

Meditation Practice and the Nine Stages of Shamatha

I WOULD LIKE TO WELCOME everybody back to this continuing discussion on meditation. We have the opportunity to do shamatha practice in our life. So in these four days I would like to present a basic understanding of shamatha and of the view and purpose of shamatha. I would also like to give some practical advice and guidelines in terms of how to do the practice.

Shamatha is about steadying, stabilizing, and strengthening the mind. Although people tend to associate shamatha with Buddhism, we are not really talking about Buddhism here. You could say that Buddhists have capitalized on the practice of shamatha. Historically, it is known that the Buddha himself did many kinds of practices in the six years previous to his enlightenment. However, what he learned during this period was based on shamatha. The Buddha himself actually accomplished shamatha, and it provided the basic ground for the further things that he did. We also have the example of the many great Indian Buddhist teachers. Asanga, Shantideva, and Vasubandhu,¹ all utilized the practice of shamatha in how they presented the dharma. The basic point is that before we go ahead and do anything else, somehow we need to work with our mind. We need to learn how to stabilize and work with this wild horse.

The Nine Deepenings of the Mind

When we talk about the development of shamatha, you might ask, “If I *really* want to understand what shamatha is, what do I have to know in terms of training the mind?” The answer to that would be, “The nine stages of resting the mind.” I am not sure if we want to get into all nine, but we will begin and see how far we get. Usually we divide the nine stages into three: preparation to meditate, meditation, and increase of meditation. Stages one through three are preparation, stages three through seven are actual meditation, and stages eight and nine are increase of meditation. That is one way to look at it.

Yesterday we talked about what shamatha, or shi-ne, in terms of peacefully abiding. We also talked about the mind becoming pliable, useful, workable. At what point do we achieve that? In a very strict sense, we can say that once we achieve the ninth stage, we are at the base of the mind being workable.

¹Asanga and Vasubandhu: Fourth century Buddhist scholars and co-founders of the Yogachara school; Shantideva: author of the *Bodhicaryavatara*, a key text on the mahayana path of developing the six paramitas.

From a Buddhist point of view, and even from purely a meditative point of view, once we have accomplished the ninth stage of resting the mind, what is it that we are called? We are known as mere beginners. At the end of the ninth stage, we are at the beginning. At that point our mind is suitable and workable, malleable and able to go ahead and enter into whatever activity comes next. If we are talking about Buddhism, it is here that we are entering into Buddhism. This is a very strict way of looking at shamatha. However, the point is that we begin to look into shamatha meditation, learning how to tame the mind.

It is important to separate shamatha from vipashyana. Sometimes we tend to mix them back and forth. These days, I've been focusing on shamatha. In the future I will focus on vipashyana; but right now, we have to understand what shamatha is. We always tend to jump ahead and say, "What about the next thing? Then what's after that?" However, once we understand more thoroughly what shamatha is, then how vipashyana works is very, very interesting. [Rinpoche winks. Laughter]

As we practice, it may seem that we are just sitting there and various things are happening. However, as meditators in the past sat on their cushions and looked at that experience, they saw an unfolding process. There is a journey taking place, and we can see the marks and signposts of that journey. Basically that is what the nine stages are. Instead of being very technical about this, with lots of lists, we can look at the nine stages as simply like the changing terrain as we walk on a journey. In the beginning, perhaps, it is very flat ground—then all of a sudden we notice small bushes or little trees. We could say that is one point where the land changes. Later we may come across a river, and then a mountain.

In dealing with lists, it is important to remember that they are simply describing what happens as a meditator goes through the meditative process. Similarly, if someone asked you how you got to Dechen Chöling, you would say, "Well, first I left my house, then I got on a bus or a car or train, and then I stopped here. I saw this person, and I did this and that." After a while, as you tell somebody about it, you have a list. However, as you go through the day, it doesn't feel like a list. It just feels like this is the next thing that you are doing. So we have to realize that the nine stages are simply ways of seeing the terrain and beginning to notice what environment we are in.

The Mind as Consciousness and Space

When we are dealing with the mind, we must understand the basic nature of the mind as opposed to the body, or form. Our basic approach is that we have form, which is any composite body, such as our physical body, tables, trees, water and so forth; and after that, we have consciousness. Very simply, we have form and we have consciousness. With form, there is something to relate to. We can see it, feel it, touch it. With consciousness, however, even though we may be able to feel it, there is no form.

In referring to the experience of the mind and the stages of meditation, we realize that in a sense we are dealing with space. We are dividing up the meditative process into nine stages, nine ways the mind begins to feel. But these are not particularly stages of the mind that we can distinguish. Instead it is like saying, "This is stage one over here, stage two over here, and stage three over there!" [Rinpoche indicates different areas of the space around him] It is all very interchangeable. When we are working with the mind, we have to remember that the mind is not a physical, substantial thing. Because we experience life through our mind, and because we tend to see life itself as physical, we may feel there are different kinds of space.

For example, we may think there is dark space or light space. However, we must realize that we are somewhat imputing or projecting the different states of mind we experience onto the space. This is something we have to reflect on.

The Nature of Mind

Fundamentally, the nature of the mind, this relative human mind, is *sel shing rikpa*. *Sel* means “clear” or “luminous,” *shing* means “and,” and *rikpa* means “to know”; so *sel shing rikpa* means that the mind is “clear and knowing.” If we were describing the quality of this kind of space, we could say it is light and it is able to accommodate. As we continue to go deeper and deeper, we have to consider what *sel shing rikpa* is. Although it is described as clear and knowing, the mind is not physical; it is not a form. The mind is translucent. Its quality is that it can penetrate anything, nothing impairs it. Because it is not a thing, it does not come up against a form. It cannot and does not just stop there. The mind can actually penetrate form.

What this means is that when we meditate very, very precisely, we can actually begin to look at the inner workings of the body. It is said that some very good meditators can break the body down and see atomic particles. They can see the body in the smallest, smallest details. They are not just seeing the form, but breaking through into the bone, the blood, the atomic particles, and so forth. This is the quality of the mind being able to penetrate. The mind is also clear, in that it doesn't have any kind of self-consciousness, so to speak.

Another aspect of the mind is knowing, in the sense that the mind is intelligent. It is able to know. For example, this is a *dorje*. [Sakyong holds up Tibetan scepter, or *vajra* in Sanskrit] We say, “This is not a rock or a banana, this is a *dorje*.” Or if it is an apple, we know it is not a pear. How is it that we are able to know this? When we look at it, there is an aspect of the mind that can actually recognize it, that knows what this is. Similarly, we could consider how we know if something is outside or inside, and so forth. [Rinpoche is referring to traditional investigations of the mind.] Generally, we take that intelligent aspect of the mind for granted. We feel we just sort of know something. But we are saying that the basic quality of the mind is to know. It has that capability. This becomes very important in the process of meditation, because we really have to know what we are doing.

The mind is like the sunlight. The sun shines; it is clear and bright; it penetrates everywhere. Another aspect of the sun is that it is warm. There is both warmth and light. The warmth is like the notion of knowing, or knowledge. Knowledge is an aspect of what the mind is. We sit here and we think about things. Because we have a mind, we start thinking about whatever it may be. Then, after a while, we ask, “What is the mind, fundamentally? What is it made of? How would one describe this mind? What is this wild horse that we are taming and training? What are its components?” The mind is clear and knowing. As we go through the stages of meditation, we are uncovering these elements of mind. We are beginning to learn about what it is. As we uncover more and more, we get closer to the source. We are able to use the mind more purely.

The notion of clarity is also that there is a lack of distance between ourselves and our objects. We could use the analogy of going underwater with a mask, scuba diving. When the water is very clear, we are completely shocked by it. I went scuba diving one time, and at first the water was very muddy, so I didn't see much. The second time we went in, it was very

clear, and I was struck by how brilliant everything was. You just see things so clearly. When some fish swims toward you, it looks much bigger. A person swam by, and I thought it was a shark. [Laughter] I couldn't see sideways, but the overall sensation is not that you are impaired. You feel you are right there. There is a lack of distance, and things are more immediate. This is the kind of clarity we can find as we work with the mind.

Another aspect of the mind is that it is a basically neutral situation by means of which we experience things. At the same time, we are looking at qualities that are in harmony with the mind. When the mind is settled, the qualities of love, compassion, and understanding can emerge. These elements are a little more in tune, a little more in harmony, with the basic mind.

The mind is relatively neutral, but we can see how it takes on the form of whatever we project on it. If we take the example of negative emotions, for instance, if we get very angry or desirous or arrogant or proud—after a while we can feel that our mind is fully taken over by them. We are sitting, and all of a sudden we come up with a thought and we get very angry about something. It starts moving towards us, and it feels as if the anger is a physical thing that begins to overtake us. After a while, we don't say, "I am *becoming* angry," we say, "I *am* angry." Our mind has become completely absorbed. It has become very heavy with that particular emotion; it has absorbed it. In a sense the mind has changed its format. It has taken on the shell or the clothes of that emotion. Over time, the mind has become laden with all these emotions. We have taken all this on and the mind is heavy.

It is important to know what the basic mind is in its natural state. If we say that fundamentally the mind is stupid and angry, ignorant and confused, that doesn't work very well. Of course, sometimes we may feel that the mind *is* stupid, or that *we* are stupid or angry, whatever it may be. When we are absorbed in our emotions, wherever we look, it *feels* that way. Nonetheless, through the process of meditating we realize that there is another element that is more pure. That is important. Otherwise, no matter how much we meditate and meditate, if the basis of mind is agitation, it is not going to work. Through the process of meditating, we find that there are many layers of the mind, and finally, we can reach something that is more pure. The mind has been conditioned, it has been stained, it has been manipulated. That is the process that has happened. It is like a white cloth that has been stained. But if we look at the pure fabric of mind, we see that it is clear and knowing. Another way to look at this is through movement, vibration. On the surface, the mind is jiggling and moving. Those vibrations create all kinds of different situations. The mind is unable to settle down—but underneath all that, the mind is like space.

Traversing the Landscape of Thoughts and Concepts

When we work with shamatha, we are going through different stages or levels towards abiding peacefully. Is it necessary for us to start with the first level and then go through each level all the way up to the ninth? On the one hand, yes, and on the other hand, no. If our mind tends to be very stable, that is automatically like stage one or stage two. So we wouldn't have to go through those particular stages. In a sense we have already gone through them in terms of stabilizing the mind.

