

**The Far-reaching Attitude of Meditative Stabilization –
Part 9 of 9: The Nine Stages, Six Mental Powers and Four Engagements; Developing Calm
Abiding.** (lightly edited transcript)
by Ven. Thubten Chodron© at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle. 23 May 94

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Nine stages in practicing calm abiding; Six mental powers to attain these stages; Four engagements to employ to do this

The section that we are now on is the nine mental abidings. If you look at your main lamrim outline, we have talked about arranging the proper circumstances, the five deterrents and the eight antidotes. So what we have left are the nine stages that we practice to develop calm abiding. These are the steps in developing calm abiding.

In the nine stages you practice six mental powers and four types of engagement that help you go through those nine stages. We should not think of these as concrete self-existent stages. They are just categories that are described to give you a feeling of the kind of flow that you go through as you are developing calm abiding. They are the progression of steps in which the mind gets trained and subdued in order to actually reach calm abiding.

1. Stage One - Setting the Mind

The first stage is called setting the mind or placing the mind. There are various translations for these terms so what I say may not be what you read in a book because different translators use different words. The first stage is called setting, or placing, the mind and this is when you are first starting out and you are just struggling to get the object of meditation.

For example, say our object of meditation is the image of the Buddha. We sit down and try to get the object but most of the time our mind is in distraction. We get the object for a couple of seconds and then the mind goes away. Then you bring the mind back to the image of the Buddha and the mind goes away again. So in this first step the time spent in distractions are much more than the amount of time you actually spend focused on the object.

Sometimes when you are on this stage it appears that the thoughts become worse than they used to be. People very often say when they start to meditate, "My mind is crazier now than it was before." It is not that it is crazier now and that there are more thoughts; it is just that we are probably noticing them for the first time. When you live by the highway all the time, you do not hear the cars, but when you go away on

a quiet vacation and then come back, the noise can seem like thunder. It is the same when we finally sit down and try to concentrate: the distractions seem like they get worse, but be rest assured they are not.

The Power of Hearing

The power we are basically practicing here is the one of hearing. We had to first hear the teachings from our teacher, then we try to remember them, then we need to think about them. So we try to recall all the teachings on calm abiding, think about what the object of our meditation looks like and then try to focus on it.

The Engagement is Forceful

The type of engagement is called forceful; other translations render this word as painstaking [laughter]. In the beginning the mind is really uncontrolled and so the kind of force, or mental engagement, that is necessary is one that needs a little more force to it because it is right at the beginning when the mind is so bananas. We are just starting out with mindfulness, with memory and with trying to get the object of meditation. So this is the first stage.

2. Stage Two - Continuous Setting

Then the second stage is called continuous setting or continuous placing. Once again on this stage the concentration is constantly interrupted by scattering. So on these first two stages, although laxity and excitement are present, scattering is the predominant thing that happens to us because the mind is very soon off onto one thing or another, or somewhere else, or getting angry, or planning our future, or thinking of our past and so on.

So scattering is going on in the second stage but the thoughts are beginning to take a rest. Because of the force used during the first and second stages of continually bringing the mind back, the mind begins to rest. It is as if your child keeps running away and you just keep bringing him back and he runs away again and you bring him back again. After a while the kid gets the point and does not run away quite so often and when he does, he does not stay away quite so long. So there is some progress here, you can begin to see it. You can stay on the object a little bit longer and the length of the distraction of the scattering is not as great as before. That is the difference from the previous stage.

The Power of Thinking / The Engagement is Forceful

Here the engagement is still forceful, but the power is the one of thinking because you are doing more thinking, more reflection and more recalling of the object of meditation. In the first stage it was a matter of just hearing the instructions and remembering what you heard. Here in this stage something is beginning to get integrated because you are thinking, mulling it over, going over it again and again recalling what the Buddha looks like.

