

Drepung Loseling Monastery, Atlanta, GA
Foundations Series
Session 1 -- Śamatha Meditation

Śamatha meditation is also known as "calm abiding" meditation. This meditation is to help in calming down the mind from distractions to achieve clarity and stability of the mind. This kind of meditation is not unique to Buddhism but is used in other traditions as well. Śamatha meditation is about refining attention. Our mind is a reservoir of peace and happiness, but we are simply unable to manifest that joy, suppleness, and calmness because it remains buried deep in our minds due to being clouded by daily distractions, afflictive emotions, and so forth. In the Buddhist tradition, this peaceful mind is the true natural state of the mind and it is merely obscured in most sentient beings. Samādhi is a state of mental stabilization which is characterized by both *clarity* and *stability*.

Attention is the key to learning; and this meditation helps you to refine attention voluntarily. It is not hard to see that our mind is untrained like a monkey -- jumping from one topic or thought object to another. Our mind is out of control. This is the source of such things as afflictive emotions, hatred, anger, harsh speech, etc. Because of these, we lose the ability to have peace of mind. **Meditation has a tremendous impact on our emotional intelligence (how we deal with our emotions of anger, jealousy, etc.) and this has a far greater impact on our joy and success in life than our cognitive intelligence.**

We know from the "fight or flight syndrome" that stresses in our mind are also conveyed to our body; and therefore this practice of meditation also has a beneficial effect on health, especially during this modern age of complexity and multitasking. In our modern age, this "fight or flight" reflex which protected us as primitive beings may, in fact, be detrimental to us because of all of the psychological stressors that we must endure. Even if there are no actual dangers around, seeing something on television or just thinking of something disturbing can trigger the cascade of hormones that can cause anger, chronic mental and physical stress, and the things related to stress like hypertension, strokes, and so forth. It has a "wear and tear" effect on our body. We live in an age of fear with demands like rent, mortgage, health care worries, relationship problems, terrorism, and so forth. Our external conditions (house, clothes, relationships, etc.) *do* contribute to a certain extent our happiness, but unless we can find a way to quiet this inner raging, we cannot find true peace.

The thing that prevents us from attaining genuine joy is that our minds are afflicted and distracted by these afflictive (or destructive) emotions, especially by the false notion of an independent, unchanging "I." We create a dualism of "I" against others and lose our sense of connectivity and interdependence. Peace

is about clearing these distractions, unhealthy cravings, afflictive emotions, and so forth.

"A person with a distracted mind dwells (is trapped) between the fangs of the afflictive emotions."

-- Śāntideva (*Bodhicaryāvatāra*)

So, thoughts and emotions contribute to our health and well-being, and śamatha helps us in this respect, as well as mentally. Moreover, looking from the spiritual aspect, śamatha meditation is one of the most important elements we can use to advance ourselves. In order to cultivate emptiness meditation, bodhicitta, and other aspects of the path to enlightenment, we need this fundamental training of our mind.

The benefits of cultivating śamatha meditation are numerous. One can make one's body and mind very serviceable so it can be used for whatever purpose you direct; and one can then be able to accomplish one's spiritual goals in striving for liberation. Also the classical texts state that whatever supramundane qualities have come from śrāvakas, pratyekabuddhas, bodhisattvas, or even the Buddhas themselves have all come out of cultivating śamatha and vipaśyanā (insight) meditation, that is the stability of the mind and the analytical aspect of the mind -- calm-abiding and special insight. Essentially, all human problems relate either to the unserviceability of the body, or to the unserviceability of the mind.

All of the hundreds of thousands of meditative techniques taught by the Buddha *at their core* are based either on śamatha or vipaśyanā meditation. These are the foundational methods which are included in some form in all of the various types of meditation taught by the Buddha including tantra.

The definition of śamatha is "a single-pointed mental state that has pacified distractions to external objects and attends to its inner meditative object continuously and spontaneously, conjoined with mental and physical pliancy or suppleness" (an inner joy, if you will). Śamatha meditation is an attention or concentration through which one is able to focus one's mind effortlessly and spontaneously on the chosen object of meditation combined with both mental and physical pliancy. The object of one's meditation may be physical or imaginary -- often one's meditative object is a conceptual one.

