

**The Far-reaching Attitude of Meditative Stabilization – Part 7 of 9:
Deterrents to Calm Abiding and the Antidotes – Cont'd** (lightly edited transcript)
by Ven. Thubten Chodron© at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle. 16 May 94

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If you are able to apply what we have learned on a daily basis, you will experience for yourself if it works. If you put into practice what we are learning, you will be able to have very specific questions that have arisen from trying the meditation. Also, if you practice daily, then when you receive the teachings, the teachings are going to make some sense to you. If you don't practice, then when I describe all these mental factors, they will seem like a bunch of gobbledygook technical categories. But if you try and practice the teachings, you will be able to see these different things in your own mind.

The five hindrances to calm abiding

We are in the middle of talking about the five hindrances to developing calm abiding.

1. Laziness

The first one was laziness. The grossest kind of laziness is just the inability to get ourselves on the cushion. You overcame that by being here!

2. Forgetting the object of meditation

The second obstacle that arises is forgetting the object of meditation. For example, you are using the visualized image of the Buddha as your object of meditation. In your meditation, you try to recall the image of the Buddha, but your mind goes blank. All of a sudden you can't remember what the Buddha looked like. Or, you try and put your mind on the object, but in a moment [snaps fingers] your attention is gone. There is no mindfulness. The mind isn't able to hold the object for longer than two breaths.

Some of you might be using the breath or some other object of meditation – that is fine. I am just using the image of the Buddha here as an example.

The way to overcome this obstacle is by generating our mindfulness again and again. The meaning of mindfulness here is not exactly the same as that in the Vipassana tradition. The word 'mindfulness' has different definitions.

In the Theravada tradition, mindfulness is basically being aware of what's going on in the mind and bearing witness. This is very much what it means in the Burmese tradition.

But here, mindfulness is remembering the object of meditation. Remembering the object of meditation – for example the breath or the image of the Buddha – in such a way that the mind is able to remain continuous on it and distraction is prevented. We have to develop some ability to keep the mind continuously on the object. That's our next job after we sit down on the cushion.

3. Laxity and excitement

When we are able to overcome the first two obstacles to a certain extent – at times, we may still not be able to get ourselves on the cushions or hold onto the object of meditation, but in general, we are able to – we will be able to develop some mindfulness on the object of meditation. At this time, we will get other interruptions, of which the two basic ones are laxity and excitement. The third hindrance actually consists of these two hindrances.

In some books laxity is translated as dullness or sinking, and excitement is translated as agitation. I'm going to describe what these mean because the English words don't give you an accurate feeling for these two mental factors.

Two main qualities required for developing calm abiding

Stability

When we are developing calm abiding, there are two main qualities we want to develop. One is called stability. This is the ability to keep your mind on the object, to make the mind stable. It's the continuity of mindfulness on a chosen object. To have stability, you need mindfulness. You need memory of the object. You need concentration or samadhi to keep your attention there for a continuous period of time. With stability, the mind is somehow engrossed with the object. It's captivated by the object. The mind is kept stable on it. It's not bouncing all over the universe.

Clarity

The other quality that is required for developing calm abiding is clarity. Now, we usually think clarity means the object of meditation is clear, but here, clarity actually refers more to the subjective mind being clear. It means our perceiving mind is clear; the mind has some quality of vividness or lucidity. By having this mental clarity, we slowly get the clarity of the object, and then we intensify this clarity.

Now, there are certain instances when the mind is quite clear, for example, when we have very strong afflictions. [['afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'disturbing attitudes'.\]](#) When we have a lot of attachment, our mind is not dull. It is not falling asleep. When we have a lot of jealousy or anger, there is a certain lucidity or vividness of mind. This lucidity or vividness of mind is what is used in tantra when we talk about transforming the afflictions*. That is a subjective quality of the mind state, and we use that in a positive way to develop concentration. That is one way that we transform the afflictions. [['afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'delusions'.\]](#)

When our afflictions[#] arise, there might be a certain subjective clarity, but this does not mean there is always clarity of the object. Sometimes there is. When you are attached to chocolate cake, your mind is vivid and the image of the chocolate cake is vivid. But sometimes, we get this other kind of attachment or this other kind of anger where the object isn't very vivid, but the mind has a lot of energy. In this case, you have the subjective clarity but not the objective clarity.