3. Stage Three - Resetting

Then the third stage is called resetting and here we still have scattering. Remember scattering can be towards a virtuous object or non-virtuous things. An example of scattering towards a virtuous object would be like when we are trying to focus on the Buddha and instead we start thinking about precious human life, or we start thinking about Tara. But when we start getting really angry, resentful, jealous, comparing ourselves to other people, getting proud, or something of that sort, that is scattering toward a non-virtuous thing.

Scattering is happening during all the first three stages, but in the third stage of resetting, scattering is recognized much quicker. The mind goes off but you are much quicker to recognize the fact that it is off. In the earlier stages, the mind would go off and you would not recognize it until the meditation bell rang [laughter]. Now in stage three the mind goes off and you are beginning to recognize it on your own and bring it back. Mindfulness is increasing in this stage and so is your introspective alertness. Previously, the mind could not return to the object readily once it was distracted, but now when you bring it back to the object of the Buddha it is more compliant and goes back quicker.

The Power of Mindfulness / The Engagement is Interrupted

In the third stage the engagement is called interrupted. You are over with the forceful engagement and it is now either "interrupted" or "repeated," because you are repeatedly renewing your attention. Your attention is interrupted and engagement is not completely smooth yet because there are still interruptions with scattering, laxity and excitement.

The power that you are emphasizing here is the one of mindfulness. It is not that you did not have mindfulness before, you did have mindfulness in the first and second stages and because of that, your mindfulness is getting a little bit firmer now.

An important point to notice as we are going through these six different powers is that in each stage there is a particular power that is predominant. But that does not mean that you do not use that power in the other stages, it just means that at this stage it is the predominant one. Simply because one distraction, or one hindrance, is more prominent at each stage does not mean that you do not have the other ones; it just means that it is the chief one that you are focusing on. But there is some progression and the mind is getting a little bit tamed in this stage.

4. Stage Four - Close Setting

Then the fourth stage is called close setting, or close placing. Here the mind is much more familiar with the object, much closer to the object and you are better able to set the mind on the object. At this point you do not really lose the object anymore. This one sounds really good to me, imagine getting to the point that you do not really lose the object. Sometimes you might have subtle excitement where your mind is thinking about something else under the surface, or there is subtle laxity, or you get spaced out, but you never really completely lose the object and go off in never-never land. That just does not happen any more, your mind is always somehow close to the object. You can really see that you are beginning to get somewhere at this point.

Engagement is Interrupted / Power of Mindfulness

The coarse dullness is actually the biggest problem on this stage. Where we have stability we have some clarity, but not so much clarity. The mind gets spaced out. This is the coarse kind of laxity. The engagement here is still the interrupted one because our concentration is not smooth. It still has interruptions from laxity and excitement and the power is one of mindfulness because the mindfulness is getting really strong. It is the strength of the mindfulness at this fourth stage that allows us to remain on the object without ever really losing it again.

5. Stage Five - Disciplining

Then the fifth stage is called disciplining, taming, or controlled. There are different translations, maybe taming is the nicer translation. What happens here is because of the fourth stage, your mind was getting pretty stable on the object and you were not really losing the object any longer, but now the mind gets too sunk into the object. So laxity, specifically the subtle kind of laxity, becomes a problem. Somehow the mind gets too withdrawn. Remember I said that subtle laxity was when you had stability and clarity, but your clarity was not very intense. So the mind somehow is not quite altogether there. This was the one I said to really be careful about. This is the chief fault on the fifth stage.

Engagement is Interrupted / Power of Introspection.

Here the engagement is still interrupted. Obviously, we are interrupted in this case mostly by subtle laxity, but of course we are also sometimes interrupted by excitement and other things. But mostly in this stage the interruption is by subtle laxity. The power here is the one of introspection. If you remember when we went through the hindrances and were talking about laxity and excitement, the antidote was introspective alertness. This is the mental factor that pops up and checks from time to time, "Am I still focusing? Am I spaced out?" We had that before on the earlier stages and we were developing it all along, but on this stage it is the one we are chiefly relying on. By having that introspective alertness and by getting that fine-tuned, we are able to recognize the subtle laxity. Only by having a more finely tuned introspective alertness can we discern the subtle laxity and then tighten the mode of apprehension on the object and tighten the concentration to remedy it. That is what happens on the fifth stage.

