

Stages on the Path to Meditative Serenity

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In the beginning, start with the intention to liberate all living beings from the sufferings of cyclic existence. In the end, dedicate all your accumulation of merit to that same goal. And in the middle, so that you will become qualified to actually benefit those beings, practice meditation according to these following instructions.

Introduction

As you engage the meditative stabilization practice (Tib. *zhi ney*) of White Ah, the normal flow of everyday mind experience will begin to slow down and become less turbulent and less intense. This process is known as pacification (Tib. *zhi*) and can be characterized by five stages of calming. In our Tibetan tradition, these stages of calming are likened to the movement of water, through five water-flow metaphors. Today we will discuss those water-flow metaphors.

On the path of Vajrayana Buddhism, there are certain practices that “anchor” us. In Tibetan these practices are called “nails” or “stakes” (Tib. *gzer*). The practice of meditative stabilization is one of those anchors. In particular, the anchor practice of meditative stabilization, which in the West has come to be known as “calm abiding” is also known as “the stake of concentration-samadhi” (Tib. *ting nge ‘dzin gyi gzer*).

Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro T’hayé (1813-1899) said, “Plant the stake of concentration to bind the life force”. This means to train in maintaining your attention on the focal point, without letting it wander elsewhere ... training in one-pointed concentration undisturbed by mind movements, in order to stabilize the life force of your spiritual practice. Replace the mental habit of continually being drawn into distraction, the distraction of being compulsively in the service of mental activities concerned with the “external” worldly world. Replace that continual distraction with a similar habit of continually being drawn back to the focus of meditation. In this way we anchor ourselves in spiritual, life by replacing mind’s dysfunctional worldly habit of being continually distracted and scattered, with the habit of remaining one-pointedly focused.

Meditation

In order to engage this practice, you start by arranging a clearly painted seed-syllable such as a white Ah syllable as your concentration support. Place it in front of you, at eye-level and not too far away. Having done this, on a relatively comfortable seat, straighten your body (your spine and central channel) and expel the stale breath three (or nine)

times¹. Then focus one-pointedly on the concentration support. Focus your mind's attention and the gaze of your eyes, and the movement of your breath together one-pointedly. Don't let these three different factors become separated. Keep them all (attention, gaze, and breathing) together single-pointedly focused on the concentration support. Train like this in short periods repeated many times. Alternate the state of fixation with the state of fixation-free natural awareness, as you have been instructed. Through this you will gradually have the following five experiences:

- 1) *Movement*: Initially you will notice that your attention does not easily remain on the concentration support but rather compulsively moves, restless and unsettled, being pulled here and there under the sway of numerous thoughts, feelings, sensations, emotions, memories, and future projections. That is the experience of *movement* which is like a waterfall ... chaotic, churning and relentless.
- 2) *Attainment*: Following that, the compulsion, strength, intensity, and frequency of thoughts will subside somewhat, and your attention will begin to remain more and more stable on the focus of concentration. As you habituate to that level of stability and non-distraction, the concentration support will begin to appear vividly in the realm of your mind, even when your eyes are closed or when the external white Ah is not present. That is the experience of *attainment* like a river flowing in a deep gorge.
- 3) *Familiarity*: When, without the concentration support being physically present to your senses, you are able to bring the concentration support vividly to mind exactly as it appears ... as if it were actually physically present, and you can change its size and appearance in various ways at will without being pulled away by thoughts of the three times, that's the experience of *familiarity* like the gentle flow of a great river.
- 4) *Immovability*: Eventually the meditation on White Ah begins to blend naturally and indivisibly with your mind itself. When your attention can remain, for as long as you wish, on the imagined form of White Ah, without being interrupted by any thought or mental event whatsoever, that is the experience of *immovability* which is like a pond undulating under a gentle breeze.
- 5) *Perfection*: In addition to this, you become able to see details of the imagined White Ah at any level of resolution, down to the corners of the headstroke or the bottom point of the long downstroke. You will non-conceptually appreciate inherent features such as its radiance and transparency. You will simultaneously hear its sound. The eight measures of clarity² and steadiness³ will reach full strength. When all of this matures, and without your attention being kidnapped by any other object or situation or mental arising at any time throughout the day or night, that is the experience of *perfection* like a great calm ocean free of surface waves.

¹ This practice is described elsewhere in Rinpoche's teachings.

² The four measures of clarity are: that your visualization is *distinct*, *alive*, *vibrant*, and *vivid*.

³ The four measures of steadiness are: that your concentration is *unmoving*, *unchanging*, *utterly unchangeable*, and *totally flexible* or *totally steady*.

Until these five have been experienced one-by-one, and until the fifth experience of *perfection* has stabilized, you should practice regularly. Gradually prolong the duration of your sessions as you become more and more proficient, alternating between meditation and *relaxation without distraction*. To say “relaxation without distraction” means to take rest while naturally relaxing your meditation mind into the innate state of awareness beyond activity. At times, train in the way of imagining the White Ah being as large as Mt. Meru or as tiny as a mustard seed, being close or distant, being in various places, and during the different situations of your daily life.

Sometimes look directly into the true nature of your own mind, by mingling indivisibly the perception of the White Ah and your perceiving mind. Abandon the three-part dualistic fixation of feeling that there’s a meditation object, a meditator, and an act of meditating. Instead, remain in awareness of your mind’s true essence. Through this sustain the meditation of non-meditation, beyond the dualistic “three spheres” (beyond notions of subject, object, and subject-object interaction).

Post-Meditation

During the periods of post meditation, also known as “your daily life”, regard all the ordinary arising of sights, sounds, and thoughts as either the spontaneous manifestation of White Ah, or as the uninterrupted state of original wakefulness. Alternate between those two modes of experience (White Ah and non-conceptual awareness). Make use of all ordinary experiences, no matter what you encounter, as being nothing but the display of wisdom mind.

In short, let all experience become your meditation. When you are sitting, during your entire meditation session, become spontaneously absorbed in the meditation on White Ah (Tib. *ah karpo*). Focus your concentration, gently but without distraction. Softly but with resolution, place and keep your concentration on White Ah. If the mind becomes weary of focusing in this way, let go of your meditation and rest naturally in the great open clarity of luminous empty awareness. Then when thoughts and cognitions begin again to clamber for your attention, as they ordinarily do, go directly back to the meditation of White Ah with no other intermission than alternating between these two (concentration-focus and relaxation into mind’s true nature). Let your sessions be like that. After your session, carry the practice with you on the path of life.

As you end your session, form the intention that White Ah meditation will arise from time to time, more and more frequently, spontaneously, anywhere and everywhere as you go around doing your daily life activities. Take this practice into your sleep and dream states by forming the intention that it be so, and then practicing White Ah meditation while going to sleep. Even if you swoon on entering the sleep state and then later find yourself involved in ordinary karmic dream, you can enter directly into the practice at that moment. In any case, between sessions, if White Ah meditation arises spontaneously, or even if you just remember it, take a few moments and let it happen. Other than that, maintain the post-meditation view as described above.

Conclusion

Since the advice I have given you here involves practicing continually during the day and night, pause from time to time to dedicate the merit you are accumulating. Dedicate that merit to the relative relief of all beings' worry, unhappiness and discomfort, and to the ultimate goal of every one of them becoming irreversibly free from wandering in cyclic existence. Dedicate like this and make many prayers of good wishes (Tib. *tashi*) for them. Then continue with your main practice, the meditation of White Ah.

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The Four Measures of Clarity

Distinct: the visible aspect of the seed syllable is clear and unblurred down to the most minute level of detail.

Alive – The seed syllable is endowed with the sharpness of awareness that is empty cognizance possessing an awake quality.

Vibrant –the seed syllable is completely suffused with omniscient wakefulness so that it is radiantly present with the hundred-fold qualities of consciousnesses fully manifest.

Vivid – the visualized seed syllable is not merely a concept or fabrication. It is vividly present in your experience as if in person.

The Four Measures of Steadiness

Unmoving refers to your single-pointed concentration being unmoved by such general faults as forgetfulness, laziness, heedlessness, and so on.

Unchanging refers to your abiding undistractedly, not being disturbed by visual or other sensory fluctuations and instabilities.

Utterly unchangeable refers to your ability to hold the meditation vividly and clearly for long periods of time throughout the day and night without being distracted or overpowered by even the most subtle thoughts.

Totally flexible or *totally steady* refers to being thoroughly proficient in all aspects of the seed syllable: its color, shape, parts, its arrival, its departure, and the emanation and absorption of rays of light.