The nine stages have to do with how the mind can be more true to itself. In terms of a practical way of dealing with all this, the various stages are nine different techniques that are appropriate at particular times. Within each stage, there are various obstacles that we

encounter in the course of our meditation, along with antidotes of how to overcome them. As meditators we need to know the obstacles and antidotes and the nine stages so that we know in what direction we are going. Why is this necessary? We have to have guidelines because the mind is so vast, and we are trying to track a course in terms of how to stabilize it. Generally speaking, if we are left to our own devices, the tendency is just to wander in thought. We come up with some idea, and for a while it seems like a good one—then all of a sudden we decide to change to something else. We go from thought to thought, from idea to idea.

In reality, the major landscape we are traversing is concepts and thoughts. Sometimes we are meditating and we have a very brief thought. We know what that is like: we think about who is feeding our dog at home, our mother's cooking, all kinds of things. In that case, everybody will say, "I know that is just a thought." We all recognize that. But there are some thoughts and concepts that may last one year! Sometimes two years! We are meditating and we think, "This is really it!"

The journey of meditation is one of overcoming concept. This is not meant in a negative sense, that we are confused. The point is simply that the mind has a conceptual layer and we are trying to unravel it. At first we think, "I need these thoughts in order to understand what is going on." But in meditation we are trying to uncover the natural intelligence of the mind, the knowing aspect of the mind.

Making Mistakes and Knowing Reality

Inevitably, as we go along, as we meditate, we tend to mimic the result. That is okay. We are going to make mistakes. As the great yogi Milarepa² was always saying, "Mistakes, mistakes, if it wasn't for mistakes, I wouldn't be here." As meditators, we realize that we have to make mistakes. Rather than thinking, "I have achieved this!"—maybe it was a mistake. [Laughter] Whatever it may be, it is a journey.

We begin to learn how to tell if something is a mistake or if it is real. We understand more and more what the mind is and what concept is. How do we know? What are the skillful means? What is our sixth sense in terms of understanding what is going on? It is *rikpa*, knowing. It is knowing what the vibration of the mind is and really being able to feel it. We become very familiar with thoughts, with the frequency of their vibration, what they are doing to the consciousness, and what games they are playing. As meditators, [snaps fingers] we immediately know! We can detect when there is something suspicious going on. We can smell it before we get there.

We become more and more skilled, and more and more subtle. Our senses become much more attuned. Initially we are intoxicated—there are so many thoughts, it is hard to stand up. We are falling over because it is difficult to stay with the recognition that we have been thinking. However, after a while we become very, very sensitive and we know what is going on. Going through the nine stages, a meditator develops greater skills and greater levels of subtlety. This is why we have to practice meditation on a regular basis.

² Milarepa: "Mila who wears the cotton cloth of an ascetic." One of Tibet's most famous saints, his diligence in following the difficult instruction of his teacher and his realization of the teachings led to the founding of the Kagyupa school.

Clumsiness and the Art of Meditation

Unless we are incredibly talented and our mind is very clear, during the day while we talk and think and do things, probably what will happen is that our mind will move more and more. It naturally takes in more ideas as it has to deal with things. That is fine. But if that is the mind that we are bringing into our meditation, it is relatively clumsy, thick-skinned mind. It is not very subtle or refined.

In the beginning, when we are learning how to meditate, we are very clumsy. We come into the room and we keep knocking things over. We don't really know how to do things. Our fingers are fat; our eyes aren't very clear; we can't smell or hear very well. We are meditating and we don't know where the present moment is. We don't even know where the breath is. We sort of have an idea, but our fingers are fat and we can't feel very much. As soon as we try to feel it, we say, "Is this it? Maybe it is over there. I don't even know what it is!"

As we continue to meditate, we become much more thin-skinned—in a good way. We become much finer in terms of realizing what is going on. We are learning how to handle the mind. We are learning what meditation is. This is the art of meditation. This is the practice. In the beginning we are getting oriented. We are being told to sit up when maybe we are not used to that. It feels awkward. We are taught to work with our thoughts, to let them go and focus on the breathing. When we initially receive instruction, it sounds very simple. Then when we actually sit down to do it, it is very difficult, but not in a bad way.

Meditation practice is very simple and subtle, but we are not used to doing it. We are not used to handling this kind of thing. It is like learning how to juggle: it feels as if we are juggling the breath and the thoughts and the labeling and the posture. Then all of a sudden we realize we left one of the balls out—we are sitting there going like this. [Gestures as if juggling one ball; laughter] We just have one of them and we think we are meditating.

The process of meditation is really one of understanding what the terrain is and what is going on. That is crucial. The more familiar we get with that, the clearer the journey becomes—and the mind itself will be happier as it goes through the process of meditation.

Applying Ourselves and the Inner Journey

We have been talking about the nine stages or ways the mind works as it goes through the process of practicing shamatha. Doing this practice means being proactive and engaging in it. If we are involved in the meditation technique and in the process of meditation, we will make progress.

Although we have to apply ourselves to meditation, we also have to take whatever comes in stride. We have to learn how to handle our meditation. The actual process of meditation is working with the breath and holding our mind right there, stabilizing and calming and so forth. There is a tendency for some people to say, "You know, I've been meditating for ten years, and nothing is happening." And always, in response, the question is, "Well, what do you mean by meditation? Have you really been meditating for ten years? How many days a week, and how many sessions a day? And *during* those sessions, how much of your mind was really there and how much was it just spaced out and preoccupied with thinking?"

We can sit in this posture and cross our legs and do this. [Sakyong holds hands in meditation mudra] Outwardly it looks very good. [Laughter] I think we all agree about that. Maybe that's why we all are here, because it looks good! [Rinpoche smiles] But seriously, the

inner journey is really what it is all about. Initially, because we live in the West, it may look very exotic or romantic when we sit by ourselves or see somebody doing that. There is something appealing about it. Maybe there is some kind of karmic connection or link. We look at it and say, "That's very interesting. What is going on there?" However, the closer we look, the more we realize that the journey is an internal one.

When we sit down next to somebody, we know what is happening inside our own mind. We can be honest with ourselves and ask, "How much am I really doing this?" When we look at the person next to us, we think, "Boy, they look like they are really meditating." Meanwhile, inside they are thinking about their dish rota, their tent in the night, their girl friend, boy friend, food, dog, whatever it may be. Mind is like this. [Spins finger in air] This is something we all go through—and we sit there and we work with it. We have to realize that at a certain point it is up to us to say, "Okay, that's enough of that. I have ten minutes left. While I am here, I might as well try the technique for a little bit and see what happens. I might even like it." [Laughter]

What we do inside is up to us. It is interesting, however, that the wish to meditate internally takes quite a big support system. It is more than just feeling bad and saying, "I am a terrible meditator, I've got to sit." And it is more than just simple exertion. It is understanding, it is view, it is relating to the whole situation. When that builds up, then we can do it. What goes on internally is very important. Posture is also very important. Getting ourselves to the cushion is very important.

Being Your Own Meditation Instructor

Before we go into the various stages, I would like to talk a little bit about how we approach shamatha. I am not sure why everybody is here. Maybe you could care less about the nine this and the ten that; nonetheless you must ask yourself, "What is the proper meditation practice for me?" Meditation practice is like medicine; we have to learn how to give ourselves the right dosage. We have to learn how to take care of ourselves.

The main thing I hope you get out of this seminar is confidence in the practice, that you know what the practice of shamatha is. We do not want to view meditation as a burden, saying "Meditation is good." Sometimes we are too simplistic and say things like, "Thinking is bad and non-thinking is good." Whatever we come up with, it doesn't make any difference. If meditation becomes moralistic, based on the feeling that we are supposed to be doing good, it weighs heavily on our mind. We should realize what it is really for; otherwise, it becomes a burden. When we feel that it is a burden, usually it is because we don't know what it is. There is a slight distance created, a slight level of ignorance.

Knowing what our meditation practice should be begins by looking at the situation we are dealing with in our life. We are talking about abiding peacefully, *shiwara nepa*, some kind of peace and harmony in our life. If we look at our life and we have a lot of work, we are busy, we have a family and children and so forth—we will only have a certain amount of time to practice meditation. At that point we have to ask, "What am I capable of doing? I am tired from doing so many things and I don't have much time or energy. Maybe I am not able to go into a very deep kind of meditation and work with all kinds of things. However, I am able to get myself into the meditation room and onto the cushion." Even that is a step in the right direction.

Sometimes we just sit there for ten or twenty minutes. We simply create a gap between our usual happenings by just sitting there. I am not going to say to you, "You are not doing it right." That would be ridiculous. Instead I would say, "Given your life, what can you do?" Sure, we can go into all the stages of meditation, but we may not have time for it. So we have to figure out what parts we can utilize, because this meditation is useful in many different ways. For example, we might notice in a very basic way that when we are walking in the meadows and fields around here, we feel much more at ease than we do when we sit. There is a natural shamatha taking place, a natural peace. That is fine. That is what I mean.

It's not very helpful if we run into the shrineroom exhausted, saying to ourselves: [Rinpoche pants quickly] "Okay, breathe! Follow the breath. [Laughter] Recall what all the nine stages are... Oh yeah, obstacles and antidotes, okay... [Looks at his watch, laughter] And I should be grateful." Probably it is more helpful at that point to take a walk, or get a massage. I am not joking! If you are like this, just relax. As I have said, we are dealing with a very subtle thing—and at this point, probably our mind isn't very subtle. Someone says something, and we say something back without even thinking about it—we are in that kind of state. [Rinpoche vibrates his head back and forth very quickly] What is shamatha at this level? Shamatha is just realizing, "I have two legs, a head, and two arms. I am a human and I live in a world." Shamatha is just a basic awareness of who I am and where I am.