There are two features that must be present to call a meditation śamatha meditation -- (1) there must be the attainment of physical and mental pliancy, that is, a kind of pleasurable feeling or total serviceability, and (2) there must be spontaneous attention able to focus on the object of meditation for prolonged periods.

But these two outcomes must have been first preceded by three aspects of the mind:

- (1) stability of one's mind,
- (2) limpidity (or clarity) of one's mind, like muddy water that has not been stirred so that the mud has sunk to the bottom and the water is left perfectly clear, and
- (3) vividness of one's mind, like the bright sunlight that illuminates and allows you to see all your surroundings.

These three cultivations automatically give rise to the aforementioned two features and give rise to the energy to sustain one's meditation. Once one has gained these two features of *śamatha*, there would be no problem in focusing on one's chosen object even for weeks at a time or even, it is said, for 20 years continuously. Both these two are accomplished by gaining control of one's inner energy or winds (Tibetan *rlung*).

In reference to *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā* meditation, we often use the example of a butter lamp shining at night. With *śamatha* meditation, the lamp is stable and unwavering. With *vipaśyanā* meditation, the lamp is bright and illuminates all of the paintings surrounding us on the walls, enabling us to see them with vividness.

"With insight alone, divorced from calm-abiding, the Yogi's attention will become distracted to objects. Like a butter lamp that is located in the draft, it will not become stable. As such, the vivid appearance of wisdom will not arise. Therefore, you should apply yourself to both *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā* equally."

-- Kamalaśīla's *Bhavanakrama*

The order of attainment must be *śamatha* first and then *vipaśyanā* second based upon a single particular object of concentration. Without following this order, it is true one may achieve some understanding of the subject with analytical meditation, but it will not have the strength of stability and will not be effective at eradicating afflictive emotions to achieve an uncontaminated state of mind.

Vipaśyanā meditation always comes after achieving proficiency in *śamatha*. In *vipaśyanā*, one is applying one's analysis and special wisdom or insight to the object of concentration to determine, for example, whether it is selfless in nature, whether it is permanent, or whether it is impermanent, etc. One needs the mental stability of *śamatha* for *vipaśyanā* to be fully effective.

In the context of the three higher trainings, the Buddha said "abiding in moral discipline, meditative stabilization (calm-abiding) is obtained. Having obtained a meditative stabilization, one must cultivate wisdom (via *vipaśyanā*, analytical meditation)."

By our very nature, we are already endowed with a certain stability of mind and analytical quality of mind, but through these śamatha and vipaśyanā meditations we groom them and increase their potency so that they become fully empowered to allow us to reach our spiritual goals.

Some non-Buddhist schools are content with the effects of śamatha meditation alone in their efforts to overcome the afflictions of the desire realm in which we live and to achieve the samādhi realm and the powers, qualities, or siddhis which one can attain through prolonged śamatha meditation. But the Buddhist understanding is that this is not a path to liberation when used alone without the wisdom gained through the special insight of vipaśyanā meditation in which one analyzes the nature of phenomena with respect to their permanence and so forth. Śamatha meditation alone is insufficient to cut the root of all delusions -- it must be conjoined with special insight meditation.

There are eight domains or levels of concentration that can be obtained through śamatha meditation -- four in the form realm and four in the formless realm -- but these samādhis are still within saṃsāra and are not liberation in themselves. There are a total of 18 concentration stages (samādhi realms) and on top of those, there are four formless realms and it is those four formless realms (the "peak of saṃsāra") which the practitioner of the *mundane* goal of śamatha is striving for. Even when having reached these formless realms via śamatha meditation, one has not cut the root of mental delusions which bind us to saṃsāra. These attainments are also achievable by non-Buddhists in their practice of meditation. So again, śamatha meditation is not unique to Buddhism and is not by itself sufficient for spiritual liberation.

Sometimes the process of śamatha meditation is likened to taming an elephant. To train an elephant, you need a strong pillar to attach the elephant to. Similarly to train the mind you need an object of attention or concentration. To train the elephant you also need a strong chain to tie the elephant to the pillar which is similar to the mindfulness (or mental awareness) of śamatha meditation which keeps the mind on its object of attention. Finally to train the elephant you need an attentive trainer perhaps with a training hook. This is similar to the alertness and introspection one needs to conduct śamatha meditation which brings back focus on the object of meditation when the mind wanders.

