finally it is channeled into one stream of attention and evenness.¹²

Thus, in the Buddhist context, meditative quiescence means more than just a peaceful feeling. It is a quality of awareness that is stable and vivid, clearly focused upon its chosen object. It is not an end in itself, but a fine tool to be employed in the third phase of traditional Buddhist practice, namely, insight. The same author says of insight practice:

Insight is attained through a general and detailed examination of reality and the systematic application of intellectual discrimination.¹³

Experiential insight into the nature of reality is the direct antidote to ignorance, the mental affliction that lies at the root of all distortions of the mind, unwholesome behavior, and suffering. However, without achieving meditative quiescence, the healing power of insight is limited, and ignorance cannot be fully dispelled.

The Kagyüpa order, known for its emphasis on meditation, passes on such adages as “Where there is no contemplative tranquillity, there is no insight,” and “If one seeks insight too early, one will not achieve tranquillity.”¹⁴ This Tibetan approach is very much in accord with the earlier Buddhism of India, as evidenced by the comments of the great Indian pandit Asaṅga regarding meditative quiescence and insight:

What is tranquillity? It is to settle the mind in tranquillity, regularly, attentively, intensely; to clear the mind; to pacify the mind completely; and to settle the mind in one-pointedness and equipoise...

What is insight? Insight is that which differentiates systematically and fully all things....¹⁵

Certainly it is possible to gain some degree of insight without having achieved great mental stability, but such illumination is like the light of a candle flickering in a breeze. This insight may be very meaningful, but due to the lack of meditative quiescence, it is fleeting, and difficult for the meditator to experience repeatedly.

Just as it is possible to acquire a limited degree of insight without meditative quiescence, so one may experience compassion to some extent without insight. But the most profound spiritual awakening occurs upon the foundation of all three—meditative quiescence, insight, and compassion—and it is for this purpose that one cultivates meditative quiescence.

THE CONDITIONS FOR MEDITATIVE QUIESCENCE

We can begin to stabilize our minds from the beginning of our spiritual practice, while placing our chief emphasis on ethical discipline. By taking out some time each day for the practice of meditative quiescence, we become increasingly aware of how our minds function; and in the process we begin to discover how scattered our minds have been all along. Recognizing this, we may yearn to explore the potentials of the human mind that become apparent only when the awareness is still and lucid.

Six conditions are necessary for the achievement of meditative quiescence. The first of these is a harmonious environment, one in which we feel secure, free from the dangers of war, pollution, contagious disease, and dangerous animals. Food and the other necessities should be easily acquired, and the people with whom we associate should be compatible. The cultivation of meditative quiescence requires a quiet environment, free from the noises of conversation during the day and such noises as the barking of dogs during the night.

The other five conditions are internal qualities. The first of these is having few desires. This is an attitude of being undisturbed by wishes for things we do not have, be it a nicer dwelling, better food, better clothing, and the like.

The third of the six conditions, contentment, complements the second. The attitude of contentment regards present circumstances, whatever they may be, with a sense of satisfaction. When we are

contented, we are concerned merely that the physical conditions for our practice are adequate. Once these are taken care of, we are free to focus our attention on our meditation.

The fourth condition of meditative quiescence is limiting our activities. When entering a contemplative retreat for the sake of stabilizing our minds, it is essential to reduce other activities to a bare minimum.

The fifth condition may be the most important of all: pure ethical discipline. This does not mean one is so far advanced one never engages in unwholesome behavior of body, speech, or mind. But it does mean that one is very familiar with the types of behavior to avoid, such as the ten unwholesome deeds; that one continually tries to hold to the ethical principles described previously; and that one takes steps to purify unwholesome actions once they have been committed.

The sixth and final condition is the elimination of compulsive, discursive thinking about desires and other distractions. Many of us find our minds inundated by a torrent of ideas throughout the day. This tendency must be curbed if we are ever to cultivate meditative quiescence. The point of Buddhist meditation is not to stop thinking, for, as we have seen, cultivation of insight clearly requires intelligent use of thought and discrimination. What needs to be stopped is conceptualization that is compulsive, mechanical, and unintelligent, that is, activity that is always fatiguing, usually pointless, and at times seriously harmful.