It can also happen, for example, when we meditate on the image of the Buddha. Our mind is clear; we have a lot of enthusiasm and gusto for doing the meditation. But the image of the Buddha isn't very clear. That might happen because we are not used to visualizing the image of the Buddha. Slowly, through practicing again and again, we will be able to get the clarity of the object.

Sometimes we may have the clarity of the meditation object, for example, the image of the Buddha, but our mind isn't completely alert and vivid and lucid on the object. The analogy that they give is, you are driving on the highway, you see the sign for the next exit and you know that it's your exit, but you drive right past it anyway. [laughter] That kind of quality comes up in the meditation too. You are there, but you are not completely there. In that case we have the objective clarity but not the subjective clarity of the mind. We need to work on this.

Those are two qualities that we need to develop in our meditation. We need to have strength in both of them.

Laxity and excitement: hindrances to stability and clarity

Now the things that interrupt the stability and the clarity are the laxity and the excitement. Laxity chiefly inhibits the clarity and excitement chiefly inhibits the stability. When there is laxity, your mind is spaced out; the clarity of your mind isn't so strong. When there is excitement, the mind is quite restless; it is very easy to lose the object. The mind isn't very stable.

Laxity and excitement are two mental factors among the twenty secondary or auxiliary mental factors. Laxity is not explicitly listed among the twenty, but is included in them.

There's another mental factor called lethargy that is listed among the twenty. Lethargy comes from ignorance. It is a branch of ignorance and it's a heaviness of body and mind. It's a state of being very close to sleep. It is different from laxity. Laxity is when you're spaced out.

Lethargy is when the laxity has become extreme and you are (falling asleep). You know how you get into that state: you start out in your meditation and your mind is kind of clear; then after you meditate for a while, your mind gets a bit vague and a little bit spaced out, but you are still kind of on the object; and then as you watch, the mind becomes vaguer, and vaguer like you are falling asleep, and you might even have other images. You get into this dream-like, trance-like state and then all of a sudden, you fall asleep. Have you had that when you meditate? [laughter] That's lethargy. The mind and body are getting really heavy.

While laxity can sometimes be neutral or even virtuous in nature, like if you are focused on a virtuous object, lethargy is either neutral or unwholesome or non-virtuous. It causes unserviceability or inflexibility of the body and mind.

[Audience:] If the image of the Buddha isn't so clear, can we visualize something more familiar like a flower or a baseball?

[laughter] There is a special advantage to using the image of the Buddha because it helps you generate refuge. It helps you recall the Buddha's qualities. Visualizing a flower or a baseball doesn't have that effect. By visualizing a baseball, you're putting that image in your mind again and again. You do not want to have this image in your mind all the time. Usually it's not recommended to switch to another object that you are more familiar with unless it's Chenrezig or Tara, or the breath, or one of the other objects that we've talked about.

If you're working on the image of the Buddha and it isn't clear, either switch to another object that the Buddha recommended or look at a picture of the Buddha before you start. Have one picture that you use regularly, and spend some time looking at it. Then close your eyes and recall it. Like after you have looked at your bills, you can see them even when you close your eyes. [laughter] Sometimes when you take tests you know which side of the page on the text the answer is on and what things look like. It's that same kind of faculty.

Look at a picture or a drawing or something, and then just close your eyes and remember it. Keep working at it like that. One of the chief difficulties why the image of the Buddha is not clear is because we are not used to thinking about the Buddha. We are more used to thinking about baseball and ice cream. But now, we want to recondition our mind.

[In response to audience:] Yes, you can remember that. It is good to remember that the Buddha's body is made of light and it's not heavy. It is good to have a feeling of the Buddha's qualities, but the main thing you are concentrating on is the visual image. You don't need to block out all those feelings, because those feelings can be quite enriching and can help you make the image more vivid. For example, when you feel the kindness of the Buddha very strongly.