To engage in śamatha meditation, it is necessary that we have first completed the prerequisites to achieving successful śamatha. Śamatha meditation is about cultivating clarity and stability of mind. In order actually to achieve this, we must develop the causes and conditions that will result in developing calm-abiding. In order to carry out śamatha meditation, you must take care of or fulfill the preconditions or preliminaries, especially if you plan to conduct a śamatha retreat. You must choose a peaceful, auspicious, or harmonious place in which to carry out the meditation which is free of causes of illness or harm,

for example from animals, spirits, or *nāgas*. Your place must have easy access to your basic necessities for survival such as food and water. You also need to have a devoted assistant with an affectionate or close relationship to you who can help you with your needs or if you fall into a state of ill health, etc. You should choose someone who has a similar spiritual vision as you, and who is not temperamental, etc. You should come to a consensus with your assistant regarding various problems that may arise. For example, one device that was used in Tibet for retreatants who fell asleep was that the assistant would use a ball of cotton attached to a string, dip it in water, and throw it at your forehead to make you wake up and refresh you. It is also important that you have some allowance to come out of your retreat place (especially as a beginner) to stroll around and relax, do some walking meditation and so forth. Also your place should have a quiet atmosphere without much commotion to distract you.

Furthermore, you need a comfortable cushion to sit on and then you must perform the six preliminaries associated with *all* meditation:

- (1) cleaning the surroundings (sweeping the floor daily, etc.).
- (2) arranging the altar with representations of the Buddha's body, speech, and mind.
- (3) making offerings to the altar daily.
- (4) sitting in the seven-fold posture of Vairocana Buddha (explained below).
- (5) generating the proper motivation for your meditation (conjoined with bodhicitta, the aspiration to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings).
- (6) visualizing the refuge field and taking refuge prior to meditation.
This does not have to be a very complex visualization. Essentially you are inviting a host of divinities to your presence as your guide, and also gathering merit, for example through making maṇḍala offerings.

Other essentials for the meditator are that one needs to have few cravings for material things, little desire, and contentment with one's allotment, for example of food, shelter, and clothing. You must be moderate and modest in food, clothing, and personal belongings, which should be kept to a strict minimum, especially during prolonged retreats. One must also be fully equipped with the instructions for meditation and most importantly have complete moral conduct so that prior unethical conduct is not a major distraction for one's practice.

There are very few who are able to actualize śamatha meditation, though many attempt it. This is not because they do not know the process for carrying out the meditation, but because most people do not fulfill or complete the preliminaries (especially the accumulation of merit, etc.). Thus, these preliminaries (Tibetan *ngöndro*) are of considerable importance. Without them, one may meditate for many years and be disappointed with the little progress one makes on the path to spiritual liberation.

Physically, the meditative posture we assume in śamatha meditation is sometimes described as the Seven (or Eight) Features of Vairocana Buddha:

- (1) Sitting in the cross-legged, in the vajrāsana position
- (2) Sitting with the spine straight like an arrow
- (3) Having the hands in the meditative posture
- (4) Keeping the shoulders level
- (5) Keeping the head slightly bent forward
- (6) Keeping the eyes cast slightly downward and slightly open at least enough just to let some light in
- (7) Keeping the lips and teeth in a natural position with the tongue on the upper palate near the teeth
- (8) (An eighth feature is sometimes added which is focusing on the breath)

After achieving a good physical posture, in śamatha it is absolutely necessary to have an object for your meditation -- just shutting off your thoughts and closing the doors of your senses is not śamatha. Meditation should not be just like fainting where there is nothing in your mind, rather your mind should be firmly placed on an object of meditation. Merely relaxing from distractions may bring comfort -- but it is running away from the world in a sense -- it does not serve a spiritual purpose. It is a momentary comfort and is not a useful meditation.

The object of meditation to be chosen differs according to the intellectual and emotional characteristics of the meditator. The Buddha taught different techniques to different people of different abilities and temperaments. For instance, if one is particularly prone to desire/attachment, hatred, or pride, the object of meditation would be the antidote to that particular emotion. Other objects of meditation are the "universal object" (a.k.a. the "pervasive object") which is the meaning generality of *any* object, for instance the mental image of a flower, or the body of the Buddha, etc. One tries to get the chosen image in one's mind as clear as possible. It is not necessary to have the object of meditation present with you. There are also objects of meditation meant for rectifying unwholesome behaviors and for purifying negative emotions.