Meditation sometimes means just going into the meditation room and sitting down and thinking. It doesn't matter, just sit there and think: "What am I doing in my life? What about this?" and so on. Just calm down. After awhile, we can say, "You know, I think it is going to be okay." We start to settle down. Otherwise, if we go in with all those concerns, and we try to do this, [goes quickly into meditation posture] those thoughts are going to be banging on the door. Then the whole session will be spent pushing them away. That is a very exhausting meditation. So we have to learn how to gauge our meditation. We have to say, "Okay, today I have been busy and my life is hectic—so now I am going to sit down for twenty minutes. I am just going to feel my breathing and try to calm my mind a little bit and just be here." That is okay. That is totally kosher.

We tend to say it has to be everything or nothing, meditation or nothing—and what we usually end up with is nothing. [Laughter] This is at least something. For example, say we have a shrine. We go in and sit down and we are kind of anxious. We are just sitting there thinking, and we look up at the shrine, Maybe we see a statue of the Buddha. We think, "Buddha—oh yeah, I am a Buddhist. What do Buddhists like to do? They are compassionate, and they realize that life is suffering. Oh yeah! [Laughter] I know suffering! And what do they do about it? They meditate. Maybe I should do that." So just getting in the right environment and frame of mind is good. We get ourselves into the room and simply try to relax—and then we begin to notice things. It is kind of funny.

We are talking about how to bridge this gap—that is what I am constantly talking about with people. Few of them have very technical questions about meditation. Why not? They are not meditating. Our conversations have more to do with why they are not doing it, and how they could do it. When I hear these things, I think there is a problem here. I know that the Vidyadhara was a great meditation master, and he taught thirty years ago. Some of his students are very good, but some of them are just not meditating. That doesn't mean they are bad people—they are good people. However, sometimes it comes down to their saying, "I feel like I have to do a Chakrasamvara retreat or I have to do nothing." No! It is okay to do a little bit in between. Just half blue! [Laughter] Just Chakrasamvara's head!

[Ed: Chakrasamvara is a blue deity.] What we are really talking about is how to be your own meditation instructor. What I hope is that from hearing these talks and being in this environment you will feel some confidence that you are able to manage your own meditation.

Meditation is Not a Miracle Cure

People in the community have also talked to me about working with psychotherapists and other professionals. Sometimes when somebody is having a problem, or when a mental difficulty is happening to them, we feel they should meditate. The reality is that this is probably not a good idea. Meditation is not always going to solve that kind of issue. We have to deal with this notion of being human and look at all that is happening. Where is our life now? What is the most helpful thing to do? Sometimes we need to be more grounded. Can meditation be a part of therapy? Of course. But just saying, "Meditation is going to solve everything. Just put them on the cushion and it will solve itself" doesn't work.

We have to be careful in terms of how we are looking at our own mind and how we are gauging our own life. We need to ask, "What is appropriate for me?" We need to ask how we are, what are we doing; and how is it that practice can affect us. If we do this, if we have some sensibility, and our view and understanding is okay—then as we are meditating, we will gradually deepen our practice. That is inevitable.

There may be times when you are fine, and you can do the meditation. You can meditate for one hour and that is helpful. However, there may be times when you find yourself in a personally difficult situation. At that point it is probably better—depending on the situation—to call a friend and talk. Go for a walk. Engage in whatever it is. Then, when you feel a little bit better about yourself, maybe you can do some meditation practice. So I am talking about being very reasonable and seeing what needs to be done.

Confidence from Knowing the View

Sometimes we think meditation is going to be a miracle cure [snaps fingers], whether it is the practice of shamatha or, in the case of vajrayana Buddhism, some kind of tantric practice. It doesn't work that way. Why? Because even if we are totally sane and have very little discursiveness, these practices are not so easy.

A very interesting shift is taking place here: we are learning to trust ourselves more. We need to ask how we are going to lead our life. What feels better to us right now? We need to begin by seeing who we are and what our strengths and weaknesses are. Sometimes we take on more than we can handle. Sometimes we come in and we say, "You know, I've been reading about Buddhism and the *bodhisattva* vow, where I dedicate not just this life, but every life after this for billions of lifetimes, for the benefit of sentient beings." We do talk about that in the Buddhist approach, and it is a very courageous thing to do. However, we have to look at it in the light of what are we able to do now. Sometimes we enter in and we realize it is too much. "What have I done? What have I gotten myself into?" So when we talk about being human, it means realizing where we are and actually doing something about it. I see meditation as a process of working with and strengthening the mind. I think it can work, but we need to feel confident. The more confidence we have in our practice, the more confident we can be in handling any situation.

It is the same for Buddhist practitioners doing advanced practices, so to speak. In vajrayana practice, for example, we have a text, we have many things to read, to do with our hands, and to visualize—all these things. But if we really understand the view, and we don't have time to do a big, complicated practice—then just sitting there and taking refuge is fine. We can simply think, "I am taking refuge in the Buddha, dharma and sangha," just being very clear about what being a Buddhist is. If we do that for twenty minutes and get up, then we feel completely okay—because we feel so certain that this is very much the view of all hinayana, mahayana, and vajrayana practitioners. We are developing the ability to know the view. The more we know, the more confidence and understanding we can have at every stage of the path. The less we know, the more everything becomes, "Did I make a mistake? Gee, I don't know, was I bad or good?" We become very superstitious.

THE OUTER CIRCLE OF OUR LIFE

We can talk about shamatha practice as circles. The outer circle is our life. Within that circle, how do we really work with our mind? What does shamatha mean in that context? You might say, "I don't really need shamatha." Okay, you may not need the meditation practice. You might not like the formal practice of sitting down. But it would be very bizarre to say, "I don't like shamatha." Doesn't everyone want to abide peacefully, to be in balance with their own mind? I would say everyone wants that, no matter what they are doing.

If we are eating ice cream, shamatha is what we want. [Laughter] It is true! We buy ice cream because it tastes good, so that the taste on our tongue goes directly to our mind and our heart. And at that point, our mind goes, "Ha-hoh!" [Makes sound of delight as he licks imaginary cone; laughter] "Hallelujah!" It is peaceful. We are not thinking about all kinds of things. We say hallelujah because our mindfulness, the object of meditation, is ice cream. We are becoming very familiar with it, getting accustomed to it.

At that point, this is our view: [licks imaginary cone]. And how does our mind feel? We don't say, "I feel discursive and agitated." We say, "I feel pretty good! I feel relaxed. I feel happy and content." In reality, this is what is going on with anything we do. If we are buying a piece of clothing, it can make us feel better about ourselves. We can say, "You know, I have more confidence now. This is a symbol that my life is going well. This is what I want in whatever I do." That is shamatha. It is a process that brings peace and harmony into our life.

We realize that shamatha applies to any activity we look at. Why? Because the mind is fundamental, it is the key principle in our life. When we sit down and meditate, all we are doing is eliminating other activities. We are just keying in to the very heart of the matter, the center of what we are doing. When we get up from meditation, the same process is happening. We get up and say, "How do I work with this thought?" So the outer circle of shamatha is life.

This viewpoint works well with the Shambhala teachings, in terms of understanding basic goodness. In a way, if we are not in tune with ourselves, if we do not have a sense of who we are, how can we touch our own basic goodness? There has to be a way to access the notion of heart. And again, this is not an exotic practice we are talking about. It is not mental gymnastics, it is working with heart. We need to ask, "What am I doing in this life? How can I be a little more harmonious and at peace?" Once we are at peace, we are more productive. Once we have more harmony in our life, we are able to do things better.

When we talk about peace and harmony, we don't mean just being physically slow, that meditators drink very slowly and walk very slowly. And it doesn't mean that the more you meditate, the slower your speech gets. [Laughter; Rinpoche is talking quite fast] As an aspect of meditation, harmony means that although there may be a lot of activity in our life, somehow we are in balance. Activities are okay because once we have balance and harmony, we somehow have more time and more space in our mind. Our mind is more accommodating. We are able to hear what other people have to say, and we are able to talk to them. There is also more harmony in our relationships. We are more available to our friends—wife or husband, boyfriend, girlfriend, whoever it may be. We are more peaceful as well. So shamatha is noticing the mind shaking, creating speed and movement, and learning how to make it more in tune with what is going on.

Not Having Too Many Activities

In the outer circle, if you want to do shamatha and have some peace and harmony, you have to look at your life and ask, "What can I do in my life? What can I handle?" Initially, the notion of shamatha is that we can achieve some kind of basic steadiness by not having too many activities. If we look at our life and it is very confusing, if we are meditating but there is a lot of anxiety, then we have to open up the circle bigger. We need to ask, "Am I doing too many things in my life? Do I have too many activities going on?"

In the process of going through the nine stages, one of the basic environmental or peripheral obstacles is having too many activities. We are engaged in too many things that are pulling us away. We are not able to maintain enough strength. Sometimes I feel that shamatha is like talking with a sane friend who says, "Boy, I think you are doing too many things! There's not enough time and space for you to do everything. You're going to have to decide what you want to do and what you can postpone."

In terms of meditation, even before we get to the cushion we have to look at what we can do in our life. We may be in a phase where we are going to school and work and many things. So in this period we have to say, "Well, I am going to be slightly speedy." Then when it happens we are not shocked, because we know what kind of pressure we have put on ourselves. We need to understand what is going on, and then make a decision based on that. We are talking about shamatha.

If we are practicing sporadically, can our shamatha practice be beneficial? If we are to have harmony in our life, our mind has to be strong. Is our mind able to handle many activities? If it is, fine. But if it is not, rather than giving ourselves a hard time, we need to look at it. What can we reduce? How can we simplify our lives in order to do what we want to do?

As we get older, we become more and more knowledgeable in terms of doing things. When we are younger, we may feel that we have to do everything. Then five years later we realize, "You know, maybe it would have been better if I hadn't undertaken so much because I didn't finish half of what I started anyway." We are looking at what is going on in our life and making a judgment.

It is the same in retreat practice. If we are doing shamatha in a retreat, we need to reduce our activities. That means not bringing too many books to read and projects to work on. We may want to say, "I am going to read and write. I am going to sew and chop wood and cook different kinds of food." But, instead, we have to simplify. The mind is like honey or glue. It

sticks to things, and it won't let go. The mind is wrapped in honey—wherever we walk, everything sticks to us. [Laughter] Even if we don't like it, it stays in our mind.