It is not enough to learn a technique for stabilizing the mind and apply oneself to it with diligence. If these six underlying conditions are not satisfied, meditative quiescence will never arise, regardless of one's determination or perseverance. This is what the renowned Indian sage Atiśa meant in his *Lamp on the Path of Awakening*:

If the conditions for meditative quiescence are impaired,
One may meditate intensively

For as long as a thousand years
Without achieving tranquil absorption.

MEDITATIVE OBJECTS FOR STABILIZING THE MIND

In Buddhist practice we can choose among a wide variety of objects for stabilizing the mind. One common method in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition is to focus on an image of the Buddha. First we take a physical object, either a statue or painting of the Buddha, and gaze at it until we are very familiar with its appearance. Then we close our eyes and create a simulation of that image with our imagination.

The actual practice is not the visual one—this is only a preparation—for the point is to stabilize the mind, not the eyes. When we first try to visualize the Buddha, the mental image is bound to be vague and extremely unstable. We may not even be able to get an image at all. I remember teaching this technique many years ago to a group of students in the Swiss Alps. After we had been practicing together for a half hour or so, we took a break to discuss people's initial experiences. One fellow raised his hand, and with some consternation confessed that he was not able to see the Buddha in his mind's eye at all. For awhile his mind was blank; then finally the image of a sea gull flew through the space of his mind!

While the above method has many benefits, it is not ideal for everyone. For it to be effective, one must have a fairly peaceful mind, and it is helpful to have deep faith and reverence for the Buddha. For people of a devotional nature, this practice can be very inspiring, and effective at stabilizing the mind. One's heart is stirred by bringing the Buddha to mind with devotion, and consequently one's enthusiasm for the meditation grows. On the other hand, if one has a very agitated mind and little faith, this and other visualization techniques may very well lead to tension and unhappiness. And these problems may increase the more one practices.

With an agitated, conceptually congested mind, the sheer effort of imagining a visualized object may be too taxing. So if one is engaging in visualization practices, especially during several sessions a day, it is important to be aware of one's level of stress. It is important not to let it get out of hand; for if it does, instead of stabilizing the mind the practice will damage one's nervous system.

Another method that is practiced widely, especially in the Buddhist countries of east and southeast Asia, is focusing one's awareness on the breath. A key attribute of this practice, as opposed to visualization of the Buddha, is that in breath awareness the object of meditation, the breath, is present without our having to imagine it.

Awareness of the breath is practiced in many different ways. Some people focus on the rise and fall of the abdomen during the in- and out-breath. Another technique is to focus on the tactile sensations, from the nostrils down to the abdomen, that are associated with the respiration. In yet another method one focuses on the sensations of the breath passing through the apertures of the nostrils and above the upper lip. All of these are valuable methods, and they can be especially useful for people with highly discursive, imaginative minds. They offer a soothing way to calm the conceptually disturbed mind.

A third method of stabilizing the mind involves directing one's awareness to the mind itself. This is the most subtle of all the techniques mentioned here, and its rewards are great. I shall elaborate on this practice in a moment, but first I would like to discuss some of the themes common to all methods of stabilizing the mind.

Two facets of awareness are instrumental in all the above forms of meditative training. These are mindfulness and vigilance. Mindfulness is a mental factor that allows us to focus upon an object with continuity, without forgetting that object. So, if we are focusing on the sensations of our breath at our nostrils, mindfulness enables us to fasten our attention there continuously. When mindfulness

vanishes, the mind slips off its object like a seal off a slick rock. Vigilance is another mental factor, whose function is to check up on the quality of awareness itself. It checks to see if the meditating mind is becoming agitated and scattered, or dull and drowsy. It is the task of vigilance to guard against these extremes.