6. Stage Six - Pacifying

Now the sixth stage is called pacifying, or pacification. On the fifth stage because of the subtle laxity, we were tightening the concentration to get the strength of the clarity back and what happened is we went over the balance point a little bit so now the mind is a little bit too tight and subtle excitement becomes the problem. You can see within this whole progression how it is always a thing of finding a balance.

They always compare developing concentration to tuning a guitar. We are not to tune the string too loose, nor too tight, but the correct tuning is somewhere in the middle. You can see here the attention has gotten a little bit too tight, so agitation becomes a problem. The subtle kind of agitation is when we

are on the object but part of the mind is thinking about something else, or part of the mind is about ready to jump out on a full-fledged attachment. We are not completely there, but the mind is half day-dreaming about something that we really like.

The Engagement is Interrupted / The Power of Introspection

The engagement here is still interrupted – we are obviously interrupted by the subtle excitement – and the power again is introspection. That is the introspective alertness that checks and sees, “Oh look, there is subtle excitement.” Then we apply the antidote of bringing the attention back by making the mind more sober by thinking about death, or visualizing the black ball at your navel, or making your room a little bit darker. So we bring the mind in a little bit more and loosen the concentration a bit, because if the mind gets too tight that is what makes the excitement come.

7. Stage Seven - Thorough Pacifying

The seventh stage is called thorough pacifying. Even though different afflictions* may arise in the break time between one meditation and the other and you rely on the antidotes to get rid of them in between your sessions, now when you are concentrating, the mind is pretty stable and you do not fall prey to the afflictions* so much. This is really one of the nice things about developing concentration. Now when you are in meditation, these twenty secondary afflictions* just do not come up so much. They really start to lose their energy.

Concentration takes away the manifest afflictions* in this way, but it does not cut them from the root, we need the wisdom to do that. But at least now in the seventh stage during the time when you are concentrating, you are not getting angry at your colleague and you are not worried about the abuse you had when you were a child, you are not planning your retirement, or worrying about how many points you have on your social security system and you are not thinking about your taxes, or about getting your car repaired because it got dented.

It just occurred to me after I listed all those things that when they used to meditate a few hundred years ago, they did not have those things to think about, did they [laughter]? We are so lucky. We have such a bigger variety of things to get distracted by now. Of course, back then maybe you got distracted about what your water buffalo was doing, or the hay that was on top of your roof and getting that repaired, or getting the hole in your water bucket fixed. I guess they had problems too.

So in the seventh stage the mind is much, much more pacified. That is why this stage is called thorough pacifying. In meditation you are not having the gross afflictions*. At this point you still have some subtle laxity and some subtle excitement, but they are not super big problems because your introspective alertness is strong enough by this point that you can notice them fairly quickly, apply the antidote and re-center yourself. Things are coming up but they are not super big problems now. You can really see how your confidence is beginning to grow at this point.

The Engagement is Interrupted / The Power of Effort

The engagement is still interrupted. The laxity and excitement do not really interrupt so much now but they are still there, you have not completely gotten rid of them. The power that we rely on is the power of effort and that is the effort to continually keep the mind away from the laxity and the excitement. And of course we are still using introspection, we are always using it but it is not the chief thing. It is not emphasized so much here because by this time introspection is pretty strong.

8. Stage Eight - Single-pointedness

Then the eighth step is called making one-pointed, or single-pointedness. ‘Single-pointedness’ is a better translation. On this stage what happens is when you sit down to meditate, you just go over the details of the object of meditation and the mind will be on the object. It takes some effort at the beginning of the session to go over the detail, but once your mind is on the object it is firmly on the object and you can just relax. You do not need to worry about the excitement and you do not have to worry about the laxity because the mind is pretty one-pointed at this stage. So, at the beginning of your session you might use a little bit of effort against laxity and excitement, but after that it is like clear sailing.

