

The Far-reaching Attitude of Meditative Stabilization – Part 4 of 9: Objects of meditation and Deterrents to calm abiding and the antidotes

(lightly edited transcript)

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We are going through the teachings on calm abiding. These teach us how to develop a very firm concentration in our meditation so we can keep our mind on the object of meditation for as long as we want without it rampaging or falling asleep. Last session we talked about various objects we can focus on to develop calm abiding. I specifically dwelt on one category of objects, the objects to eliminate afflictions [Note: 'afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'disturbing attitudes'] or to subdue bad behavior. We also talked about different meditations one can do by meditating on different things and thereby develop calm abiding according to our own level of mind. For instance if we have a lot of attachment, we might want to develop calm abiding using the unattractiveness of different objects as our object of meditation. Or if we have a lot of superstition, conceptualizations, chattering mind, we would use the breath.

Objects of Meditation

Using the image of the Buddha as our object of meditation

The benefits

In the Tibetan tradition they quite often emphasize using the Buddha as the object of our meditation. In other words, we would meditate on the visualized image of the Buddha to develop calm abiding. Instead of the breath, or the ugly aspect of something, or metta, or something else of that nature, we visualize the Buddha. This has many advantages to it. By using the visualized image of the Buddha as the object of our meditation, we continually remember the Buddha and in that way we create a lot of positive potential on our mindstream. This is because the visual form, the physical form of the Buddha, is itself virtuous.

Psychological benefits

We can see psychologically the effect visualizing the Buddha has on our mind. It makes us settle down and it makes us remember our own Buddha potential and thereby encourages us on the path. Just visualizing the image of the Buddha leaves a good imprint on our mind and is good for our mind, whether or not we are actually able to develop calm abiding by using it.

Purification, accumulation of merit and preparation for tantric meditation

Also, by continually remembering the Buddha through meditation, when we are dying it is then very easy to recall the Buddha. This is extremely important because, when we die, what we are thinking about at the time of death is really going to influence our future rebirth. If we're dying and we are really angry, or

we are thinking about, “Who is going to get my embroidered things that have been passed down in the family for three centuries,” or thinking about any of this kind of stuff, it is really going to adversely affect our mind. Whereas if we spend a lot of time trying to make the mind single-pointed on the image of the Buddha, then it is very easy to make that arise at the time of death. This automatically puts the mind in a virtuous state and so prevents the ripening of negative karma and in that way, ensures a good rebirth.

Very consistently visualizing the Buddha also helps in other aspects of our life. When we are in danger or nervous, it becomes much easier to remember the Buddha and thereby remember our object of refuge. It also helps us to purify our mind and to accumulate a lot of positive potential. If we have had some practice visualizing the image of the Buddha, then doing tantric meditation later on becomes quite easy because we are familiar with visualization. When we visualize Chenrezig, or Kalachakra, or Tara, or whomever, it is very easy for that to come into the mind.

Remembering our own Buddha potential

Visualizing the Buddha also helps us to remember the Buddha's qualities and thus our own Buddha potential, which gives us a lot of inspiration and encouragement along the path. It also helps us to create a lot of positive potential to actualize the Buddha's form body ourselves. When we talk of the Buddha, we talk of the form body of the Buddha and the mind of the Buddha and visualizing the Buddha's form helps us to create the cause to be able to attain it ourselves one day.

A positive, strong imprint

Another part of our practice involves visualizing the field of positive potential, making offerings and doing confession, which once again involves visualizing the Buddha. We develop a lot of positive, strong imprint from visualizing the image of the Buddha, so when we do offerings, or prostrations to the thirty-five Buddhas, or something else, those practices become stronger because it is easier for us to visualize. We can get the feeling that we are really in the presence of the Buddha and doing these practices with the Buddha. So if the level of your other afflictions [[Note: 'afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'delusions'](#)] is about equal, then it is good to use the image of the Buddha as the object of concentration.

Advice on the visualization

Where to visualize the Buddha and the size to visualize

We usually visualize the Buddha in the space in front of us. They say to visualize the Buddha about five to six feet in front of us. Try visualizing it small, because if you visualize a really enormous Buddha your mind is going to get distracted and way out there. You are going to have this huge thing that you are trying to keep in mind. So they say the smaller you make it, the better. You do not want to make it so small that your mind gets really tight and you get a headache. They say the size should be like that of a barley seed. If that is too small, then make the size like the top joint of your thumb. If that is too small, make it the size of your thumb. And if that is too small then make it four fingers width. So you can kind of play around with it. Some people think that they have to imagine a huge Buddha. When the mind tries to imagine something very big, it gets very distracted. So keep it small.

