

Shambhala Office of Practice and Education

August 2002

OVERVIEW OF MEDITATION INSTRUCTION

View

When we give meditation instruction, we are obviously giving more than a particular technique; we are essentially communicating a view of the world. How we understand the nature of mind, the purpose of meditation, and the application of a technique are the key elements to our view. In his forthcoming book, the Sakyong summarizes the view as follows:

When we talk about enlightened society, we aren't talking about some utopia where everyone's enlightened. We're talking about a culture of human beings who know the awakened nature of basic goodness and invoke its energy in order to courageously extend themselves to others. Their motivation is allied with compassion, love, and wisdom. This enlightened attitude is not inhibited: it accommodates and incorporates the vicissitudes of life.

To meet our basic goodness, we meditate. Through peaceful abiding, we learn to rest fearlessly in our natural state. We see what an enlightened being sees: basic goodness is the ground of being, the nature of everything. It's an indestructible continuum, a diamond hologram with infinite facets. Through contemplation we discover that like the reflection of a jewel in the sunlight, it is empty. In continuing to contemplate, we see that this emptiness is vibrant and dynamic—a playful display of thoughts, emotions, and perceptions. This is luminosity.

We experience basic goodness when we relax deeply into how things are, without wanting to change them. From that supple state, bodhichitta naturally flows. This is the mind of enlightenment. By using meditation to dissolve the illusion of "me," we ally ourselves with it. Now we can rely on its energy, just as we can rely on the energy of a horse. The majestic spirit of our wild-horse mind has been tamed and gathered into windhorse, the primordial energy of basic goodness. Our practice now lies in riding it.

We call it windhorse because its nature is uplifted, strong, exuberant, and brilliant. It's running and the mane is flying. When I was in Tibet I saw windhorse in the bearing of warriors on horseback who were dressed as King Gesar, Tibet's epic hero. Making the mind an ally gives us the power to ride the radiant windhorse in any situation. Riding the energy of basic goodness is like riding the rays of a sun that is always rising. In the Shambhala Buddhist tradition we call it the Great Eastern Sun. Everything we encounter shines with the dignity and splendor of basic goodness, and we see a sacred world. With this view, we are beginning to lay the foundation of an enlightened society.

[ch. 21, p. 85] Since our mind is naturally good and awake, meditation is not an improvement project nor a saving grace. This lays the ground for our nontheistic approach, and for undercutting any spiritual materialism that tries to turn the practice into an adornment of ego. We can work with any meditation technique with gentleness, relaxation, and appreciation for who we are and for whatever arises in our experience. Meditation also arouses our soft heart of compassion such that we extend ourselves to others and create relationships inspired by wakefulness. Therefore, rather than being a self-centered improvement project, ultimately our practice becomes a profound expression of social action.

Being a Meditation Instructor

Generally, we do not give the full view conceptually to a new meditation student in a first interview. Instead, we plant seeds of this view and can also communicate this view simply by our state of being. Embodying gentle relaxation, precise appreciation, and open flexibility goes a long way toward encouraging this view in a new student.

Basically, we are embarking on a journey with our students. How quickly they understand what the purpose of meditation is and glimpse the basic goodness of their mind will be different for each individual. Traditionally, meditation instruction is always a personal, one-on-one relationship. The Vidyadhara taught in *Meditation in Action*:

Techniques, of course, vary a great deal, as everything depends on the person's character. Therefore no generalised technique can be suggested. [p. 73]

In the early years in North America, the Vidyadhara did give individualized meditation instruction. Over time, he instituted a more standardized approach. However, he has always encouraged us as meditation instructors to use our intelligence. We can be flexible in how we give meditation instruction. When we are in a group context, we can give a standard approach to initial instruction. When we meet with one person, we could adapt our presentation to fit with the person we are talking to. Yet, we should never give instruction on a technique that we have not practiced or do not feel familiar and synchronized with.

Unifying Our Approach

It is now time to clarify and weave together the Sakyong's step-by-step teachings on shamatha with the more fruition meditation instruction given by the Vidyadhara. There is no real conflict between the two approaches. The Sakyong has consistently presented the view that if you can practice the outbreath approach without spacing out, then there is no problem. For example, at the 1999 Seminary, he said:

Some people have been asking me about this outbreath/inbreath business. You can follow the outbreath and you can follow the inbreath. People say, "I thought we were just supposed to follow the outbreath." Obviously you can do that, but you could say that just following the outbreath is a little more advanced. The first thing we're trying to do is just regulate the breathing. The breath is going in and out, in and out. Initially we're trying to just calm our minds, so we have a feeling or thought of the breath going out, the breath going in: "I'm breathing out, I'm breathing in."