Before in the preceding stages, sometimes not applying the antidotes was a problem. Maybe you would get the laxity or the excitement but you would not apply the antidote. Do you remember that not applying the antidotes is one of the obstacles? You have kind of gotten over that one by the time you get to the

eighth stage and that is no longer a problem. Now the problem is we have swung to the other side. Now we are applying the antidote a little too much.

That is the difficulty at the eighth stage: over application. Here we need to have some equanimity. So again, especially before stages six and seven, maybe we really had to put some effort forth to apply the antidote. Even before that, more effort was especially required to apply the antidote. But by the eighth stage, you are so much in the habit of applying the antidote that you are doing it even when it is not needed. What is needed now is some equanimity.

The Engagement is Uninterrupted / The Power of Effort

The engagement now is uninterrupted because the subtle laxity and excitement do not arise anymore and the engagement with the object is uninterrupted, it is consistent. You sit down, you get the object and you go on. The power of effort has matured at this point, it is really, really strong and very clear at this point.

9. Stage Nine - Setting in Equipoise

Then the ninth stage is called setting in equipoise. Here you can basically maintain your concentration without any effort; even though you still do not have the actual calm abiding. Again, at the beginning of the session maybe a tinge of effort is needed, but basically it is effort in the sense of just making up your mind that you are going to concentrate. It is effort in the sense of turning your mind to the object of concentration, but once you turn your mind to the object of meditation, your mind is on it like a completely obedient child. This stage sounds really good.

The Engagement is Spontaneous/Effortless

Meditation is really a breeze at this point because just a very minute amount of effort is needed to turn your mind to the object of meditation and then the rest, because of the previous training and the force of the habit of concentration, just very naturally flows. The engagement is called spontaneous engagement or effortless engagement in the sense that now your effort, your engagement with the object, is effortless. You do not have to strain and it is spontaneous. That is why they say that many people as they are developing more and more concentration, they begin to look younger, more youthful, more radiant and more relaxed because the mind is more relaxed, well tamed and pacified. It is so relaxed that you do not need to make an effort to concentrate.

That is interesting isn't it? We usually think of concentration as, "I have got to make a lot of effort and squeeze," but this is really showing us that our tendency to push and squeeze is not what causes the concentration. The concentration comes about through a relaxed mind. But we are not talking about relaxation in the way our mind is usually relaxed. We usually think of relaxation as meaning totally spaced out, or daydreaming about anything you like, or spaced out and then going off to sleep. This is not that kind of relaxation. It is relaxation in the sense that your mind is so well tamed that you do not have to worry about it anymore.

The Power of Familiarity

I guess it would be like when you are bringing up a child. At first you take your child over to your relative's house and you do not know what in the world your child is going to do that might be really embarrassing. But by this stage your kid is just a breeze and you do not have to worry about him at all. It is kind of like that, you are just totally relaxed, with complete confidence and the concentration really flows. That is why the engagement is spontaneous and the power is familiarity; we are just so familiar with the object now.

At this point you still do not have calm abiding, even though you are looking more radiant and youthful. You feel light and vigorous and your dependence on coarse food is decreasing. You do not need to eat so much and that is actually why when we sometimes do the eight offerings on the altar, the offering of the food symbolizes the offering of samadhi, the offering of concentration.

They often talk about being nourished by the food of concentration, the food of samadhi. I think it is an interesting analogy because I think in one way it is quite literal. As the concentration develops the need for so much coarse food decreases. The person does not need to eat as much and not just their body, but also their mind, their heart and everything else, is completely nourished by the concentration. I think that emotionally also, there is not a feeling of poverty and neediness either, the mind is also completely fulfilled in that sense.

I think it is nice to hear about these higher states because it gives us some kind of idea about the potential of our mind and where things can go if we work at it.

Way to develop actual calm abiding from this

So now we are at the ninth stage and we still do not have calm abiding. Now there are some more things that we need to do to get to full calm abiding. Calm abiding is a single-pointed concentration that is conjoined with the pliancy of mind and body.

