

SHAMBHALA OFFICE OF PRACTICE AND EDUCATION

THE MANUAL FOR SHAMBHALA INSTRUCTORS

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Overview of Meditation Practice

A sense of personal relations with the teachings seems to be very necessary. When the teachings become just information, a foreign entity apart from your basic being, then there's a tendency to become a book or information service, rather than communicating the teaching as a personal thing. Some sense of familiarity seems to be necessary. Not that one has to read the books and memorize all the jargon, so to speak. But it is a matter of attitude, that students are willing to open themselves so that the teachings come into their system. This needs a great deal of generosity and absence of ego. And it is possible to become a well-intentioned charlatan—trying your best, but ending up worse in some sense. That comes from lack of communication and openness to the teachings. A certain amount of blockage exists, and being too shy to acknowledge that, one tries to patch things up with quotations, logic and guesswork. It's patched together so that it becomes seemingly reasonable but at the same time there is no actual journey taking place in us. So we could discuss the mechanical or doctrinal details as we go on. But I think these are the basic issues that we should be aware of.

One has to be watchful of one's ambition in some sense. Ambition to convey the truth is basically good. I suppose it is following the Bodhisattva example, but at the same time one's ego could tend to become tightened and hardened. In other words, one has to become somewhat professional rather than amateur. Professional in this case means someone who could feel and experience the essence of the teachings on an intuitive level, particularly. So no one is especially expected to be a scholar or linguist at this point. But in terms of professionalism, when professionals talk about something or do things, they do it with feeling, because they have training, and they have some feelings toward their trade. In that sense the teaching has to become soaked into us. Another factor is some sense of commitment, dedication to the teachings, as well as to the spokesman of the teachings, one's own spiritual master. And an attitude of friendliness seems to be extremely important and necessary. We are about to influence a lot of people's lives, and that responsibility is very heavy. The person we talk to will have friends, and friends of friends. Usually mistakes are much easier to catch, like flu or a disease, whereas the truth is very hard to discover. So we have to be very careful that we don't transmit germs to anybody, which is extremely important.

In other words I would like to put you off a little, and have you see the dangers in the whole thing so that you'll be very careful when you return to your home base. There you can relax and go through the whole thing, but not relax too much, and have some sense of responsibility and a sense of taking a very important role. So I think that is some basic groundwork that we can discuss today. This point seems to be quite abstract, but we could discuss the details as we go on.

Maybe we could go through some definitions for your own record and get some ideas of the patterns. I wonder whether people had a chance to go through the literature on the four foundations of mindfulness from the seminary talks. No? We could go through it again. I think it is very necessary to

know particularly the four foundations of mindfulness practice that's described in great detail in the seminary talks. The book I was basically using is Jamgön Kongtrül's work on the three yana principle in which he refers to the hinayana practice, and quotes a lot from works of Gampopa that we don't have translations of. He also quotes the Kadam tradition, an early Tibetan monastic school, on the mindfulness practice. He combined things like that together.

The pattern of meditation practice falls basically into the hinayanist practice of shamatha and vipashyana discipline, and then the mahayanist practice of shunyata, and the development of bodhichitta, the exercise on contemplation of compassion, and the vajrayanist practice of the four yogas of mahamudra, as well as the four levels of ati yoga.

I think that you should have a very clear understanding as to the necessity to start on the practice of meditation, which is the basis of everything. It is like the water if you are going to make bread. The daily life awareness and the practice of behavior patterns that have been presented, like the eightfold path and the six paramitas and the other things are like the flour. To make dough you mix the flour with the water, so the water is one of the important ingredients. It is a very penetrating ingredient which combines things together—it makes the bread rise and that makes bread into bread. So it is very important to have some starting point. But before you start on anything, it is necessary to have a relationship to these particular meditation practices. Because the logic of the path is very precise, but it is also very expansive. People might find it difficult to tune themselves according to the teachings. So before you get into any styles of becoming a practitioner, before you have any sense of style, the first point is to prepare yourself so that you have the capability of following these styles. So the first point of taming oneself seems to be an extremely important one.

SHAMATHA: TAMING & SHARPENING

Taming: Basic Principles of Technique

The secret hint there, which you usually don't talk to students about, is that when the out breath has ended there is a moment of gap, which is the actual true state of meditation. But somehow if you make any emphasis on that, it obviously becomes very desirable to people and a source of enormous inquisitiveness so that people begin to disrespect the general notion of breathing and just try to cultivate that. So that unsaid thing is important here.

The first one is obviously the shamatha practice which is referred to as a process of taming. In this case taming, as a definition of shamatha, does not necessarily mean a process of calming or curing or of any kind of meditation or treatment. The idea in this case is just simply plowing. That is Milarepa's metaphor. You plow through the ground of ego. As you tame your wild horse, or as you plow the tough ground, there are obviously going to be a lot of challenges. That is expected and one has to be willing to go through it.

In order to do that, the body has to synchronize with the mind in a certain sense. At least there should be some kind of attempt to do that, that the body is obeying the mind's principle of meditation. The body seems to become much easier to work with when you sit cross-legged on the ground and with a straight back. Once the body has accepted that commitment, then the mind tries to go along with it in some sense. Again there is a problem with the mind. Mind is basically restless and uncertain of its own existence. So there is a tendency to shift around a great deal. And the only way to tame mind is to give it another toy apart from the body itself. The toy is a kind of self-portrait of the mind, like giving a child a teddy bear which is small and cuddly and workable. It's not too big and not too small, and you can take it to bed or you can throw it around and play with it. You can dress it up and put it to bed and whatever you want. It's sort of a self-image of yourself, which is the breath obviously. The breathing is not still by any means—breathing is somewhat restless. Once you breathe out you want to breathe in, and once you breathe in you want to breathe out. So that's the image of mind in some sense, the restlessness and looking for further alternatives. That kind of energy is the breathing.

So this toy of the breathing is given to mind. It has been said in the books that only twenty-five percent of one's concentration should be put on the breathing and no more than that. Only twenty-five percent. So working with the breathing is just touching the highlights of the breathing. You can't completely become one with it. It's like a child playing with a teddy bear. When a child has gone through a process of restlessness, then he is occasionally cheered up by the teddy bear. In the meantime, the child is interested in other things. But there is something to come back to—your teddy bear. And it's much easier to work with in a lot of cases. For one thing, because breathing occupies mind. There is out and in and out and in which happens constantly. Another point is that the sense of breath also brings a suggestion of stepping out of the body into a world of dream. Then the dream becomes an empty dream, so that finally you are stuck there. In the meantime you breathe in, and then you want to step out into the dream world again, so you breathe out again. There is a constant stepping out process. According to Gampopa that's known as mixing mind and breath together. Working with outbreath is like getting on a slide and you slide out. Then you have to walk up and then you slide out again. So the process is going along with riding the breath. And then you finish with your ride. Then there's a gap. You ride again, and then there's a gap. Then you ride again and then there's a gap.

As for the question of thoughts, when thoughts arise just let them arise. At the same time a deceptive twist often goes on. One thinks, "If I let thoughts be, then they will go away. Then everything is going to be okay. If I don't reject them and don't accept them, I can be sure that something's taking place. I'm doing good."

What is traditionally recommended—and has been confirmed by my own experience as well—is that when students come and want to study and practice meditation, you don't tell them *at all* that one day you might change their technique or that they might get something better than this. You give the impression to the student that this is it: the rest of his life he will be doing this constantly. And maybe

he will. Maybe we will. [Laughter] That is much more helpful than giving people some kind of hint or promise that this present technique may be very boring and unpleasant but at some point they're going to get a better deal out of it. So the idea is to give the impression that this is Buddhist meditation—which it is—as you begin. That seems to be a very important point: no kind of hint of anything, this is it. This is the way that Buddha had to practice himself, and the way that he taught to others, the way to enlightenment.

Sharpening: the Beginning Stages of Shamatha Development

One aspect of shamatha is that it is the way to make your mind sharper than ordinary. What has happened to us is that we have become so involved with reality or whatever [laughter] and, in a lot of cases, we are so stunned by the whole thing that our mind becomes dull. We lose a lot of the precision in our mind and are unable to receive any clear idea of the reality of anything. Our mental faculty has been overused and therefore one tends to get very vague. We jump back and forth with thought processes of all kinds and try to sum up a million thoughts at once, which makes us extraordinarily numb and hazy. So the shamatha practice makes you sharper and more direct. Before we get into further things, one's mind has to be really sharp and direct, capable of receiving whatever you might learn. So the preparation to be a good student at this point is the shamatha practice. There is no other way of sharpening one's mind by giving someone a quick and effective trick at all. The only way to do it is to go along with the breathing and let the mind get extraordinarily bored. This is the first point—to get extraordinarily bored so that there is nothing else but your breath and your body and your occasional flickering of visual and audio entertainment. But even those flickers become somewhat dull and uninteresting. When you give more boring things to your mind, mind becomes sharper, because there is nothing else to relate with.

It's like the teddy bear situation again. If a child isn't given any other toys, but just one teddy bear, he will know it from top to bottom, the inside and outside of the teddy bear, and completely memorize the whole thing. Whereas if you are entertained by hundreds of millions of toys then you lose interest in any particular thing, you become very cranky and demanding and you shit and piss a lot. [Laughter] So giving one thing at a time is best. So that when a person begins to work with outbreath the sense of body becomes very real, but still there will be thought process coming up. This is by no means a state of tranquility, but at least letting one's mind learn to be precise and direct. Before you develop any sense of awareness your mind has to become sharp.

Awareness is that product of mind which produces discipline and an appreciation of ongoing things constantly. There is one thing going on constantly. You are aware of that, so there is a constant continuity. Once you are able to be sharp, then you might notice that some continuity is taking place. So awareness is not so much a mental product, but awareness is an existing situation, and you are open to the awareness. It's you that provides the sharpness to notice that awareness does take place constantly, rather than that you manufacture awareness on the spot.

So the idea is making yourself extraordinarily sharp and direct. You become more and more sensitive, and consequently hidden neurosis of all kinds begins to come up to the surface. You begin to remember your childhood memories, your hopes and fears, and your relationship to your friends, enemies and parents. Things begin to come onto the surface and those are the result of being sharp. Once you're more sharp and you have less toys to play with, then you get more and more precise and direct and consequently up to being actually capable of developing mindfulness practice. So taming the mind is providing sharpness, at the first stage. That seems to be the basic idea. There is constant pain that takes place because of the basic split and the basic sense of bewilderment and uncertainty. There is some desire to be sharp at the same time that you want to be occupied and entertain yourself, to take your mind off the undesirable truth that might reveal something.

So the sharpness of *Shi-ne* or shamatha practice brings the realization of pain much more—the fundamental pain and *duhkha*. It also brings a sense of journey. At the beginner's level that journey is not a journey forward especially; it seems like a backward journey. You are almost regressing constantly. You rediscover all kinds of things that you realize you have ignored. Nevertheless the sense of regressing is just a kind of illusion that one goes through. To realize the backwardness of it is the journey forward. So the shamatha practice tames the mind and provides a sense of sharpness by using identification or letting go through the breathing awareness. What that actually does to you is that you become extraordinarily sensitive so that you will be able to work with your mindfulness practice. But at the beginner's level, even the mindfulness practice hasn't occurred.

I think maybe we could discuss the four foundations further tomorrow. In the meantime it would be helpful for you to go through the four foundations of mindfulness literature. Are there any immediate questions?

QUESTION: You were talking about the sort of dullness that is developed because of the lack of mindfulness. I always associate boredom with that type of thing, with that inability to experience anything in a fresh way. I know you've used the word boredom differently, but when it's presented to other people it tends to give that impression. I've wondered how to explain it.

VAJRACHARYA: Well, you can't be bored unless you are intelligent, unless you are really hypertense or something, which means that you are restless already. Then the restlessness is the same as the boredom. You are running out of sources of entertainment. In other words, pigs in the pigsty don't get bored because their intelligence is not so good. They are quite content with what they are and you see them just standing there and eating. Like animals standing in the snow letting snowflakes fall on them—they are quite contented. That's the kind of bewilderment or confusion where even boredom hasn't taken place yet. So the idea of boredom is restlessness, and not having further things to play with. Mind can be starved without any entertainment resources. And let mind be bored. Then the more you get bored, the more you begin to look around you, trying to look for entertainment. That's the way the mindfulness comes.

Q: Through the search for entertainment?

V: Yeah. Having nothing to entertain oneself with but still searching for something. Then you discover the mindfulness.

Q: Were you also saying that it was too early for mindfulness practice to happen in everyday life?

V: Well, today we're talking purely about the introduction to meditation, the first step. We just touched on the verge of mindfulness, but we haven't discussed it yet.

MINDFULNESS (T. *TRENPA*; SKT. *SMRTI*)

VAJRACHARYA: Well, has everybody gone through the literature on the four foundations of mindfulness? Maybe we could discuss more about awareness, mindfulness, following what we discussed yesterday. When you develop the sense of complete precision and are able to see all the mental activities and also to see through the techniques, then natural mindfulness begins to occur. Not necessarily obvious, but natural mindfulness, which becomes obvious to do. There is a Tibetan word for mindfulness, which is *trenpa*. *Trenpa* literally means memory, or recollection. And this means not recollection in the sense of path or recognition of anything particularly, but recollection in the sense that there is an organic process of emptying one's lung when you breathe out completely. Then you have a natural automatic process of filling your lung.

What actually happens is that there is a general sense of reminders occurring in one's process of life, and a person is going to click to it. It's like a new impression; like if your husband died recently or if you had a fight with your wife recently. That fresh memory occurs to you because it's very vivid to you, because it's not long ago. You have some sense not only of the literal memory of that experience, but there is some kind of memory of thatness which is not conditioned—not conditioned in the sense of categories, concepts, ideas. But a general sense of *That* happened and you get a feeling of the whole vividness coming back to you. The only thing that sitting meditation does is exaggerate that there is a meditative state which happens. Whether you have been meditating successfully or unsuccessfully, it really doesn't matter particularly. But something has actually happened to you and because of that you have become constantly wakeful in some sense. There are gaps that happen to you automatically because what you've done is very heavy in some sense; so things happen to you constantly, all the time. That is mindfulness, fully being there. In other words, one responds to the gaps that exist there. It's not so much scrutinizing your mind to a point and trying to test something out with that, but something actually happened because of what you're doing. That could be called postmeditation experience, or it could also be called mindfulness during the time of your sitting practice. That experience is very difficult to catch, to develop.

Often when you speak to people about being mindful, they think in terms of just simply being careful—"shave carefully; don't shave your pimples or you'll bleed." So you have to be careful; that's a conflicting idea. Quite mistakenly a lot of people are attracted to the Buddhist approach of mindfulness because Buddha said that everything must be carefully done. If you have a complete misunderstanding of that, you'll end up by tiptoeing all the time. You're not actually sitting in

meditation but you're perching on your cushion; you're not actually conducting your life but you are tiptoeing through your life. So that doesn't seem to be the point here.

The point here is just actually allowing yourself or your behavior to be available so that when the mindfulness comes you are ready to leap into it or open yourself into it. It's like taking a photograph in that your camera is loaded and your film is ready to be exposed to the world outside and everything's set—the speed, the aperture, everything's ready to click because the world outside is ready to come into your picture. The point is that you can't make yourself mindful. It could create an enormous further burden on yourself, becoming so solemn and stubborn and heavy-handed to yourself. So mindfulness already exists and you can be available to it. The idea is that mindfulness is not a process of application in terms of growing yourself, but a process of undoing yourself. There is a sudden sharp jerk, a gap of undoing, ceasing to act. When you cease to act, then the mindfulness enters into your system of being. That seems to be the basic meaning of recollection. There is something in the past, not as memory but experience that is there already in an embryonic state; you create your apertures to it, are open to it. I think that's the definition of mindfulness.

There are two levels: mindfulness comes early on in shamatha, and awareness comes much later in the level of vipashyana. Again, I would like to point out to everybody—so you will know the basic geography and basic priorities in the practice—that shamatha always comes first. That is the first step of meditation practice as a starter, as a beginner in the Buddhist tradition. You do the same thing according to the Buddha; you start with shamatha, whatever school it may be. After that the awareness comes in the vipashyana practice later on. In this case when we talk about actually identifying with the breath, we are talking about shamatha, basic shamatha practice. When we are talking about mindfulness it also includes shamatha experience expanding to the potentiality of vipashyana. But it hasn't quite begun. And I have already discussed the details of the shamatha experience in the four foundations of mindfulness talks.

Q: Rinpoche, in your description of mindfulness, I got a feeling of a discontinuity, that there would be peak moments when something would suddenly happen, and you would be there. But much of the time there would be a kind of low level of consciousness, and then something might happen again. In contrast with awareness, which seems more panoramic and continuous. Is it something like that?

V: I think so, because mindfulness is very direct. It has a face and a back, and a right side and left side. Whereas awareness doesn't have a face—it's all-pervasive. So you can be mindful at certain levels of direction, and you can develop awareness all over. That seems to be the difference.

The English equivalent of *trenpa* is “resting the memory;” in Sanskrit, *anusmrti*, which means “complete restfulness of recollection,” restful here meaning opening. When you're open, then the mindfulness comes to you, you create the boundaries or the gateways to it.

Q: Could you say that when mindfulness does come, you're opening yourself to the ordinary state of mind?

V: You mean *the* ordinary state of mind?

Q: Yes.

V: I don't think so, not at this point. This is just your going through the thing you manufactured yourself, in the early stages, which is very honest and cannot happen without sitting practice, which brings some kind of continuity. You are allowing outer effects to come into your system. Rather than *the* ordinary mind, which would be very ordinary, and wouldn't depend on actual technique or any practices particularly. You haven't yet become all that transparent at this point.

Q: [Inaudible]

V: That's a point I haven't mentioned. I'm glad you raised it. The idea is to make yourself available to be touched. After that you let yourself let go; you don't possess what you have touched. You detach yourself, you let go, that's it.

There should be some kind of intelligence in the clarity as soon as the clarity occurs to you. Then you don't hold onto it; you just let go. You disown it, otherwise the clarity could be diluted or overcast by trying to hang on, trying to possess it. You don't see the sharp glimpse of the whole thing.

Q: Then you would be distracted again?

V: Yes. Usually, letting go and disowning creates a further sense of sharpness. Though that's not the point in this case.

V: Recollection is used greatly by the contemplative traditions of the West, particularly, the Catholic tradition of monasticism and that kind of thing, and the mystical schools. Sattipattana practice of the Theravadin or Smritipattana practice of Sarvastivadins also has some kind of approach of recollection, which doesn't mean to say capturing experiences—but being awake in a different way. Being totally awake and free from any other unnecessary commitments which seem interesting to get into. It actually has nothing to do with memory; it is entirely different. *Smṛti* is translated as *trenpa* in Tibetan, which could be referred to as a sense of recalling past. But also *tem* means “to think,” and often *trenpa* is used to mean “heart” in colloquial Tibetan. Particularly, in the peasant language, people say, “Would you like to have fried *trempe* tonight?”

Q: What's the quality that marks this as being different from memory? You say that it's a sense of recalling the past, but at the same time, it's not caught up in memory.

V: It's not really recalling past in terms of details, digging up your old things from the attic, so to speak. But it is habitual mind which automatically has a reference point. The indoctrination of the reference point is implanted in your mind.

Whatever we think. You say, “that's a car,” suddenly, without any reference to the past. But it is reference to the past from that point of view. Otherwise, we can't say, “there is a car” if we haven't remembered that it is a car before we experience it. So it ceases to become a reference point, but it is a direct reference point as well at the same time because we do not have to dig up our reference point of memories and love and hate of anything of the past anymore. We just say, “there's a car.” Simply, as direct as that.

But, at the same time, it is not quite free from past particularly. Like even our awareness practice is the product of the past. You've been told it's good to develop awareness and sit and do it. And so we do it because we've been told. But, at the same when we do it, we don't have to go back and check it any more. We just flash on it. Like if someone is going to hit you, you cover your head with your hand, which is part of the result of indoctrination—but at the same time, it is a spontaneous act nevertheless.

SHAMATHA INSTRUCTION

Orthodox Approach

Generally when we instruct in meditation we are not trying to convert people into Buddhism or proselytizing, because we all know that if anybody wants to have instruction they have some interest. So what we're trying to do is to give them a very solid basis to work on. That is to say, a basis according to the tradition of the path that was developed and that we're trying to present. In the case history of my coming to this country and teaching, I presented the whole thing somewhat loosely in the beginning because, for one thing, there were no physical facilities for people to sit and practice. Retreat situations were not known, and the general sangha situation hadn't developed yet. So the techniques were presented in a somewhat loose manner, somewhat free style, but still in keeping with the shamatha and vipashyana practice. And I often taught beginners vipashyana at that point.

But the situation is changing. We have enough strength within our own students of meditation that we can inspire people. We have to bring the teaching to a more systematic procedure, which is very necessary. At this point we are making history, so to speak, in transplanting Buddhism into this country. Once we begin to do that, we had better do it properly and purely. That seems to be the important point—to do it in a very traditional way, as it has been done in the past. In the days when Buddha himself taught meditation to his students, and in medieval times when Buddhism went to Tibet from India, it was presented in a very orthodox and straight-forward manner, rather than improvised.

Meditation instruction is going to be conducted by students as part of their training. Students shouldn't feel free to play around with their instructees, improvise as they come along. That tends to lead to all kinds of fascination, power-tripping, and using people as part of an experiment. That has actually happened in many cases, in this country particularly. It tends to become a very powerful avenue to become a charlatan. So at this point we are trying to stick with the basic minimum discipline and practice instructions. One of the first points is that the instructors themselves should try to indulge, so to speak, into the practice as much as you can. You might go on retreat, or do three dathüns, or do a lot of daily sitting practice—so that you know what you are talking about and there's no particular hypocrisy involved. If you are doing it yourself, you know others can do it at the same time—so the whole thing becomes very natural and real.

Formal Environment

There are a few hints that I have, before we get into the actual details of instructing people. It seems to be necessary to provide some kind of suitable room situation in which to instruct people in meditation. If you're a disciple of somebody, and if you're not the real person himself, people might have a tendency to undermine your existence and doubt your authority. In order to make people believe in what you're saying and actually follow your instructions, it is necessary to provide some kind of physical situation, an interview room of some kind. If it happens to be in your house or your bedroom, you should tidy it up and provide some kind of dignified setup to begin with. That seems somewhat petty if you look at it from one angle, but on the other hand, it seems to be very important that the person doesn't rush a mile a minute. You and your student should be able to relax and sit down, and settle down in that situation. In other words, the whole thing should be conducted in a rather deliberate way, rather than too casually and overly friendly. That doesn't necessarily say, of course, that the instructor has to be uptight, or ready to pounce on them. But having set up that kind of situation, the instructions should be given in a very deliberate way. That doesn't mean to say that you have to put on an act. But speak clearly and precisely. That's supposed to be one of the rules that teachers should follow—to speak as clearly as possible. And try not to use too much philosophical argument in the situation, but just be very simple, direct, and practical. Try to make the whole thing simple, real, and authoritarian at the same time, and somewhat friendly of course—there's an undercurrent of humor trickling on constantly. That kind of thing is necessary.

We had one meditation instructor here who was very shy, and spoke almost in a whisper in a fashion. People sat and talked with him and didn't realize that that was meditation instruction somehow. Then they wanted the actual meditation instruction. So one has to be somewhat heavy-handed and realistic. That seems to be necessary, so that you are recognized as somebody. I think those are the general public relations considerations, the best kind of salesman's act we could put on. [Laughter]

Apart from that, as far as the instruction is concerned, we are not instructing beginners in vipashyana any more. That comes later. If you're working with a student over a period of say ten months or so, consistently, then maybe you can instruct them in vipashyana—which we'll discuss at the end of our gathering. The first thing is shamatha instruction, which is somewhat rigid and very realistic.

Background of Non-Existence

What we're trying to do is to bring out the realization that you don't exist, that nothing is existent, everything is impermanent—not only impermanent, but nonexistent. That's the first idea behind the whole thing. You don't exist, because if you actually look at yourself, you don't find anyone to look. That's not quite the same as the guy in the movie *The Ruling Class*. Someone asks him, "How do you know you're god?" and he says, "I find when I'm praying I'm talking to myself." [Laughter] But it's that there is some kind of haunting echo that takes place constantly. When it is solidified we call it

thoughts, we call it me, ourselves—my thoughts and my ideas, my emotions. But fundamentally there is a kind of ripoff that takes place all the time in our minds. It is intangible, and you can't hold onto it. The practice of shamatha brings that out very clearly, I think. So that when you use the breath, sit and breathe, the only thing apparently existing is the breath; the only thing that is seemingly existing is the recapitulation of events reflected in your mind. There is the past and possibilities of the future. But nothing really happens in the present except the past and future crowded into your mind.

The whole thing sometimes could seem like a great bank of energy. Nevertheless, there's no vibrating power particularly. It's a kind of self-existing nonexistence. Of course, if you are trying to relate this to new students [laughter] probably they wouldn't make head or tail of it. The point of working with the breathing is very important, because then you begin to pick up some kind of flow of that particular energy that occurs out of nothingness. Depending on your mood of the day or night, sometimes breathing is like a current of air flowing out and in. And sometimes breathing turns out to be like a big tube of plexiglas stretching out from your nostrils. Sometimes it's like a spray of water, a sprinkler system. These very detailed experiences of breathing are not matters of importance. We should just let them go as they are, simply.

In quite a lot of cases people have a great difficulty in actually going along with the breathing, and at some point the breathing becomes imaginary. They have to visualize breathing going out—in other words, they can't hold onto anything. In such cases it is not desirable for them to visualize their breathing going out and in, but just to feel it. The imaginary world is not regarded as important or necessary. Sometimes in fact it is regarded as dangerous, because it brings all kinds of mystical visions. So if you can't feel the breathing going out, just be with it. There's an outward feeling that comes out of the nostrils, and if you can't follow it, just let it go that way. But don't hold onto the breathing particularly. So it's sort of gone, dissolved.

Sometimes we find it easy to go along with breath going out, and then actually feel the dissolving. In such cases the inbreath is also very tempting to follow. When that temptation comes, just let it drop. Just let the inbreathing automatically come in. It's like when you swim: when you breathe out, breathing in happens naturally. You don't have to consciously breathe in.

The world of relating with the breathing becomes very complicated sometimes. In many cases people find that they can't breathe, and they're stuck with something. They just simply can't do it, there's a matter of blockage. I think in such cases, the problem is not so much with the breathing, but with the intention of the sitting practice itself. They view the whole thing as a very important kind of activity—so they begin to sit very carefully and in a very special way. Then obviously the breathing is petrified, and you don't have breathing anymore. All your energy is spent on your posture, your special big deal that's happening on that occasion.

Labeling

In the case of the thought processes, one of the special points of shamatha practice is that you label them as thoughts. When the thought process occurs, you label them as thoughts. But you don't necessarily categorize them as particular thoughts—just anything that occurs is thoughts. So that kind of labeling does help in many cases, on a large scale, because then the process doesn't become too mysterious any more. You have a definite intention and a definite experience of what's happening. There could be a thought of emotional upheaval—you would like to go out and punch somebody, or you would like to wash your socks. Anything of that nature, big or small scale, none of them are regarded as a Freudian or a Jungian analysis, as if everything means something to you—"I have these thoughts; something must be happening in my meditation." So that takes care of the whole mysterious aspect altogether. We are not particularly trying to hide or trying to oversimplify. The actual practice that happens is not thought processes of all kinds—the smaller ones, bigger ones, significant ones, insignificant ones—but all of them are just thought processes. The bigger ones are "emotions," the smaller ones are called "discursive thought," the religious ones are called "pious thoughts"—but still it's the same thing. It's the thoughts, still thought—thinking process, and labeling.

Q: In one of the early 1974 Seminary talks, you said that when you find yourself having wandered off into a thought, you don't just go back to the breath, but some acquaintance with the thought develops. That often brings up the question from students: "You mean that we shouldn't just label the thought, but we should learn about the thought?" "There's always a sense of contradiction because of that remark.

V: Well, when you are in a situation to label it as thought, something has already happened. You don't have to try an encounter group exercise with your own thoughts. Whenever something arises as a highlight or something, you call it thought. So that means you are already getting into it. Whereas if you look at them first, analyze them and look into it, then you are completely confused by the time you are about to say it is just pure thought. It seems to become a thought, then it becomes something more than ordinary thoughts. It's "I want to kill my father, isn't it terrible." You know, it becomes a guilty conscience, or it becomes primal whatever. So you begin to feel shocked, or you get more involved because of that.

So one approach here is designed for beginners, particularly. At the beginning level, whatever occurs, one has to recognize as coming out of nothing. We were talking about that earlier on: nonexistence, you are nobody. They are thoughts, they come out of nowhere.

The other question is that there is a tendency to think labeling them as thoughts will do the trick, will be another way of rejecting the thoughts. That seems to be the wrong idea entirely. In this case we are not trying to dissolve the thoughts or encourage the thoughts in any way at all. Maybe you occasionally boycott, occasionally come back to the breathing, leaving half-done, half-eaten thoughts. But we are not particularly regarding the thoughts as a nuisance, by any means.

The labeling should not be regarded as a trick or a spell to cut down or overcome the thought process. That seems to be a very important thing, because otherwise you would have a constant trick, and you would begin to play it. This is not supposed to calm down thoughts superficially, but to know what we're doing. Trying to overcome thoughts would be a sort of double-cross. Since thoughts are part of yourself already, you can't fool yourself exactly. There would be some kind of superficial trick—the birth of thoughts and the perceiver of thoughts would keep a mutual silence. That tends to get very complicated. So a thought happens, and then acknowledge it, label it. After that, don't watch what's happening, whether it works or not. Just label it and then come back to the breathing.

Q: What about thought that gets tied up with emotional feelings like resentment or sex fantasies, that also have some current of interest which isn't exactly in the thought itself? Thoughts of this kind hang on a lot.

V: Well, each time there are thoughts—maybe a head begins to appear, you say, “thought,” and when a neck appears you also say, “thought.” [Laughter]

Q: Sometimes there's a sense of relief; and I wonder if it's frivolous, particularly when the thought comes up, “I wonder if I'm doing this right.” I feel I don't have to worry about that, I just go back to my breathing.

V: Yeah, that's what it's all about in some sense. It's not a very intelligent way to do it, of course, but that's what a lot of people in the past did, including Buddha himself.

Q: I was wondering if it might be clearer to describe another way. You've said that your concentration shouldn't be one hundred percent on the breathing, but that it should be twenty-five percent on the breathing, fifteen percent making friends with your thoughts, and twenty-five percent relaxation. Could you say something about that?

V: Well, why don't you say some more?

Q: Well, I think it might be a problem if people try to stay one hundred percent on the breath. If you try to do it totally, it's so hard that you end up not being able to do it at all. It should be more of a light touch, and as Rinpoche has said at other times, about twenty-five percent should be on the breath; then there's room for other things to come in. They won't shatter anything because there's room for them to come in the pasture.

Q: That's right. I think that that is because everything's a light touch. But it's somewhat meaningful too, well disciplined, highly disciplined. At the same time, you don't put yourself into an obligatory corner or any kind of awkward corner any more. That somehow allows things to come and go, thought process comes and goes, and you acknowledge them. So the whole thing becomes very sane and realistic.

Not Categorizing

Q: I've been hoping you would go over some specifics of the kind of shamatha practice you are having us teach now. That is, we still keep the emphasis on the outbreath, but as far as dealing with the

thoughts, instead of the no-technique approach of “let them be there,” you want us to label them as “thought.” I’m wondering how far to take this naming process. Should it be part of the regular technique, or only used when thoughts are persistent?

V: I think you will probably confuse people if you speak of *naming* thoughts. The technique is not exactly what is described in *Heart of Buddhist Meditation* or similar books. We are not talking about categorizing thoughts. You just name it as “thought,” it’s exactly what we’ve all read in the Dathün Letter, regarding everything as thought, naming it as thought, everything that comes up.

Q: I thought it was more specific than that—naming it as what it was. Not philosophically what it was, but I mean as anger, etc.

V: Well the attitude is that anything that occurs in your mind is thought, whether it is highly evolved emotion or whether it is just discursive thinking. It’s the thought “I would like to drink a glass of water” or thought of intense anger at your parents, or whatever occurs. And the idea is to simplify everything into the level of thoughts. Anger is not actually an emotion as such, but anger is just a process of thought, which makes things much simpler. And the whole area’s covered under that heading, so to speak, so that even with drowsiness it’s “thought, thought.”

Q: Labeling everything as thought begins to get almost philosophical even though it’s just a technique.

V: Yeah, but it’s very simple. The whole idea here is what’s known as the contemplative tradition of practicing meditation, rather than the pandits’ approach to meditation. That is the approach that we are following, and accordingly everything’s simplified to one level. So you cannot possibly escape—you’ve been pushed back. You have a one-track mind, so to speak, into just that level.

Accepting as Thought

Q: It seems to me that identification with the breath and returning to the breath at the moment you realize that you’ve wandered is a return in itself. What is the purpose of having this labeling in addition to the simple breath.

V: Well, sometimes the breath doesn’t do it because you have to block the thought process in order to come back to the breathing. Whereas if you have the labeling happening, that is not heavy-handed anymore, but it’s a channel that you provide, sort of an intermediary adapter you provide.

Q: You mean it’s for a very heavy type of thought?

V: Well, yeah, or for thoughts that are questionable and thoughts that have problems or even simpler ones. Somehow as soon as you label you are back to breathing anyway. So that’s sort of approaching from the back door, which makes things somewhat into intellectual training, intellectually developing shamatha meditation. But intellect is also included in the experiential level.

Q: You once talked about a certain space that’s created at the moment of recognition of a thought. Would that same space be created through the labeling method?

V: Yeah, I think so. When you decide to call it thought then somehow it becomes very neutral, a very open-minded situation. Everything is accepted as thought rather than rejected as thought.

Q: But then you have to attend to the breath, so in a sense it is a rejection.

V: Well, if you look at it that way, I think so. But as soon as you label them as thoughts, then you have made them somewhat available, and softened them a great deal. The only thing to do is to come back to the breathing. You could go back to your thoughts, although that seems to be unnecessary at that point.

Non-Verbal Acknowledgement

Q: I'd like to indulge myself and pursue the need for labeling. You explained in the seminary that at the point when you come back to your breath there was no need to institute any tool like labeling or to drag oneself by the ear to get back to your breath. At the point when you realize some notion of any technique, the breath was there already, so at that point you have the choice of whether or not to go through a moment of labeling. When doing this technique I have to make a choice between going with the breath that was right there or taking the indirect route of regarding what was happening right at that moment as thought. See what I mean?

V: Well, you see the thing really happens anyway in your mind, whether you actually label it as consciousness or an officially accepted thing. You do label anyway when you come back to the breathing. You see thought and you see that it's wandering and then you come back to the breathing. You label it anyway. So this is including the whole thing as being kosher.

Q: I immediately begin to short-circuit the whole thing. Having seen what's going through my mind as thought, then the act of having seen it as thought was itself a thought, which was itself a thought. It just seems to flower into absurdity immediately.

V: Yeah. So in the labeling it's just thought. And then come back to the breathing. One has to play dumb a little bit. [Laughter]

Labeling as Simplifying

Q: I'd like to go back a little. I got a little confused by what was said yesterday about labeling thoughts.

V: Well, I think it's a question of a sense of clarity. At the mindfulness level you begin to see things very clearly, which doesn't mean to say quiet and calm particularly. From that you begin to develop a sense of completely unworkable details coming through your mind—sort of overlapping of overlapping of overlapping of various degrees of thoughts of a heavy or light type. So it would be very difficult to name everything. In fact, that would encourage further confusion. So the idea is just basically to acknowledge and name them as thought, and by doing that somehow the clarity on the breathing becomes more real. It's like you see that your life's dull, therefore you think you need to sharpen it. It's a double accent—coming back to the breathing is simplifying and labeling is also simplifying, which I think is the heart of shamatha and very necessary. And, in fact, because only twenty-five percent of mindfulness is on the breathing, that leaves room for the labeling. At the same time a letting-go process—after labeling you don't just hold tight; you are just touching the verge of

the breathing as breathing comes and goes. So there is a natural harmony of pull and push together, which creates a kind of crystal-clear background.

Shi-ne Drosum

Q: Is the outbreath generally a Nyingma practice?

V: No, it's both Nyingma and Kagyü. It's an amalgamation of both traditions. I don't think Sakya and Gelugpa traditions have anything of that nature. And the Kagyupas particularly have the labeling practice, *Shi-ne drosum*—where the thoughts rise, where they dwell, where they vanish.

Technique and Experience

Q: I am trying to get my attitude straight towards the labeling approach. Right now I have the attitude that in the beginning we began to sit with our relatively sophisticated meditation technique, which was somewhat shamatha and had tremendous space for vipashyana. And then you were recommending the labeling practice, which is somehow less sophisticated and has less room for vipashyana. It is strict shamatha in the sense of being strictly mindfulness experience.

V: That seems to be a typical Western approach to technique—that techniques are the only things that make us valid, or tell us where we stand. Somehow it doesn't work that way.

The development of meditation practice doesn't come from what you do with your method, your technique. Technique doesn't have that much power to bring you down to the hinayana level particularly. Techniques are just sort of lip service—a very convenient lip service that you pay. Underneath that, what happens is the real thing. So you can have ati type labeling, you can have mahamudra type labeling, or all kinds of things. The labeling itself doesn't make that much difference. Labeling seems to be just another way of relating with the manifest world, if we could look at it that way. Underneath, the whole thing might be heightened, but still you know that gesture is good—just like sitting in meditation itself is a hinayana style.

Improvisation and Orthodoxy

A lot of things that we discuss here are obviously not absolute guidelines. You have to use your intelligence and your experience, and since everybody here is intelligent already, I'm sure that you could do a good job. The general guidelines of the path are suggestions of all kinds, and there's a lot of room left for you to use your intuition, within a certain limit. That is to say, if you begin to suggest new techniques, new tricks, obviously that's violating the whole thing. But otherwise, certain types of people might be extremely depressed or completely fucked up, or some students may be extremely ready for it, very intelligent. Some people are angry by basic nature and are going to resent anything you say, even if you say it with a light touch. One has to approach them so that the message gets across. So I think, therefore, that there is a lot of room for individual improvisation.

Working with Emotions

Q: Where does feeling the quality of your emotions come in? Is that something that just happens because you're letting everything come up and pass?

V: Usually what happens is that when you are letting go that far with just doing nothing and sitting, actually you are not just doing nothing. Generally when we talk about doing nothing, we do all kinds of other things. But in this case, of actually really doing nothing, you do get all kinds of things of the past and things of the future. What usually happens is that the more people sit through the time, they get more and more extraordinary, and some mental warfare begins to develop. Particularly if they sit for dathüns, or even a nyinthün, or for beginners even if they sat for one hour of sitting practice. In that situation they get all kinds of extraordinary things towards the end of the period. There's physical irritation, and some kind of resentment that "I'm supposed to be doing this, I can't get up and stretch my legs." The emotions start from there. Then they begin to drag out all kinds of other things.

The first shot of sitting practice, the very first time, quite possibly everything will go extraordinarily smoothly. In a lot of cases people manage to do everything exactly as they're instructed, and they follow it and do it. Their excitement and novelty orientation tends to bring that kind of thing about. You try to be a really good student, which tends to create a smoothness, and then you begin to get familiar and bored with it halfway through. Then the emotions begin to be very powerful; but quite possibly that wouldn't happen at the beginning.

Q: But it's important to become acquainted with them. Is there a registering or a kind of categorization, in that you recognize certain patterns of emotions?

V: I don't think you have to study them especially, like you study animals in the zoo. Acquaintance here means not getting disgusted with it or not being shocked by it. Just accept them—sexual fantasies, aggression fantasies, whatever occurs, however perverted it may be. Still it's okay, nothing to be ashamed of.

Q: When we give instruction, should we mention that emotions or thoughts might appear and get more overpowering?

V: Well, at the beginning, just simply present the technique and play it very lightly. Let suggestions come from them, rather than planting something in their mind. Otherwise they might manufacture something. A lot of people at the beginning are concerned with whether they actually are doing something, or whether what's been taught is true or not. So it is quite likely that they might manufacture everything.

Q: I've been reading the 1973 Seminary notes, and at one point you say that the whole meditation practice is to relate to our past, make the best job of our previous experience, and continue in the present situation. Could you expand on that as an element of the practice?

V: I don't know what it could be. Do you have any more suggestions?

Q: Could it be learning to make friends with our past?

V: Well, not necessarily, actually. It seems that fundamentally there is nothing to be guilty about at all, to feel bad about. That is to say, if you have to make friends with your past—if you have had some nightmare with the past, then you have to make friends with it. That automatically suggests that there is some kind of guilt conflict or ill will about something that's happened. But in this case, you are

starting fresh on the present moment, whatever shape you may be in. You know, we didn't fuck anything up. Here we are, we are not trying to build ourselves up or reform anything, and we are not trying to be good boys and good girls particularly. There is always a chance to start afresh as long as there is now, which is always here. I think that's the point, you know. Making friends does suggest in some sense that there is ill will, some kind of enemy relationship. Even renewing a friendship means that the friendship was stale and you're trying to jazz it up. So the practice of meditation actually provides a gap: stopping all the activities of karmic inheritance and karmic creation. We start on new ground, so we don't have to feel particularly bad about what happened in the past.

Speedy Mind

Q: What about the case where a person's mind is just so speedy he doesn't seem to be able to come back to the breath.

V: Oh, that's no problem. In fact this whole practice is designed for people like that.

Q: What if you get someone who is not really nuts, but he's freaking out and has a tendency to shift his attention. For example, in a conversation he'll hear a car and say, "Well, that's why I have problems with cars," when in fact he wasn't even talking about cars. Do you know what I mean?

V: You see, the whole thing is that as an instructor you are an example. Your way of behaving is very solid, as stable as possible. You don't buy any bullshit from anybody. Tell them to keep sitting. There is confidence in the sense of solidness, in the sane kind of qualities in you already. Which doesn't necessarily say that you have that quality all the time. But while you're dealing with that particular person at least give them a good response. It helps actually; it's worth trying to be as together as possible during that period.

Magic

Q: Rinpoche, in the seminary notes you spoke of the magic involved in sitting practice. Today you said that within shamatha the practitioner should have some sense that everything is workable and understandable. Where does the magical aspect come in?

V: Well, I suppose the magical aspect is an undercurrent. That doesn't mean to say that a magical situation is not understandable and workable. It's a natural thing, like there is magic when you turn on the stove and the flame comes up and begins cooking your food. That undercurrent is there. It is a kind of subtle power, much more powerful than any other seeming kinds of "magic." It is a way to squeeze people's neurosis on the surface, and to affect people's personalities and behavior, and make them grow up much more than before. I suppose that all of those undercurrent situations could be called magic. I mean it's not just that they are different from kids playing cowboys and Indians - nobody suggests playing Buddha here particularly. It's much more than that. The whole thing becomes very powerful. I think when you begin to work with people, you find more and more that you begin to influence people's life immensely, and change their whole outlook, much better than a hundred books that they read or a thousand asanas of yoga. So I think that that's why we're very careful here. It is somewhat dangerous for you to do this. At the same time that doesn't mean that you shouldn't do it;

since you are here you might as well go ahead and do it. You're ready for it, and you are taking great responsibilities. [Laughs]

Awareness

Mindfulness develops into awareness, which seems to be a later stage. The sense of mindfulness enters into the level of your basic being, and acquires a certain sense of generosity. Out of that naturally comes some sustaining of that entrance. In other words the mindfulness enters into one's being, and awareness is the sustaining of that, and also sort of distributing it all around. That's the definition of awareness.

Awareness sometimes seems extremely artificial. That artificiality is the discipline. That artificiality is the commitment in some sense, being willing to be a fool. It's as if you are making up something totally unfamiliar and unknown to you, but still letting it be that way. At the same time there is a sense of slowing down the world. Or there is a sense of transcending the usual manipulation that takes place. That manipulation is another kind of awareness, but it is not founded on the basic ground of mindfulness. It is usually based on personal gain or on an attempt to be deaf and dumb, numb, so that you can enjoy further pain. Or one tries to make oneself sensitive so that you can detect any threat. Then you can attack it or destroy it, and maintain what is good for you. That kind of manipulation seems to be generally what's happening. In the case of awareness, none of those schemes are involved. It's like switching on a light: that light then begins to permeate the whole room. The switch actually sustains that first click, and then begins to hold and fulfill its functions. Within that basic general environmental awareness, you also develop a sense of specific things. For instance, being aware of one's speech, or being aware of one's actions, communications and other things. Those are included. I think we might face some problem there, if we made that into a cult-oriented or evangelical sort of practice—trying to be serious, solemn and solid. That might bring some problems.

But we can actually cultivate this awareness without the potentiality of such problems. One is actually able to do it properly when there is a sense of identification with teachings, so that you are part of the discovery. The Buddha has seen something and you are now part of it. So there is not a sense of accepting and order. Buddha's way of discovery is part of one's being.

QUESTION: You said that in the beginning the awareness might seem artificial. Then you talked about switching on the light so that once it happened, it happened. Once vipashyana happens does it go on and on or is it still a matter of switching on and off?

VAJRACHARYA: Well, it's a matter of acknowledging that something is switched on. That doesn't necessarily mean that the light is switched on and therefore going to shine forever. But there is a sense that there is light and you have begun already, and now you just go with it. There is a natural sense of going along with it. And one goes along with it fully.

Q: It sounds like part of the art of this is recognizing vipashyana when it occurs. Can one then have flashes of vipashyana experience in the midst of a more primitive, less developed level? It seems like there are times when that happens. It just comes and goes.

V: I think there is no such thing as a less developed level, you know. We go along with our state of mind, which has the possibilities of experiencing both vipashyana and shamatha. What we are doing is just using our resources properly and that happens.

Speeding

S: When you're speeding, could the feeling of the speed be the vipashyana awareness?

V: Yeah, that could be. Well I think at this point, there is no such thing as really speeding. It's just doing things in their own way. Sometimes you do them fast, sometimes you do them slow.

Q: It seems your mistakes show you when you don't do it very well.

V: Well sometimes your mistakes are inevitable, if you haven't planned properly. Then they happen, not because you aren't doing it properly, but because you planned it wrongly in the beginning.

Mindfulness and Awareness Together

S: Sometimes it seems that awareness can be the biggest obstacle to mindfulness practice in sitting meditation.

V: Well, that's good. If the two have a battle between them, then that's great. That seems to be a very cheerful situation.

Q: Why is that?

V: Because you are in the midst of total awakeness of some kind and your mind is so scrutinizing in the particular situation that you feel a difference between mindfulness and awareness.

Q: Could mindfulness seem like a certain strain at that point?

V: Yeah that's fine, yeah.

S: Well then, should you just not strain?

V: Well, it sounds like the mindfulness is becoming alien property. It's not so much a question of refraining from it, but of accepting it, giving in to it. If you begin to look that obviously has strain, but there's no point in not straining either. What you do is just go along with it, you just give in completely. There seems to be the pull and the push taking place at once. One can give in, let go, and then the whole thing becomes a total picture.

S: But you always say to go back to shamatha. It seems that the shamatha opens into some kind of awareness, and one is always trying to come back to some kind of limited focus.

V: Yeah, so that you don't dream.

S: You mean that awareness can expand off until it diffuses into dreams?

V: Yeah, so you become more mindful and aware. Even if you are only taught shamatha mindfulness, the end product tends to be that you expand toward the vipashyana level anyway. The point there is not just to dissolve into it, but to come back. At the beginning level, particularly, the clean cutness is important. In other words we haven't even properly seen our world samsarically—we haven't seen the black and whiteness of the world. So much so that we are in a dream state, you know. The wakeful quality, the bodhi quality, at that level is seeing the samsaric world as it should be seen.

Vipashyana Technique

S: Does the technique remain the same?

V: There is more sense of awareness on the breathing, whereas the mindfulness of breathing is somewhat optional. So there is a possibility that the mindfulness on the breathing could just sort of diffuse. One might find that it is no longer important to stick with the breath, particularly. In the zen tradition it corresponds to shikan taza, which is the non-technique stage. That is vipashyana experience. So at the first level, mindfulness of breathing is important in shamatha. At the second level, of vipashyana, mindfulness of breathing becomes optional. Not because you should give it up by force, but the mindfulness of breathing might go away. There might be a level of expansion taking place, and less sense of one-pointedness. Traditionally the walking practice is much more associated with vipashyana. Walking practice has somewhat more expansiveness, the body moving through the air. There's a more free idea and also there are more obvious things happening, because you are actually walking. Whereas with the breathing it is questionable whether it's dream level, imaginary breathing, or if you're actually breathing.

Well, today we should discuss some points about vipashyana experience. The vipashyana experience is a gradual process that develops from the shamatha experience. In many cases students automatically arrive at that situation. In fact, it's almost predictable. So you are not particularly changing their style of technique from one to another, like graduating suddenly from one level to another. But when practitioners do enough sitting and expand their sense of identity with the practice, they tend to feel somewhat at home with it. At that point the actual mindfulness of breathing begins to become less important or less obvious to them. They slowly find themselves not needing to sit with the breathing alone; they find they can do without using the breath. In other words, the technique of breathing begins to drop away. And also some kind of fundamental continuity of mindfulness begins to happen. That's what's known as awareness, as opposed to mindfulness.

When such a situation has occurred, you don't particularly tell the student, "Now you have graduated from shamatha level to vipashyana level." Simply tell them to sit at the beginning of the session with mindfulness of the breath. And then when breathing goes away, that particular type of mindfulness goes away and a natural kind of mindfulness becomes all pervasive. Go along with that, and continue with that. So at the beginning it seems unwise to ask them to drop the breath altogether. Usually start the first session of sitting with just five minutes or so of breath. Then slowly the mindfulness of breathing dissolves into awareness.

The general nature of vipashyana is that you slowly begin to go away from techniques of any kind. That is the awareness. You have introduced systematic formal, rigid discipline at the beginning, and then you begin to go away from that formality slowly and become more and more involved with general panoramic mindfulness, which is awareness. That also makes the everyday sitting practice, as well as leading life in the postmeditation experience, easy for you. In other words the mindfulness is very hard to carry out exactly—while you’re cooking, while you’re eating and everything. On the other hand, awareness becomes much easier to carry out, because there’s no particular specific technique involved, for one thing, and there’s not a concentration which is based on pinpointing the situation. So the whole thing is generalized, but at the same time wakeful.

That is the general tendency of vipashyana, which means awareness. Vipashyana literally means “development of clear-seeing,” but it also means clearseeing in the sense of general vision rather than focused attention on one particular object of perception. It is panoramic, all pervasive. Somehow, it is very difficult to begin on vipashyana first, with the development of general awareness, because we haven’t actually worked on the specific awareness first, in all situations—like one’s pace in walking meditation or one’s pace of sitting and breathing. It would be difficult to institute anything general because we haven’t developed the individualities. Once the individuality is already developed, there would be no difficulty at all with just expansion of that. That seems to be one of the basic points of vipashyana. It seems to take a long, long time for people to get to that point.

However, it is possible for some students to make amazingly rapid progress. Sometimes you find that they are ahead of you. However you have to help them in some sense, as much as you can.

The general sense of vipashyana possibility is always there. Sometimes the vipashyana experience comes from the other angle. That is, in sitting practice a person works on the breathing—that still seems to be needed very much—but after the sitting session is finished you have an everyday life situation happening, and a sense of panoramic awareness develops as an after-effect of the very concentrated shamatha. So the concentrated shamatha tends to bring vipashyana in everyday life situations with some people. Such people can’t do without using the breathing while sitting, but later they can be fully there, fully aware, and at the same time accomplish what they’re doing. So those are the two possibilities. People have different styles and find different ways to develop that, but both of them lead to the same situation. The whole purpose of practice here is to provide a very vague boundary between sitting and not-sitting practice, so that finally everything becomes part of meditation.

Signs of Beginning Vipashyana

S: Are there any signs that indicate a person has already crossed over, or is about to cross over, that borderline between shamatha and vipashyana?

V: What do you mean?

S: What would a student say? How does he clue you in? I mean, he’s not going to say, “I had an experience of panoramic awareness . . . are there any problems?” [Laughter]

V: Well, I think it's quite simple, actually. The person begins to see through the technique. They might be very faithful and willing to continue with the breathing. But they feel that it is somewhat irrelevant, somehow they feel there's something which happens behind the breathing, behind the actual mindfulness of breathing activity. They feel that there is some awareness still going on. They begin to see through the techniques. You see, that process goes through all the nine yanas of the journey. Each time a person begins to see through the technique, he or she is ready to get into the next one. You begin to drop your crutches and see them as irrelevant. You still obey your doctor's orders—although you can walk perfectly normally, you might still carry your crutches along. There's that kind of tendency, and somehow a kind of insight develops. "I am still faithful to the technique, but I feel that something larger than onepointedness is taking place."

Slow Jump, Ocean Wave

S: For a person doing shamatha all the time there are gaps where you just weren't mindful, where you were dozing and you woke up. In vipashyana is there still that sense of waking up? Do you experience the same sense of having missed your awareness constantly . . . coming and going?

V: I think nothing is all that perfect, but at the same time the quick jump, like a flea's jump, is not there anymore. It might be sort of like an airplane taking off—you know, a slow jump. The on and off is not so obvious; it becomes fuzzy.

S: Essentially what we have to say is that vipashyana is technique-free? Your student says, "You mean I'm not supposed to do anything?" and your answer is yes?

V: Yes, that's right. But still the physical thing of sitting is important. There would also be a sort of swaying back and forth—you lose that grip and then become completely ordinary and pick up that grip again—that happens like an ocean wave that goes back and forth, ebbs and flows. You don't use technique, but still be aware and come back to awareness. By that point a person has enough grasp of what that awareness is. Something is happening.

S: You don't exactly have to ignore the technique. It seems in vipashyana you might be aware of the breath because that happens to be going on. But it's not employed simply as a technique.

V: Well, breathing is not a highlight anymore. Breathing is part of the totality.

Shamatha-Vipashyana and Mahavipashyana

S: Is this shamatha-vipashyana or is that a further development?

V: Well, when you have to come back to awareness, that's shamatha-vipashyana still happening. When the actual vipashyana or mahavipashyana occurs, one doesn't need to come back particularly. In fact you go out. That comes next, I suppose.

Oar in the Ocean

S: I've heard you speak of the combination, where the breathing technique functions as an oar in an ocean. The precise mindfulness is the oar and the ocean is the general awareness.

V: Yeah. I think that happens throughout the shamatha situation generally, when the shamatha experience becomes old and familiar. Before you get to actual vipashyana you begin to feel that way, and quite possibly people go through different stages of change. These kind of standards apply purely to a normal person who is not particularly extraordinary or ordinary, just regular middle-sized, not too thin, not too fat.

S: You mean that's not a sign of the dawning of vipashyana?

V: Not particularly, no. Generally in the beginning people would like any kind of sitting practice because it's a novelty. When the novelty begins to wear off, there will be a sense of progression, because you are so tired of doing the same old thing over and over again. There is a sense of resentment—disliking what you are doing, what you've been taught to do—and people ask for a new technique or a different way to do the whole thing. Beyond that, having been told to go back and do the same thing again and again, somehow the feeling comes that you can still do it; there's no problem with it, but it's not particularly entertaining or pleasurable.

I think it will be much beyond that level when a person begins to feel a sense that sitting practice is actually part of your lifestyle and a very natural thing. When you sit, you just do it, when you finish your sitting practice, it's still continuous in some sense, in theory, at that point. Beyond that, the actual potential of vipashyana begins to happen. So it takes a long period of changing over moods of all kinds.

Going Slow

Q: Don't you have to be rather suspicious? Some people can be clever, intellectually seeing that the technique is limited or hollow. They can begin to see that there's something behind it.

V: Sure, but I don't think they would have the same kind of composure.

Q You think that's rather evident?

V: I would think so, yeah.

Q: And in that case you have to take a hard line about shamatha practice?

V: Sure. "Come back to breathing." Yeah.

Q: Is shamatha a practice that one does theoretically for years?

V: Theoretically for years, yeah. In practice it may be shorter, you know. I think it depends on how much a student is able to pick up on the energy. The whole thing is based on the level of escape. The more sources of entertainment are provided, the more chance for you to cheat, and that slows down the whole journey, obviously. So it's very hard to say. There was a disciple of Nagarjuna who supposedly did shamatha for nine years before he finally got to vipashyana. Nagarjuna, as you know, was a great saint-teacher and was teaching him constantly. This disciple was a very diligent practitioner, but supposedly rather stupid, too.

I think it is necessary to go very slowly. The general tendency is that one tends to rush and not be patient enough; and one might suggest, unskillfully, to a student that there is more to come. As if the practice is like a course that you go through, which is a mistake. So when a student comes back and asks you, “What next?” one has to push them back and say, “Keep doing the same things.” One has to be very persistent, otherwise nobody takes deep enough root in the practice. So I think if you’ve been hasty things become disassociated, and people have less feeling of the practice of meditation. The vipashyana experience comes much later. The shamatha approach is like a worm in a tree; it eats the tree, it digests, and it leaves excrement behind; and then it goes on eating. So it creates a tunnel rather than any escape. That seems to be traditionally what’s called the walk of a tortoise, which is very slow and very definite, but covers ground. In other words, if there is any kind of glamour, it’s very attractive to present. But to tell people, “There is this meditation and that meditation yet to come, but we have to start with this” seems to be the wrong approach. They should feel that this is it.

Coming Back

Q: I have a question about “coming back” in vipashyana. I find it’s second nature that when I catch myself I become aware of the breath. You said that in the beginning of a person’s vipashyana practice they should not drop the breathing technique completely, but start the session with it; and if the breath faded out in a few minutes, that was fine. Well then, when you come back to your awareness during the sitting, would you suggest being with the breath for a moment?

V: No, not necessarily. Just come back to the awareness, in that particular session of sitting.

Clinging to Technique

Q: I think you once said that it was possible somebody would try and escape from vipashyana, complete openness, into the reassurance and security in the technique. Would you encourage the person to let go if that happens?

V: I think so, yeah.

Q: Could it happen that at the borderline between shamatha and vipashyana a person might have a preference for the definiteness of the shamatha technique over the openness of that vagueness?

V: They could, yeah.

Special Cases

Q: Do you find that the breathing technique is too violent for some people when they are first beginning?

V: You mean violent in the sense of “I have to come back to that”?

Q: Violent in the sense of too manipulative.

V: I suppose so.

Q: I find sometimes that it’s delicate to tell people to do that, because they seem to have a good understanding of some kind of flash, a good understanding of nonduality.

V: Well, still I think it would be good to begin that way. They might have some good ideas and good experiences, but they are not systematically organized. Quite possibly they are fascinated by a beautiful tie or shirt, but they may not have bought their trousers. [Laughter]

Q: But they might feel some unwillingness—although I haven't found anybody who expressed that.

V: No, I don't think so. It's such a solid approach and a sound way. I think people will buy it.

Synchronizing Body and Mind

Q: Can you tell the difference between when you're in a state of vipashyana and when you're not? Would you feel a difference during the day?

V: I think so, yeah. There's the alternating sort of wholeness as opposed to the individual starvation that goes on.

Q: Individual starvation?

V: Which is unwholesome, sort of neurosis.

Q: You mean like the times when you feel that you're really speeding and you can't keep yourself under control?

V: Yeah.

Technique-non-technique

Q: There are periods, months long, when I feel a natural inclination to drop the techniques. Then later on, I come back to it again. It seems important to relate to that inclination. Is this some kind of rationalization?

V: Well, I think there is no immediate problem, but at the beginning one has to come back to the techniques, maybe for long periods and then there's a gradual growth that takes place. It's like a baby being bottle-fed and breast fed, alternately at the beginning. Then slowly the baby takes the bottle for a longer period of time.

Q: I'm still trying to understand vipashyana awareness.

V: Well, I think vipashyana awareness is a general sense that there's a greater understanding of the whole thing taking place. Almost you can see in back of your head. It's like everything can be operated in the daylight. We are not particularly aware of the sun shining on us, but everything functions in the daylight, as opposed to nighttime. There is a sense of total clarity, which isn't extraordinary at all—it's just very simple. It's another kind of preoccupation, if you'd like to put it that way. You know, if you are upset about something, you still feel it in the back of your mind; but at the same time you can pay your bills and make your phone calls.

COMPARISON OF MINDFULNESS AND AWARENESS

Mindfulness: Sharpness and Alertness (Trenpa and Sheshin)

We could go back to discussing the difference between awareness and mindfulness. When we talk about mindfulness we are talking about experience which is alert—I suppose the closest word is alert—and has some sense of sharpness. Alertness is kind of a general alarm system, whereas sharpness is able to discriminate from one situation to another situation. In the case of shamatha practice, sharpness is provided by the actual breath—the insight and the sense of special qualities about being mindful of the breath. It's very definite and direct. As for alertness, that's the general situation in which your particular situation is allowed to be sharp. So alertness is a general sense of perking up. Then with particular details, once you are perked up already, you keep that alertness together by using the breath or whatever. That is very special, and very, very personal.

Your relationship to the world at this point is just a one-to-one relationship. It's like the relationship between your food and your mouth, and your jaws and your tongue, as you taste the food. It's that kind of relationship. Those two situations together bring about a sense of wholesomeness, and of completely being there, which is crystal clear. Nobody can argue about that, and you are precisely being there.

Awareness

But quite possibly you could be shocked by some other situation, while you are being mindful of your breath. Someone could pounce on your back and you'd probably jump. And that's kind of a one-dimensional situation. Mindfulness has a front and a back and faces to certain areas, in particular directions. Awareness, from that point of view, is somewhat vague and doesn't have a special concept or idea. On the whole, awareness is not being aware of particular problematic situations. It is fundamental alertness—you are being alert. At the same time this kind of alertness is like walking into a cool atmosphere. The elements begin to wake you up. It's not that you're trying to be alert from this end. The external situations begin to come to you, in part because you have ceased to use your particular object of concentration, like the breathing, heavily. You have begun to deal with the whole thing without any particular one concentration point. That tends to bring you out to the atmosphere. It's like eating a delicious meal, sitting in a drafty room with a lot of cool air coming through the cracks in the walls. The drafts approach you rather than just relating, one-to-one, to your meal. That's why it is called lhakthong, clear seeing. That does not just mean something visual, but clear feeling altogether. In order to feel clear, you have to have some sense of totality, which does not have a face. It does not have one-dimensional communication, but it's all pervasive. In the case of awareness, nobody can pounce on you from behind your back and shake you. It's an all over situation. So your openness is completely all pervasive.

Passionlessness

On the whole those two situations have one common factor. When we talk about mindfulness or awareness of any nature, there is no sense that you are looking for danger. It is not a corrective mechanism that is operating in you. When we talk about mindfulness, people usually think, "Oh, I

forgot to fetch my purse, because I didn't have enough mindfulness." That is a very domestic, petty idea of mindfulness. People feel you should tensely watch out, looking out for problem areas or any kind of attack. Things might go wrong, therefore you should be careful.

That is not quite the case: in fact, it's the opposite. When we talk about mindfulness and awareness, we are not looking out in terms of being careful, watching out for danger. It is possible, if we're fully and thoroughly able to interest ourselves in the day-to-day living situation of the sense-perceptual world, that we could pay immense attention to the world. We could develop some wakeful qualities generally. This wakeful quality doesn't have to be particularly dedicated to warding off danger or shortcomings. So a fundamental point is that, in fact, mindful awareness comes from a sense of relaxation, a sense that you can afford to open and let go. Because of that, an aware situation can occur. Because of that, you can practice twenty-four hours a day. Otherwise, if mindfulness relates to being careful and warding off danger, your discipline cannot be practiced for twenty-four hours, and it will become a one-sided situation. You feel, when things are going peacefully, you don't have anything to do, whereas when things are going badly maybe you have lots to do, but it may be more than you can cope with. So that approach becomes somewhat awkward and lopsided. I think that's one of the very important points, according to the teachings, that everything is an expression of passionlessness. That is to say, there is nothing to grasp, and nothing to fight at the same time. The expression of passionlessness is that you don't try to accomplish anything as a special project. But somehow, as a by-product, you don't forget your purse absentmindedly. Because your awareness of totality becomes more powerful than your one-pointedness. Do you have any remarks about that?

Q: Does passionlessness extend to enthusiasm? Should we not get excited about things?

V: I would say within the realm of humor or something like that, you begin to find subtle details of the world. I don't think there is any problem with that. In fact, then, you begin to learn the trick to develop your mind, and pay interest, immensely. There are no other distracting elements crossing between your thought and your interest.

Q: What about getting in an extremely good mood? Is that a problem?

V: I don't think so. I don't see why.

Q: Well, I find when I get excited, I cling to my expressions of happiness and become somewhat stupid.

V: Well, the problem is not with the excitement, but with where you collect it. The traditional analogy is that an enemy can attack his opponents while they're having a wild party celebrating their victory.

POSTMEDITATION IN SHAMATHA

Early Stages

Q: It just occurred to me that we're all thinking in terms of sitting practice, and we never think of saying anything in terms of practice in everyday life. And you know—

V: Well, I think a person has to make some commitment of some kind. He has to make some kind of gesture—which is sitting practice—before he gets into working with the daily life situation. Then vaguely what happens is that the person becomes very sensitive to everything in the everyday life situation. Then maybe there are possibilities of developing mindfulness from that. But until a person becomes sensitive to it there's no reminder to be mindful anymore. So mindfulness is not so much the result of your intense discipline, but mindfulness comes because the standard of your mental faculties has been raised. Mind becomes sensitive to your irritations, so the irritations trigger off your awareness. That seems to be how the whole thing works.

Q: Would you say that in some sense the same principle of the boredom works in everyday life in producing more of a sensitivity to unfrivolousness? You kind of starve your normal activities, so there's less entertainment in your everyday life and you start paying more attention that way?

V: Yes, I think so. That's possible.

Q: Is there any kind of postmeditation experience connected to shamatha, like *je thop*?

V: I think that comes in *lhakthong*, *vipashyana* experience much more than in shamatha practice. Shamatha practice is somewhat artificial; it's very deliberate, and it's kindergarten level. But it seems to be absolutely necessary for people to do that in the beginning.

Q: But isn't there also a very beginning stage of meditation in daily life?

V: When you say a beginning level, that would be the beginning level of *vipashyana*. The idea is that people have gone through the ordinary level, the lay level, already. You are in the professional level when you have the *vipashyana* experience developed. That is usually regarded as the starting point of a different level of sanity.

Q: In terms of giving the meditation instruction, where does mindfulness in action come in? Should you give it right in the first instruction or wait awhile?

V: Well I think the first instruction should be just purely on sitting practice. Maybe as a person gets into it more and more, and sitting practice becomes part of his life situation, then the action part becomes important too.

Q: Would you wait till there seems to be some suggestion of *vipashyana* on their part?

V: Not necessarily, you can do the same thing on the shamatha level, very graphically. I don't think you can just jump to the *vipashyana* level of mindfulness of action. First one has to get into the mindfulness of action basis of shamatha.

Q: So what one undertakes, one does thoroughly, whereas at the same time one could be jumped from behind.

V: Yeah. Sure. But as long as you do everything properly, that's as good as you can do. Usually we can't even do that, you know.

Mindfulness in Action: Involvement, First Impulse, and Echo

Q: Rinpoche, I'm confused about mindfulness as you were talking about it last time. You said it was not any kind of heavy deliberate carefulness or tiptoeing. You very often give the example of making a cup of tea and doing everything very properly. I'm not sure of the distinction between making the tea properly and this careful tiptoeing quality that isn't mindfulness.

V: I think that's quite simple. If you are careful and tiptoe then you don't relate with the tea, you relate with yourself too much. And the result is usually that you make a bad cup of tea. You find yourself creating. It's a perfect example of neurosis, you know. Making a perfect cup of tea comes from relating with the tea rather than yourself.

Q: So it has something to do with watching yourself too closely.

V: Well, you just relate thoroughly with what's going on, rather than have internal conversations.

Q: Sometimes when I get really into cooking for instance and I really have to concentrate on it, I find myself talking to myself. You know, I say "one-half cup of flour and mix that with that." I actually say it out loud, giving myself direction. It seems that happens when I'm really into it. And when I'm not into it things are much more abstract, I think about what happened before, but there seems to be some kind of separation.

V: I don't see any problems if you're fully involved with what you're doing. You might think about it, you're so fully involved.

Q: Would that be mindful?

V: That seems to be mindful, yes. It's like reading the signs on the road. You know, there's a sharp curve. You read it, you say it to yourself, and you go along with it. Rather than saying, "I'm driving—I might crash," which might bring up other things.

Q: But isn't that very much a shamatha type of mindfulness? Wouldn't it be possible to have more spaciousness involved?

V: You mean vipashyana has more spaciousness?

Q: Yeah, more of the environment around what you're doing, as well as what you're doing.

V: Well I think if you are into one particular thing properly, then you obviously wield the environment naturally. In shamatha mindfulness just the first impulse is being used. In vipashyana awareness there is the first impulse and its echo that happens beyond the first.

Q: What do you mean by echo?

V: Well, as opposed to the actual sound. There is a reflection of the first impulse which creates environment. You get conceptual feeding from memory which creates some kind of texture. If you see a dead end sign, it says "dead end." First you see it and read it, and then you feel it. It's a dead end, and you create the environment that the road doesn't go beyond that.

Q: That's the echo.

V: Yeah. So even on the vipashyana level you have shamatha mindfulness plus vipashyana awareness taking place.

Q: Rinpoche, can we all expect to go through that state that you were describing? Does that happen later on, or is that just something that may happen?

V: I think it's natural in some sense. It's like, if you know how to spell, then you can read.

Loneliness

Q: Sometimes it seems like there's almost two different people within me. It's like, I would say, when I'm more aware it seems to make other people uncomfortable, because my reactions aren't always completely normal. Maybe because there is more self-consciousness involved or something. But there's always this thing in me that wants to slip back into what seems the normal thing. I mean, I also want to be comfortable you know.

V: Well, the only problem I can see is that it makes other people uncomfortable because they expect you to go along with their pattern of neurosis.

Q: Yeah, that's what I mean.

V: I think in that case you are teaching them a lesson. That's the point where you should remain alone. I think that's where loneliness comes from. You are not sharing the usual fun and games these people are experiencing. They are having fun being mindless. Whereas you are there in an isolated mindful situation. In such a situation one should really actually be severe and austere in some sense.

Q: Are you saying that there is no point in trying to join in the fun and games?

V: Yes. I mean that will just create corruption for yourself in some sense.

SPECIAL ISSUES

Retreats

QUESTION: What length of time meditating by yourself would be considered a retreat—say going off for three days?

VAJRACHARYA: Well, three days would be for lack of a better choice. Ideally you should spend ten days, so you have a chance to settle down and get into it. It takes several days to settle down.

Q: In terms of people, say, asking you about doing a retreat, what if a person just wants to do three days by himself?

R: Three days is quite simple, I think. That's classified as an extended nyinzhün.

Q: Even if it's done alone?

V: Yeah.

S: So anything less than ten days falls in that category.

R: Yeah.

Q: Apropos of retreats, I think that the dathüns and ten-week study periods offered by the Colorado Center and by Karmê Chöling are automatically recommended—not so much by the individual meditation instructors, but that kind of thing is always recommended.

V: Yeah, a dathün is always a place to come and take part in, because there will be meditation instructors there, and people will be taken care of. Whereas going into retreat is usually by yourself. So if you can recruit a hundred dathün sitters it's great. [Laughter] You yourselves should come, definitely. As instructors you have to have several dathün experiences, hundreds of them.

Q: What about doing retreats in the city?

V: Well, we tried to do that with the Dharmadhatu in New York. Having retreats in the cities would be a very good statement. You don't have to be in the country to do that; you can do it any time. And the people on retreat in New York could take a break by walking around the block instead of walking in the meadows. That's okay; it seems to be workable.

Q: If a retreat is done in the city, can a person do it in his own place?

V: Usually not in your own place, because there are so many associations with your environment. It would be preferable to borrow a friend's apartment or something like that. That's usually the best. Disconnect the telephone, put away the books, switch off the television.

Refraining from Teaching

I think in a lot of cases, meditation instructors could misrepresent things. However clear the guidelines and directions are, the whole thing could be presented completely off the wall. You might act as a spokesman for the teachings, sort of by rough guess, being full of information you remember from reading materials, and trying to repeat what you've heard. When you have little personal experience or sense of involvement you constantly have to grope for that kind of resource. But whenever there is a sense of complete involvement, complete connection, and particularly a sense of surrendering, then all these problems seem to be solved. That requires great openness to critical intelligence—the criticisms that might come up to you—openness to being confronted with criticisms, or confronted with challenges of all kinds. In other words, instructing in meditation should not make you hardened, but in fact softened a great deal. The more one teaches, that much more humility and softness you have, because of the sense that you are not proclaiming or displaying your understanding, your depth of wisdom, but you are simply voicing what you've experienced.

I think that is quite an abstract point. But at the same time it is good if individuals feel that they can't continue instructing in meditation, because they feel they themselves need more personal development first. It is worthwhile to chicken out, so to speak. That seems to be a very good sign, to chicken out before the whole thing gets too much into one's system, before one has begun to learn our act, so to speak, and finds a comfortable home in that. In other words this training here is not regarded as a long-term commitment that one can't give up. This is still temporary, and you might feel that this

presents more of an obstacle to your practice than a help. In that case it is necessary to drop out. That is not regarded as a failure, but one could go back to one's practice and then maybe at a later stage one could resume teaching.

I think this is also connected with the level of one's own awareness, as it develops. If one's own awareness becomes somewhat ragged, uncertain, and unintelligent, then what you project to other people is also going to be that way. Then one seems more to be imparting disease than sanity. Maybe up to that point you've been doing an extremely good job, but at a certain point it might be time to chicken out. So our situation here is not such that if you sign the contract you can't go back. It's still an organic process. We could have discussion.

Q: What process is a person going through, when he reaches a point where he wants to chicken out? Is it a case of somebody losing confidence as their awareness actually does become ragged, and their intelligence seems to degenerate? Or is it a question of actually becoming more aware, so that you begin to discover new holes in your system?

V: I think it's both in a way. Sometimes, in the early stages, you'll be extremely inspired and you're full of resources and wisdom. Then at a certain point you find yourself like a record that got stuck. You repeat yourself again and again, and you say the same things all over again to whoever comes along. There's no personal experience involved, no experience of a journey. It's not moving.

Q: You mean, you think you come to a dead end in your practice of teaching meditation?

V: Yes. In such cases it is not advisable to try to continue. Refraining from teaching is an act of wisdom.

Q: I guess this is different from the continual sense of insecurity, of being out on a limb, that you feel when you are in a teaching situation.

V: Well, if you feel yourself just shitting, so to speak, still you can communicate even through that. There is still fuel burning, so you are not running out of materials, and experiences. So that seems to be okay. But at the point when you are stuck and you have no more materials to go, then the obvious traditional attempt that people make from there is to resort to quotations and memories. One tries to manufacture something out of that.

Q: So is it like a person who gets so involved in working for the scene they can't even sit anymore?

V: That's one possible case. However a person might sit a great deal, and still one's meditation feels stuck, as well as the process of teaching. That is not the fault of one's meditation; it may be the fault of the teaching. So one has to refrain from teaching at that point, and regroup oneself.

Q: Where does one go from that point?

V: I think just come back to your practice, without teaching. It's that you've imparted something, and then you've begun to spend your own capital. So one has to stop spending.

MISCELLANEOUS TOPICS

Establishing Confidence

Q: That raises a real question which I'd like to ask Rinpoche. I've found in working with people some questions about how much to limit it to the bare bones. Sometimes I can sit with someone for forty-five minutes and talk about their life and the whole environment of Buddhism and meditation. Or I can limit the interview to giving the technique, a little encouragement, and leave it at that. I wonder if that's really determined by individual situations or if there's some guidance on that? That is, how much do you give them on the whole environment of the practice?

V: Well, I think it depends on how people come to you. Some people would like to relate to you as an authority who has something to say. They need some kind of confidence in you before they can relate with you—a sense of how much you know about the whole thing, and how much you are worth. And you have your own personal experiences, so in such cases it's good to demonstrate some kind of stableness, and that you know what you are talking about.

In some cases, that might become very heavy-handed. But just make basic friends with the people, and suggest somewhat lightly. That might be the best way to relate with them. I think it very much depends on the individual case. I find myself doing that in interviews for newcomers.

Making Friends with Oneself

Q: I've heard a lot about "making friends with yourself." To me that seems like watching the breath. You know, there's myself and then there's making friends with myself. It seems to present some sort of confusion, as if there are two people or something.

V: Sure. Well, I think that's the crux of the matter. Some people come on with enormous dissatisfaction, feeling that they are completely hopeless. This may be their last chance and they will try anything. But at the same time they are uncertain—there is enormous aggression happening, and they are not willing to hear anything; they become completely numb to the whole thing. And usually people punish themselves, so making friends with oneself or a certain sense of celebration is necessary. You know, life's not all that bad, and you are not all that bad, and maybe it is worth cheering up, worth celebrating something. That kind of angle is sometimes very helpful.

Q: Yeah, I understand that idea, but—

V: Well, you don't have to do that constantly. Then it becomes a trip of some kind—self-congratulatory or something. It doesn't have to be so constant. But I think that needs to be said to a certain type of person who is extremely severe on himself. Fundamentally speaking, it's true—the idea is to develop nonaggression, to make friends with oneself. Develop the maitri principle in oneself.

I don't think you can present that to just anybody. Some people have to be tightened up, because they're too indulgent; they indulge too much in some kind of entertainment. On the other hand, some people are too austere and too cold to themselves. So you have to feel the kind of personality in various individuals.

Life Guidance

Q: What about when people come to you with a very heavy emotional problem. It may not be related at all to meditation instruction—they may be having a very hard time with their marriage or something like that. It seems that you could easily get tripped out on trying to help them in a very heavy way, you know. As though you had it all together and they don't. How should we work with that kind of thing?

V: I think that's an interesting point actually. That happens with a lot of people; they are not only looking for meditation instruction as such, but probably looking for guidance in their lives. They trust that you can do something for them, because you seem to be relatively together and you have a harmonious life of some kind. So when people want to relate with you that way, it is quite legitimate.

I think that basically if you know what you're saying, and if you're not making up truths out of the blue, but if you've related with your own situation, then it is okay. But there is a possibility that you might be making up something imaginary, something that you read in a book or thought up on the spot. You might begin to build up something so as to save face. I think it's a question of your own personal experience and not to go beyond it. In some cases it's more advisable, if you are unable to help them, to say that you can't and "I don't know what to tell you." That's very simple and you're often much better off. As we have discussed earlier on, being a meditation instructor here does not mean you have achieved a state of being masters, but you yourselves are students. So maybe you could relate with it from that angle.

Advising

One last point is a sense of responsibility that you're going to have. Sometimes your role will be not only one of giving instruction, but also one of counseling problems and that kind of thing. In such cases, you should watch how you handle situations. One doesn't want to act as a psychiatrist particularly, but at the same time one doesn't simply say, "I'm a technocrat in meditation instruction, and I have no other responsibilities in relating with people." So it should be very clear that you should make friends with people; and they might ask questions about their marital problems, their sex life, problems with the economy, general frustrations, and dreams about their exam. When those little problems come up, the general tone that you can take is to keep it very simple, non-intellectual and non-analytical, simply dealing with the sitting practice, which would bring a general sense of clarity. That's the basic point, and having related with the sitting practice, a lot of the side problems begin to dissipate slowly. Of course, on the other hand, sitting neurosis might be erupting constantly, but that's not particularly problematic.

I personally find that situation in dealing with students. Further complaints are a sign that they are looking for some other problem rather than relating with sitting practice. So, more or less, we can assume that the problems are rooted in the sitting practice, not doing enough sitting. When a person actually gets into the sitting practice completely, properly, the neurotic and psychological problems become more verbalized as thought chatter, but not so much as hang-ups in the daily life situation any more. When sitting practice is being done, the neurosis begins to change its shift, because it's been scrutinized by the intense concentration of mindfulness.

So a meditation instructor's role is to instruct people and to make friends with them, and not just keep the whole thing between two people alone, but to try to bring the student into the sangha, to relate with the rest of the community practitioners. It would be ideal if they can manage to come and sit together with other students. It would be great, unless they're in extremely difficult situations with their schedule. It would be good to encourage them to do that because the group sitting tends to bring mutual support, and also tends to radiate some sense of the sanity of the blessings of the lineage. Each center has been practicing for a certain amount of time, and the students have made a great deal of connection with the lineage and practice, so that they do carry a sense of sacredness in them, actually. And when a newcomer comes to sit together with them, it does provide immense help.

At the same time, they should not become dependent on the group sitting alone, which sometimes makes individual sitting very uncomfortable and spooky. So we should sit individually as much as we can. A reasonable suggestion might be that daily sitting practice could be done in their own homes; and then periodically sitting together for nyinthüns, group situations, is highly recommended.

In terms of nyinthüns, people feel they might not be able to do it because they have never done it before. That's not quite true. People who have never done it before can in fact sit for a whole dathün. Sitting for a nyinthün is no particular problem. It's just at the level of breaking the ice and kind of breaking in new students. Invite them and ask them to participate; you should try to encourage and push them as much as you can.