[In response to audience:] Try to do both. It is like being able to look at somebody and saying: "I love you," at the same time. You can do that, can't you? You can look at somebody and feel love at the same time.

Coarse and subtle laxity

Now, when we talk about laxity, there are two main degrees of laxity – gross laxity and subtle laxity. Actually there're all sorts of different gradations of laxity in between. Don't think it's just either/or. It is like the dimmer switch that you turn to adjust the level of light you want.

Coarse laxity happens when the clarity or the lucidity of your mind decreases. You are still on the object. You have some stability, but your mind is getting spaced out. The mind is depressed. The clarity is on its way out. The object doesn't appear as distinctly. You have stability but things are fading. If you are not on top of the situation, you will go into lethargy and then soon you are going to fall asleep. [laughter] This kind of laxity is easy to recognize but difficult to oppose, as we know.

When you are able to eliminate the gross laxity, the mind may get into the subtle kind of laxity where you have stability and (subjective) clarity, but it is not very strong. They say that this subtle laxity is a very dangerous pitfall because it's very difficult to recognize. Once you've recognized it, it is easy to eliminate. You just need to tighten your concentration. But it is very difficult to recognize.

This is not the main thing that we have to worry about at the moment, but it is good to understand it. Sometimes people can be so concentrated that their breath stops, but they still have this subtle laxity. Or they can remain concentrated on the object of meditation for a day without moving, but the strength of the clarity of the mind is not completely strong.

They say the subtle laxity is real dangerous because many meditators mistake this for calm abiding. They think they have reached calm abiding when actually they are being very subtly 'spaced-out'. This is dangerous. You think you have gotten somewhere when you haven't and it is very easy to become complacent. If you become complacent and you just continue meditating in this subtle laxity, then what happens is that your wisdom decreases, your memory starts to go, your intelligence decreases, and you can even have an animal rebirth afterwards.

[In response to audience:] This is when you have stability and you have clarity, but the clarity isn't real strong. There's something missing. It is not completely there. It is like you are watching the TV set, but part of your mind is somehow still a little bit spaced out. The clarity of the mind isn't complete. They say the apprehension of the object is slightly slack. The clarity remains, but your grip on the object is a little bit loose. This actually comes a bit later on the path after you've eliminated the coarse laxity. My guess is that the coarse laxity is much more what we have to deal with now.

Antidotes to coarse laxity

I want to give you some remedies for the coarse laxity as they are quite practical.

Make the object of meditation interesting

What happens with the coarse laxity is you have some clarity but your mind is actually vague about the object. Your mind has become too withdrawn inside. What you need to do is to make the object more interesting. For example, if your object of meditation is the breath, make the breath more interesting: "What does it feel like when I start to inhale? What does it feel like in that space between the breaths?" Enlarge the scope of your object. Make it more appealing.

If you are working with the image of the Buddha, make the colors more vivid. Brighten it up. Make the Buddha appear gorgeous. Brighten stuff up. Make it interesting. Imagine him being made of light or go over the various features. Look in detail at all the parts of the Buddha. Maybe look at the Buddha's eyes and feel the Buddha's compassion. This is where the feelings that you were talking about help make the object more interesting. The Buddha isn't just this flat image. It is a 3-D thing. It's a person who is looking at you. There's some kind of relationship there and this is interesting. The mind wakes up.

Temporarily switch the object of meditation

If that doesn't work try to temporarily switch your object of meditation. For example, leave the image of the Buddha or the breath, and switch to doing some analytic meditation on a topic like the precious human life or the advantages of bodhicitta, or refuge and the qualities of the Buddha. In other words, doing some kind of analytic meditation that is going to make your mind happy and buoyant. When there is coarse laxity, what has happened is that the mind has gotten flat or dull. It isn't energized. Do analytic meditation on one of the lamrim topics that's going to make your mind excited.