Remember when we were talking about the first hindrance, the first obstacle of laziness, the actual antidote to that was pliancy, or flexibility, which is a serviceability of both the body and the mind so that you can use your body and mind however you want to. This is where you do not have to face aching knees, a bananas mind, a hurting back or restless energy in your body where you cannot sit still because you feel it jumping all around. There is none of that anymore. The body and mind are completely pliant.

Mental Pliancy

Mental pliancy is the mental factor that we really need to develop here. When that is complete and we have the single-pointedness, then we have actual calm abiding. As you go from the ninth stage to the calm abiding you familiarize yourself with concentration. The bad physical states which are due to different kinds of energy (the Tibetan word *lung*, or the Chinese word *chi*) begin to become subdued because the concentration is getting stronger. So at a certain point, some of these kinds of energies leave the head through the crown and sometimes there might be some sensation at the crown of the head as these bad winds, or energies, are leaving. As soon as that has happened then one has mental pliancy. So the first thing that you get is mental pliancy. The mind is really flexible now, completely flexible, you can do with your mind whatever you want and the mind is totally serviceable. You can put it on the virtuous object and it stays there. There is a lightness and clarity of mind and an ability to use the mind in any way that you want to.

Physical Pliancy

By the power of having this mental pliancy you then get a wind, or energy, in your body that is called physical pliancy and this is a physical serviceability. Physical serviceability is a physical quality where your body is now completely serviceable and it ceases to be a problem as you are meditating. It does not get in your way and there is no sense of hardship when you are meditating. You can use your body for whatever you wish; there is no kind of coarseness, or of being uncomfortable, or any bad physical states. So the body, they say, feels very light like cotton and all the internal winds are pretty mild and subdued. The body is very light and very flexible and they say you feel like you could ride on your own shoulders.

Bliss of Physical Pliancy

This physical pliancy now leads to what is called the bliss of physical pliancy, which is a very blissful physical sensation. You have the mental pliancy that gave the physical pliancy, which now leads to the bliss of the physical pliancy. As you remain in concentration, you get the feeling that your body has just melted into the object of meditation and there is no sense at all of other objects. At this point you have a bliss of mental pliancy which is the next step.

Bliss of Mental Pliancy

The bliss of mental pliancy is when the mind is very joyous and you feel like you can concentrate on every atom in the wall. You do not have to make any effort. You can just concentrate. You feel like your mind is so fine tuned that you can concentrate wherever you want to. But the mind seems so joyous, almost as if it is going to explode and it can no longer stay at the object of meditation. It is almost as if the joy is a little bit too much, so it peaks and settles down and it becomes more stable. So the intensity of that bliss of the mental pliancy settles down, calms down and becomes more stable.

Full Calm Abiding

At this point you get what is called an immovable, or an unchangeable, mental pliancy. This is where the bliss is very stable, the pliancy is very stable and at this point you have actually attained full calm abiding. You feel like you can completely absorb yourself in the object and it is called 'calm' because the

mind is totally calm from distractions and totally calm from any kind of agitation or distraction to external objects. It is 'abiding' because the mind abides on this internal object, whatever your object of meditation is, so this is full calm abiding.

This is what is called a preparation to a form realm concentration. I am not going to go into describing that but in the Abhidharma there are descriptions of the four form realm concentrations and the four formless realm concentrations which are all different levels of samadhi that you gain. This is a preparation to the form realm concentration, but it is also a very, very good mind for meditation because sometimes if you get on the really high formless realm of concentration, it is not so good for meditating on emptiness. They say that this kind of calm abiding on the preparation level is much more effective for meditating on emptiness. Although many people still like to attain these higher levels of absorptions (and you can hear all about them and the descriptions are pretty incredible), I think we have enough to work with right now [laughter].

Signs of Having Attained Calm Abiding

Some signs of having attained calm abiding are that you have mental and physical pliancy so that the body and mind are totally pliant, completely cooperative. You can meditate as long as you want without any kind of physical or mental discomfort.

Also, there is no longer an internal civil war to do anything and during your meditation, during meditative equipoise, the sense of appearances vanish and the mind is filled with incredible spaciousness. There is no narrow tightness in the mind; it is incredibly spacious.

