

**The Far-reaching Attitude of Meditative Stabilization – Part 2 of 9:
Arranging Proper Circumstances for Calm- Abiding Meditation**

(lightly edited transcript)

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We've just started the teachings on calm abiding. If you look at the Lamrim outline*, the first section is talking about finding a conducive place and arranging the proper circumstances for doing calm abiding meditation. They say that if we have all the proper circumstances, it is possible to attain calm abiding in as little as six months. But if you don't have them, then even if you meditate for years, you won't be able to attain calm abiding. As we go through the list, you'll probably see that we lack one or more of them. Don't be discouraged. We can still practice at our own level. It is also telling us not to expect to be able to attain single-pointed concentration and go into full absorption while living in the middle of Seattle. It's telling us to be realistic with what we expect to attain.

Different texts have different ways of listing these circumstances, but they boil down to the same points.

1. Live in a proper and conducive place

The first one is to abide in a favorable place. This is talking about the external place, the conditions required for the place. It should be a place that is calm and quiet. If possible, go to a place that is high because when you are doing a lot of meditation, you want to be able to look out onto far distances, to stretch the mind out and look in the sky. Hence a place in the middle of a valley and a closed-in place will not be suitable.

It should also be a place that is healthy and free from illness, where you can easily get good quality water and food and where the air is pure. These things do influence the mind. If you are living in a place where the water is very dirty, or the air is polluted, or the food lacks substance, then it becomes more difficult to carry on with your practice.

You want a place where you can get your necessities easily, for example, food and clothing. You don't have to go down to town a lot and you don't have to break your meditation schedule to go and get things. When you do calm abiding meditation, you have a pretty rigorous meditation schedule. You can't afford to take a half-day break or a whole day break to go down to town to get food or clothes.

Also, you want a place where you will not need to engage in wrong livelihood in order to get the necessities. You don't want to be in a situation where you have to steal to get your food, or where you have to tell stories or lie in order for people to give you things. That's going to damage the meditation.

It's also good if we can live in a place where other great mediators have practiced before. There is a certain blessing or transformation that happens in the place. I remember when I first heard this, it sounded like superstition to me. But when you go to some of the pilgrimage places, for example, Bodhgaya or Mt. Kailash, you find that there is a special energy in these places. I figure if I can feel special energy then it must be there. I am about as tuned in to esoteric, mysterious things as a piece of concrete is.

My own experience from doing pilgrimage is when I am in places where great practitioners have been, it does inspire my mind. It could just be an interplay between your mind and that place because you think of how the great practitioners were, how they practiced, the attainments they received in that place. Automatically your own mind feels much more uplifted, joyful and enthusiastic about practice.

However, we can't just rely solely on the energy of a place where a great meditator has been in order to practice well. That alone isn't going to take us into deep meditation. I learned this from my own experience. One year Lama Zopa Rinpoche took a small group of students up to Lawudo, the cave where he had meditated for 20 years in his previous life. It's way up in the middle of the Himalayas. It's an incredible, beautiful place. We did a short retreat inside the cave. If you are talking about blessed places, this was it! But my mind was totally bonkers, all over the world, bouncing off the walls! This showed me very clearly that you can be sitting in a room with a holy being, in a holy place, doing a holy practice, but when your mind is uncontrolled, it is uncontrolled.

I'm trying to put things in balance here. There is a certain energy in places where great meditators had been, but don't give it more importance than your own mind.

Also, we want to be in a place where it's free from dangers, where there aren't wild animals or wild people, for that matter. Maybe a place where they have no guns, or there is gun control or some other kind of control.

Also, a place that is free from disease and where there's not much sound. There is no sound of barking dogs, running water, howling wind, or noisy people. Even the sounds of nature can be distracting when you're trying to do single-pointed meditation.

It is good to be in a place that's near other meditators. We want to be solitary enough to be able to do our practice seriously, yet not too isolated from other like-minded meditators. When we do serious meditations, we often encounter obstacles and difficulties. It's helpful to have Dharma friends around who are doing similar kinds of meditation and who have a similar value system as we do. We can then discuss and seek advice from them when we encounter obstacles and difficulties.

When you go into a serious retreat, you should have all the things that you need with you. I have watched some people go into retreat and everyday for the first week or the first month, they come up with a new shopping list of the things they need. They were sure they had everything before, but they didn't.

It is important to make sure that we have a clear understanding of the teachings before we do long retreats. This is the purpose of the study that we are doing now. We want to get a clear understanding of the teachings so that when we do a serious retreat, we will have the 'tools' at our fingertips. We will know how to meditate, what the antidotes for the various obscurations and problems are, and what to do if certain hindrances arise. There are people, especially Westerners, who go into long retreats without knowing what meditation means. This can be quite difficult. It can make the mind restless and uncomfortable. If you don't know what you're doing, then what comes up in your meditation? Well, the usual things that crop up when you are in the city, except that if you don't know how to meditate, you won't know how to deal with them. Therefore it is valuable to have clear instructions, to study and prepare yourself before hand.

I received a letter from one young man who had first met the Dharma at one of the courses I was teaching at Tushita [in India]. He had spent three years studying and doing some retreats. Last autumn, he did a strict retreat. He said he had a good experience doing it. He felt that all the years of study he had done had really paid off in this retreat. He felt like he knew what he was doing and where he was going in his meditation. I thought that was quite interesting.

2. Have few desires and attachments

The second prerequisite is to be free from gross desires, and to have fewer desires. That means working with our attachment. The more we can do this before a retreat, the easier our retreats are going to be. The more we can subdue our attachments, the easier our whole life is going to be! We have to be able to abandon the mind that is always day dreaming and thinking “How nice it would be to have...” When a shopping list is coming out of a practitioner’s room everyday, it is the desiring mind that is at work.

Sometimes there are legitimate needs that people forget to take care of before the retreat. Sometimes it’s the mind that’s saying, “Oh well, if only I had this, my meditation would go better.” The ‘if only’ list goes on and on and the mind starts wanting ten zillion things. When you’re meditating, you have nothing to distract you from your craving and your cravings get exceptionally forceful and potent, “I need a box of raisins. I can’t meditate without a box of raisins!” This happens a lot. We have to be mindful in our meditations and during the break times to apply the antidotes when the mind of desire arises.

Actually, the word ‘mindfulness’ has different meanings. In the Theravada practice, mindfulness refers to just witnessing different things. Here, mindfulness is referring not just to witnessing, but also to actively ask ourselves, “How am I responding?” and if a defilement is arising, knowing the antidote and applying it. Here, it isn’t just sitting and watching attachment, clinging or craving as these are coming up, but knowing, “OK, when my mind is stuck in attachment, clinging and craving, I have to meditate on death, on the ugly aspects of the things that I’m attached to, on impermanence and on the disadvantages of cyclic existence.” It is knowing what medicine to give your mind to calm the desires.

The attachment habit is one of the chief obstacles when we start to do serious meditation. It is a particularly hard habit to break for those of us who have grown up to be patriotic consumers [laughter].

3. Be content

This point is similar but slightly different from the previous point. To be satisfied or content is truly a virtue. Satisfaction doesn’t mean getting all the things that we want. It means being able to say what I have is good enough. When desires pop up, to practice saying, “Oh what I have is good enough. What is happening in my life now is good enough. These clothes are good enough. This house is good enough.” Developing contentment and satisfaction gives us the ability to be happy no matter where we are living and what’s going on. If we don’t have contentment and satisfaction, even if we go in to do a retreat in a penthouse hut, the mind is still going to be wavering and discontent. Try having the mind be content with what is happening right now instead of thinking, “Oh when this retreat is over, I’ll go and get this and this and that.”

It’s interesting. When you lead a two-day retreat [that starts on Friday night], people’s mind starts leaving on Sunday morning. If you lead a four-day retreat that starts on Wednesday night, people’s mind starts leaving on Saturday, which is the day the people who are doing the two-day retreat are just settling in and getting there. And when you lead a month-long retreat the mind starts leaving about a week before the retreat is over. The mind just thinks, “Oh when I go out of retreat I’ll get this and do that. I’ll talk to this friend and that friend and I’ll tell everybody my far out experiences.” The mind is so creative in its distractions! We kind of settle into retreat and we have some kind of experiences in meditation, then we get all excited and can’t wait for the retreat to be over to tell people about it.

Try to develop the mind of contentment, not letting the mind go into the future with fantasies of pleasures. Not wanting more and better. This is America’s theme: more and better, more and better. Whereas here, we are developing contentment, “What I have is good enough.” As much as we can develop this in our daily life right now, that much more it will prepare us for serious retreats. It will also make our life right now much more peaceful.

4. Avoid distractions and extraneous activities

The next quality is to be free from involvement in worldly activities. When we are doing calm abiding meditation, we have to set up a good condition not just externally, but also have some discipline in our mind so that we aren't always communicating with other people. It is very difficult to do a retreat and carry on a social life at the same time. That's why when I lead retreats I encourage people to be silent. As soon as you talk during the break time, when you sit down to meditate, you start rerunning the discussion in your mind. You'll probably see this if you meditate in the evening, or in the middle of the day. You rerun all the things that happened in the day, and our mind gets so picky, "Oh they said this to me, and I said that to them. Oh I hope they didn't misunderstand. I said the wrong thing. They didn't mean this. I responded the wrong way. I've got to get up from my meditation seat. Oh no, they're meditating too. I can't talk to them in the middle of the session, but in the next break I've got to clarify that I didn't mean that, so they're not mad at me and not upset with me." We spend the whole meditation worrying, basically, about our reputation.

Either that or we're on the other end of it and thought, "They said that to me. What did they really mean?" And start analyzing it. Therefore it is important when you are doing meditation, to have your own space and basically mind your own business and not get involved in a lot of what's going on in the community around you and what's going on with the people around you. This means no telephone calls. No letter writing. No socializing. No doing business, or you will start meditating on, "Well, I bought two of these for five dollars, and I have to sell them for seven dollars to make a profit. If I sell enough then I can meditate for another two years." We have to keep our energy very much inward, and communication with other people to a minimum. That doesn't mean blocking other people out when we're in retreat and being cold. We are very much trying to cultivate a heart of compassion. Rather, it means not getting involved in frivolous socializing that keep our mind chattering away.

Above are some disciplines to think about deeply not only for the days when we go and do serious, long retreats, but also when we go down to Cloud Mountain [Retreat Center] or any other retreat center to do a weekend or a month long retreat; how to make our retreat successful.

5. Maintain pure ethical conduct

Another quality we need is pure ethical conduct. This is one of the most important ones. Maintaining pure ethical conduct means to abandon the ten destructive actions during the time when we are in retreat. And also to do some purification for the destructive actions we have engaged in previously. When we do retreat, all our 'stuff' comes up, one of which is a lot of desire for this, that, and the other thing. Another thing that comes up is a lot of regret, self-hatred and remorse for things that we have done in the past. If we are able to keep good ethical conduct before we do the retreat, regret and things like that will not come up as much, and this means less hassles and less problems during the retreat.

It is also good to do purification both before retreat and daily while we are in retreat. I was really pleased that during the one-month Lamrim retreat last year, the retreatants, of their own accord, due to the enthusiasm of a few of them, got very conscientious about doing the thirty-five Buddhas and Vajrasattva practice every night. I went to take a walk or read a book or go to sleep, and they were all doing prostrations and Vajrasattva. It was very good because I think it helped the retreat tremendously. As you purify, your whole retreat goes better.

Ethical conduct is important because when you are doing calm abiding meditation you are working on controlling the mind. Before we can control our mind, we have to practice controlling our verbal and physical actions. Our actions are much easier to control than our mind. They say everything comes from the mind. The mind is the originator or source of all activities. First the mind moves, then the speech or the body. If we want to stop negativities, we have to start with stopping the actions that happen after a time delay or time lapse. It's easier to stop the verbal and physical negativities and then work on the mind. It will be very difficult to control our mind if we can't even control a little of our speech and our body.

6. Abandon preconceptions about sense objects

The last one is to abandon preconceptions regarding sense objects. This has to do with having much attachment or aversion towards sense objects. It also has to do with developing a proper motivation for meditation. If we think, "Well, I'm going to develop calm abiding so that I'll feel good or I'll be famous or I'll have clairvoyant powers," our motivation is one of attachment to the happiness of this life. But the mind of calm abiding is a mind of the form realm which has given up attachment to the realm of desires. If we have a motivation that's very much concerned with desire realm success, our reputation and our own personal benefit, it will become an obstacle to our meditation. It becomes more difficult to leave this kind of attachment to go into the mind of calm abiding.

So above are the circumstances for having calm abiding meditation.

More advice on doing retreat or meditation practice

Consistency

When we're doing calm abiding meditation, we do a very consistent practice, not taking a day off. Actually, this is true whether you're doing a calm abiding retreat or any other kind of retreat. It is very important to keep the consistency up. If you take a day off in the middle of your retreat, you need another five days to get back to where you were before you took the day off. A retreat is very much a practice of developing a new pattern, developing a new habit, and immersing your mind in the Dharma. If you take a day off and go into town, the energy is lost. You don't realize it until you do it, and then you have to go back and then you will realize, "Oh God I blew it, didn't I?"

Starting with shorter sessions

Calm abiding is a special kind of meditation where we're trying to develop the ability to focus the mind single-pointedly. We're not doing a lot of analysis and investigation of other things. We identify our object of meditation and then hold the mind on the object without letting it either get lax or excited. It is recommended that we do short sessions at the beginning, because we can't concentrate very well. You probably notice when you do the breathing meditation that you get about two breaths on a good meditation before your first distraction comes.

It is good to start with short sessions. Gradually as our ability to concentrate improves, we lengthen the duration of the sessions. Often, they recommend having eighteen sessions a day at the beginning of the practice, each lasting about just five or ten minutes, not very long but something potent. You have a session and a break time, and another session and a break time, and so on.

What to do during the breaks

In calm abiding meditation, break times are very important. In other kinds of retreats that you do, you may want to read a book in your break time to help you in your retreat. For example, if you are doing a retreat on Chenrezig, in the break time, you might want to read about Chenrezig or about compassion. This will help your retreat on Chenrezig. But if you're doing calm abiding then you do not want to do too much activity in the break time. You don't want to read too much because it makes the conceptual mind more active. This will make it more difficult to stay firm on the object of meditation.

In different retreats, we act differently, and we have just seen one difference above. Actually in all retreats that we do, it is incredibly important to be mindful in the break time. Be aware, "What am I feeling and thinking? What am I about to say, what am I about to do?" To be very aware of what our experience is, is important not only in retreat but also in daily life. Otherwise we develop a kind of schizophrenic mind that says my meditation is here and my life is over there. In our meditation we are mindful of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, but as soon as we get up from our meditation seat, we let our mind run all over the place.

This is something to be very careful about in our daily meditation and especially in retreat so that we carry the energy with us in a retreat situation. Also if you're mindful in this way in retreat, it makes coming out of retreat much easier. You do not have the schizophrenic mind of retreat and break time. Everything becomes part of your meditation. When you do retreat, you see how much of what you do in the break time influences your retreat sessions. You can probably see it in your daily meditation too.

What you do during the day influences the quality of your meditation. In our daily life we have a long break time between sessions [laughter]. The more mindful we can be, the better it is for our meditation.

When to lengthen the session

In a calm abiding retreat, except for time spent eating and sleeping, you're trying to meditate most of the time. As I said before, you might do a short session followed by a short break, and then another short session and another break, and so on. Gradually, as the ability to concentrate improves, you can increase the session time. But you want to have your meditations fairly stable before you increase the session time. You don't increase the duration of all your sessions because you had one ten-minute session that went very well. You want to ensure it is a consistent pattern before you increase the duration.

Do not push ourselves too hard

It is important not to push ourselves in meditation. If we push ourselves and try to sit too long, concentrate too hard, we end up making the mind tight. We begin to look at our meditation cushion with dread instead of with pleasure, "I have to go sit again and fight with my mind." Therefore it is important to make your sessions a reasonable length of time. When I was preparing for this session, I recalled what Lama Yeshe used to tell us. We didn't do any calm abiding meditation, but he had us do deity meditation or Lamrim meditation. He would tell us to make the session about an hour or an hour and a quarter long; not to sit there and push ourselves for two or three hours.

But we pushed ourselves. We did group retreats where the sessions were two hours or two and a half hours. You would just push, push, and push to get yourself to sit there. But it doesn't work. Your mind becomes tight and we wrongly think that meditation is just all a matter of will power. But you can't willpower your mind into meditation. Make your sessions of reasonable length and take breaks, go outdoors, stretch the mind and stretch the body. Then when it is time to go sit again, you feel happy to do it. You like the place. It is a place where you can make friends with yourself, not a place where you have to fight yourself because you expect too much and want yourself to do something that you're not ready to do.

[Audience:] What is lung?

The Tibetans have this expression *lung*. *Lung* means the wind or air element in the body. It is easy for this element to get out of balance. One way that it gets out of balance is if we push ourselves in meditation, if we see meditation as a matter of willpower, "I'm gonna sit here for two hours and concentrate!" Or we get tight with our concentration. Or when our minds are distracted, instead of being patient with ourselves by thinking, "Of course my mind is distracted, I've never tried to concentrate before." We get angry, judgmental and critical, "Oh, I'm not doing it right. I'm not doing it properly. Everybody else is meditating better than I am. I bet no one else has these kinds of problems. What's wrong with me? Everything in my life is a mess!" This creates a lot of tension or what they call *lung* or wind imbalance. It comes from this kind of combative, heavy mind.

Lung manifests in different ways in different people. One way is you become extremely restless. You have pushed your mind so tight, the mind is like [explosion sound] and it becomes exceedingly restless. Some people get *lung* in the form of fatigue, where they are just constantly tired. Other people get *lung* in the form of pain – pain in the back, stomach or heart area. When *lung* happens, you have to let loose and relax your mind and meditation a bit.

I always believe in *lung* prevention. I am like Smokey the Bear [laughter]. When I do retreat, I take long walks. This is very important for me. This is the way I prevent *lung*. If I get out and look at nature, at flowers, at the stars, and into the far distance, the mind relaxes. There is not this kind of tension and pushing.

Let's talk about the cushion and the environment in the room.

The environment in the room

It is not necessary to face the wall when you meditate. But if your mind is very excited and it helps when you face the wall, then do it. I find that for me, facing the wall when meditating is not particularly helpful. I know in the Zen tradition they do that.

If your mind tends to be sluggish, then you want to sit in the bright part of the room and to make sure your room is bright and cheerful. You want the room where you meditate to be clean and not be littered with all your paraphernalia and junk. [laughter] Otherwise your mind gets distracted. Having lived in a monastic situation, when I go and stay in people's houses at times, there are so many things in some of these houses and I would have the urge to go and clean everything up. [laughter] I think that somehow our environment reflects our mind. The two things interrelate. If you make your meditation area tidy, it is easier for your mind to be tidy.

Also, when you do sessions, have everything taken care of before you do the session. This way you don't have to sit there with a notepad and write down all the things you [laughter] need to do. It is very helpful sometimes when you start a session to say to yourself (let's say your session lasts half an hour), "Do I have this time free right now to do this?" And you check, "Yes I have this time free. OK, then I have a half an hour I can spend meditating now, and there isn't anything urgent to be done to pull me off the cushion". This helps the mind to be a little firmer and more stable when we start the session.

The meditation cushion

You want to have a cushion that is even, not lumpy and not off-balance. This way you're not sitting leaning off to one side nor are you leaning backwards or forwards. The Tibetans usually sit on quite a flat surface. But most of us find it easier to have a cushion under our rear. They actually advise doing this because it enables you to keep your spine straight and your legs and your rear don't fall asleep. By keeping your spine straight it helps the flow of the energies within the body which helps the meditation. There are different types of cushions – round or square, hard or soft, flat or low. You might have to experiment to find out what works for you. But again be aware that the mind can take off and be dissatisfied, always wanting to change cushions like musical chairs.

That's why when you do a tantric retreat and you are counting mantra, you have to do that number of mantra in one place on one cushion. I think it is done this way to take care of this restless mind. As you do retreat and you cut down your relationship with sense objects, then all the small things in your environment become really inflated. How comfortable this cushion is and many other small things become issues. Sometimes in retreats you will see people constantly changing their seat. Every session their sitting place looks different. They will sit with their feet tucked under one of those little benches (I forget what you call them). Then they're on a chair, and then they're doing something else. After experimenting a while, it is good to settle on one thing that seems to work best and stick with that.

It does take your body some getting used to sitting cross-legged. It can be painful and you do have to be patient with your body. I think there is some kind of change that happens even in your physical energy as you meditate with time. When I first began meditating, I was a lay person and I remember sitting in the meditation hall. The nuns were in front and they didn't move. It was like, "Oh, my goodness!" Ven. Sangye Khadro was already ordained then and she did not move. I was sitting there and I had so much problem with my right knee that every five minutes I had to stretch my leg out. I was squirming. My back hurt. My knee hurt. My body itched. "This is impossible!" And it was 'impossible' like that for about a year (and maybe even a little longer) of serious practice.

But eventually the energy in the body begins to change. Your body gets used to it and you can sit for a longer period of time. The restless physical energy calms down and your muscles get stretched out. But you have to stick with it initially. Of course, don't torture yourself and don't cause permanent damage. People always say, "If it hurts very badly, what do you do?" I am not one of these samurai Zen people who says, "SIT THERE!" I say move your leg. But before you move your leg, check up and see what is going on. See if you do need to move it or if it is just the mind being restless. When you move it, move it mindfully. Some people can spend some time looking at the pain in the meditation and find it quite helpful. At some point we do have to build up some tolerance for discomfort. If every time you are uncomfortable you move, then you'll never get anywhere because our body is an organism that is constantly uncomfortable. When it hurts badly, then you move. But until it gets to that point, try to develop a little bit of patience with it, without straining yourself.

If you're doing other kinds of retreats and not calm abiding retreat, it can be very helpful to do prostrations in between sessions. With calm abiding you do not want to move your body too much between sessions. But if you are doing a Lamrim retreat or deity retreat, doing prostrations between sessions can be very helpful. It is important that when you do prostrations, put a cushion under your knees to protect them. When you're doing long prostrations especially, don't crash your knees down on

the floor when you're going down. Put your hands down first, followed by your knees, and then stretch out. Do take care of your knees if you are doing a lot of prostrations.

The Tibetans have a custom of putting a swastika under your meditation seat or cushion. You draw it with chalk or on a piece of paper and put it under your seat. It's a swastika that doesn't go the same direction as the Nazi one. This one goes clockwise. Don't get worried. It's quite interesting. It's a symbol of Buddhism. If you go to China you'll see swastikas all over. It's an ancient, Asian symbol and it's for auspiciousness, hope and well-being.

You also put some kusha grass under your seat. This is the grass that they make brooms out of. It's the grass that's very straight. This is the grass that the Buddha sat on when he attained enlightenment under the bodhi tree. Some people would even sleep on kusha grass. They believe that it's purifying and it helps to clear the mind. It helps to straighten the mind. Often you take two sticks of kusha grass and you put it with the tips forward and coming together, as in being single-pointed. You put them underneath your cushion.

And then there is a kind of long life grass too, which is a grass that has many joints and knots in it. It is like long crabgrass, the kind that keeps growing on your lawn. It's customary too, to put some of that under your meditation seat. It symbolizes long life.

Shrine

It can be helpful to have a shrine where you are meditating. I highly recommend this for your daily meditation practice. For your life in general, it's very nice to have pictures of the Buddhas there. When you are all frazzled, you might just be walking past it and see the Buddha, and the Buddha is just sitting there, and it occurs to you, "Oh yeah, I can be like that too. Calm down." [laughter] Having a shrine in front of your seat can be very helpful. Make some offerings on the shrine.

When you are doing calm abiding meditation and you're using the visualized image of the Buddha as your object of meditation, then it's especially helpful to have an image of the Buddha there. You can look at the Buddha and it helps when you close your eyes to visualize it.

Similarly, in terms of your daily practice, if you're doing Chenrezig meditation or Tara, if you have a picture of the deity, then you can look at it before you visualize and do your practice. Or before we do the prayers like we have been doing here, look at the merit field, look at the Buddha, and that helps in your visualization before you do the prayers.

Sitting posture

In terms of your posture, it's recommended to sit in the crossed vajra position. It's not called the lotus position. It's called the vajra position. The way you do this is first you put your left leg on your right thigh. And then you put the right leg on the left thigh. If you can do that, it is very good. If you can't do that, then you put your right leg down, so your left leg is on your right thigh, but your right leg is down. It's called the half vajra position. Another way to sit is like how Tara sits, except with your legs closer to your body – your left leg in against your body and your right leg in front. Both of your legs are flat on the floor. Or, you can just sit cross-legged. It's going to depend a lot on your body. I think it's often easier for women than for men to sit cross-legged, because of the construction of our bodies.

When you get to high stages of practice, being able to sit in the vajra position is important. At our level of practice it's less important. If you need to sit in a chair, do so. But if you train yourself a little each day to sit cross-legged so that your body gets stretched out and familiar with the position, it is very helpful. Some time or another, you will have to sit cross-legged. If you go to the teachings in India, you can't bring a chair along. [laughter] Many people like to use the bench, but I think later on, it is still good to train your legs, if you can, to sit cross-legged.

Your right hand is on the left, with the thumbs touching forming a triangle. This is in your lap, and depending on where your navel is, your thumbs are either at your navel or a little below your navel. Sometimes I see people holding their hands up [not resting on the lap], and it looks incredibly uncomfortable. Rest your hands on your lap. Your thumbs should not slouch, but they're up forming a triangle. You get used to this position after a while.

The shoulders are level, and the back is straight. There is some space between your arms and your body, allowing air to circulate. Don't hold your arms in [against your body] like this and don't stick them out like chicken wings. But again, a position that's comfortable and reasonable.

To help get the head at the right angle, it can be helpful to imagine that you are being pulled up by the crown of your head. Your head might be very slightly inclined. It's not inclined too much. It's not sky gazing. And it's not in a rigid military position. It's straight and erect but it's not military-like.

The eyes are lowered. Don't roll your eyes back in their sockets. Some people think this is a sign of being holy. No. [laughter] They say you can have your eyes directed toward the tip of your nose, but many of us find that very uncomfortable. You can loosely focus your eyes down on the ground in front of you. Open your eyes a little, but do not focus on anything in particular. Keeping your eyes a little open is a good habit to get into. I know very often your eyes close naturally, but they say in the long run it's better to go through the difficulties and learn to meditate with your eyes a little bit open.

One reason for this is that you won't experience this big difference of seeing things and feeling the visual world as imposing when you arise from your meditation. Another reason is that with your eyes a wee bit open, some light comes in, and you don't get as drowsy. Also, you learn not to pay attention to the visual consciousness. It's functioning, but you're not paying attention to it in your meditation. This is also very helpful later on in your practice. It's also helpful for maintaining your visualization during your break time when you are using your visual consciousness. You have already trained yourself to be able to visualize with some visual appearance, with light coming in your eyes. In the long run it becomes helpful if you can do that.

But I wouldn't make a big deal out of it. I wouldn't strain myself and I wouldn't be constantly checking to see how much my eyes are open. But just kind of try to do it. Don't open your eyes fully and look straight out ahead and stare at everything. It's not like that. It's just opening your eyes very slightly, and letting some light come in.

Level shoulders, straight back, your head slightly inclined, your eyes slightly open.

Leave your lips and your teeth in a natural position. Don't clench your jaw. They say it is good to have the tip of your tongue on the upper palate. I've always wondered where else you are going to put the tip of your tongue. But I have heard subsequently in talking with other people, that some people have more room in their mouth than I have in mine, and the tongue can wander all over the place [laughter]. But in my mouth there is no other place it can be, but against the roof of the mouth. It is good to do because then when you develop deep concentration, you won't start salivating and drooling [laughter]. If you go into samadhi for a few hours, you don't want to make a mess [laughter].

*This teaching is based on the *Lamrim* or *The Gradual Path to Enlightenment*. Please refer to the following web-page for its outline and other transcripts or to listen to the audio recording of these talks: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/GradualPathToEnlightenment/outline.html>