If a practitioner is predominately afflicted by desire/attachment, a suitable object of meditation would be ugliness and its different forms with the goal of achieving a clear image of that ugliness inwardly. If a practitioner's strongest emotion is pride, then one can meditate on the innumerable fields of study and how little one knows about so many different fields of knowledge. This will help reduce one's pride (and then there is also meditation on dependent arising to reduce one's pride -- the idea that "I" am knowledgeable -- because dependent arising meditation helps reduce that false conception of "I").

If a practitioner is predominately afflicted by numerous distractions and random thoughts, then the object of meditation is often recommended to be the breath, counting it (if that is helpful) and focusing one's attention and concentration on its movements and the processes of one's own breathing.

The most important thing is that in meditation we need to achieve clarity; therefore we must have an object of concentration to focus on. The object you choose can be anything that inspires you -- anything that attracts you to the meditation. The object you use is not limited -- you have the freedom to choose. For instance, you may use a Buddha object or statue. Anything that is special to you is suitable. We commonly use our breath. You can also practice *śamatha* with the object of concentration as a mantra such as *Oṃ Maṇi Padme Hūṃ*. We could even use our own *awareness* as this very object of attention, though this is a much more profound meditation.

If your object is a visual one, focus on the object at the level of your eyes. A smaller object is better for concentration. If it is a Buddha image -- look at it as in the form of a living person -- not flesh and bone, but in the form of pure light.

After you look at the object to familiarize yourself with it; when you do the meditation, you look at the object with your *mind's eye* in *śamatha*. Remember, staring at the object is not *śamatha* -- we are training our mind not our eyes. Meditation is not about visual consciousness, but about mental awareness. Only a change in our minds can change our outlook on the world. If we change our lens that we are viewing through, we change the landscape that we see.

The eyes can be open but should not be fixed on the object during the meditation.

In the beginning you may not be able to hold many details of the object in your mind. You may only have a rough picture. That is fine -- clarity will improve with time. Do not change the object every day. Keep using one object and develop one-pointed concentration on it. Use the same object over an extended time.

In meditation, we are looking for quality, not quantity especially for beginners. Therefore it is important to make the time of meditation short, even breaking up 15 minutes into two or three sessions at the beginning, and focus on quality. Otherwise, if you carry on for half an hour or more, you may not experience any benefit and you may even associate meditation itself with boredom. Make sessions short in a way that interest and enthusiasm for meditation still remain. You must use good judgment when it comes to meditation. Otherwise just by seeing your cushions, you may experience a feeling of boredom or aversion. Like two friends who go their own ways on good terms, they look forward to seeing each other again; unlike two friends who have been in the same house and have "worn-out their welcome."

We need to understand what the impediments are to achieving good *śamatha*. These are known as the Five Faults. These are five obstacles to good *śamatha* meditation and to these obstacles we can apply Eight Antidotes.

(I) The first obstacle or fault is **laziness** (not having the motivation to do the meditation) and *this is one of the main problems holding us back from good meditation*. It is our strongest adversary in our attempt to achieve *śamatha*. That is why the first four of the antidotes are antidotes to **laziness**. They are (1) **Confidence** (the stronger your confidence in the Dharma and the Three Jewels, the stronger your effort will be in overcoming laziness), (2) **Yearning**, (3) **Effort**, and (4) **Pliancy**.

Laziness is something that can attack us from the very beginning even when we are trying to carry out the preliminaries. One type of laziness is being distracted by unwholesome activities. Another type is self-degradation or feeling that we are incapable of carrying out the task. Still another type of laziness is procrastination or inactivity despite the desire to do meditation. There are four antidotes to laziness because it is such a powerful fault. The first of the four antidotes, "confidence" or "faith," is achieved by reflecting on the benefits of meditation and its purpose. This can even create a craving for meditation and therefore persistence in the meditation. If this antidote is strong, you do not really need to apply so much effort in the other three antidotes.

(II) The second obstacle is **forgetting the instructions for meditation**, and the antidote is (5) **Mindfulness** which helps achieve firmness and stability on the object of concentration. (In this context, mindfulness refers more to not forgetting or losing one's object of focus or attention.)