Then another quality is that you can abide firmly and steadily on the object and even if a sound is made nearby, like a cannon goes off, or one of those jets that breaks the sound barrier goes by, it does not faze you at all; it does not interfere with your concentration at all.

Another quality of calm abiding is that there is great clarity and you feel like you could count all the particles in the wall.

The mind is so finely tuned...

[Teachings lost due to change in tape]

...the manifest afflictions [['Afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'delusions.'](#)] are gone. The manifest afflictions [['Afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'disturbing attitudes.'](#)] are gone, but the seeds are still there and that is why you need the wisdom.

It becomes very easy to mix, let us say, your sleep with concentration. You do not have so many things making the mind muddy and murky so even when you sleep, you can be meditating.

Then they also say that when you arise from equipoise, there is a sense of getting a new body and even though you might get some of the afflictions* in your break time rising in a manifest way like a little tinge of anger, annoyance, or something like that, nothing really takes hold. It is just there and then it is gone. The mind is pretty smooth.

Other Religions Practice Calm Abiding

This state of calm abiding is something that is in common with other religious practices. This whole teaching on concentration is not a specifically Buddhist teaching. People in other religious traditions practice it also. But sometimes people actualize calm abiding and because the mind is so peaceful and calm, they mistake it for liberation. It is not liberation. That is why they say calm abiding is not a strictly Buddhist practice and that is why having the determination to free ourselves from cyclic existence is so incredibly important.

If we do not have the determination to free ourselves from cyclic existence, we might just get the calm abiding and stay there with the calm abiding. If you stay with the calm abiding you can have a great time for the rest of your life and create a lot of good karma from doing that. If you actualize some of the form and formless realm absorptions in this lifetime, then next time if you leave this human body you might even be reborn in the form realm and the formless realm. You might stay there for a few eons, hang out,

be blissful and have no problems. But because the mind still has the seed of ignorance in it, once that good karma of concentration has worn off, then the only place you can get reborn is somewhere lower and that is definitely going to be more painful.

Serkong Rinpoche said, "When you go to the top of the Eiffel Tower, the one direction you can go from there is down." He would say that if you attain these form and formless realm absorptions that is what happens; when that karma runs out – plunk! That is why it is so important to have the determination to be free conjoined with our calm abiding. That determination to be free actually moves our mind so that we get the wisdom teachings and meditate on wisdom and actualize the wisdom. It is the realization of emptiness that is actually going to free our mind from all of this confusion in samsara. When you have the wisdom combined with the concentration, then that is what leads to actual liberation.

In general, the concentration is very, very helpful for all the other meditations we do. For instance, if we could meditate on the four immeasurables and have full concentration, we might actually have some sustained feeling of love, compassion, equanimity, or joy in our heart for some period of time. If we were able to meditate on bodhicitta with calm abiding, then the bodhicitta could really sink in. So it is the ability to concentrate that makes the other understandings really integrate in the mind because the concentration keeps that understanding there and that imprint is always getting made because the concentration is there. But the concentration alone is not sufficient.

Questions and answers

Gross Excitement

[In response to audience:] Your introspective alertness is what notices that there is gross excitement. If you are sitting there meditating on hot fudge sundaes [laughter], or you are thinking of your next holiday in Venezuela, or thinking about family and so on, at that point the introspective alertness is what notices that the mind is off the object of meditation. Then depending upon how severely off you are, how long you have been off and how intensely you have been off, then you are going to see which kind of antidote to apply and some of the antidotes you might apply right there in the meditation session.

So in the case of the gross excitement, let us say your mind is way off and you realize you have been daydreaming for a few minutes. Then you have to shift your object of meditation temporarily and meditate on something that is really going to sober the mind and make the energy of the mind go lower. So sit and visualize corpses and think how everyone that you saw on that lovely vacation is going to become a corpse, all those people are going to become corpses. Everything is going to decay and fall apart. Think about death. Think about your own death. Think about impermanence. Think about the suffering in cyclic existence and taking one rebirth after another. Think of how many lifetimes you have been in the same places with however much pleasure you had and now here you are and you are doing it again and there is still no happiness. Again and again and again all this attachment just causes one rebirth after another rebirth, after another rebirth.