As to what height to visualize the Buddha at, this is going to depend a lot on your mind. If you visualize the Buddha real high, then it tends to make the mind veer toward excitement and agitation. The mind gets too high, too flighty. If you visualize the Buddha too low, then it is very easy for the mind to get lax and tired and to start falling asleep. So they usually say to visualize it at about eye level, but you can vary the size of the Buddha according to your own particular mind.

If you find that doing it at eye level makes your mind too excited, then lower the image a little bit. If your mind is getting lax, raise the image a little bit. But remember it is only a visualized image. You do not want to visualize the Buddha so low that you start looking down [lowering your head], or visualize the Buddha so high that you start looking up [raising your head]. Remember that this is just a placement in your mind's eye. You are not really looking at anything out there at all.

Using a picture

To start with, it is very good to have a picture of the Buddha that you look at, one that you find particularly pleasing, or you can also design the artistry yourself with the exact expression on the Buddha's face, etcetera. But if you have a picture that really appeals to you, look at that. Then, close your eyes and try to remember the picture.

Making the image come alive

Visualization basically is a kind of creative, or imaginative, aspect of the mind. You do not want to visualize a postcard like image, or a statue, or something like that. You want to really make it live.

When you visualize the Buddha, think of him as having a body of golden light and that it is three dimensional. You do not want to visualize a three dimensional statue, or a two dimensional postcard-like image that is painted. You want to visualize something that is made of light, that is three dimensional and that is a living Buddha. You want a real feeling of communication with the Buddha and his qualities. This has a really nice impact on our mind.

Visualizing the details

After you have looked at your picture and visualized a three dimensional Buddha, then go over the details of the Buddha's body. That is why descriptions like the one in *Pearl of Wisdom* Book I, have a lot of detail of what the Buddha looks like. So with an analytical mind, you look at all the details of your visualization as if you are painting a picture. What does the Buddha's hair look like, the earlobes and the long narrow eyes?

I think it is especially effective to spend some time on the Buddha's eyes because they are very compassionate and for those of us who feel unloved and unappreciated it is very helpful to imagine the Buddha who actually appreciates and cares for us and even remembers our birthday. [Laughter] This helps our mind a great deal. Look at the robes and the hand gesture, the hand position and the lotus flower. They usually have you start at the bottom with the throne, the lotus, the cushions of sun and moon and then the Buddha seated on top of that. But you can go over the details as it feels comfortable to you. Then when you have done that, focus on the entire image.

Do not squeeze the mind to such an extent that you are thinking, "Ok, I have got to get every detail of the Buddha exactly correct." Because if you do this, you are going to drive yourself totally nuts. Rather, go over the details to get the general image and then, however clear the general image is, be content with that and hold your mind on that. Try at the beginning to focus more on stability and getting your mind stable on whatever image you have, rather than focusing on trying to get the image really precise and clear.

We tend to do it backwards, we want to get the image real crystal clear and then hold the mind on it. It is good to go over the different qualities to get the basic image, but then focus more on stability and hold the mind on whatever image you get. Really develop a sense of being satisfied with that instead of being so self-critical thinking things such as, "I cannot see every single one of the Buddha's toes!" [Laughter] Really, some people do this. They start getting involved in visualization and thinking things like, "Well how many folds does his robe have, how many patches going across here and where exactly is the belt?" They just drive themselves nuts with it. So that is why I say to focus much more on stability in the mind and then slowly, slowly you can go over the details again and again to become more and more familiar with the image.

Develop some sense of contentment with your own ability. Do not expect to see anything. Do not think, "Okay I am visualizing the Buddha so the Buddha should appear in 3-D, living color like I am having a vision." It is not like that. I use the following example: if I say "pizza" everybody has a very good image in their mind of pizza. If I say "your home", do you have an image in your mind? Yes and it is very clear; you know exactly what the image is even though your eyes are open. It has nothing to do with your eyes being open or closed. That image is in your mind.

We all know very, very well that we can talk to somebody and think about something else at the same time, usually an object of attachment! [Laughter] So visualizing is the same kind of thing. When our attention is good, the little bit of light coming through our eyes or even some sound, is not going to disturb us so much because we are really going to be focused on the Buddha. It is just basically making our mind more familiar with the Buddha's image than with the image of pizza, or the image of Mickey Mouse.

We can visualize Mickey Mouse very easily. This just shows we are more familiar with Mickey Mouse than with the Buddha, because when we start to visualize the Buddha we think, "Well, how is he sitting? What does he look like?" So it is basically a thing of familiarity. As we train the mind, we get more and

more familiar with the image of Buddha.