Not Being Oppressed by Our Life

The outer circle of life is looking at a bigger picture, which is the notion of the view of shamatha, or meditation. When I get up in the morning, what view do I have? The point is to clarify it. Meditation provides us an opportunity to be contemplative, to reflect or think a little bit. It is giving us space in our mind. When we get up in the morning, we don't have to just jump out of bed and put on our clothes. We can have a sense of: "This is my life. What I choose to do today is up to me, in terms of what I want to do and how. I am not at the whim of fate. I am not being oppressed. I can do what I want. I have the choice." Then it becomes a question of providing the opportunity.

Shamatha practice gives us enough confidence and space to lead our life, to actually pull our life forward. What often happens is that life oppresses us. As soon as we wake up, we automatically feel squashed timewise. The rest of the day is underneath us and it also sits on top of us. We are squashed from the first breath, and we are panting. When we look at that sense of oppression, it is our mind. It is the fear factor, the unsteadiness, and the lack of feeling any freedom in our mind. That is what makes it oppressive. We must realize that we have an opportunity to alleviate that to a degree.

The irony is that such an opportunity starts with this simple practice of meditation. It starts with just having the time in our life to reflect and to work with our mind a little bit. Sometimes people ask, "Now that I am meditating, how does that affect the post meditation? Does it mean that I drink mindfully? Is it that I say 'How are you?' and do everything very slowly?" [Gestures as if shaking hands slowly] No. It means that we have a different angle on life. More space is created in our mind, so that all of a sudden we can lead our life slightly differently. Things come to light in a different way than before. In that way, there is an opportunity. This is a key factor in terms of the bigger circle.

Children and Self-Awareness

Within the outer circle, I would also include children. Sometimes I work with eight-year-olds or ten-and eleven-year-olds. And parents have asked me all sorts of questions about their children: how and when their child should meditate, at what age, and so on. Before their children are eight, parents usually speak more about how the child should grow up healthy and happy. But at a certain point, they want to introduce their children to meditation. Generally speaking, getting them into the meditation environment is difficult enough. It doesn't do any good to say to them, "Just sit and watch your breath." What we can say is, "Just come sit with me for a while. Let's just be together for two minutes."

What you want is for your children to gain some kind of curiosity about life and about themselves. Sometimes with children I'll say, "Sit there and think about what you like and what you don't like. Think about who you are. Think about what is being mean and what is being kind." It is on this very simple and basic level of what is kindness, who are your friends, why is it that you don't like this or that. This provides a kind of reflecting. It is an opportunity for the child to have some cognizance that they are a human being, that they have a mind, that they can think and have ideas. We realize that maybe they have never thought before about what they like and don't like, or they never thought about what the

mind is and what the body is. I keep it very simple. At this point, it is really about a sense of self-awareness—and as they grow up, a sense of gaining confidence.

In the outer circle, I feel that it is helpful to do the same thing with ourselves. Often when we are meditating, if we think about it, what is it that we are doing? Sometimes we are doing the technique—but other times we are just sitting there thinking about what we like and don't like, what we are worried about and not worried about. We are going over basic things, thinking about ourselves in the world. That is an important stage. We have to have that level of awareness of who we are. It is an important aspect of the journey. In a sense, it is like the journey with a child. So within the outer circle there is that kind of basic healthiness. It is a sane, healthy, simple approach. If we can do that, we are already doing a lot.

THE INNER CIRCLE OF MEDITATION

Curiosity

We next move into the inner circle, which is what we are doing with meditation practice. Now that we have a sense of who we are, a kind of self-awareness, or self understanding; we move into the circle of meditation. We think about the meditation process and view. Once we feel there is purpose in meditation, we can work with it in many, many ways. Initially, shamatha meditation is going to a deeper level of understanding thought and concept. Knowing who we are to a certain degree, we begin to see what it is that detracts us and pulls us away from being grounded.

This may sound simple minded, but the first stage of meditation is having curiosity. That is what we are talking about, as in the example of children. When you are a child, discovering little things is a huge deal. It is important to keep that level of curiosity growing in a child, and also growing in ourselves. As we get older, we have more responsibilities, more things we are supposed to do, and our curiosity can become dampened. We have so many things to worry about, we are afraid to be curious. It is not that we are afraid to find out, but it is just too much. We are full. We say, "I don't want to know any more. That's enough for now. I just want to stew in what I know—or think I know." The mind feels full. When we get older, we realize that the boundless quality of mind we had when we were younger doesn't seem to be there any more.

Sometimes the mind feels like a computer chip that is full. However, as we talked about before, the mind has no form. It is completely vast. It is able to know a lot. So here we are talking about expanding the basis of the mind by having curiosity. Curiosity is essential if we are going to do the meditation properly.

There is a relationship between curiosity and imagination. In order to be a good meditator, believe it or not, we have to be imaginative. We may have the feeling that meditation means, "Don't think!" But we don't want to put out the fire of imagination. It is not so much that we are imagining things, but we are realize how many ways there are that we can do this meditation. There are many ways we can work with our mind. The steadiness of our mind being right there doesn't mean that we have to eliminate intelligence or imagination.

We tend to think that since the mind has to be calmed downed and tamed; therefore, we must become simple minded. We must become stupid and not think too much, not do too much. If we take that approach, meditation becomes like having just one nail, and hitting it with a hammer again and again and again. That's our meditation. We have that

nail, and we go... [Gestures as if pounding a nail slowly, repetitiously. Laughter] That's it. No wonder we fall asleep. No wonder we start thinking or daydreaming. I mean, who would want to do that? Who wants to be there? Nobody wants to be in that space.

We are learning about meditation so that we know that is not what we are talking about. If it were, there would be no longevity for meditation. If somebody is doing a job that isn't pleasant, they're not going to be doing it long—they'll figure out something else to do. It is the same thing with us and our practice. If our meditation is like this [pounding the nail], somewhere in the back of our mind we are going to figure out something else to do. Eventually we are not going to meditate. So that is not really the right approach. We have to have a much bigger basis for practice, and bring a lot more to it.

The process of meditation involves realizing how the whole thing works, and how curiosity and imagination and so forth begin to come into play. In the second ring, the inner circle, we have to become curious about ourselves. That is important. If we are not curious about our mind and our life, it will be hard to meditate, because curiosity and openness are the main themes when we meditate. They are the principles we are working with. We can develop that curiosity in numerous ways—through studying, reading, interactions, and discussions. It is important to have opportunities to be curious.

Working with Larger Thoughts

Once we get to that space of being curious about who we are and what we are, we begin to deepen that experience. At this point, we start dealing with larger thoughts. An important aspect of meditation practice altogether is learning how to handle thoughts and concepts.

We need to know what is happening to us when we are meditating. We come into the meditation session from various activities. So the first thing to do is to calm down and get grounded in our posture and in our understanding of the technique. Then we may have all kinds of thoughts—wild thoughts or thoughts that take us away from the theater or scene of meditation. We need to understand all the aspects of what has happened to us in our life, and the various thoughts and concepts we are bringing into the meditation practice.

Being aware of who we are means understanding the process of thoughts, ideas, and concepts. Our first objective when we sit down and begin to meditate is to be able to release those larger thoughts in our mind. We can be very practical about this, thinking, "I am bringing certain issues to the cushion." Maybe we are between jobs, or just entered school. There are many possibilities. Something is always going to be happening to us in our life, and we have to bring it in. We have to accommodate the situation and say, "Yes, those things are happening. However, during this meditation period I will sit down and basically just try to get oriented." Often we sit down and we are spinning. It is very, very scattered. So when we sit down, we try to get oriented towards our mind, to who we are and what is happening.

Sometimes we feel that before we meditate, we need to relax and let go of our self, or develop egolessness. Ultimately, that sounds good—but at this point we are trying to gain a sense of strength in who we are. This is really what is happening in the practice of shamatha. We are trying to get a sense of the mind being steady and strong. When we sit down and there are many wild thoughts taking us away, we must say, "Even though I am working with my breath and relating to it, I realize that I have many issues. There are many, many thoughts coming into my visual or mental field."

Recognizing Thoughts

Just recognizing those thoughts is the first stage. We call this “labeling thoughts.” The word *labeling* is fine, but there are also other ways of looking at what is happening. When we are meditating, the important point is that moment of recognition. We are thinking, and then there is a moment when we recognize that we are caught in a thought. The mind is moving, it has moved into a thought. We could say it has morphed all of itself into a thought. That’s what it is—it *is* the thought.

Now, rather than being on the calm water, we are on a wave. We need to recognize the disturbance of the mind. We see that the mind is moving; it is not calmly abiding. Recognizing the thought is an immediate antidote, in terms of slowing down the movement of the mind. At that point we realize that the mind can abide calmly. Having that recognition is also the notion of knowledge, intellect, wisdom, self-knowledge. It is the knowing part of the mind that sees what is going on. It sees we are no longer settled in our mind, but we are caught in something. The mind basis itself has shaped itself into something else.

Experientially, how does that feel? It is like we are lying in a meadow staring into the sky, and all of a sudden there is a moment when we realize we are looking at a cloud. We see a shape and we recognize—that is a cloud! What does that moment do? It grounds us, so to speak, in that it separates: I am who I am—the cloud is what it is—and I am lying on the ground. Suddenly everything falls into the place. Before, we were the cloud. Our consciousness was in the cloud.

Acknowledging Thoughts

The moment of recognition is important. In the first phase of meditation, our practice in terms of thoughts is simply being able to have enough moments of recognition—recognizing those thoughts, and then recognizing them again and again. Once we have recognized them, the next stage is acknowledging them. So first there is a recognition and then acknowledgement.

The process of labeling thoughts is more like acknowledgement. It is saying, “Oh! I had a thought.” In the process of labeling, we don’t want our practice to get too clumsy. If we say, [very slowly and deliberately] “That is a thought,” then we’ve added a couple of more thoughts into the process. That is not going to help us a lot. The point of labeling is the notion of neutrality. It is neither a good thought nor a bad thought, but there is neutrality—we are just realizing that something has occurred. That is what the labeling is. We are simply acknowledging a thought. At that moment we are aware and conscious of the mind. So acknowledgement is restabilizing the mind.