If you just follow the outbreath, that means you're able to maintain the continuity of your mindfulness to the point where you don't lose it on the inbreath, you don't drift off. If you find yourself following the outbreath, spacing out, and then coming back a few minutes later and following another outbreath, the practice is not working. If you're able to maintain the space while just following the outbreath, fine. If someone can maintain perfect awareness without having to follow the breath, then following the breath should be pretty easy. (1999 Seminary Transcripts: Teachings from the Sutra Tradition—Book One, p. 16)

In light of this view, the Sakyong's approach has been to provide a more gradual approach to beginners to help them tame their mind. It is also the case that even the most "advanced" practitioners at times have benefited from working more closely with their breath in order to stabilize their mind.

Therefore, the Sakyong would now like the initial instruction to be in harmony with what he has been presenting in his shamatha teachings over the last few years and what will be presented in his book, which will be published in February 2003. At that time, the Sakyong will be traveling on a major book tour, visiting 14 Shambhala Centers. In preparing for this tour, we should be clear how we are presenting initial meditation instruction as well as the full spectrum of different instructions.

We are not really replacing one instruction with another, since if we look closer, we can see that there is no "one" instruction. The Vidyadhara in his lifetime gave a range of instructions. For example, his instruction in Meditation in Action was:

One tries to feel the breath—outbreathing, inbreathing, outbreathing, inbreathing—and it usually happens that the outbreathing is longer than the inbreathing, which helps one to become aware of space and the expansion of breathing outwards. [pp. 63-4]

The Vidyadhara also gave refinements and variations even after he had standardized the technique (for example, the instructions in his talk on the nine stages of shamatha in the 1979 Seminary Transcripts: Hinayana-Mahayana). There is also the very pithy talk that the Vidyadhara gave in London in January of 1986 in which he emphasizes the key point of meditating on nothing, although "nothing could mean something." He then gives the instruction that you should pay equal attention to the out and inbreath. In the same way, we are looking to keep the big view of meditating on nothing that could mean something and to be flexible in our instruction.

Three Approaches

To simplify, we could say that there are three major approaches:

a "precise" technique in which we are working very closely with the breathing process, gaze, posture, and thought process. The emphasis here is on drawing in the mind, relaxing, and stabilizing our mindfulness so that our mind begins to rest in itself.

an "open" technique in which we have stabilized our mind to a degree that the technique becomes more natural and spacious. The main point is to enjoy the space of our mind, using the outbreath as a bridge, and to include sense perceptions as part of our awareness.

a "beyond" technique in which our mind is well stabilized and naturally rests within itself, feeling very spacious and not needing to apply any technique. In fact, the main technique here is to disown any attempts to "meditate," and yet not to wander for an instant.

Obviously, there can be further fine tunings and gradations within each of these approaches. For example, the Sakyong has given the main "precise" instruction, also mentioning the technique of counting the cycles of breaths. This could be used as a remedy for someone whose mind is so wild that they cannot even find and follow the breath at all. Then once they have stabilized their mind, they can just work with the breathing without needing to count. As long as we understand what we are doing and why, this flexibility of instruction is practical and beneficial.

The Buddhist Curriculum

In the Buddhist curriculum, we will introduce the "precise" technique in the first class, "Taming the Mind," This will be deepened in the next course offering, the first community meditation intensive, "Shamatha: Nine Stages." Later, in the second community meditation intensive, "Vipashyana: Four Foundations of Mindfulness," students will be introduced to the "open" technique of working with the outbreath and mixing the mind with space. The "beyond" technique will be introduced in the third community intensive, "Union of Shamatha and Vipashyana." However, if students are also taking Shambhala Training levels, they may be introduced to the "open" and "beyond" techniques earlier in their path.

Shambhala Training

Shambhala Training already presents a graded instruction over the first five levels of The Heart of Warriorship in which the subject matter and meditation instruction go hand in hand. Level One teaches the unconditional quality of basic goodness. The technique of touch and go, mixing mind with space, points out that moments of resting in openness are natural and need not be created by effort or a technique. Therefore, we have kept the

Level I instruction of placing 100% mindfulness on the outbreath, and at the end of the outbreath, letting go and relaxing in the space.

Level Two presents the need for precise attention to habitual patterns, calling for a more focused practice. This instruction most closely resembles the precise instruction that the Sakyong has presented. Therefore, the Level Two instructions will now incorporate the Sakyong's teachings on stability, attention to the whole breathing process, and practicing with a gentle yet exacting precision. In Levels Three through Five, the meditation opens up further to include more space and awareness. Overall, the range of precise, open, and beyond techniques is presented fully, and at the end of the five levels, students can practice the approach that best suits the state of mind they are working with.