There are many inner hindrances to stabilizing the mind, but they boil down to the two extremes of excitement and laxity. Excitement is a mental factor that draws our attention away from our intended object. This hindrance is a derivative of desire. If we are meditating and suddenly find ourselves thinking about going to the refrigerator and getting a snack, we can identify this impulse as excitement born from desire. Excitement draws the mind outward. It can easily be stimulated by sound such as that of a car driving by. It compulsively latches onto the sound—a kind of mental hitchhiking—and elaborates on it with a series of images and thoughts.

When the mind is not agitated, it is prone to slipping off to the other extreme of laxity. This mental factor does not distract the attention outward, but brings on a sinking sensation. The mind becomes absorbed in its object without clarity, and drowsiness is bound to follow. At that point the object of the meditation is submerged under waves of lethargy or obliviousness.

The chief antidotes to excitement and laxity are mindfulness and vigilance, and the results of overcoming those hindrances are mental stability and clarity. These are the fruits of the practice.

Meditative stability necessarily implies an underlying ground of relaxation and serenity. The mind is peaceful, and the attention remains where we direct it for as long as we wish. Clarity refers more to the vividness of subjective awareness than to the clarity of the object. When it is present we can detect even the subtle and most fleeting qualities of our object. For example, if we are visualizing the Buddha with clarity, he will appear in our mind's eye in three dimensions and very lifelike. We will be able to see the color of his eyes, the individual folds in his robe. He will appear almost as clearly as if

we were seeing him directly with our eyes. Such subjective clarity is instrumental in focusing on the breath as well as on the mind.

All of us have experienced moments when our attention is extremely vivid. This may occur, for example, while driving a car or motorcycle at high speed on a winding road, or when rock climbing. But when such mental clarity is experienced it is usually combined with a high degree of tension, and the mind is neither serene nor stable. On the other hand, mental stability is a common experience when we are pleasantly tired and we lie down to sleep. But in such cases there is rarely much clarity of awareness.

The challenge of meditative quiescence practice is to cultivate stability integrated with clarity, generating an extraordinarily useful quality of awareness. To bring this about, experienced meditators have found that there must be a sequence of emphases in the practice. First seek a relaxed, wholesome, and cheerful state of mind. On this basis, emphasize stability, and then finally let clarity take priority. The importance of this sequence cannot be overemphasized.

FOCUSING AWARENESS ON THE MIND

Many meditation teachers have made a common observation concerning Western meditators: We *try* so hard! Our efforts in meditation may be sporadic, but when we put our minds to it, we show true grit. This attitude can create a lot of problems. For example, if we are trying to stabilize the mind through the practice of focusing on a Buddha image, the initial image is bound to be unclear and fleeting. At this stage, meditators are properly advised to be satisfied with a vague object. It is best not to try harder to improve the quality of the image; simply see if we can hold onto it without losing it.

However strongly this may be emphasized, there is a powerful tendency, especially among Westerners, to try harder and harder to create a vivid object, and to hold it with sheer tenacity. This same attitude often prevails among those practicing awareness of

the breath. Once again these serious meditators bear down on the object, trying very hard to see it clearly and to hold onto it for dear life. This, after all, is what we have been taught from childhood: “If you want to get ahead, do your best. Try your hardest.” Our society often considers these two phrases to be synonymous.

In meditation, however, they are not synonymous. Doing our best in this training does not mean to try our hardest; because, if we are trying our hardest, we are trying too hard. And if we try too hard, we will burn out; and our practice will be sporadic at best, until it fizzles out altogether. Doing our best in meditation means being as skillful as we can at finding the delicate balance between relaxation and exertion.

An especially helpful tool for this is meditation on the mind itself. In this practice we have no clearly delineated, concrete object on which to focus. The mind has no form or location. If we try strenuously to focus our minds on it as our object, it eludes us. The tendency to overexert simply does not work here.

To engage in meditation on the mind, one first finds a suitable posture. Much has been written on this subject, so I shall discuss only some of the major points. It is important to sit in an erect posture, with the spine straight. It is important not to become slouched forward or to tilt to the side or backward. Throughout the meditation session one should keep the body still and relaxed.

At the outset of this or any other Buddhist practice, it is helpful to take refuge. It is also vital to cultivate a good motivation, for this will profoundly influence the nature of the practice. Finally, it is helpful to be cheerful, cherishing this wonderful opportunity to explore the nature of consciousness.