What we are acknowledging is our recognition of the movement. There are five basic experiential phases³ that happen in meditation practice. [Ed: *See also* The Nine Stages of Shamatha chart in Appendix] The first one is known as movement. In the practice of meditation, yes, it is very important to follow the breath. We’ll get into that. Right now we are dealing with thoughts. What is the purpose of acknowledging a thought? It is to see the movement and instability of the mind.

³The five experiential phases are: movement (like a waterfall); attainment (like a brook); familiarity (like a slow river); stability (like a calm lake); and perfection (like a mountain).

What we are doing in the process of shamatha is being cognizant, being aware of who we are as human beings. The point is to be human and not to be completely distracted all the time. It is to be present, to be whole, to be healthy. In meditation practice, that is what we are trying to do. Meditation is about understanding what a thought is and what the mind is. What part of the thought is the mind? Is the thought cognizant? The notion of being present in the space—is that consciousness? Is consciousness thought or not thought?

Calming Down and Being Conscious

This process of acknowledgement needs to become ingrained. To do so, we first must recognize it as an aspect of the mind. This has to do with consciousness. When we are asleep, the mind is not in a very clear state. We have lost consciousness, and the mind is not clear and knowing because all its facets are sunken in. When we are meditating, the mind can be clear and knowing. Shamatha means to be completely present and to know what is going on in terms of our experiences.

From a Buddhist point of view, how do we use shamatha? If we have good shamatha, then we know what *gewa* and *migewa* are—virtuous and nonvirtuous actions. We can begin to be cognizant of our karmic actions—and not just our actions alone, but the whole situation, the whole universe. We have a level of stability and consciousness to understand the interplay of nature and phenomena.

There are two aspects to shamatha practice. One aspect is calming ourselves down, stabilizing, and so forth. The other aspect is realizing that calming ourselves down and being at peace doesn't mean being asleep, but awake. Shamatha doesn't mean being unconscious. We may think that shamatha practice is nought practice, not-thinking practice. But really it is not. There is always a level of thought, or consciousness. There is always a level of concept going on. We are just trying to get it more refined. That is what is taking place here.

Calming down and stabilizing has to do with being embodied within the knowledge aspect of our mind. It is holding our mind right there. Rather than that, what we have gotten used to is the mind constantly slipping in and out of cognition. It is continuously being pulled into thoughts that have become habituated in our mindstream. Such waves of thought have already been created in the mindstream, so the thought that happens right now has not necessarily started right now. It is like the rock in the pond business. We are feeling the effects [the ripples] rather than what is actually going on [the rock landing in the pond]. So when we sit down, we are feeling the waves of our life coming through our mind in the form of various thoughts arising. That is why we have to practice in a steady way, because if we do, those waves begin to slow down. This is also why it is important to have the level of awareness that we have been talking about.

THE CIRCLE OF WILD THOUGHTS

The next circle is the wildness of thoughts. There are many levels of thoughts. If we get very practical and step back and look at it, wildness of thoughts means that there is no consistency or logic to these thoughts. They are all over the place. In the beginning of our meditation practice, it is more extreme. There are all kinds of emotions and fantasies. After a while, the emotions generally die down more or less. Maybe there's just desire, for instance; whereas in the beginning you had wild thoughts of anger, food, sex, and money. All kinds of things come up, and they are all wild. And when you are finished you think, "Geez, what

was that?" It is like flipping through television channels. It is one thing here, one thing there, and then another thing.

Having the view means understanding what is going on and knowing what is important. We must feel the need to meditate. If we don't see any good reasons to do it, we won't. We think, "I don't feel like meditating." In that case, we have to back up many steps and ask, "What is the reason I started? Why is it that I am here?" Then our motivation will probably prevail. When we know why we want to do something, we are very energetic about doing it. Again, this has to do with being imaginative, and keeping alive our motivation and intention to meditate.

Nonetheless, in the beginning we have wild thoughts. Then, obviously, we add many layers of fantasy and details. If we are fantasizing about going on a long holiday canoeing on the Amazon River, we can imagine the foliage and what we are going to eat. As we sit there meditating, we begin to notice this is what the mind is doing. At this stage, we just need to be able to recognize the wildness, the swings of the mind. We simply see how it is. It is like looking at a wild horse. Before we train and tame this horse, we have to acknowledge and appreciate its wildness. We have to realize that we can't just go up and grab it. Otherwise, it could be dangerous.

To review, as we are sitting meditating, we very meticulously work out various fantasies and thoughts and so forth. The first stage of practice is being able to recognize and acknowledge those as thoughts, to realize that we are thinking. When we get down to it, our meditation at this point is just staying in the tent. Of course *physically* we are in the tent [at Dechen Chöling], but we also have to be in the tent *mentally*. Right now, in fact, you could say that mentally we are just trying to be in France, then Dechen Chöling, then the tent, and then on the meditation cushion. At the end of the session, we could ask ourselves, "How much of the time was I actually here? How many countries and how many people did I visit?" If we are meditating for twenty minutes to an hour, first we are learning how to do the technique. However, a great deal of the session is dealing with those wild, very intricate thoughts. It is recognizing and acknowledging them—and then letting them go, releasing them. That is the process. When we do that, we build up some kind of strength.

THE CIRCLE OF SMALLER THOUGHTS

If we continue to work in an inner way, another circle comes along once we are able to tame our mind long enough so that we find ourselves more or less staying in the tent. We are still dealing with wild thoughts and so forth in our meditation. However, when we find ourselves fantasizing, we shouldn't get upset with ourselves and try to grab our mind and hold it very tight. That is probably not going to work very well. Our mind will squiggle away and escape. Instead, what we need to do is say, "Okay, my mind is pretty wild today. Basically what I am going to try to do is stay in this realm and just be an environmentalist. I am going to stay put, so that I feel the room. I am feeling where I am and staying with that."

If there are small thoughts coming up, we might say, "Before I was thinking about being at the North Pole. Now I am thinking about what's for dinner at Dechen Chöling." That is an improvement! At least we are here. [Laughter] We have to be honest. This is better. If we have a couple of smaller thoughts, that is not a problem. We are at least *somewhat* here.

You might think, "That doesn't sound like very good meditation." The point is that this is the level we have achieved. Let's stay at that level. Let's see if we can maintain it for ten

minutes. What is happening at this stage is that the mind is getting stronger. It is now able to reside in a place, and it has a lesser level of thoughts. Perhaps many little thoughts are coming up, but the circle is getting smaller in the sense that we are becoming more and more focused.

Meditation is a day-to-day process. We have to observe how our mind is today. When we sit down on the cushion, we need to see what we are bringing along. We may look at ourselves and feel, "You know, for whatever reason, I am pretty calm today. This session is probably not going to be so wild, so I can go a little further in my meditation, a little deeper." Then we work with that. On other days, we see that our mind is still very wild. We can change the size of the pasture for the horse. We can give it a little more grass or make the fence a little smaller. We deal with it in that way.

We need to be very practical. We tend to say, "I am terrible, I am thinking and thinking." Then we're gone again. [Rinpoche pants as if trying very hard to be with the breath] Then fifteen minutes later... [pants as if trying very hard again]...and in between, we don't know what really happened. That approach is never going to become very consistent. It is like learning how to drive when the car is constantly stopping and starting. The main thing we are trying to do here is to develop some consistency or stability in our meditation practice—holding our mind there, very practically.

THE NINE STAGES OF SHAMATHA

The First Stage of Shamatha: Placement

Now we'll talk a little about the nine stages of shamatha. Since we are on this topic, we'll also talk a bit more about mindfulness. We want to make sure we understand what mindfulness is and what awareness is. The first stage of shamatha is known as placement. In Tibetan we call it *jökpa*, which means "to place." As we are placing the glass here; in the same way, we place the mind on the object of meditation. [Places glass down on table] We'll keep the examples very simple. Previously, the mind has engrossed itself in thought and discursiveness. Now we are taking that mind, which is very workable but scattered, and placing it. On what? In this case, the object of meditation is the breathing process. We are placing the mind on the going out and coming in of the breath.

Jökpa means placing the mind on the object of meditation, whatever it is. For example, if you're doing a visualization practice, it is taking the mind from thinking about all the other things in our life and placing it onto whatever we are visualizing. It is like grabbing a friend who is talking to many people and placing them elsewhere. We take the mind and we hold it to an object. You can say we are *placing* it on the object, or you can say *holding* it to the object. *Jökpa* is holding our attention, our focus, on the object of meditation.

In a formal session of meditation, when we have sat down and begun to meditate, placement is the first action. It is the first of the nine stages. The first thing we have to do in order to eventually achieve the ninth stage, where we have a completely pliable and workable mind (or the beginnings of a pliable mind, I should say) is that we have to have a reference point. The mind is space—we have to pick a point in that space so that we can have some kind of orientation. We place the mind there.

A Very Definite Beginning

Placing our mind is a very important step when we begin the process of meditation. We may have to take this step many times, but that is not a concern right now. Here we are just talking about the beginning of each meditation session. Let's say you have decided to do an hour of meditation practice. You're at home and you say, "I have an hour and I'm very confused and busy, so first I will cool out for ten minutes." It doesn't matter if your eyes are open or closed, you can do whatever you want. Just sit there and calm down for ten minutes or so. Then at ten past the hour, you can say, "Now I am beginning my meditation session. I am going to take my mind and place it on the object of meditation, on the breathing." At that point, you become aware of the breathing. You are mindful of it. Then you place your mind there and hold it there.

It is important that we acknowledge that we have begun the practice. Initially this has to be done very deliberately: "I am beginning." It is like the first step in a journey, taking our foot and planting it. Or it is like the first domino. If we do not do this one thing, the other dominos will not fall into place. Why is it important to make it so definite? For the *crispness* of the meditation. In our mind, it is clear. We can't say, "Oh, I didn't really begin yet; now I am going to begin." It doesn't matter if later you have millions of thoughts; you can still say, "I have begun, and this is what happened."

Beginning to Meditate

In this first stage of placement, what we are dealing with is a period of learning how to meditate. We are talking about very beginning meditation. We are learning about the posture, the breathing, the labeling, recognition and acknowledgement, that whole process. We are learning how to balance all that. After a time, we will become comfortable meditators, but initially, we are not very comfortable. It is awkward. We push too hard on our breath. We prefer to tune out, we space out, we do this or that. It is very ungraceful, you could say. After a while, our meditation becomes more graceful. The way we handle our meditation becomes very smooth.