So when you have gross excitement think about something that is really going to sober the mind. Wake it up to the reality of the situation. Make it sober. When the mind is more sober then you can shift it back to the image of the Buddha, or to the breath, or to whatever is the object of your meditation.

Emptiness and Calm Abiding

[Audience:] Which comes first, the calm abiding or the understanding of emptiness?

Regarding the order of calm abiding and emptiness, you can understand emptiness before actualizing calm abiding, but you cannot enter into the paths. When you have the special insight or what is real vipassana – the special insight into emptiness, that special insight is combined with calm abiding. Then when you have special insight combined with calm abiding on emptiness and you have already generated the bodhicitta, then you enter into the second of the bodhisattva paths. Now before that time you can have a realization of emptiness, because a realization of emptiness does not necessarily mean that you have single-pointed concentration on emptiness.

Realization is a vague word once you get down to it. It basically means that you can have a correct conceptual understanding of it and in that sense have a realization, but that is a very gross level realization. You can have that before you actually develop calm abiding, but that alone does not have the force on your mind because it is not linked with the calm abiding.

Psychic Powers

[Audience:] Can you explain why people would attain psychic powers when they have the calm abiding?

I cannot speak from my own experience, so I will tell you my guesses. With the clairvoyance and the clairaudience, because the mind is concentrated the field of awareness is much broader. Our mind is so busy with all of our internal chatter that sometimes we cannot even see where we are walking and we fall down the stairs. It seems to me that as the distractions in the mind cease and the mind gets clearer, as the clarity of the mind is there and the concentration is there, then the field of what is possible to perceive just very naturally expands.

These powers though, they can later get lost. If you get it but then you do not practice it, then these things can be lost. Some people have psychic powers not because of calm abiding but because of karma, but the psychic powers that people have because of karma are not as reliable as the ones that you actually get through meditation. The powers obtained because of karma can be much more inaccurate.

Eating Less Food

[Audience:] Can you explain why people would eat less when they have the calm abiding?

Regarding the gross food, I think what happens is that the whole energy in the body is changed. The energy in the body is so closely related to the mind. You can see that when your mind is agitated, the body is agitated. They really go very much together. So as the mind begins to pacify, the energy in the body gets pacified and then the body does not rely so much on gross food. It does not have to eat so much because it is not expending all that energy in a lot of the useless stuff that we normally burn up our energy on.

Regarding Physical Sensations

Oh, I should say one thing that commonly happens: people hear these teachings about how you get some tingling on the head when the bad airs are leaving right before you get some mental pliancy. So beginning meditators often think when they get a little tingling or different symbols, "Oh boy, I am going to the big time now. I must be almost to calm abiding!"

They say you can tell who is a bodhisattva because sometimes their compassion is so strong that the hairs on their body stand on end. So then one day you have a little compassion and your hair on your arm tingles and you think, "Maybe I am almost a bodhisattva." It is very natural to get some part of a little sign and think we almost got the whole thing. Do not worry about labeling which level you are at, the basic thing is just to practice.

You can have experiences when you are meditating. Even though you are basically at the beginning stages you can have a few moments of pliancy. There is nothing that says that you cannot. Sometimes your compassion can be really strong and your hair stands on end. But what I am saying is that having a little bit of something does not mean that you are near to having the whole thing. Those experiences, nonetheless, can be very encouraging, because when you are meditating and have those few moments when your mind is really peaceful and calm, even if it does not last very long it gives you a whole new perspective on what your potential is and what is possible and you begin to think, "Wow, even if I had this for only five seconds, my mind is capable of experiencing this. So if I train some more maybe it will come again and stay longer."