This is why it is very good to do the analytic meditation on the lamrim topics on a regular basis. Then when you just think about the precious human life, some feeling comes. Or you think about the qualities of the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. Or you think about the advantages of bodhicitta and what it would be like to be a bodhisattva. All of a sudden your mind gets jazzed and it seems good. Once you have woken your mind, you can switch back to your object of meditation: the breath or the image of the Buddha, or whatever it is.

Visualize the syllables

If that doesn't work, another thing to try is to use a forceful way to remove the laxity. With this technique, you visualize your mind the size of a white pea, or as a white letter "AH" at your heart. You say the syllable "PEY" very loudly and you imagine that the white pea, in which is your consciousness, shoots up and comes out of the crown of your head, splits open, and your mind dissolves with the infinity of space. Do you see how this visualization is completely contradictory to that withdrawn sunken-in mind of laxity? This helps to broaden the scope of the mind.

Break the session

Now if all these techniques don't work, then break your meditation session. Stop your session. Go out, put cold water on your face, take a walk, look at long distances, get some exercise, drink a cup of coffee – they didn't say this in the scriptures. [laughter] Sometimes our mind is in a state that is withdrawn and sunken in. It just doesn't do any good to sit there and push ourselves, saying: "I've got to concentrate. I've got to do this right. Everybody else is doing it right, but I'm so horrible. Look at me!" This usual thing that we get into and is completely useless. It is better to break the session. Look in the distance. Don't go sit in your dark room to read a book. That's going to make your mind more dull. You have to get outside, get some exercise, look up, look out. Cold water is great.

It is interesting that throughout all these calm abiding instructions they really emphasize: don't sit there and squeeze and force your mind. I realize that is something that we tend to do. I appreciate these instructions. Before I heard these, what I used to do whenever my mind gets sleepy and dull is, I would think about death and suffering: "I have a precious human life but it's going to end very soon. I'm going to die." But that wouldn't wake my mind up at all. And then I heard these teachings and they say: "No, when your mind is dull, you have to think about something that makes your mind joyful."

You think about death and suffering when you have too much excitement and attachment, but when your mind is already suppressed, don't think about those things. Think about precious human life, bodhicitta, the Triple Gem. This is pointing out the fact that we have to be very skillful with our mind and know how to recognize the defilements and exactly which antidote to apply. If you apply the wrong antidote you will go nowhere.

[Audience: Inaudible]

The subtle laxity: the hard thing about it is noticing it. Once you have noticed it, just tighten the mode of apprehension of the object a bit. Tighten the mind on the object. It is a very delicate thing, like tuning a guitar string: if you make the attention too tight, excitement can start coming in. But if you make the apprehension or the attention too loose, the mind starts getting lax. It is a matter of learning to balance. But if you are going to err, it is better to err on the side of making the mind slightly too tight. When you do that, you can see the excitement very clearly and counteract it. Whereas if you err by holding the object too loose, you get into this subtle laxity which is more difficult to detect. But we should really concentrate more on the gross laxity and the lethargy.

[Audience: Inaudible]

That's lethargy, not laxity. It usually happens when you are sitting in the front row of teachings in front of the high lamas. You fall asleep. Repeatedly falling asleep in your meditation can be a karmic obscuration. One of the things that causes it, is mistreating Dharma materials: leaving them on the floor, putting your teacup or your prayer beads on top of your Dharma books, using them to earn money, selling them to earn money, using them to line your wastepaper basket.

Look what the communists did to the sacred things in Tibet and China. They put them right on the floor and made people walk on them. Karmically it can result in this kind of obscuration where the mind gets

dull. I'm not saying that this is the only cause of falling asleep during teachings. There are many other causes too.

Another action that can cause it is to do the following out of ignorance: avoiding the Dharma, criticizing the Buddha's teachings, saying that Dharma practice is useless. In previous lives, we might have said: "Dharma is useless. It's worthless. It's much better to go horseback riding and ice-skating, and have a good time. We don't need to go to teachings." What happens is that when we finally and miraculously have the opportunity to listen to teachings again, that karma ripens and the mind shuts down.