(III) The third obstacle has two components -- **mental dullness** (or "sinking") and **excitement** (or distraction), also known as **laxity** and **agitation**. These are the two strongest factors opposing good concentration. Although there are many other mental states that can impede meditation, these are the most important when one is well underway in one's cultivation of *śamatha*. For instance, for beginners, distraction by desire or hatred may be the initial hurdle that one must overcome (or it may be one of the "20 Near Delusions" as discussed during the *bLorig* teachings).

Laxity comes only in relation to the object of meditation. It is a distraction which makes the body and mind less active and therefore less serviceable. It is a degradation of attention or enthusiasm for the meditation -- a loss of the sharpness of focus. *Subtle laxity* is when there is some clarity of focus on the object of meditation but the sharpness of focus is lost. *Gross laxity* is when we lose both the sharpness and the limpity (clarity) of the object. Aṭīśa pointed out that many meditators mistake a state of subtle laxity for *śamatha* itself.

Excitement, on the other hand, is an emotional or mental state that is a derivative of desire/attachment and views its object as being pleasant. Excitement means the mind is wandering, roaming on to other thoughts and off the object of concentration -- usually onto some kind of craving or attachment to random thoughts that come up -- following them as a sort of fantasy rather than just letting them go.

Our mind is so complex that these obstacles can begin to occur even with the object of concentration fairly well-fixed in our mind. These things can be going on underneath the meditation. Mental dullness means having a sense of heaviness, a lack of clarity, or sleepiness. The antidote to both of these conditions is (6) **Vigilance** or *introspection* of our mind and watching how well it is focusing mindfully on the object of concentration. Through vigilance one is able to recognize immediately when one has been overcome by laxity or excitement so one will know when to apply the antidotes to these.

(IV) The fourth obstacle is **not applying an antidote when one is needed**. This is not applying the appropriate antidote when you know in your meditation you are falling into laxity or excitement (or any other consciousness). (7)

Application (of the antidotes) of course is the remedy for non-application.

(V) The fifth obstacle is **applying an antidote where one is not needed**. This is just the opposite of obstacle (IV). If we over-apply an antidote, for instance to dullness, then we can overshoot into distraction by raising our mind-state too much. Therefore there must be a balance. If one applies an antidote to meditation where one is not needed, this itself creates a problem. If everything is fine with the meditation, just stay in a neutral state. Here the antidote to this fault is understood as the neutral state, so (8) resting in **Equanimity** is the remedy for over-application of the antidotes.

To summarize the eight antidotes, the first four are antidotes to laziness -- faith (which, in this context, doesn't mean some sort of belief in a supernatural being, but a delight in wholesome activities such as meditation, and a belief in the positive benefits of what we are doing), aspiration, effort, and pliancy (which is your life becoming more calm -- finding more joy and energy in life -- a suppleness. This is the actual antidote to laziness -- when an inner calm unfolds.) The antidote to forgetfulness is mindfulness. The antidotes to mental laxity and mental excitement are alertness and introspection respectively. The antidote to non-application is application of the antidotes. And the antidote to over-application is to rest in equilibrium and not apply the antidotes where they are not necessary.

Sometimes one good antidote to meditative distractions is reflecting on *saṃsāra*, our precious human birth, impermanence, the inevitability of death, etc., and then returning the mind to the object of meditation.

The process of *śamatha* meditation is sometimes described sequentially in **the Nine Mental Abidings**. These mental stages are more of a continuum in our development of calm-abiding than a step-by-step progression.

(1) The first level is **Mental Placement**, fixing the mind on a certain object, for instance the breath. This is the beginning of the process. At this point, you may recognize how distracted you have been for so many years and how you have been living with that. At this level of experience, you place your concentration and then your mind falls away from the object quickly because of distraction.

(2) **Continuous placement** (or "continuous fixation"). Now you are able to maintain your focus for some time; you have a relaxation now of your experience of your distractions and you are more focused on your object. Still the period of distraction for you is longer than the period of good focus on your object (you keep bringing your mind back to the object of meditation time and time again and you find periods of, say, three to four minutes of focus).

(3) **Patched placement** (or "re-placement"). Here the time period of your focused concentration is longer than that of your distractions. You are easily able to "patch" any distraction. Here, you are feeling that the distractions themselves are getting exhausted and mindfulness becomes complete; for instance, you *notice* whenever the mind wanders and you are able to bring it back soon.