When you get any kind of experience like that when you are meditating, use it in that way. Think, "Oh this is a capacity I do have in my mind," and use that to energize yourself to really train so you can make

it more stable. Do not make the mistake of thinking, "I got that quality now. Wow, isn't that wonderful! I have to go tell a lot of people. I must be almost there!" Do not use these experiences to inflate the ego.

Calm Abiding is not a Goal

[In response to audience:] They say in the teachings that if you have all the conducive circumstances, depending on your karma and if you practice well, then it is possible to attain calm abiding in six months. For some people this gives them enthusiasm to practice. But I have talked to people who when they heard that, started practicing and even did retreat for six months, afterwards their mind was still bonkers and they got completely discouraged. They were so totally focused on the goal that actually, that teaching had completely the opposite effect than it was intended to have.

I was thinking about other examples too in the teachings of how sometimes they tell different stories and say different things that are meant to illustrate one point, but because of our Western culture we get a completely different point out of it. An example of this is when we get goal oriented after hearing things in a teaching.

Different Approaches

[In response to audience:] There are different ways of viewing things. If your mind is getting too tight, then they teach about not having a goal and they talk about how it is all here right now, that there is nothing else to see anyway. But when your motivation is too loose, they start talking about developing the good qualities and the stages to do that. So it is good to understand that there are different approaches.

In other words, here is a practice and there are stages to do it and we do have to train to do this, but we should not evoke our Western grasping, goal-oriented mind in doing it. If we are doing that and we have the motivation of, "I am going to meditate real hard and get calm abiding so I can say I got it," then we are going to get it and we are going to lose it afterwards. That would be as if you just wanted to attain calm abiding to say, "Ok I did it. What else is next?" That is why the determination to be free, bodhicitta and all these things are really important, it is not like going for a prize. You do not want calm abiding because calm abiding is real good, far out and you can tell people you got it. But rather, you want calm abiding to benefit sentient beings and if your mind is bananas and not concentrated, how can you benefit other people? So calm abiding is not like getting a prize.

After Getting the Calm Abiding

[Audience:] When you attain calm abiding what happens then?

You have to keep meditating to keep it. I think it probably depends on the person and how much you are meditating. It would seem to me that if you went and you did a retreat and you got yourself to calm abiding, then you went back to your job and back to meditating five minutes a day, you are going to lose it. It does not seem to me that you would be able to keep your full calm abiding with five minutes a day of meditation. But it seems to me that if a person were going for the calm abiding and got it, that afterwards, they would keep meditating and use the calm abiding to meditate on emptiness and meditate on bodhicitta. They would not just say, "Now I've got it. I am going back to work." You are trying to get the calm abiding so that you can use it in your other meditations and to keep it, you have to keep using it.

[Audience:] That sounds like you have to be a monastic to get calm abiding and that a layperson couldn't achieve it.

Why not? Milarepa was a layperson. Marpa was a layperson. But we should not think, "Ok I cannot work and get calm abiding at the same time, therefore I will not even try to do anything." It is ridiculous to say, "I'll just stay home and complain because I can't have both of them at the same time." No, we should start practicing and put into our daily practice the teachings that we have heard that could be put into practice right away, and our daily practice can really start improving. If we use all these instructions that we have heard, we can begin to see some improvement in our daily practice. So even though you may not have calm abiding during your morning coffee break, still you are getting more improvement. You can see a change in your mind and that will help the other aspects of your practice too because you can

concentrate better and when you go and do retreat, you are going to be able to concentrate better there too. We should not have an all or nothing mind either.

[Audience:] So does that mean that once you achieve calm abiding you always have it even if you do have to go back to work?

No, you can always backslide. I mean that is part of the whole thing – you get born in the upper realms, you lose it, you fall back down. When you are on the bodhisattva stages, then maybe you do not backslide, but it is my understanding that it is basically like any other skill – you have to keep practicing it to keep it at top level. It seems to me that if you have got the calm abiding that is necessary for entering the path of accumulation of the bodhisattva, then because you have bodhicitta, you are going to keep up with the meditation. So at that point you are going to keep it up, but it is always possible to lose it if you do not practice.

Let us 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>

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