Meditation is just like any other activity. When we first begin to learn something, it is very awkward. We sit there and have a thought—and then we remember, "Oh! Thoughts are bad"—and we hit it, so to speak. It is almost as if our mind becomes very irritated trying to deal with the thought, so we overreact. Then we feel bad and try to hold our mind too tight. This is that period of learning, where we are going from here to there and back. At this stage we need to be kind to ourselves. We could give ourselves a grace period and say, "I am going through this as I learn how to meditate, just as if I were learning how to ski or something. I am going to be falling down, getting up, falling down, getting up." It is the same as learning how to ride a horse: in the beginning you are just learning how to balance.

MINDFULNESS AND AWARENESS

We will continue now with an introduction to mindfulness and awareness, or how we are going to hold our mind to the object of meditation. We'll talk about mindfulness first; later we will talk about awareness, or introspection. When we talk about meditation, we hear the word mindfulness quite often. Basically, mindfulness is the technique through which one engages in meditation.

Mindfulness and awareness are the tools of the meditator. How does one actually do meditation? How are we going to tame this wild horse? If you are working with a horse, you have a whip and a rope. If you are a doctor, you have a stethoscope and a scalpel. If you are a cook, you have a spatula and a frying pan. This is what you need in order to tame a horse, to heal whomever you are trying to help get well, or to cook a meal. Likewise, mindfulness and awareness are the mechanisms by which we journey in meditation.

We have the mind and we have the object of meditation. How are we going to hold them together? To use a visual image, we could use our arms. We hold it with our left arm, which is mindfulness, and with our right arm, which is awareness. If we don't have arms, then we can't hold them. There's nothing we could do—we could only wish. With mindfulness and awareness, we have something by which we can actually hold it together.

Another way we talked about mindfulness is the notion of *samten*, or strengthening the mind. One of the functions of mind is to be able to hold or stabilize, and mindfulness strengthens that. For example, if I pick up this glass, my mind has to be there long enough for me to hold it. I have to say, "I want to pick this up," as opposed to something else. My mind has to go to the object and stay with the object long enough for me to recognize that it is a glass, that it is not a cup or a banana or anything else. When my mind is there long enough for me to recognize the image, then I can hold it.

Developing Intrinsic Mindfulness

Mindfulness works in that same way with any object. If it is a sound, mindfulness is the ability for us to hold our mind to that sound long enough to say, "Oh, that is so-and-so who I am hearing on the telephone." We recognize their voice. If it were not for mindfulness, our mind would not be able to hold that sound and image so that we could recognize it. Mindfulness is an intrinsic aspect or quality of the mind. When we are meditating and practicing mindfulness, we are doing something that is natural or intrinsic. We are strengthening an aspect of our mind that is already there.

It is important to look at it in this way, otherwise we tend to think that mindfulness is different, separate, or outside. Mindfulness is not something foreign that we are trying to bring in. On the contrary, the practice of mindfulness is strengthening what we already have. We are developing our qualities as human beings. We are strengthening them. Why is it that we are not able to hold onto something, like our breathing or the various other objects of meditation? Why is it that we are not able to maintain our mind? Generally speaking, it is because our mindfulness is weak.

Through the course of meditation, we are training the mind to develop its ability to be mindful. In the first stage of placement—and in the first phase of meditation altogether—our main concern is gaining stability, stabilizing the mind. For example, if we are doing a visualization practice, although a lot of things can happen in visualization practice, the first thing that needs to happen is to stabilize the visualization. If the visualization cannot remain in our consciousness long enough, then we will not reap the benefits of that particular practice. So mindfulness is very, very basic.

The Power of Mindfulness

The mindfulness element of meditation is closely connected to the mind beginning to feel its strength and its ability to simply be present. When we experience such mindfulness, it can be

a powerful experience. Sometimes when we say the word, *mindfulness*, it sounds very tedious, very small. “Be mindful and pick up that small little thing” or “Be mindful, that step is uneven. You might trip.” It can have that usage, referring to very small little things. However, what we are saying is that with mindfulness, the mind becomes very powerful. We are beginning to realize what a stable mind feels like.

In the beginning period of meditation, our experience is of the movement of the mind. How does mindfulness feel? When we are off in thought—all of a sudden we come back and are present. Our mind is very much right here in the space. We feel tremendous energy and clarity. This experience is very powerful. It comes from the ability of mindfulness to be here in the present moment. Our mind is able to relax and expand out. So, as we can see, the notion of mindfulness is not just taking up a pair of tweezers and trying to pick up tiny grains of sand.

The First Aspect of Mindfulness: Familiarity

Mindfulness has three qualities: familiarity, not forgetting, and the ability to hold. We are getting down to the building blocks of how we meditate. Basically, we have mindfulness and awareness. The more we understand what they do, the better our meditation becomes. This is not being simple minded, it is realizing how the whole thing works. It is not just hitting that same nail over the head again and again. It is beginning to have rapport, imagination, and understanding of what is going on. If we have the three qualities of mindfulness—familiarity, not forgetting, and the ability to hold—we are practicing complete, balanced mindfulness.

The first aspect is familiarity, in the sense that the mind has the ability to be in tune and harmonious with the object. The mind is becoming familiar with the object of meditation, whatever it might be, because the mind is able to be there long enough to gain understanding and knowledge of what the object is. When we are beginning to meditate, we know that we have the present moment, we have the breath, and we have bringing our mind back.

Why is it that sometimes we are not able to stay in the moment, that we tend to be pulled away by distractions? One reason is that we are not very familiar with this present moment. We are not very familiar with the breath. It is not intimate for us; it feels distant. We are not sure what the breath is, and sometimes we are not able to recognize it. “Is this the breath? Is this the present moment?” We don’t recognize what it is. We could say we are *close* to it, but we are not really *familiar* with it. As we practice more, we are better able to come back to the present moment, to the breath, to whatever we are meditating on. We are becoming more intimate with it. That is another word we can use, *intimacy*.

When we are off in thought, we have to have *reasons* to come back. Why would we come back? It is because we are becoming more familiar with being in the present moment and quite fond of the feeling of stability of the mind. That becomes something we want, so we have a desire to come back in our meditation practice. If we are just told that it is good to come back, that it is simply something we should do, then it remains very distant. The whole thing has no warmth and we have no desire to be there.

We have talked about the aspect of releasing thoughts when we meditate and the aspect of becoming more and more intimate with the object of meditation—breath, in this case. The more intimate and familiar we become, the stronger our mindfulness becomes. Our

mindfulness is no longer this very small thing, but becomes much bigger and more pervasive. When we talk about holding our mind and being mindful, our tendency is to think small. That is because we are generally so distracted that when we come back to the present moment, we feel that we have to hold on for dear life. When we finally have the present moment, we think, "I've got it and I don't want to let it go." But we soon find ourselves drifting.

We must come back, and at the same time realize that mindfulness and stability can be quite vast. If we are present, mindful, and familiar with the moment, then that could become a very expansive feeling. It doesn't have to be just here. [Indicates a small space in front of him] Initially we are breathing and we are right here because that is all we can handle. However, that space gets bigger and bigger. Eventually it becomes a whole meadow that we are mindful in. We then have complete awareness. Awareness is the term that applies here, even within the topic of mindfulness.

At this point, a true moment of mindfulness happens. We begin to feel completely affected by the mind finally being stable. Our mind is able to take its seat much longer, and we are able to penetrate. All of a sudden we notice things we did not see before. We notice so many things, now, that it is shocking. At the same time, the mind is also at ease, so it feels good! There is an element of familiarity in which we realize that practicing mindfulness doesn't simply mean, "I am holding my mind onto this technique for dear life," but, "Okay, now I can develop my understanding of what this is."

It is like being here at Dechen Chöling. If we just drive by, obviously we see it, but we don't really know much about it. Our experience is not very deep. There is not much we could write home about. If we wrote a letter, we would say, "Well, it looked like this," and it would be very short. However, if we spend one hour here, we become more familiar—and if we spend one month or one year, then we become very, very familiar. We are understanding and becoming intimate with the whole environment. We notice more and more things. Likewise, in meditation we are beginning to recognize more and more about the breath.

The breath is a mechanism, a way for our mind to stay focused. We are mindful of the breath, but is it the breath we are becoming more and more familiar with? To a certain extent, yes, but it is more that we are becoming familiar with our mind. The breath is the mechanism by which we are recognizing the depth of our mind. In the same way, visualization practice it is not so much that I have to become familiar with a *painting* of the visualization; it is more that I am becoming familiar with the *meaning* of the whole thing.

To balance our notion of mindfulness, we have to add here that familiarity has an aspect of deepening. We are now able to recognize a thought, let it go, and come back and be present. Beyond that, there is a dynamic taking place, something else. It is not that we are simply pushing thoughts away and we have nothing to come back to. Sometimes we feel that there is nothing to come back to, so we don't stay around for very long. We say, "Nothing interesting here," and we are off on the next adventure. We say, "Might as well go back to Tasmania," or wherever it is we were. "Let's go back on holiday and plan our trip. Let's think about something else because there's nothing interesting here."

Of course there won't be anything interesting about coming back if we are just holding on by our fingernails. That is not a very pleasant or comfortable situation. It seems that we have two choices: either we just try to push thoughts away and gain strength in doing that, or we actually enhance the reasons for coming back. However, we have to balance those two. We have to balance the reasons for letting go, based on our understanding of what a thought

is, with the reasons for coming back. We need to enhance the reasons to come back. Fundamentally, what we are enhancing is our ability to know our mind, to know what it is. As I said in the beginning, the mind is a wonderful thing. It has many, many wonderful dimensions. Now we are beginning to learn more about what those are.

Discovering Joy and Engaging

After a while, a meditator who is comfortable practicing discovers that one of the qualities of shamatha is joy. The meditator enjoys being here. He or she enjoys being in the space of meditation. When a thought comes up, we don't say, "Oh no, I have to leave my holiday and go back to school!" Although that is how our meditation sometimes feels; at some point, it becomes the other way around. When we meditate, we feel like children at the beginning of holidays. We are quite happy to have come here. Then, when a thought does disturb our meditation, we simply say, "Oh, there's a thought, a disturbance," and we come back. That is the notion of familiarity. Otherwise, there is no reason to do this. We would just think it is tedious or boring.