You can see cause and effect working there. If this is happening a lot, then doing some purification can be very helpful, and I think specifically prostrations can be good for this. You can see that prostrations is the opposite of laxity.

[Audience:] Were you saying that even though there is laxity, that it could be considered a virtuous action if you're meditating say, on the image of the Buddha?

It is virtuous in the sense of the Buddha being the object of meditation. But from the point of view of your mind falling asleep, if your mind gets bogged down and completely dull, that's not a virtuous state of mind.

[Audience: Inaudible]

Right. I think sometimes it is very good to make an effort to sit for a certain amount of time. Don't take what I was saying as: "Oh okay, the next time the knee hurts, I will get up and take a walk," because then you are never going to develop any concentration. There is no endurance. What I was talking about is when you have really been making an effort, but still, your mind is just totally... you have totally lost it, then it is time to take a break.

[Audience:] If you've been making an effort for some time...

It's hard to say what 'some time' is, and again it depends what kind of meditation you are doing. Doing your morning prayers is different from being in a retreat to develop calm abiding. If you are doing your morning prayers, then keep yourself on the cushion and finish the session. If you are in a retreat developing calm abiding, and you are going to be doing many short sessions throughout the day, then it is better to end that session and come back five minutes later for another session.

This isn't saying that you end your daily prayers early and don't do any kind of meditation for the rest of the day. It's referring to situations where your mind is completely out of control. In such cases, give yourself a break, but come back soon after for another session.

Sometimes it does us good to sit there and look at our mind. We don't have to get tight, but rather: "My mind's going bonkers. Well, I'm going to sit here and look at it. What is my mind going bonkers about?" Instead of getting all wrapped up in the objects that your mind is going bonkers about, start to notice and give labels to those objects. "I'm going bonkers because I have ten million things to do and nobody's helping me." "I'm going bonkers because somebody criticized me." "I'm going bonkers because I feel rejected." "I'm going bonkers because..." – whatever it is. It is good to develop some ability to notice what's going on in our mind and give it a label, instead of developing the habit of getting off from the cushion the moment we have a little bit of mental discomfort and going to the refrigerator. Namo [homage to] refrigerator, Namo TV [laughter].

[Audience: Inaudible]

It makes a huge difference. That is why we say it is very good to do some purification every day. That is why in the evening, before you go to bed, it is so important to look over what happened during the day. Do prostrations. Do Vajrasattva. Do the Shakyamuni Buddha meditation with the light and nectar coming and purifying. It does make a difference. It is important. This is why the preliminary practices are so important, why the seven-limb prayer is there. We do a very short version of it, but why it's there is because it purifies, it creates positive potential. Why do the masters recommend that we do a hundred thousand prostrations or a hundred thousand Vajrasattva? It is not because a hundred thousand is

particularly this or that, but it is just to get us going, to get us to do that purification. It really does work; it does make a big difference.

Excitement and its antidotes

The other part of the third hindrance to calm abiding, is excitement. It is sometimes translated as agitation. Excitement is a kind of distraction or wandering, and it can develop at other times, not just during meditation. Whereas laxity happens more specifically in meditation than in other activities. Outside of meditation, we tend to have lethargy rather than laxity.

Excitement focuses on a sensual object that we are familiar with, had some previous contact with, and the mind is scattered outwards. The mind grasps onto the object with a feeling of clinging, craving, wanting. So there we go. It obviously functions to obstruct calm abiding since it is very difficult to have calm abiding when the mind is thinking about chocolate cake, pizza and this very good looking person that you have just met. The mind is looking outwards; it is not on the object of meditation.

Excitement is slightly different from scattering. Excitement is directed towards an object that you have an attachment or attraction for, and is a form of attachment. Excitement is a type of scattering, but scattering can include other things. For example, when you are sitting and meditating, all of a sudden you remembered the guy who criticized you, or you remember what happened ten years ago, and you get very angry, or you get jealous or resentful. These are examples of scattering, but they are not excitement. Excitement is referring specifically to instances where objects of attachment come in the mind.