Although the main practice here is awareness of the mind, it is useful to begin with a more tangible object to calm and refine one’s awareness. Breath awareness can be perfect for this. We should cultivate a general awareness of the breath coming in and going out. During inhalation, we should simply be aware that this is taking place.

During exhalation, we note that the breath is going out. Awareness is allowed to rest calmly in the present, while we breathe in a natural, unforced way.

As we now move on to the main practice, we may follow the counsel of Tilopa, the great Indian Buddhist contemplative: “Do not indulge in thought, but watch the natural awareness.”¹⁶ “Natural awareness” has no shape or color, and it has no location. So how can we focus on it? What does it mean “to watch” it?

First of all, our task is to focus our attention on the mind, as opposed to the physical sense fields. One way to do this is to focus our awareness initially on a mental event, such as a thought. This thought could be anything—a word or a phrase—but it is helpful if it is one that does not stimulate either desire or aversion.

One possibility is the phrase: “What is the mind?” The point here is not to speculate on this question, or to try to answer it. Rather, use that thought itself as the object of awareness. Very shortly after having brought that phrase to mind, it is bound to fade out of our consciousness. At that point we keep our awareness right where it is. We have now directed our attention on the mind, and what remains between the vanishing of one thought, and the arising of another, is simply awareness, empty and without obstruction, like space.

An analogy may be helpful. Imagine yourself as a child lying on your back, gazing up into a cloudless sky, and blowing soap bubbles through a plastic ring. As a bubble drifts up into the sky, you watch it rise, and this brings your attention into the sky. While you are looking at the bubble it pops, and you keep your attention right where the bubble had been. Your awareness now lies in empty space.

In the actual meditation practice one focuses initially on the bubble of a thought. When this thought vanishes one does not replace it with some other mental construct. Rather, one stabilizes one’s attention in natural awareness, uncontrived, without conceptual elaboration.

This practice is so subtle we may find we become tense in our efforts to do it right. Some people even find the intensity of their

concentration impedes their normal respiration—they restrict their breathing for fear it will disturb the delicate equilibrium of their minds. Such tension and constricted respiration can only impair the practice and our health in general. So it is crucial that we engage in the meditation with a sense of physical and mental relaxation.

Starting from relaxation one cultivates meditative stability, resting in natural awareness without being carried away by the turbulence of thoughts or emotions. Finally, it is important to recognize that this practice is not based upon a vague sort of trance or dull absorption; rather, it calls for vivid, clear awareness.

To cultivate these three qualities of relaxation, stability, and clarity, it is usually helpful to keep the meditation sessions relatively short. The chief criterion for determining the length of one's meditation sessions is the quality of one's awareness during the practice. Five minutes of finely conducted meditation is worth more than an hour of low-grade conceptual chatter. Another useful criterion is one's state of mind following meditation. The mind should be refreshed, stable, and clear. If one feels exhausted and dull, one's session was probably too long or of low quality.

PHASES OF THE PRACTICE

Once we have entered into this discipline, it may not be long before we experience short periods—perhaps up to ten seconds or longer—during which we are able to abide in a natural state of awareness, without grasping onto the thoughts and other events that arise in our consciousness. We may well find this delightfully exhilarating, and our minds may then leap upon the experience with glee. But as soon as our minds grasp in this way, the experience will fade. This can be frustrating.

The remedy is to enter into this state of awareness repeatedly. As we become familiar with it, we can then take it in stride, without expectation or anxiety. We learn to just let it be.

As the mind settles in this practice, our awareness of thoughts and other mental events is also bound to change. At times we may no longer sense ourselves thinking, yet a multitude of thoughts and images may arise as simple events. One friend of mine told me that while she was meditating in relative conceptual silence, the thought arose: “Pass the pizza, please.” She had not had a pizza for months, nor did she particularly want one at that moment. Thoughts will simply arise, as will entire conversations. When this happens, just let them be.

Do not cling to these thoughts, identify with them, or try to sustain them. But also do not try to suppress them. Simply view them as spontaneous outflows of natural awareness, while centering your attention on the pure, unelaborated awareness from which they arise.