(4) **Close placement**. Here, you have *almost* subdued your distractions and the laxity or excitement that are left are only at the subtle level -- the course level has been defeated -- but you still need vigilance. (Here, your focus is quite strong, but there is the danger of subtle sinking/laxity therefore it is important to increase alertness.)

(5) **Subduing** (or "taming" or "controlling"). Here, we have some danger from *subtle laxity* and we still need to apply *vigilance* with regard to this. Since there is this danger, we normally heighten the mode of our mind for instance by thinking about love and compassion, death, or impermanence, so that we do not become dull. But we must avoid heightening the mind too much to the point of subtle excitement or distractions.

(6) **Pacifying**. In this stage, as above, we take care not to overdo the heightening of the mode of our mind. At these fifth and sixth mental states, the meditator starts to experience feelings of pleasure, joy, and rejoicing and a feeling of one's mind being almost fused with the object of concentration. Also, at these stages, one is not overcome by the grosser levels of desire/attachment or other afflictive emotions within the desire realm -- of course, one has not yet cut the root of these emotions or eradicated them completely. Still, there is no emotional intrusion into one's meditation and there is a strong sense of longing

toward higher states of meditation. At the actual attainment of *śamatha*, even though the meditator may be physically living in the desire realm, his mind no longer belongs to the desire realm.

(7) **Complete pacification.** Here there are no more dangers from the obstacles, but we still have not yet reached the point of pliancy and mental quiescence, therefore we still need to persevere and move forward. Still we have not achieved our goal of one-pointed fixation without effort. In the seventh mental state, the person has pacified most of the afflictive emotions within the desire realm and there are no more hurdles caused by laxity or excitement.

(8) **Single-pointed concentration** (or one-pointed attention). Here we need to apply only a little effort to have single-pointed concentration without any problems. Only a little push is needed. In the eighth mental state, one extends the state achieved in the seventh mental state and also one is able to focus on the object of concentration without any effort -- with complete spontaneity. This is also known as "Solitary Continuity" in some texts. Some meditators confuse this state with the complete attainment of *śamatha*.

(9) **Balanced Placement** (or resting in equipoise or equanimity). On the ninth level, you need no effort for single-pointed concentration. Here, not only is there spontaneity of focus, but one can maintain this state for as long as one desires. Here, mindfulness and vigilance have been "fired from their jobs" because they are no longer needed since the mind does not waver from its object of focus.

Even at the ninth level, we have not achieved the full goal of *śamatha* -- complete mental quiescence. This only comes after achieving mental and physical *pliancy*, the precursor to the bliss of mental quiescence.

After achieving the ninth level you come to the point that you can put your mind on whatever object you choose and have it be fixed in one-pointedness. Therefore you have pacified the winds of the mind.

The **Four Attentions** are simply another system for describing the process of going through the stages of meditation. (1) **Forceful Attention** corresponds to the first mental stage (Mental Placement). (2) **Interrupted Attention** corresponds to the second through the seventh of the nine mental stages. Here, there is always the chance that laxity and excitement as well as numerous other impediments can obscure one's meditation. (3) **Uninterrupted Attention** corresponds to the eighth mental stage. (4) **Spontaneous Attention** corresponds to the ninth mental stage. Still, at this point one has not achieved *śamatha*. This is the last moment before one fully actualizes complete *śamatha*. One attains *śamatha* only when one attains mental and physical pliancy -- a type of ecstasy in conjunction with the mind of the ninth mental stage. At this point, one may

attain *siddhis*, for instance clairvoyance, and one has the perfect basis to work on attaining the four stages of samādhi in the form realm and the four stages of samādhi in the formless realm. Of course, as previously mentioned, these still belong to the mundane benefits of cultivating śamatha meditation and are within the realm of saṃsāra.

When one has attained śamatha and has subdued the deleterious mental winds, it also has an effect of imparting physical ease, giving the ability to put ourselves in any position or do any movement without any trouble. Mental and physical dysfunctions are cleared and you feel uplifted, light in mind and body, and blissful -- free from discomfort. You may even feel your body is disappearing and dissolving into the object of concentration which is even further uplifting. This is extraordinary mental quiescence.

There are many metaphors or similes which are used to describe the process of śamatha meditation. For example, the experience of śamatha is like "the sun unobstructed by clouds." Thus the mind is focused on the breath, unobscured by distractions.