We need to be proactive; we have to engage. We have to be willing to learn about the mind. If we just sit there and don't do anything, what are we learning about? We are just learning about discursiveness. We are ingraining discursiveness more and more. That is the thing with the mind—when we are meditating, we are always ingraining something. It is not that we are lessening something. We have to realize that we have this ability, and make a shift.

How can we become more familiar with what is going on presently with the mind? The breath, the present moment, is the anchor for stabilizing the mind right now. We have that reference point. This is the aspect of knowing, the subtle element of the mind that can cognize and understand. It is not a mind that is thinking and thinking. This process of knowledge can unfold because it is a natural element of who we are. It is the good water rising to the top, the natural strength of the mind coming out. It is like the sun shining through. It simply becomes more prevalent—it is not that we are creating a state of being.

When we are meditating, we have to be curious and interested. We might think of shamatha as just pushing down and squashing. Instead, we have to be interested in the process of becoming free thinking and wise, which is the end product, so to speak, of practice. We cannot be ignorant during the process of meditation and discover wisdom at the other end. That transformation is going to have to start taking place right now, as we meditate.

Another way to consider it is that when you are sitting and practicing the technique of meditation, you are working with the view. In Buddhism, we talk all the time about view and meditation. What is meditation? It is holding the mind to the view. The more you hold the mind to the view, the more you understand the view. After a while, the view doesn't become anything different – it becomes you.

It is the same with familiarity. When we are meditating, thoughts and so forth are taking place. What does "familiar" mean in this case? It means we are working with duality. In Tibetan we call it *sungwa* and *dzinpa*, the "objective" and "subjective" aspects. We have these two: the meditator and what the meditator is meditating on. We have here and there; that is what is taking place. When we become truly familiar, that duality begins to dissolve. The mind begins to relax. You can say that *true* familiarity is not seeing a separation. That

means that if I am working with the breath, I *become* the breath. At times that shift takes place, so that we are not observing the breath any more, we are not observing the present moment—we are becoming whatever it is.

Familiarity means being completely in tune. This is a kind of like the old spiritual jargon of “being one with” something. However, as you go further, at least in terms of Buddhism, there is no “one” or “with.” However, we are not really at that point. We are still trying to deal with the fact that there is someone here, and we are trying to be with that person. Nonetheless, when we are meditating, the notion of familiarity in mindfulness is that all of a sudden we are just not holding on any more. Once we become truly familiar, we have transcended that quality. Suddenly, we are the breath. There is no act of meditating at that point. We are totally there.

In terms of the first level of familiarity, that would mean, “I am familiar with Dechen Chöling. I am familiar with my meditation. I am familiar with the present moment.” Then there is another level of familiarity, which means, “I *am* Dechen Chöling,” as opposed to “I like Dechen Chöling,” or “I know Dechen Chöling.” At this level, it is the dualistic mind that we are dissolving. We are dissolving the need to have an objective point of meditation.

In order to enhance that notion of oneness, of unity, the mind has to be strong. We have to know the reasons to meditate. Why unity? Because the mind is like space. When we are practicing mindfulness, the mind is no longer fluctuating in thought; therefore, it is not agitated and it begins to settle in. We have the ability to do that. The experience of mindfulness is of the mind subsiding and being in itself as opposed to outside of itself. Generally speaking, the mind is always outside or inside of itself—“inside” not in a good way and “outside” in terms of always leaving. However, at this point the mind is actually being drawn back in, in a good way. But that is tomorrow’s topic. We are a long way from there.

The Second Aspect of Mindfulness: Not Forgetting

After familiarity, the second aspect of mindfulness is known as not forgetting—or remembering. You could say it either way: when you have remembering, you also have mindfulness; or, when you are not forgetting, you have mindfulness. This means that if I am mindful of this [holds up Chapstick], it does not leave the continuum of my mind.

An example of the second aspect, not forgetting would be if someone asks me, “How is your mother?” I have to think about it before I say, “Oh yeah, she is living at Karma Chöling now. And she’s fine. Her health is better.” In that case I would say that right now I am not mindful of my mother. She has left the continuum of my consciousness, so to speak. Don’t tell her this! [Laughter] I have to think about it, so right now I am no longer mindful of her. However, if someone says, “How is your mother?” and right then and there I say, “Oh, she’s fine,” that would mean that she’s never left my consciousness. She is always there. That is mindfulness.

We are talking about not forgetting the object of meditation. When the mind is resting in the state of mindfulness, it embodies the notion of stability. Mind always knows where it is. In this case, we are using an object of meditation, a thing. We can use a rock or a banana or whatever it is. We can use a visualization, any object of meditation. If you are meditating on Manjushri, the bodhisattva of wisdom, you are supposed to be doing the mantra and visualizing him holding a sword and a text. If someone asks you, “By the way, what are you visualizing?” and you say, “Oh...uh-uh...oh yeah, Manjushri,” you are not mindful of

Manjushri at that point. Manjushri has left the continuum of your consciousness. He is no longer there.

We are talking about *continual* consciousness. That is the aspect of a continuum of mindfulness. If we stray, it leaves; it is no longer there. If we have twenty minutes for meditation, the breathing is supposed to be in the continuum of our consciousness during this time period. That is what we are mindful of. So now we not only have familiarity, but we also have a continuum of mindfulness. Continuum means that it is always present, it is undying.

It is like being in love. If you are in love with somebody, they never leave your consciousness. You think about them all the time: what they would like, where they are, what they are doing. That is always going on. It is the same thing with food. If you are very, very hungry, for example—[Laughter; it is past mealtime] Just simply an example, don't take it personally!—you are always thinking about dinner. It does not leave your consciousness. You are very, very mindful of it, and your mindfulness is very strong and familiar. That is the feeling taking place here. So next time—now!—when you are hungry, just see how it feels. It never leaves. It is always there.

Remembering also has a quality of being unstudied. There is a very easy way to check for this. You can ask, "Did I have to think about it in order to remind myself of what I was doing?" If that is the case, then you are no longer mindful. We are talking about mindfulness in a very strict sense right now, in terms of formal meditation. This is the second aspect of remembering. The notion is that we have to build up to this.

Another way of looking at continuity, or the continuum of consciousness, is to examine what we are experiencing when we meditate. At this point, we are experiencing the stability of the mind, the steadiness of the mind. It is no longer like this, [waves hand up and down] like the ocean waves. What has happened now is that the mind itself has more energy to be where it is and to be cognizant of itself. The steadiness provides a continuum. It is then much easier to have a continuum of consciousness as the basis of our meditation.

All these aspects are teaching us about what the mind is and how it works. The mind is like space, as we have said. We are learning what it is and what are all its aspects. We can also consider whether these aspects are a cause or a result of mindfulness. Looking at them as a cause, if you have familiarity and not forgetting, you could say that leads to mindfulness becoming stronger. Or you could look at it and say that these aspects are the result of the mind slowing down and steadying. That is, it is easier to have a continuum and to be familiar because the mind is more stabilized, not as discursive or "moving."

Generally our experience in the first stage of meditation is the movement of the mind. Now, when we have mindfulness, we are feeling the effects of the settling down of the mind. Therefore we are more familiar with, and we have a more continuous feeling of where our mind is. What is it that we are experiencing? We are finally settling into who we are. We are settling into the mind. Before it was very scattered. Now it is settling in, and its natural aspects are arising. As meditators, we have to divide meditation up into all these aspects because we need ways to talk about it so that we can understand how to improve our meditation. We need to know what aspects of meditation we need to improve. And when we know that, then we need ways to work with them.

The Third Aspect of Mindfulness: The Ability to Hold

The third aspect of mindfulness is the ability to hold onto the object of meditation. It is able to hold. [Long pause] We'll keep it simple. This third quality is an ability or strength of the mind. For example, if I am looking out at this, [holds up glass] it hasn't left the continuum of my consciousness coming into contact with it. Therefore I can see it. I am familiar with what it is. This third aspect is that the mind is able to hold on to this object. Basically, it is the notion of strength.

If I do not have this ability to focus in this way with the strength and stability of the mind... [Rinpoche switches glass for Chapstick; laughter]...if I can't hold on, then I will drop it. Someone might say, "Make sure that this Chapstick is in the continuum of your mind and you are becoming very familiar with it." And I might reply, "Oh yeah, like this." [Holds it and drops it; tries again and drops it again] I can't do it because I am holding the Chapstick just for a fraction of a second, and then it drops. I can get familiar with it only as long I can hold it, basically. So we are talking here about the ability of strength. When we are first meditating, what is the feeling? It is of not being able to hold. We can't hold the moment or hold the breath or hold the visualization, whatever it may be. The strength aspect is not happening.

When we have these three elements of familiarity, not forgetting, and the ability to hold, then we can say we are truly mindful. At that point we have the three qualities of mind, and our mindfulness is mature. The way I sometimes like to think about it is that at each stage in the process of meditation, each of our abilities matures and strengthens. Initially, our mindfulness is kind of infantile, childlike. As we go forward and our mindfulness gets older and matures, it is much more dependable. It is more like an adult. A child is not always dependable—they do whatever they want to do. Sometimes they help and sometimes they don't. But now our mindfulness is maturing.

I'm not sure if these kinds of things are very interesting for you. But if you're going to understand meditation, you have to get inside it. Otherwise you just keep going around and around and around it, and there's not much point. We are trying to penetrate inside to what is really going on, in terms of how the mind is working. When we are sitting here, something *is* going on. Sometimes we think, "I just can't meditate." And sometimes we think, "Something's wrong. I'm tired." Those are our usual very simple summations. Eventually we realize that in order to work it out, there is more to it than those simple summations. There are many elements that we have to deal with. We have to approach mindfulness in a more profound and subtle way.

The Predominant Feeling of Movement

The other element that we need to talk about is the notion of movement. Within the five experiences, the first one is known as movement. The way to look at these five is that they are experiential feelings on the meditator's journey. In looking at meditation, we can talk about methods of working with the obstacles and antidotes, which we will do later. There is another tradition, which looks more at the experience of the meditator. We can talk a little bit about that now.