On many occasions we are bound to find ourselves carried away by trains of thought. When we recognize this has happened, we may react with frustration, disappointment, or restlessness.

All such responses are a waste of time. If we find our minds have become agitated, the antidote is to relax more deeply. Relax away the effort that is going into sustaining our conceptual or emotional turbulence. It is best not to silence the mind with a crushing blow of our will. Instead, we may release the effort of grasping onto those mental events. Grasping arises from attachment, and the antidote is simply to let go of this attachment.

On other occasions we may experience mental laxity. Although the mind is not agitated, it may rest in a nebulous blankness. The antidote for this hindrance is to revitalize our awareness by paying closer attention to the practice. The “middle path” here is to invigorate our awareness without agitating it.

The great Indian Buddhist contemplative Saraha says of this practice:

By releasing the tension that binds the mind,
One undoubtedly brings about inner freedom.¹⁷

Tilopa speaks of three phases of the meditation. In the initial stages the onslaught of compulsive ideation is like a stream rushing through a narrow gorge. At this point it may seem that our mind is more out of control, more conceptually turbulent, than it was before we began meditating. But in fact, we are only now realizing how much the mind normally gushes with semiconscious thoughts.

As the mind becomes more quiescent, more stable, the stream of mental activity will become like the Ganges—a broad, quietly flowing river. In the third phase of the practice, the continuum of awareness is like the river flowing into the sea. It is at this point that one recognizes the mind's natural serenity, vividness, transparency, and freshness.

During early stages of practice, we may experience moments of mental quiescence relatively free of conceptualization, and we may wonder whether we are now ascertaining natural awareness. Most likely we are not. Our mind at this point is probably still too gross and unclear for such a realization. Patience is needed to persist in the practice, without expectation or fear, until gradually the essential qualities of awareness become apparent. When we ascertain the simple clarity and knowing qualities of the awareness, we are well established in the practice. We can then proceed to the attainment of meditative quiescence focused on the mind.

THE ATTAINMENT OF MEDITATIVE QUIESCENCE

In Buddhist practice the achievement of meditative quiescence is clearly defined. As a result of the practice outlined above, one eventually experiences natural awareness, and the duration of this experience gradually increases. Eventually we no longer become distracted or agitated. At this point the emphasis of the practice should be on cultivating clarity. For the mind, even after it has become well stabilized, can still easily slip into laxity.

When we finally attain meditative quiescence, we are free of even the subtle forms of excitement and laxity. During the early phases of practice, considerable degrees of effort are required, but as we progress, more and more subtle effort suffices. Gradually the meditation becomes effortless, and we can sustain each session for hours on end.

Benefits from this practice are also evident between formal meditation sessions. The mind becomes so refined and stable that it is very difficult for mental distortions to arise. And even when they do occur, they are relatively impotent and short-lived. Through the attainment of meditative quiescence, the mind is brought to such a state of heightened sanity it is very difficult for these afflictions to thrive. In addition, one will experience an unprecedented quality of inner well-being that arises from the balance and health of the mind. Due to the shifts in the energies experienced in the body (closely related to the nervous system), one will experience a delightful sense of physical lightness and buoyancy.

The attainment of meditative quiescence is also said to be a fertile basis from which to cultivate various types of heightened awareness such as clairvoyance. When cultivated and employed with wisdom and compassion, these can be very useful. Otherwise, they are simply a distraction at best, and may be a real source of danger.

In Buddhist practice the chief purpose of attaining meditative quiescence is to use this refined state of awareness for investigating the nature of reality. Meditative quiescence by itself is a temporary achievement that can easily be lost, especially if one becomes immersed once again in a hectic, turbulent way of life. Only by using the mind that has been trained in meditative quiescence is it possible to gain the depth of insight needed to utterly uproot the fundamental distortions of the mind, which are the root of suffering.

In the meantime, the cultivation of meditative quiescence is something that brings us greater sanity, serenity, stability, and clarity. This is bound to aid us in all the pursuits worthy of our precious lives.