Scattering can also happen with virtuous objects. For example, you are meditating on the Buddha and all of a sudden Tara walks in and you want to switch the object of meditation. Or you are meditating on the Buddha and you think: "Oh, I got to meditate on bodhicitta instead." You are distracted by a virtuous object, which is certainly better than being distracted by pizza or Rock-n-Roll music, but still, it is distracting the mind from your main object of meditation.

They usually emphasize the excitement more than the scattering because when our mind gets distracted from the object of meditation, it is usually due to an object that we have attachment for. Watch out for this when you are meditating. You will get a good idea of the kinds of things that your mind has difficulty with. You get an idea of the things that you are attached to, because you watch where the excitement arises from.

When you start daydreaming of something that's wonderful, what are you daydreaming about? Those are usually the things that we are attached to. When we see what they are, we can start applying the antidotes to them. We remember their impermanence. We remember that they have limited ability to bring us happiness. We remember that even if we get them, they are going to bring a whole new set of problems and we will probably still be dissatisfied.

This is a very good way to get to know yourself. We are always saying: "I don't know myself. I don't know who I am." Just watch your mind when you are trying to concentrate. You'll get a very good picture of yourself.

When we start observing the kinds of things that our mind scatters to, we will notice that it is not just objects of desire that distract us. We also dredge up all the old memories of past hurts and pains and grudges, resentment, jealousy and the feeling of incompetence, discouragement, etc.

When these things come up, recognize that the mind is scattering. Recognize that you are distracted from your object of meditation. In this way, you can get a good idea of the things that the mind is clinging to, the things that have not yet been resolved. And again, apply the antidotes to them. Meditate on loving-kindness. Meditate on patience. See the disadvantages of the anger and so on to balance out your mind.

[Audience: Inaudible]

The mind becomes very obsessed and goes beyond the bounds of compassion into obsession, or righteousness. Something like that. This is very common. When we do a meditation retreat, we come out with the best remedies to save the world. We design all sorts of social action things. We design

orphanages and welfare projects. We know how we are going to build a monastery. We have the whole visit of the Dalai Lama planned out. We do all of these in our meditation because they are all virtuous. But we must recognize that they are not the object of our meditation. We have to be very careful not to get scattered by them too.

When you are in your meditation session, those are not your object of meditation. The creativity should be on the object of meditation. Otherwise what will happen in your meditation is: one day you are bringing the Dalai Lama to Seattle, the next day you are building a huge Dharma center, and the next day you are working for refugees, and the next day you're doing something about welfare rights. When you get up from your meditation session, it is all gone anyway. You may act on some of them, but you haven't developed any stability in your meditation.

It is true that sitting and thinking about those virtuous things is better than thinking about being violent, which I often distract myself with. But still, it is not the object of my meditation right now. It is actually going to please His Holiness much more if we develop some concentration, and like you said, make peace with ourselves, develop that kind of mental stability, and then in our break times when we are off our cushions, we can think about all those virtuous things and actually act upon them.

I have a friend who keeps a notepad by his meditation cushion. He gets very good ideas when he's meditating. He writes them down, then he can say: "Okay, I won't forget it and I'll think about it later." But the disadvantage of that is when the mind is very active that day, you'll find yourself writing all the time. [laughter] We have incredible creative capacity, you see.

[Audience: Inaudible]

What you are saying is very good because it pinpoints the difference between what a bodhisattva might feel and what emotional suffering is, and what we need to work at to be a bodhisattva. Often in our development of love and compassion, we confuse them. Bodhisattvas have this incredible kind of mental stability or mental peace and the ability to be continuous with their activity. It's different from us in instances when our mind gets so 'compassionate' that it becomes obsessed with something; we are really hot on it for a while but then we quickly get disillusioned and disappointed, and we burn out.

We will continue with "excitement" in the next session. Let's sit quietly for a few minutes.

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>

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