If you are here at Dechen Chöling and someone asks, "How does it feel?" you may say, "Well, we are in the countryside. We are away from the city, so it is calm. It is green and it feels pleasant and peaceful." Then, if you go into Paris, and someone says, "Tell me what

that feels like," you might say, "Well, it is very busy. There are a lot of people, and it is kind of hectic and noisy." That is what it feels like to be there. Likewise, as a meditator, you could be asked, "What does it feel like in the first period of meditation as you begin to work with your mind?"

We are not talking about every experience, but about the *main* feeling. The predominant feeling of the first stage of shamatha is known as movement. Why? The basic experience we have is that of the tremendous movement of the mind. It is like being on the ocean when it is in turmoil. If you were asked what that basic experience is like, you would say, "The ocean is rough and churning. There is wind and so forth."

At first we experience tremendous discursiveness, and our feelings come from dealing with that. Once again, I would say that this is a very important experience. Sometimes we tend to get overwhelmed, scared, or depressed. When people are beginning, this is the time when most of them say, "I've begun meditation practice, and now I am worse than I was before. I have more thoughts and more emotions. You know, it is working the opposite of what it should. I read the book and heard a talk—and now look at me! This is worse!" [Laughter] It is that kind of thing—so they wonder why it is this way.

You could say you *are* worse off. Why? Because now you know too much. We have opened a can of worms, and now all of a sudden we can see everything squirming inside. What is happening here is that we are now recognizing it for the first time. Meditation is not really going to create any more thoughts and emotions. This all comes from just sitting here, simply noticing what is going on.

It is the same as going down to a pond and sitting there. After a while we think, "You know, now that I am sitting next to this pond, there are more frogs and more insects." [Laughter] We think that every time we meditate, the frogs multiply—which is probably true! [Laughter] Maybe it *is* true, I don't know. But when we go down to the pond and we sit there, it is the same thing. Could it be that by sitting there, by our physical presence, it is actually worse? The other possibility is that we are finally able to notice what is going on. We notice all the different kinds of insects on each little blade of grass. We notice the different kinds of tadpoles and fishes, and the various species of birds and animals and all sorts of things.

With meditation practice, we are sitting next to the pond of our mind, basically. And now we are noticing. What we notice is what is obvious: there is a lot of movement. That is simply what is happening. Furthermore, we have to have this experience if we are going to go forward. We have to realize and appreciate that movement. This is actually a valuable step. Movement doesn't mean constant turmoil. I would say that there is movement even if you are the sanest, most peaceful person in the whole world. When someone peaceful sits down to meditate, at the beginning the predominant feeling will be movement. It may not be as large a movement as for some other people, but it will definitely be movement.

The imagery for this first experiential stage of movement is the waterfall. As we go through the five stages, the waterfall becomes more like a fast-moving river, or a gushing brook; then it becomes a slow river; then a lake that is still. Finally it is a mountain.

We have to get through the first of the nine stages today—and by the way, it is going to be very long tomorrow! [Laughter]

The Fruition of Placement

The first phase is that we are meditating and applying mindfulness and awareness; and at this stage predominantly we experience movement. This first stage has three parts: learning how the meditation works, settling down and feeling good about practice, and being able to be with the breath for twenty-one cycles every time we practice. We have to break it into three parts because generally as meditators we spend a lot of time here.

At the end of stage one, where are we in terms of our ability to meditate? When we first do the practice of meditation, we are not able to hold our mind very long. It comes and goes, and that is fine. There is some kind of meditation happening, but our mind goes off. Let's say that we are able to stay there for a few seconds. Is that the fruition of stage one? One way of looking at it is that if our meditation sessions are such that we can maintain our mindfulness and introspection for a period of twenty-one breaths during shamatha, that is it—if the mind does not leave for a cycle of twenty-one breaths. This is just normal breathing, not l-o-n-g breaths, not short breaths. During that cycle we notice that our mind doesn't drift too far. We may have little thoughts, but generally speaking we don't drift away. Does this mean that the first time we are able to do that we have accomplished stage one? No. It means that we have just been able to do that one time. [Laughter]

During stage one, you can also have experiences where you are completely mindful for half an hour or one hour. People have that experience where they are completely there; the mind does not drift. For forty-five minutes they are completely precise. They are there and doing all the elements of mindfulness. Fine. Then the next time, it comes and goes. And maybe the next time, it is just a few seconds, and then it is a little longer. That would not be a very stable situation, although it is getting better. When you are able to just be there, when your mind is simply there for that period of time, that is the fruition of the process of the first stage of placement of the mind.

To review, the first part of the placement is just learning how the meditation practice works and developing the ability to meditate. That is how it begins. The second part of phase one is that we begin to settle down and our meditation has a quality of comfort. It feels good. We have finally gotten the hang of it. We feel slightly confident, and we think, "You know, I can meditate. It is okay." We are able to maintain our mindfulness a little bit, and we are present. We still see the movement; the mind is very, very moving. But it is not so bad. The third part is the fruition of the first stage, where we are able to be with the breath for twenty-one cycles anytime we practice shamatha, as I said earlier. It is important that we don't start timing ourselves here. However we do need some kind of gauge, a way to say what is really happening in the context of meditation practice—although once we get up from meditation, our mind may drift.

Building Meditation Brick by Brick

It is important to remember that in the initial phase of learning to meditate, we are mostly dealing with the movement of the mind. How is it that we can learn to maintain more mindfulness? It is through the ability to become familiar and learning how to let go of thoughts. When we are meditating, every time we let go of a thought, we are able to become a little more familiar.

We build the house of meditation brick by brick. I think that sometimes we want to build a whole wall right away—but whenever we come back during meditation, every time

we let go of a thought, that's another brick. That it's not the whole wall doesn't mean it is useless, one meaningless brick. It is the same way if we are painting a wall. We could say that this little brush stroke is meaningless in relation to painting the whole thing. But there is no other way to paint the whole wall without painting one stroke at a time. So we have to develop confidence and the ability of our mind by realizing that everything we do in this context begins to add up. Every time we recognize a thought, acknowledge it, and let it go, our mind becomes stronger. We learn a little more.

Thank you very much. Any questions? [Laughter] We'll take a few questions—and then, three hours of meditation!

Difference Between Remembering and Holding

STUDENT: Rinpoche, I am not sure I understood the difference between remembering and holding on.

SAKYONG MIPHAM RINPOCHE: Okay. I think we have to see that each of the three aspects in itself has a quality of mindfulness. The three aspects, again, are familiarity, not forgetting, and the ability to hold. Holding on has to do with strength: it is the ability for the mind to stay focused on something. If we decide to stay focused on a visualization, we are able to hold it. This is very similar to not forgetting, because if you are holding, you are not forgetting. That is true. But holding is a different aspect from remembering what you are doing. You could say, "I am holding the image. At the same time, it never leaves the continuum of mind; so I am also not forgetting it."

All three aspects are connected. You don't have one without the other. At the same time, when you are meditating, you could be holding a little bit, but forgetting. Or you could have a certain level of familiarity, but not really be remembering. Of these elements, the last one is the ability to hold. I think the best way to remember it is that this is the strength aspect, the stability aspect. How we experience it is that it never leaves the continuum of our mind, so there is also the aspect of never forgetting. Once we have forgotten, our mind has been placed on something else, either another object or another thought.

Working with Strong Emotions

S: You said something nice about taming when you were thinking about the North Pole and being in Dechen Chöling. Could you say something concrete about how to work with strong emotions, without using a hammer, or going for a walk?

SMR: Yes, I will—all right, I am going for a walk! [Laughs] I think that if we have a particular emotion happening in our life that is very, very strong; the best way to deal with it is to begin to look at it, if you can. It depends on what kind of emotion we are dealing with. If it is very, very strong in our mind, if we are angry at somebody, what we have to do is look at that and realize that it is a state of mind. Through the process of looking at it, thinking about it, and contemplating it, we begin to weaken the ability of the emotion to capture us. So if we have anger, for instance, we think, "Why is it that I am angry? What is it that they are doing?" Just think about it a little, because a lot of times we keep our distance and it becomes very solid. When we begin to look at it, we might say, "Well, I don't really feel that way." There is more movement and it begins to loosen up. With the emotions, what we are

trying to do is just loosen them up a bit, so that we have more perspective of what is going on.

I would also say that if you do have a strong emotion, sure, you can deal with it in the context of meditation—but first you have to slow down, breathe, stabilize. Then, if you want, you can always use that emotion as an object of meditation. You can bring in anger or jealousy or pride or whatever it is, and just say, “This is my object of meditation. I am looking at it and asking why is it that I feel this way.” That is known as contemplative meditation. It is just basically thinking about it. As we begin to think about it, it begins to fall apart. If you look at your life, you can say, “You know, I had this emotion, this feeling. But then, when I went back to it over time, what happened to it?” There was some space created. You thought about it, and somehow it began to weaken. That change comes from the ability to actually look at the emotion.

As a meditator, we have to realize that these emotions may have some good reasons behind them. Nonetheless, generally speaking, these strong emotions are very unpleasant. The mind is agitated, and we don’t feel good about it. We are not happy that we are angry about something, but it comes over us. We are learning how to get the mind to the point where it can begin to let that go, where it begins to have some maneuverability.

That is only going to come about by understanding what the nature of these emotions are. How are they experienced? When the mind is angry, it is tormented. When it is desirous, it is also this way. This is beginning of understanding the notion of pain. That usually comes about if you look at each emotion. There are ways of looking at emotions. You can look at what they are and how they come about. You look at the person, look at yourself, and look at the emotion itself separately. The practice is just thinking about it. When we begin to do that, it creates some kind of space.

There is also another aspect to consider: what does the mind really do when it gets into these states? Through the course of meditation, you begin to realize that you can see your mind forming itself into various emotions. But that is not going to happen unless you begin to have a little bit of stability and learn to balance back and forth. Then you can begin to understand how the mind works and how thoughts work. You can see yourself taking a thought and embodying it. You can see the whole process. We’ll talk a little bit more about that later.

Who Rides the Wild Horse?

S: You said that the mind is a wild horse, and we ride this wild horse. But what is riding this wild horse? Is it the mind?

SMR: Yes, generally it is the mind. