

**The Far-reaching Attitude of Meditative Stabilization – Part 5 of 9:
Deterrents to Calm Abiding and the Antidotes – Continued** (lightly edited transcript)
by Ven. Thubten Chodron© at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle, 23 Feb 94

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We were talking last time about the eight hindrances ...sorry.. I meant the five hindrances. Nobody corrected me? [laughter] I remember one time when Serkong Rinpoche said something that was a slip of the tongue and no one corrected him. When he realized what he had said, he looked at us and asked, "How come nobody corrected me? You are going to let your teacher say something that you know is not right?"

Five Hindrances and Eight Antidotes

1. Laziness

We were talking about the five hindrances and the eight antidotes to those hindrances. The first hindrance has four antidotes. The first hindrance is our old pal laziness. This is the laziness of getting discouraged, or the laziness of liking to hang around and sleep, or the laziness of keeping ourselves super busy.

The antidotes to laziness

i. Developing faith or confidence

To counteract laziness, we first develop faith or confidence in the existence of calm abiding and in the advantages of developing it and the disadvantages of not developing it. This is the same psychological process that is behind watching a commercial. We see the good qualities of something and our mind becomes interested.

ii. Aspiration

Aspiration is the next antidote. This is where we want to attain it because we see the advantages of having it.

iii. Joyous effort

From there we go to the third antidote, which is joyous effort. The interest increases to where we really want to go out and do something about it.

iv. Pliancy

Then what we do about it is the fourth and actual antidote: flexibility, serviceability or pliancy – there are different translations of this word. What this term means is having an extremely flexible body and mind which enables us to do with our mind what we want to do. It also means that the energy in our body settles down so that we are not so distracted by it when we meditate.

The above is just a review of laziness, the first hindrance that we talked about last time.

2. Forgetting the object of meditation

After we have overcome the laziness and get ourselves seated, the second hindrance then comes up and is our next biggest problem. This is when we forget the object of meditation. Let us say we are trying to use the breath as our object of meditation. You take two breaths and then your mind is off in never-never land. Or you visualize the image of the Buddha and then, "goodbye" – it disappears or changes.

The mind just totally goes off the object. It does not have the ability to stay on the object because there is no stability in the mind. The mind just constantly forgets it.

This kind of forgetting is a specific mental factor and it has a specific meaning here. It is not the same as forgetting where I put my keys. Rather it is forgetting in the context of calm abiding. What happens is, our mind forgets the object of meditation and instead is distracted towards something else.

The antidote to forgetting the object of meditation—or sometimes translated as forgetting the instruction—is mindfulness.

Antidote: Mindfulness and its three qualities

Mindfulness is another mental factor and here it has a very specific meaning. It has three qualities.

i. Familiarity

Mindfulness is familiar with the object of meditation. Whatever our object of meditation, whether it is loving kindness, or the breath, or the image of the Buddha, or the ugly aspects of phenomena, or whatever it is, our mind is familiar with it. In other words, we cannot have mindfulness or the memory of an object if the mind is unfamiliar with that object.

ii. Holding onto the object

The second quality is that mindfulness holds onto the object so that the object is not forgotten. So the mode of apprehension of the object is something that is continuous. The mind does not forget the different aspects and does not forget what it is doing.

iii. Prevents distraction

The third quality is that mindfulness prevents distraction. By being familiar with the object of meditation and having a continuous memory of the object, it functions in such a way to prevent distractions so that other thoughts do not intervene.

Illustrations of mindfulness

Sometimes you will see a little drawing about the different stages to develop calm abiding. Mindfulness is symbolized by having a rope around an elephant and tying it down. It is depicted that way because that is the first big thing that we have to do: learning to tie the mind to the object of meditation.

Another illustration: losing the object of meditation is like a child running wildly around and running out the door. Your kid is running out the door and runs here, there and everywhere. Mindfulness is bringing that child back into the room and saying, “Look here.”

With practice, the thoughts will settle

As we keep practicing mindfulness and keep bringing the mind back to the object of meditation, after a while the thoughts get tired of running around all the time. I am not saying that this is necessarily going to happen in one meditation session but, as you practice, over a period of time as your memory and mindfulness gets stronger, the thoughts that instantaneously take you away from the object of your meditation are going to become less strong and they begin to take a rest.

Sticking with one object of meditation

It is important to stick with one object of meditation when we are developing calm abiding and not change objects all the time. The first of the three qualities of mindfulness is familiarity with the object. If we keep changing the object of our meditation for calm abiding, then our mindfulness does not get a chance to function.

Of course, if you are doing practice during the course of the day, you may choose to be mindful of many different things. Sometimes you might meditate on Chenrezig, or Tara, or the breath, or loving kindness and in all those different meditations you are mindful of each of the objects of meditation. But when you are really setting out to develop calm abiding on a specific object, you want to develop an especial familiarity with that object.

What we are doing a lot in our daily practice is developing familiarity with a lot of different facets. That is good and we need to do that. I am just saying that when we are actually going for developing full calm abiding, we have to stick with the same object each meditation session. This is because if one session

you are focusing on the rise and fall of your abdomen and the next session you're focusing on the breath at your nostrils and the session after that, you are focusing on the Buddha, and then next you are at Tara, and the next session you are at loving kindness, your ability to be mindful of one object to the point of developing calm abiding on it is quite limited.

Questions and Answers

Samatha retreat

[Audience:] When we go on a samatha retreat, do we stay with just one object of meditation throughout the retreat?

You basically do. If you have commitments like tantric commitments or something else, you do your commitments. But your basic meditation is just doing the samatha meditation when you do that retreat.

[In response to audience:] Basically yes, or you incorporate your commitments in the calm abiding session. For people who do the six-session guru yoga, you would incorporate the guru yoga and do that as part of the calm abiding session. Because in the calm abiding session, you would take refuge, do the seven limbs and other preparatory practices. You could do the guru yoga at this point. It would be like a preparation for the calm abiding that you do right after. But basically, when you do a samatha retreat, you are really sticking with one object and one kind of meditation, and not doing your commitments in elaborate form. In fact, they even say that as your mind gets more advanced, more concentrated and single-pointed, then there is a way to really shorten your commitments, or rather transform your commitments into the calm abiding meditation. There is no cheating on our commitments.

Day-dreaming and obsessing

[Audience:] If I am constantly thinking about someone and cannot get them out of my mind, is this the same thing as mindfulness on a single object?

It is the diluted form of mindfulness. The kind of mindfulness that we are trying to cultivate here is on a virtuous object. But that kind of thing you are speaking of is more an obsession.

You will notice when you are visualizing the object of attachment that you are not completely single-pointed on it. The object is changing and moving as you are fantasizing and having a whole video show. So you are not being totally single-pointed on the object. You might be focused on that wonderful person, but the image is not one hundred percent right there, because first you visualize that you are at the beach, then you are at the mountains, then you are doing this and then that. So it is not real single-pointedness.

[In response to audience:] When your mind is concentrating on something in calm abiding, we call it a virtuous mindfulness. When it is concentrating single-pointedly on your enemy – when you are holding the image of your enemy in your mind without thinking any thoughts and without getting distracted about what you are going to do to him – that is kind of a diluted mindfulness.

When we talk about introspective alertness and all these things, there is a diluted form and a pure form. They have similar qualities but are distinguished by how they are functioning in terms of the object and by the motivation behind them. Even though there are some similarities between diluted forms and pure forms of introspective alertness, they perform very different functions depending on the motivation and the object.

Concentration is not mindfulness

[In response to audience:] We have to really think in depth what mindfulness means. We need to differentiate between mindfulness and obsession, between calm abiding and what we, in our worldly way, call concentration. Concentration is like playing computer games, or a kid playing Nintendo. They are completely glued and we would say they are 'single-pointed'; they are totally 'concentrated'. But if you look at it, this does not have the characteristics of calm abiding. In calm abiding you are focused on the object. Your mind is not moving and the object is not changing. You have complete control of your mind.

When you are a kid playing Nintendo, you are not distracted by your mom yelling at you and telling you to shut it off, but your mind is not single-pointed because you are shooting that one and shooting this one and switching games back and forth. The mind is changing objects and there is a lot going on there. So although we say that is concentration and it seems like mindfulness, if you really look at it, it is not.

This is similar to when you are thinking a lot about your vacation and you are getting obsessed about it, or thinking about some wonderful person. In each of these instances your mind is thinking about a lot of different things. You are not just holding the image of the beach single-pointedly in your mind and nothing is moving – not your mind, not the beach, not the waves. A lot is moving. There is a whole drama going on and so it is very, very different.

Meditative absorption and Sand mandalas

[Audience:] What is meditative absorption? Is that what happens when one is doing something like building a sand mandala?

That is not the way we would use that term in the illustration you gave of somebody working to build a mandala. They might be very absorbed in what they are doing, but it is not what we would call meditative absorption. Meditative absorption is referring more to the calm abiding where your mind is not thinking about a lot of different things. When you are working on the mandala, you are working with physical things and you have to think about the sand and the little funnel and the thing you are rubbing here and all this different stuff. You are very focused on that general thing that you are doing, but within that general thing, your mind is going to different things.

You are developing the ability to concentrate, but it is not the single-pointed concentration that you develop when you are really doing calm abiding. It is similar in the sense that your mind is not thinking about chocolate cake, but still, your mind is thinking about many things within the mandala as you are making it.

