

Shambhala Office of Practice and Education

THE PRACTICE OF MEMORISATION

The practice of memorisation has been an important discipline whenever and wherever buddhadharma has been propagated. Initially, it was *the* means of transmitting the teachings from one generation to the next. Even after the teachings were written down, memorisation practice was considered an important means of sharpening one's mind and thereby propagating prajna. Memorisation is not approached as a dry and lifeless retention of details, but as a means of making connections. It provides fundamental lubrication in the process of learning, contemplation, and meditation. That is to say, if you do not know something, it is difficult to contemplate it. If there is no contemplation of dharma in one's life, it is difficult to realise the living nature of dharma in one's state of being.

The Vidyadhara introduced The practice of memorisation at the 1982 Vajradhatu Seminary, where formal memorisation periods took place in the shrine room. These were held in the evenings, which is traditionally considered the best time to memorise. You memorise, go to sleep. When you wake up, it is still fresh.

The Vidyadhara suggested a three-step guideline for approaching memorisation:

1. Divide the text to be memorised into sections according to the logic of what is being presented, or some sense of headline for each section. Then study the text in order to understand the progression of the logic, both within each section and how one section leads into the next. Repeat this again and again.
2. This step is known as "ungluing oneself from the page," or "beginning to take off." Without looking at the text, try to go through the sense of it. The main point is to try to make sense of it, not regarding words as "hard things."
3. Having developed confidence in the sense of the text, return to learn the specific words used. In appropriate situations, this step could be practised in small groups of two to five people. One person recites one line, the next person the next line, and so on. Or alternate this approach with everyone reciting the text together.

In a text such as *The Sutra of the Recollection of the Noble Three Jewels*, which does not lend itself to division into workable sections, one could begin with a sentence which "stands out," which seems particularly meaningful, and then work backwards and forwards from there.

These guidelines to memorisation can be applied to various degrees in learning our daily liturgy, memorising lists, such as the obstacles and antidotes to shamatha, or simply in studying a talk or a text.

It would be good to propagate these basic guidelines in the sangha in situations appropriate to your centre. For example, they could be introduced in teacher training or in class situations.