Also described is a mental perception, "like an eagle gliding in the sky." The eagle is quite a large bird that just needs to flap its wings once or twice and then glides for long period of time unlike the smaller birds which need to flap their wings more rapidly. The eagle has qualities of spaciousness, effortlessness, and gracefulness.

Another metaphor for the mind of śamatha is "a sparrow flying through the sky without leaving a trace." This metaphor emphasizes being present in the moment, not tracing or allowing our mind to dwell and be distracted in the path of our thoughts that have gone or have been ongoing.

Another metaphor is placing the mind "like a great ship on the ocean." The metaphor of a great ship on the ocean emphasizes *equanimity* -- not trying to suppress the random thoughts that arise, and not pursuing them, but allowing them to fall away. They will naturally calm down. Just as a massive ship is not swayed from side to side by the impact of the waves against its hull, the mind is not swayed by the arousal of random thoughts. This is sometimes alternately described as like the stillness of a lake where there are ripples on the surface, but below is calm and quiet. When the conditions arise, ripples will appear on the surface of the lake, but they will subside on their own into the stillness of the deep lake. We relate to the random thoughts that occur during our meditation like these ripples and dwell in the calmness of the *depth* of the lake rather than on the surface of the lake.

Another metaphor is "having mind like that of a child looking at a complex mural in a temple for the first time." This is having the beginner's mind of

innocence, openness, inquisitiveness, and being non-judgmental about whatever objects are presented to the mind.

After achieving mental quiescence, there are different ways of using this tool in life. Some people's purpose is to achieve certain levels or degrees of dhyāna. Others have the goal of achieving common *siddhis*, such as clairvoyance and so forth. But the fact is, no matter what kind of powers you have, these are all within saṃsāra. So the reality is that when your karma in this life is exhausted, you will not have escaped from saṃsāra. So there is no lasting benefit in achieving the magic attainments or common *siddhis*.

From the Buddhist perspective, mental quiescence should be applied as a tool to achieve some long-term benefit, not focused only on this lifetime but also future lifetimes. So we use this mental quiescence attained by śamatha meditation to cultivate:

- (1) *Renunciation*
 - (2) *Bodhicitta*
- and (3) *Wisdom* understanding *emptiness* -- the wisdom that apprehends the reality of existence.

These are the three principal aspects of the Buddhist path that leads to enlightenment.

Buddhism understands all our suffering to be the result of our previous karma and the self-cherishing ego -- the ignorance which causes the false notion of the self. So the main goal of our practice is to understand how we can uproot this ignorance -- the grasping at the self.

The wisdom of understanding emptiness and ignorance (of thinking we exist in a substantial way) is the direct antidote to ignorance and thus to suffering. Anything else is merely cutting off the branches of a tree when what we really need is to *uproot* the entire tree. **We do in fact exist, but not in a concrete, static way.**

Talking about the way we apprehend how we exist in this world, we often use the word "selfless" -- this does not mean that we do not exist -- we do exist *in dependence on many factors* -- but we humans tend to go beyond that in our mind and imagine a concrete, self-sufficient "self" -- an "I" -- and *that* self does not exist; and *that* idea has to be uprooted to achieve lasting happiness and liberation from saṃsāra.

These two together -- śamatha (mental quiescence), and the wisdom of understanding emptiness -- are the tools that we used to uproot the source of saṃsāra. "Special insight" is a term that we use when our wisdom meditation (*vipaśyanā*) has been effective and results in a state of bliss. One really needs to proceed fully through the nine stages of śamatha before the practice of

vipaśyanā meditation (analytical meditation) can have its strongest effect and achieve special insight. But you may not be perfect in your practice of śamatha and still may benefit from the practice of vipaśyanā (emptiness meditation). You can still benefit from the other practices. You may not be an expert with a hammer and a saw yet, but you can still begin to build your house.

"Through the process of familiarization,
There is nothing that does not become easier." -- Śāntideva

Now we have had this auspicious teaching, we had good intention, and we were engaged in wholesome behavior so there is definitely merit from our efforts. Let us dedicate this merit to all sentient beings.

Notes consolidated from sessions with:

Lhading Rinpoche, 9/11/2004
Geshe Lobsang Tenzin, 1/21/2006
Geshe Lhabu Dhondup, 7/15/2006