[In response to audience:] When you are doing the Theravada vipassana meditation, you are really focused on the subject and labeling the different mental factors and attitudes going on within you. Whereas when you are building a mandala you are concerned with the blue and the red colors and these sorts of things. At the same time you are visualizing them as deities and you are thinking of the blessings of the guru and a whole lot of other stuff. With vipassana meditation you are focused on internal objects; when you are building the mandala, your senses are working. I am not talking about visualizing a mandala, but building one with sand. If you are building a three dimensional thing, your senses are working. That is very different than doing calm abiding or any kind of meditation where you are not paying so much attention to your senses.

[Audience:] How can the mind stay focused on one object (for example, the image of the Buddha) if everything, including the mind itself, is changing moment to moment?

Everything is changing moment to moment, but you are focused on the image of the Buddha (and the image is not moving). The Buddha is sitting (still) there in the image that you are focusing on. The mind is changing moment to moment, but it is staying focused on one thing.

[In response to audience:] There are different ways of interpreting ‘changing.’ Everything is changing moment to moment. There is no way to stop that. But there is gross impermanence, which is very different from subtle impermanence. Your mind is changing moment to moment (subtle impermanence), but it is not having the gross impermanence of the mind being in New York one split second and being in D.C. the next. There is some stability in the mind and continuity on the object. In distraction there is no continuity of the object – everything is changing all the time. Whereas what we are talking about here, there is a real continuity moment to moment so that it appears the same. It is similar moment to moment.

[In response to audience:] But that is when you are meditating on subtle impermanence. When you are meditating on calm abiding, you are not doing subtle impermanence. You may do it later after you have developed calm abiding. Then you might switch and use that precision mind to meditate on subtle impermanence. But when you are developing calm abiding on the image of the Buddha, you are not focusing on the moment to moment change of the mind, because the moment to moment change of the

mind is not your object of meditation. The image of the Buddha is the object of meditation.

Preliminary practices

[Audience:] What about the practices where you are physically moving or doing stuff: does this make it harder for us to learn to focus on an object?

You are asking about things like learning to build a mandala where we put piles of rice and rings here and chant the prayer, and then we knock it down, and build it up again. Or like when you do prostrations to the thirty-five Buddhas. You are doing something physical. So you are asking, is that not contradictory to trying to make the mind stable on one thing?

The thing is our mind is not really capable of remaining stable on one thing in its present state. I cannot speak for you but my mind is not capable of that.

The Buddha was incredibly skillful when he thought of all these preliminary practices. A lot of these preliminary practices are very physically oriented and that is because at the beginning of the practice, we are very physically oriented. We cannot sit still. The body has too much restless energy in it. The mind has too much restless energy. So a way of channeling all this mental and physical energy is through the practices the Buddha developed, where you are really doing physical things. In this way you are using up a lot of energy. You are prostrating up and down, up and down. You are doing things with your mandala rings, the sand, the grains and the beads, and you are dumping it over. Or you are doing 100,000 water bowl offerings and you are moving. This is the skill of the Buddha in taking our tendency to be movement oriented and physically oriented, and transforming that into something virtuous. By that we purify the mind. We collect a lot of positive potential. The restless energy begins to calm down and that really helps us when we sit down to do calm abiding meditation and focus on an object.

So, all these things get fitted together into one practice. Tibetan Buddhism teaches many, many different practices and we do all of them because there are many, many aspects of ourselves that we need to develop, refine and reform.

[Audience:] Why couldn't we just go directly into a cave to meditate and skip all those preliminary practices?

Because otherwise what you are going to do is, you are going to move into your cave and you are going to start interior decorating. Really! You will first interior decorate your cave, then you will plant a garden outside your cave and then you will build a fence of stones and do lots of other stuff because the mind has all that restlessness in it.

[In response to audience:] Setting up a line of seven bowls full of water – there is nothing particularly virtuous about that. It is not like bowls and water are virtuous, but what we are trying to do is think of the Buddha. We are developing the wish to make this offering for the benefit of sentient beings. We are developing some simulated bodhicitta. We are developing a generous mind that makes offerings. We are imagining the Buddha and offering all these things. By the power of our thought that is conjoined with physical action, it then becomes something really healthy for the mind.

Otherwise, at the beginning stages of the practice, if we go and sit in a cave, our mind will do a whole movie. That is why they really emphasize purification, collection of positive potential. As you are doing purification and the collection of positive potential, you slowly develop some single-pointedness, some mindfulness. When you are doing prostrations, you can hold the image of the Buddhas more continuously as you are prostrating. Or when you are making offerings, you can hold the image of the Buddha more in your mind when you are offering. And you can hold the image of the mandala more so that you are also developing some more ability to concentrate.

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>