Even though the order of presenting the techniques is slightly different in these five levels, there is no difference in view nor any difference in how we understand to apply these techniques in the Buddhist tradition. Moreover, the Sakyong has given instructions not in just the precise technique but also for the open and beyond levels. For example, at one public talk, the Sakyong gave the instruction of just being present, without any mention of working with the breathing at all. To create continuity for the students and Directors of Shambhala Training, the next Shambhala Training Teachers Guide (available in fall 2002) will include the Sakyong's meditation teachings corresponding to each of the instructions given within the Heart of Warriorship levels.

Cutting Fixation on Techniques

With all this discussion of the different techniques, we might start to miss the larger perspective. In the early 1970s in North America, the Vidyadhara experimented with giving a couple of approaches to his students in his personal interviews with them. He either gave them the meditation on the outbreath, or a direct introduction to being present without technique. Over time, particularly with the introduction of longer meditation intensives, he found that people could not sustain just resting without any technique, and so at the 1973 Seminary, he made it clear that working with the outbreath, labeling, etc. was the standard approach for everyone at that point. One student was confused by this more "primitive" approach and asked:

Question: 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 of 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.

Rinpoche: 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. (Sourcebook for Shambhala Instructors, pp. II-21)

The important point here is that even though a student is given many instructions on their path, they will go at their own rate. Just because we give students a more "full" vipashyana-like instruction, e.g. in Levels IV and V, does not mean that they will be able to practice this instruction in an ongoing way. It will depend on how much they have stabilized their practice and how much they understand what they are doing.

In the same way, just because they are given a more "precise" shamatha-like instruction at the beginning of their path does not mean that this technique will hold back their realization of vipashyana. Most students quite naturally progress in their insight along the path, whatever their instruction may be. No matter what technique they start with, their experience and understanding of that technique will naturally evolve over time. At times they will receive different instructions to try out in the context of a weekend program or their meditation instructor may suggest a slightly different technique to work with. All of this is a natural process on the path. The key point is knowing what we are doing and having the confidence and experience to stabilize it.

Ultimately, the point is to go beyond the technique itself. The technique is just a method to help us uncover and expand our innate awareness. It is not that the technique itself creates awareness. Therefore, it is said that by applying the technique, we can eventually wear the technique out, like a pair of shoes. When our mind becomes very stable and clear through applying the technique, the focus on the technique will naturally decrease and finally dissolve. Other times, we can experiment with letting go of the technique to experience what that feels like and see how easy or difficult it is to do.

We would encourage everyone to take to heart that we are adapting our instruction to make a more gentle slope for introducing people to their minds as well as preserving the full heart of our lineage transmission. As always, we will make sure to educate our students as to the basic purpose of meditation and to the full range of techniques such that they can ultimately become their own meditation instructors. Even though a meditation instructor can help a person along the path, fundamentally each one of us is on our own. Only we can judge whether we are mindfully present or spaced out. Only we know what is happening with our mind.

Summary

1. All public and open house instruction (except Level I) will present working with the precise technique as a beginning place. The emphasis is on taming the wildness of the mind.

2. The Buddhist curriculum:

precise technique Taming the Mind
Shamatha: Nine Stages

open technique Vipashyana: Four Foundations of Mindfulness

beyond technique: Union of Shamatha and Vipashyana

3. Shambhala Training The meditation instruction for Levels 1–5 remains the same except that the instruction for Level 2 is changed to work with the inbreath and outbreath.

Level 1: open technique 100% on outbreath

Level 2: precise technique in and outbreath, noticing contents of thoughts

Level 3: open technique 25% 75%, sense perceptions

Level 4: open technique raise gaze, going out

Level 5: beyond technique let go and rest in space

A Final Note

Lest we think we are creating something new, we could compare these three stages of instruction and experience with a selection from "Maha Ati," an essay often mistakenly attributed to Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche or as being a translation of a Tibetan text, but which was actually taken from oral instructions given by Trungpa Rinpoche to Michael Hookham in England. Michael completed the editing of this around 1968.

First, let the mind follow the in and out rhythm of the breath until it becomes calm and tranquil; then rest the mind more and more on the breath until one's whole being seems to be identified with it.

Finally, become aware of the breath leaving the body and going out into space, and gradually transfer the attention away from the breath and towards the sensation of spaciousness and expansion.

By letting this final sensation merge into complete openness, one moves into the sphere of formless meditation proper