Psychotics

Q: What about psychotic-type persons interested and attracted to your Dharmadhatu? Should we call you immediately?

V: Well, I think in some cases such people are workable. And some cases they are completely unworkable. So I would not try to work too hard, trying to help them constantly. The problem is that usually when you try to help them too much, you begin to feed them rather than helping them. At that point something unsaid is the best help, rather than something said. You have to let go and not develop a moralistic or evangelical attitude of trying to save everybody you can lay your hand on. I don't think that works. In some cases it does work—people can be approached from different angles, and that's left entirely to your devices. But the main point is that if you think trying to help them is going to create further chaos, then you have to let them go, definitely.

Personal but not Confessional

Something else I want to mention concerns the style of your teaching. I think the style of teaching should be very personal and very understanding. At the same time a lot of people fall into the trap of confessionalism. You begin to tell people how bad you were, how terrible the trauma was that you have gone through. If I may use such a term, that is a Ram Das style of confession. You feel that students will think you are an honest guy, and you have vomited everything you have to vomit. Somehow that seems to be very deceptive in some sense; it builds you up, showing how honest a

person you are. Another thing is that you are not presenting any genuine transmission of the dignity of the lineage. Instead, you are comparing notes between two people in jail, and somehow that doesn't seem to be the point. The point here is that you are acting as a spokesman of the lineage. Obviously there should be first-hand experiences exchanged, but at the same time one shouldn't indulge that particular style of winning someone's confidence. That's a double twist of some kind—that purity and at the same time a lot of personality trips are involved. That is something we should watch.

Constricted Breathing

Q: What do you say if somebody gets a tightness in their chest or some sort of constriction in their breathing while meditating?

V: That's very simple. Maybe they've been doing zazen or something like that. They should put more accent on going out, not on bringing in. The general style is that when you sit, just regard it as a casual thing to do. You put yourself in the right posture, sitting crosslegged and so forth—that's important—but as for everything beyond that, don't prepare too much, just sit and do it. Again, it's necessary that they should be given the technique of following the outbreath. Usually what is happening with such people is that there is too much sense of a big deal, for one thing, and also too much internalizing takes place. That tends to create tension not only in the body, but sometimes in the back of your neck, like someone wearing a very tight turban. The whole thing becomes very tight. So I think that's a sign that everything's been too internalized, and that there's not enough letting go. Maybe there's also some attitude toward one's thoughts of trying to capture thoughts rather than letting them pass through.

That happens more often when people come from a very tight hara practice like zazen or working with a koan. I find this problem with a lot of Zen students who come to me, especially people who have been involved in Rinzai practice, more so than Soto students.

Resistance

Q: What if somebody has been sitting for a while and suddenly they feel incredible resistance?

V: I think such a person has to be slapped on the face somehow. Just push them back; they should make themselves sit. I think it is a question of not being willing to see through, and of too much labeling as good and bad, and this and that. There is too much emphasis on duality. Practice is regarded as a very good thing to do, and the rest of it's mundane. So there's an enormous contrast, and you find resistance to your medicine. Which is very silly.

Q: I should think that kind of thing would happen a lot, like in a dathün.

V: Well, a dathün is different. You can't sit on your shit all the time; you have to dissolve it, all the time. In those circumstances you don't need any help to let people see through their resistance. A dathün is a very safe situation; you're happening all the time.

Q: Because they have to deal with it?

V: Yeah, whereas in other cases, it's much more difficult to handle. People shouldn't be allowed to escape.

Outbreath and Inbreath

Q: What about people who come in through other techniques? For example, there's a couple who are doing inbreath and outbreath. If they ask, "Why just the outbreath?" what would be the appropriate answer?

V: Well, we discussed already that the idea is not to provide one ongoing thing without any gaps, but to keep providing gaps.

Q: Then the same comment would apply to the contrast between mantra and this technique?

V: Yeah, yeah. It's like a chain of pipe, you know. The pipes might go back and forth, and form the in and outbreath, but it's still a pipe.

Relating with Trips

Q: Speaking of aggression, I was noticing today when giving meditation instruction that nearly everybody who came up for meditation instruction had already been doing some other technique. One person in particular described that their technique had been visualizing fantastic things happening. But no matter what they described, it absolutely wasn't Buddhist mindfulness. At least half the time, there seems to be an element of destruction in proposing the new method, and people are always shocked by it a little bit if they've been doing some other approach. You end up being put in a slightly condescending position as an executioner of hopes and dreams. Is that a problem? I begin to wonder whether I'm taking the right attitude. Somebody will say, "Well, you know, I had this experience," and you say "yeah." Then they'll say, "Well, what about this?" And no matter what they say you just act like a wooden Indian because everything they present falls into the same category. [Laughter]

V: Well I think you have to be courageous in some sense. If a person is coming to you so far as to ask for instruction and you're extremely polite and compliment everything, then you're not helping. You are in fact being very destructive, letting such people get away with things contrary to their own good.

Q: What about someone who says, "Rinpoche is giving me instruction during my meditation and during my retreat." What to you say?

V: Well, you could say that it's a question of oral instruction. That the way we go about things, everything is based on personal oral instruction and you as the instructor have given the oral instruction from that point of view. Whereas somebody's dream and fantasies are not oral instruction. You know, you can manufacture all kinds of things.

Do you remember Peter Tooley at Samye Ling? He was in retreat, sitting in front of my photograph. He had a vision of me twiddling my thumbs and he heard my voice. It said, "Go to the kitchen and take what is rightfully yours." [Great laughter] And he got up and raided the icebox [More laughter] Well, I think you can be very brave in saying that's not how to go about it. We have to stick to discipline.

Q: Couldn't we say, "I asked Rinpoche and he said he never does anything like this." [Great laughter]

Q: There's a problem that the scriptures and what people take into retreat are full of that kind of thing. Marpa appears on clouds to Milarepa, you know.

V: I don't see any contradictions there particularly. What Marpa tells Milarepa is to go back to the practice. [Laughter] He says, "What's the matter with you? Go back."

Counting Breaths

Q: Many people come to us who have been counting breaths.

V: I think counting breaths is one of the techniques which is the same as labeling. But then counting breathing becomes very complicated. You know, you get confused between the fourth one and the fifth one, and then you try to go back to number one. The whole thing becomes very complicated mathematical calculations [Laughter]

I once discussed that with Suzuki Roshi, actually, and he said, "Well, we don't actually count; we think we are counting, you know." [Laughs]

Young People Meditating

Q: Is there some age minimum as to how old a person should be before they start meditating? Someone came over to our place and brought his ten year old son. He had him sitting in full lotus for a whole hour. Is there a general age limit or is it just up to the person himself?

V: I think it depends on the child's desire. We have a fourteen year old girl in Boulder who sat two dathüns and regularly sits nyinthüns and everything else according to her wish. She seems to be okay, but at the same time she's extremely mature, so she feels like somebody who is in her twenties. But I think you can't push a child, making it part of his duty. Sometimes a child of eight or nine would ask, "What do you do when you sit, and could I join you?" "Sure, you could come and join me." People do that, and sometimes they only last for three minutes. But it's a good try, you know. I don't think anything is wrong with it.

Common Path

Q: In the seminary talks you spoke of the common path that could be shared by Hindus, Christians, and Buddhists. Could you speak a little bit more about that? Say some people want to come and sit with us who aren't into our kind of meditation, and who want to find some common ground.

V: Well, I suppose some kind of general interest in the direction of wanting to lead a life of non-aggression and some sense of peace. In terms of working with ego I don't think there is any common forest, but other than that, the shamatha practice itself could become some common ground. Trying to develop a sense of mindfulness doesn't support people in becoming any particular religious follower.

Interested Non-Buddhists

Q: Rinpoche, I have been embarrassed in speaking to people to say that Buddhist teaching is nontheistic. Many of my friends and associates come from a theistic background. My question is whether to plunge right in, or whether to let them figure it out for themselves.

V: I don't think there is any problem there, because meditation will provide some kind of inspiration to look into themselves to begin with. One doesn't have to set up doctrinal definitions of anything at the beginning, as long as a person sits. And if you begin with shamatha and vipashyana practice, the way of sitting has nothing to do with relating to external beings. It's simply working on oneself. So I think that's how you begin. Three years ago when I first came here we didn't discuss those subjects particularly. We just made everybody meditate. When people begin to realize that finally, and come to that conclusion already, then you can say it. It's not a big deal anymore.

I think it's basically obvious that in relating Buddhist teachings to Westerners in general, you are talking to a theistic person, though people today might not admit themselves as theists. You know, they say they are agnostic or whatever. But still, once they become interested in some kind of spiritual discipline, they are caught in trying to rediscover some divine being, a divine principle. Also people have a tendency to jump to the conclusion that everything's all the same. "You open and work on your mind, and we work on our worship, and we're all one." Nevertheless if they really begin to work on themselves, then that acts as a sorting ground automatically.

Degenerating Practice

Q: Before I left someone asked me whether what we do—sitting morning and evening and whole nyinths—is what the Tibetans did when Buddhism was practiced there.

V: Well, actually the Tibetans divide the day and night up into eight sections. That's to say, there's a sitting early in the morning, then there's one after breakfast, and then there is another after lunch, and then an evening sitting—and it goes on that way for twenty-four hours. But we should be quite clear that ordinary Tibetans don't sit very much, which is a degeneration of the teaching in the country. And sometimes in certain districts, particularly when the Gelugpa population is more prominent, if you try to sit, a lot of people make fun of you by saying, "Are you trying to become Buddha or something?" [Laughter] And I heard a similar story that happened in Burma according to Aghananda Bharati. How did it go?

Q: One of the monks was meditating a lot, and the others would say, "Who do you think you are, an American?" [Laughter]

V: That is the kind of aggression and degenerating suggestion that takes place. People think Tibet is a land of Buddhism, where everybody's highly evolved, and everybody, including children, was taken care of. Everybody sits, and millions of people attain enlightenment every year. Somehow it doesn't happen that way. Even in the monasteries it sometimes is very hard to make people sit, and the actual serious sitters are people in various retreat centers, and individuals who receive teachings from great teachers. The monasteries have an assembly hall which is usually used for ceremonies and occasional sitting practices conducted as prescribed by the regulation of the monastery. Usually there is chanting and sitting practice in the morning, chanting and sitting practice in the evening. And in the case of ceremonies, like festivals for Guru Padmasambhava or Milarepa, then you have ten days of continual ceremony, and there are certain places where you are supposed to break and sit.

Intense sitting practice was done in the early times a great deal. That's what we're doing, what we've been doing. There's a story of a warrior who was sitting. His enemies were approaching and he wouldn't give up his sitting practice. They had to roam around outside and attack his house. Stories of that nature show that in early days, particularly, when Buddhism first entered into Tibet, people sat a great deal. People actually did shamatha-vipashyana practice a great deal.

But somehow recently, everything has become much easier. People just mumble a mantra, you know. They shake their rosaries when they're eating, and just beat a drum and chant with the prayer wheel, you know. [Laughter]

Marks of a Successful Shamatha Practitioner

Note: The "Characteristics of a Dharmic Person" are one description of this kind of wholesomeness.

Q: We've been talking about the difficulties, conditions, and pitfalls of meditation techniques. I'm wondering if there are any signs or marks of successful shamatha practice. For example in the seminary transcripts, I'm led to believe, by certain remarks that people make, that a sense of being breathed rather than being the breather, or a sense of the flow are indications that a person's meditation is going fairly well. Am I right in drawing that conclusion? Are there other signs like that?

V: Yeah, I think a general sense of wholesomeness begins to develop. You know, you can't miss that kind of outlook, that kind of mannerism, a person begins to develop. He is somehow less frantic. I suppose the whole thing is that there's some kind of maturity, a humorous kind of confident sense of maturity.