Some people are very advanced meditators and they might use the mind itself, or emptiness as their object of meditation. But those are much more abstract and difficult for us to focus on. So using the visualized image of the Buddha is something that is more “physical” to us even though it is not physical. It helps our mind, which is so entrapped by color and form, to really focus on something. Whereas if we start focusing on emptiness or the mind itself, we might get really, really spaced out because we have a hard time even recognizing those objects.

Keeping the whole image in mind

Sometimes when you are visualizing the image of the Buddha, one aspect of it may become really clear to you, maybe the eyes, or the robes, or some other particular aspect. At that point in your meditation it is okay to put most of your attention on a particular quality, but not to the exclusion of the other qualities of the Buddha. Do not just focus on the eyes and forget that the eyes are attached to the body. Do not just visualize the Buddha’s eyes as if they are appearing in empty space. If you were looking at a person you might really look at their eyes, or you might look at the mole on their cheek, but you recognize that there is the rest of them there. In the same way, if one particular aspect of the Buddha’s body becomes more vivid in your mind, then focus on that but do not have it appear in a vacuum. It is still attached to the rest of the body.

Keeping your image stable

Sometimes when you are trying to focus on the image of the Buddha, your mind might start to play games and it might start to move around. The image might start out at a proper size and then the Buddha gets off the throne and he starts dancing. Or instead of being gold in color he turns to blue, or instead of the Buddha you get Tara. Our mind does all sorts of different things. So whatever you choose as your object of meditation, keep it like that. If the mind starts changing the image and joking around with it, then just remember that it is not the image that is changing. It is not that the Buddha’s there and then standing up. It is our mind that is making the image change. Be real aware of that.

Gen Lamrimpa says, “If the Buddha gets up, tell him to sit right back down again.” [Laughter] If the Buddha changes into Tara, say “Come back, Buddha.” If you use Tara as your object of meditation and if Tara changes into Buddha, then you say “Come back Tara”. But whatever it is that you have chosen, keep to that. The mind can become very creative and do things.

Be a part of the visualization yourself

Another thing that I found very helpful when you visualize the Buddha is to imagine a whole scene and that you are a part of it. I really saw this when I went to these caves in China – the Dunhuang caves – because the artistry of the murals on the wall was such that you, as the viewer, were involved as part of the scene. It was not like you were just looking at an image out there. The way the artistry was, you became part of the scene. I find that it is better to meditate as if you are part of the scene, rather than visualizing a postcard type scene. Thinking, “There is the Buddha and there is Shariputra and Maugallana,” makes you feel very separate and excluded. But if you visualize the Buddha and make a very pleasant scene, maybe a lake and a mountain, or whatever you find pleasant, you can make the scene all around you and in that way you become part of that environment. This makes it much easier to imagine the Buddha and it makes it much more alive for you. So try this as well.

Managing the image

If, when you are first starting, the Buddha seems to change a lot, or float, or move around, then for a few days you might imagine the image as if it is heavy. Even though you are imagining it as made of light, you might imagine it as being kind of heavy in some way in order to help your mind stay there with it. But do not continue that for too long, because if you keep imagining the image as being something heavy, your mind is also going to get heavy.

So that is a little bit about using the Buddha as the object of meditation and it is nice to try especially for those of you who do the meditation on the Buddha in *Pearl of Wisdom* Book I. When you do that practice, before you say the mantra, it is very good to spend some time creating the image of the Buddha and holding your mind as single-pointedly on that as you can. And when the mind gets restless, then start doing the purification and say the mantra and imagine the light coming. That helps your mind gain some stability on the image before you proceed with the whole meditation and it is very effective that way.

Using the mind as an object of meditation

Another object that we could use to develop calm abiding on is the mind itself. I wanted to talk briefly about this even though it is not highly recommended for those of us who have very scattered minds. Some people can develop calm abiding on the mind itself and it can be very beneficial, but it is more difficult because the mind itself is very abstract.

Two qualities of the mind

The mind has two qualities: it is clear and it is knowing or aware. The mind does not have any kind of physical form. So first you have to discern the clear and aware aspects, or qualities, upon which the mind is designated. You have to be able to discern these and then keep the mind focused on them. If you do can this, it can be very helpful for really understanding the nature of the mind.

Care to be taken when using the mind as a focus for meditation

But the danger is that instead of actually apprehending the clear and knowing nature of the mind, what we get instead is our concept of the mind and we focus on that. That is one danger. Another danger is that we think we are meditating on the mind, but in fact, it is just an image of nothingness. Because the mind is clear and knowing, it does not have form so there is nothing to visualize and we can just get a little spaced out concentrating on our image of nothingness, thinking that we are meditating on the mind, when in actual fact we are not.

They say that in the past some people have tried to develop calm abiding in this way and they think they have developed calm abiding on emptiness, but in actuality it was basically just blank mindedness, the absence of concept. Or some people think that they have attained enlightenment when they get very blissful feelings, when in actual fact they are just basically spaced out in their meditation. They think that they have the mind as their object of meditation, but they really do not. Or they think that they are meditating on emptiness, but in fact it is a mere non-conceptual state on which they are meditating.

The Tibetans are quite strong on emphasizing this. They emphasize that the object of meditation is not just to free the mind of concepts. We can certainly see that all of our concepts in our very busy mind are a huge obstacle to our developing single-pointedness, but just getting rid of those is not necessarily developing single-pointedness on a virtuous object. After all, cows do not think very much and they do not have a lot of concept, but we do not want to really translate our mind into a cow's mind.

So just freeing the mind of concept is not meditating on emptiness and is not meditating on the nature of mind. We have to really know very specifically the objects we are meditating on. This has been something that has been the subject of debates for centuries. I find even in teaching people nowadays, it is still very much something that concerns people. I will sometimes go to teach at some new age this or that and people think that basically if you just get yourself in a non-conceptual state, that is great! But that is not necessarily it. It is very true that we do need to go beyond the chattering conceptual blah, blah, blah mind, but we need to have the object we are meditating on very clear in our mind and know the process for doing that.

Questions and Answers

The non-conceptual mind

[In response to audience:] Well we do need to become non-conceptual at a certain point. I am not saying that we should keep our mind chattering. But I am saying that just getting the mind non-conceptual is not necessarily realizing the conventional nature of the mind, nor is it emptiness.

[In response to audience:] Getting the mind non-conceptual is better than just sitting there thinking about salami, bologna and cream cheese because at least you are doing something with your mind. But they say that some people only meditate in a non-conceptual state and their mind becomes very dull and they are then reborn as animals.

[Audience:] Is there any way to check?

That is the reason you need a good teacher. Right? [Laughter] That is why when you are doing calm

abiding meditation in a really serious way, you do it under the guidance of a good teacher. That is also why you do some study before hand about the different ways the mind can go off so that you know the various pitfalls and can check your own mind too.

Zen meditation and koans

[Audience:] In Zen meditation, are koans used so that the mind does not become too conceptual?

I think that the Zen idea of koans is to push the mind to a certain point where our usual tendency to make things into nice neat categories just does not work and you need to drop your old way of thinking. I think it is geared towards that because we tend to see things as very inherently existent and solid and we confuse the label with the object itself. I think a lot of the puzzle-like questions in Zen are designed to help us see that that kind of very rigid conceptual mind is just not where it is at.

Tantric meditation

[In response to audience:] What you are doing in tantric meditation, for instance when the Buddha dissolves into you and then you dissolve into emptiness, is trying to recall your meditation on emptiness and to generate that same feeling again.

[Audience:] So you mean that what you are recalling is what you have been practicing in calm abiding?

Not necessarily. You have been doing analysis on emptiness and you try to develop some stability and calm abiding on that. You do not necessarily have calm abiding. When you visualize the Buddha dissolving into you and you dissolving into emptiness, you are trying to recreate the experience that you had before when you were actually able to ascertain the lack of inherent existence of something.

Westerners have a very solid sense of self, "I am this person, I am this body, I am this nationality, and this gender and this, this and that is me." In order to loosen that really rigid way of thinking, Lama [Yeshe] would say, "The Buddha dissolves into you and you just let go of all your concepts and stay in this open space." He left it very open like that and that is really good for us Westerners.

As we get more familiar with this, we then have to make our understanding of emptiness much more precise and not just get the mind free of concept, but actually be able to discern what is emptiness. But for a start, it is helpful for us to just drop all of our concepts of ourselves, because that is basically what emptiness is at a much coarser, grosser level.

The role of calm abiding in realizing emptiness

[Audience:] So there are two different ways of understanding emptiness – through the calm abiding or through dissolving into emptiness?

You need to do all of it, because the dissolving that you do in tantric meditation, as soon as you understand emptiness correctly there, then you hold that with calm abiding.

[In response to audience:] Calm abiding is what allows you to remain single-pointedly on emptiness. Calm abiding itself will not help you to discern the object of emptiness; only the analytical meditation will help you discern it. But once you have discerned it, the calm abiding is really necessary to keep your mind on it. Instead of going: "emptiness-chocolate-emptiness-chocolate-emptiness-chocolate", you are able to stay on emptiness. That is what the calm abiding does.

Calm abiding alone does not lead to liberation

That is why they really emphasize that calm abiding alone will not get us to liberation. Calm abiding just enables us to keep the mind single-pointedly on the object of meditation. Non-Buddhists have this ability as well. They say it can be very blissful. But the thing is, if you do not have any wisdom with it; if you do not have refuge, bodhicitta and the determination to be free, then even if you can stay in samadhi day and night for ten years, you are still going to get reborn in cyclic existence. That is why in our meditation practice we are trying to develop many kinds of meditation and many kinds of understanding.

[In response to audience:] You can get very attached to your calm abiding, and then you get reborn in the form and formless realms and have a few eons of bliss. But when that karma ends, kerplunk! Therefore, this is why our motivation is very, very important.

[In response to audience:] First of all, someone who would meditate on the nature of the mind probably would be someone who has done a lot of purification, collected a lot of merit and has the ability to discern clearly the mind. If you are meditating on the nature of the mind and feel like it is slipping away and you are going into some kind of spaced-out blank-mindedness, they say to let an emotion arise. You do this because an emotion is the nature of the mind; it is clear, it is knowing, and this brings you back to the mind. You do not focus on the emotion, but you use it to help you recognize the mind as something that is clear and knowing.

[Audience:] So let us say you let anger arise to bring your mind back. But then you become angry, so then what do you do?

[Laughter] See, this is why you have to be very skillful to do this meditation, because it is not about bringing anger back so that you can then become angry. It is letting the anger arise in the mind for an instant so that you can recognize the mind. The sages say that when meditating on the mind--that is, on the mind's nature of clarity and awareness--it's easy to lose the object and slip into a spaced-out state in which your mind is focused on a vague type of nothingness instead of on the clear and aware nature of the mind. Since emotions are a type of mind and have that clear and aware nature, by letting an emotion arise, a meditator can again recognize the clear and aware nature of the mind and return to it as his or her object of meditation.

Later on when I explain the meditation on emptiness, one of the ways there to recognize the object to be refuted, in other words the 'I' that does not exist, is to let anger or another powerful emotion arise and then to observe the way your mind grasps the self or the 'I'. But it's important to do this skillfully, so that while one part of your mind is grasping at a solid "I," another part identifies the object to be refuted, an inherently existent "I." While doing this, you don't want the anger to take over your mind so that you get lost in the story, "He did this and that to ME!" For this reason, identifying the object to be refuted involves a delicate balancing act for us beginners.

The need for both stabilizing and analytic meditations

Are people real clear about the difference between the meditation to develop stability and the meditation to develop understanding, analytic meditation? These are two different things and we need both of them. Just developing stability does not necessarily give you the understanding of the object and just developing understanding does not necessarily give you the stability and the ability to concentrate on it. So that is why we need both the stabilizing meditation and the analytic meditation. Calm abiding, in general, falls under the category of stabilizing meditation. Vipassana or insight meditation, in general, falls under the category of analytic meditation. But we need both of them. I am trying to give you a global understanding so that you can fit lots of things together and understand how it works.

So this has all been about the object of our meditation. Are we ready to move on?

Purification and positive potential

[Audience:] Where do purification and the creation of positive potential fit into all of this?

Purification and the collection of positive potential – both of those are really important. It is not like you just do purification and creation of merit or positive potential and do not do the others. In the process of doing the purification and creation of positive potential, you are also developing very slowly these other two: calm abiding and insight. But if you just try and jump into these really difficult meditations without purifying your mind, it will be real difficult because our mind is so habituated with garbage that the garbage is just going to keep coming up again and again and become big obstacles. That is why even the great meditators do so much purification practice. For instance, in the more complex tantric meditations there is a whole psychology applied and in the beginning there is always purification and the creation of positive potential before you have the meditation on emptiness and self-generation of the deity.

Calm abiding and Vipassana

[Audience:] How is calm abiding meditation different from Vipassana?

Vipassana in general is under the analytic meditation and calm abiding in general is under the stabilizing meditation. Real Vipassana, when you have actualized Vipassana, is actually a combination and you have calm abiding at that time. But this is when you have real Vipassana, not just simulated Vipassana.

[Audience:] I just went to a ten-day Vipassana retreat and all we did was look at the breath. So how can that be analytical?

Well, because what they are having you do is look at the breath but then as other objects arise in your mind, you also concentrate on them. If the itch in your leg gets too strong and it takes you away from the breath, then you go to the itch. Then the anger comes and that takes you away from the itch, so you focus on the anger. So there you are moving basically from one object of meditation to the next.

The idea, where the analysis comes in, is that at a certain point, first you recognize that it is all impermanent and all these events that are happening are all changing, changing and still changing. Second, you begin to realize the suffering nature of cyclic existence. Third, you begin to see there is no solid self controlling the whole process. It is just all these different mental events, from the breath to anger, to itches, to regret, to this and that, to attachment, etcetera. You begin to see it is just these events and that there is no central controller "I" that is running the show. That is where the insight is.

[Audience:] How come they never explained all that at the retreat I went to?

Well often when they teach beginners Vipassana, they cannot give you the whole big teaching in only ten days. So they give little chunks that help us learn to recognize the breath and recognize different things going on. So you are not going to get the full instruction in a ten-day course.

Acceptance and understanding

[In response to audience:] Well that is one important part: just accepting all that stuff is not going to free us from it. Only the understanding of emptiness frees us from cyclic existence. Nothing else does.

But to get the understanding of emptiness, we have to become a little bit more accepting and patient with ourselves. As all this stuff comes up in us, we have to learn to have an attitude of, "Well here it is. I can tolerate it and it is not going to run me over. This is what it feels like and it will go away." We definitely need to make friends with the junk in the sense of accepting it, but we do not want to make such good friends with it that we think, "My anger is my best friend. I need my anger. I cannot give it up." We do not want to be that kind of friend with anger and say, "Anger is my best friend. It never fails me. It is always right." [Laughter]

Actual Way to Practice Calm Abiding

Now, in the next section if you look at your outline, we are going to start talking about the five faults or the five interruptions to developing calm abiding and the eight antidotes to those. Yes, I know that there are five interruptions and eight antidotes – they are not the same number. Somebody once said, "Symmetry is stupid. Do not expect it all to fit together nicely." There are eight antidotes because the first interference has four antidotes and the others all have one. Let me just list them and then we will go through and explain them more in depth.

Five deterrents to calm abiding

Overview:

1. Laziness and the four antidotes to laziness

The first fault is our old 'friend' laziness. Laziness has four antidotes. First we develop faith or confidence to oppose it, then aspiration, then joyous effort, and then finally pliancy or flexibility. I will go back and explain all these. We are just doing an overview right now.

2. Forgetting the object of meditation

Once we have gotten over laziness and are able to get ourselves on the cushion, the next thing that happens is that we forget the object of meditation. Our mind gets distracted. It goes to cream cheese, or chocolate, or whatever you happen to prefer. Here we need to invoke mindfulness as the antidote. I must say here that all these words in the context of calm abiding have very, very specific meanings. We throw the term mindfulness around left, right and center but you cannot even find it in Webster's dictionary. Here in the context of the calm abiding meditation, it has a very specific meaning, as do all these different terms and that is why it is helpful to hear the teachings so you can identify these mental factors very clearly in your own mind...

[Teachings lost due to change of tape]

3. Laxity and excitement

The next thing that happens is that the concentration gets interrupted either by laxity or excitement. These are actually two different hindrances, but they are categorized under one here. Remember 'symmetry is stupid' so two can be counted as one. The antidote to these is the mental factor of introspective alertness. Sometimes this word is translated as alertness, sometimes as introspection and sometimes as vigilance. There are many different translations for this particular word.

4. Failure to apply the antidotes

The next hindrance, after we begin to deal with our laxity and our excitement, is that we fail to apply the antidotes. With introspective alertness we have begun to notice the laxity and the excitement, but we do not apply the antidotes. So this next hindrance is non-application and the antidote to that is application.

5. Over application of antidotes

The next thing that happens is that we apply the antidote, but we over apply it and so over-application becomes a hindrance. The antidote to that is equanimity, letting the mind be. I will go back and explain these.

1. Laziness and its antidotes

The first one is laziness. We went over this one a lot when we talked about the far reaching attitude of joyous effort. So I will not go into it in too much detail here. Do you remember the three kinds of laziness? They are: sloth; distraction and busyness; depression and discouragement.

These are the three kinds of laziness that really interrupt our meditation. They are what prevent us from getting ourselves on the meditation cushion in the first place. They prevent us from going to teachings on meditation, from getting on the cushion, from staying on the cushion and everything else. This is because we either just like to sleep and block everything out and procrastinate, or because we keep ourselves incredibly busy running around doing all sorts of things, or we keep our mind totally preoccupied with putting ourselves down and telling ourselves how lousy we are and getting thoroughly discouraged. So laziness keeps us from doing anything.

Confidence or faith in the benefits of calm abiding

The real antidote, the real cure to laziness, is the mental factor of pliancy or flexibility. This is a mental factor that allows both our body and our mind to be incredibly flexible and relaxed and tuned in. But because we do not have much flexibility and pliancy right now, although it is the real antidote, we start with something that is going to help us develop the flexibility. So we start first with developing faith or confidence, then we move on to aspiration, then we move on to joyous effort and then all that results in having the flexibility or pliancy.

So to come back to the first antidote: gaining faith or confidence. This is talking about the mind that is able to first of all have faith or confidence that such a thing as calm abiding exists. For us this can be a big issue. If we doubt the existence of calm abiding, then for sure we are not going to get on our meditation cushion and try to develop it.

We Westerners have lots of if's, ands or buts. We hear about single-pointed concentration and we go, "Well yeah, but I want to see it statistically, with somebody's EEG, that there is some change here." Actually this is quite an interesting point because His Holiness has given his approval to a group of scientists who are involved in doing research like this. They are testing the GSR of some of the yogis, as

well as attention response and all sorts of other things, to see what happens when somebody develops concentration and measure them in scientific terms. His Holiness has consented to this research because if they can prove something, then for Westerners it gives a way for us to say, "Oh yeah look, here are all these statistics. Calm abiding must exist." Whereas if we just hear stories about people who have calm abiding, we might scratch our head and say, "Well I wonder." [Editor's note: The results of this research have been published in the book "Destructive Emotions: How Can We Overcome Them?: A Scientific Dialog With The Dalai Lama" by The Dalai Lama and by Daniel Goleman.]

Gen Lamrimpa comments on calm abiding

So as Gen Lamrimpa said—it was so cute in the book the way he said it—we hear stories about calm abiding and we can choose to believe the stories and practice, or we can choose to not believe the stories and we do not practice. It is completely up to us. He was saying if you happen to believe the stories of people who have gained calm abiding, then it is going to inspire your own mind to practice because you have that conviction that calm abiding exists. And based on that conviction that it exists, you can begin to notice its good qualities and you can begin to see the disadvantage of not having it.

Disadvantages of not having calm abiding

Now I think we can already see in our own experience a little bit of the disadvantages of not having calm abiding. Without calm abiding, when we sit down to meditate on anything, our mind drives us completely buggy. If you do not have any feeling for the disadvantages of calm abiding, just do a week-long retreat and see what goes on in your mind. See how the mind just takes you all over and creates these incredible fantasies and makes you so upset, so depressed, so ecstatic, and none of it is real because you are sitting there in one room on a cushion. But your mind makes everything very real and very solid. So we can already begin to see the disadvantages of not having calm abiding by looking at our own experience.

Advantages of calm abiding

What would be the advantages of developing calm abiding? Well number one, you could sit down and have some peace of mind. I could actually control my mind and if I do not want to think about chocolate, I am not going to think about chocolate. If I do not want to think about what somebody did to me fifteen and a half years ago and get depressed about it again for the umpteenth time, then I am not going to think about it. So some ability to control the mind is one of the profound advantages of calm abiding.

Another advantage to developing calm abiding is it makes all the other meditations more forceful. Because we can control our minds, it helps to eliminate the gross levels of the afflictions*. When we meditate on loving-kindness, or on bodhicitta, or anything else, if we can do it with calm abiding then that meditation is going to sink in and go into our heart.

Calm abiding can also be very blissful; so for people who are looking out for bliss, this is a good advertisement.

It can also help us develop psychic powers, which can then be used to help other people.

It can help you do the tantric meditations where you have a lot of visualization and different things to do. Also for meditations on the subtle nervous system, it is very helpful to have calm abiding and the ability to concentrate.

It also helps all of our other practices become stronger. For example, when we do purification or collect positive potential, if we do these with calm abiding then those practices become stronger which then helps us to free our mind from the negative karma and to create positive karma. This really aids us in getting a good rebirth and it helps us be reborn in a place and at a time where we are able again to meet the Buddha's teachings and do the practice.

When we develop calm abiding and tie our mind to an internal object, it ceases a lot of the external harms we used to experience. When we develop calm abiding we are really concentrating the mind on something important, so all the other things that usually preoccupy us as being harmful, they fade away and no longer appear to our mind as being harmful or as enemies. This really helps calm our life down a bit. It makes the mind very clear and very powerful. Then whatever meditation we do, we can really have an experience of it.

Sometimes we go through the other meditations and it feels like we are just going through it and we are not getting anywhere and the mind is not very powerful or clear. If we have calm abiding and then do the meditation on loving-kindness, or taking and giving, or whatever, then the mind is so powerful that you generate a real strong experience in the meditation because of having developed calm abiding. So it really helps us to gain the realizations and then, of course, as we have the realizations of the path, we progress along the bodhisattva's stages and become closer to liberation and enlightenment.

If we really think about all the advantages of calm abiding and how it helps us in this life, but more importantly, we think about how it helps us in our practice and helps us have good future rebirth, attain liberation and enlightenment, be of service to others and how it pacifies and smoothes out our own mind and helps us work out a lot of our junk, the more we see these advantages of calm abiding, the more faith we have. And because we now see the qualities of calm abiding, this leads us from this first antidote of developing faith and confidence, to the second antidote which is aspiration.

Aspiration

When you see the qualities of something advertised on TV, the next thing that happens is that you have the aspiration to have it and the thing that happens after that is that you have the energy and the effort to go get it. So it is a similar kind of process that is working here. First, to develop faith we really spend some time thinking about the advantages of calm abiding and the disadvantages of not having it. Then from that we develop the mind of aspiration, which is the mind that really takes interest and yearns for calm abiding and wants it. So that mind of interest and aspiration leads us to put effort in the practice.

Joyous effort and pliancy/serviceability of body and mind

Effort becomes the third antidote because effort is the mind that takes delight in doing what is virtuous. We will really have interest and delight, propensity and eagerness regarding the practice. Then automatically, as we practice more and more, we develop the flexibility of body and mind and that actually completely eliminates the laziness.

So it is a progression that we go through in doing this. It is a progression, but do not think that you have to fully master faith before you get any aspiration or effort or pliancy, because it can happen that you do. Sometimes as baby meditators we get some kind experience of pliancy – it lasts for maybe ten seconds – and then, just from our own experience, this makes us go, “Oh hey, wow, this feels good and is similar to what they might be talking about in the books.” So that initial experience, or flash, helps increase our faith and confidence and therefore increases our aspiration which therefore increases our energy or our joyous effort, in doing the practice.

So do you see how these four are connected? Although there is a progression it is not like they are real solid steps. You can go back and forth and one can really affect the other. So it is not that once you get aspiration, you stop having faith and once you get energy, you stop having aspiration. It is not like that. It is really seeing how they affect each other and how they build on each other and how they really help us go someplace.

We have what we need, we just need to increase it

The whole purpose of talking about all these things is because all are aspects of our own mind. All the interferences are aspects of our own mind; all the antidotes are aspects of our own mind that we already have right now. The only problem is, our faith is small and our aspiration is tiny. [Laughter] Our energy is low and our pliancy is diminutive too. They are all still small, but we have all these qualities right now in our mind. It is not like we have to go and get the qualities somewhere else. It is just a matter of taking what is there and really increasing it. In the same way, all the interferences are mental factors too. We use the positive mental factors to smooth out and subdue the interfering ones.

This is really talking on a very psychological level. The whole purpose of doing this is so that when we sit down and meditate, we can begin to identify the different mental factors in our own meditation. What does laziness feel like? What is my mind like when I am lazy? We want to be able to recognize laziness when it is happening. What does faith feel like? What does aspiration feel like? How can I cultivate those? Sitting and praying, “Buddha, Buddha, Buddha, please give me these four antidotes,” will not do it for us. We have to be able to recognize these things in our own mind and the teachings say exactly how to develop them. If we want pliancy, develop effort; if we want effort, develop aspiration. If we want aspiration, develop faith; if we want faith think of the positive qualities of calm abiding and the negative

qualities of not having it. If we do that, it then leads us to develop all these other mental factors that really transform our mind.

[Audience:] Why is pliancy important?

Because pliancy is a flexibility of body and mind that enables the mind to remain flexible and relaxed so you can put it on an object of meditation and it stays there. When you have pliancy the winds in the body have been purified, so your body does not start aching, complaining and groaning when you are meditating, and your mind does not get bored, distracted and tired of the whole thing. So it is with this flexibility and pliancy that everything becomes workable or serviceable.

[In response to audience:] That is exactly it, because laziness is just being stuck. The mind is totally inflexible when it is lazy. You are right. Laziness is the total opposite of this flexibility we are talking about in which the mind is very serviceable.

[In response to audience:] Calm Abiding helps us to not just get the psychic powers (which are called the common attainments), but the real important thing is that it helps us get the uncommon attainment of liberation and enlightenment, which are what we are really after.

So let us sit and meditate for a few minutes now.

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>

*'Afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'disturbing attitudes'.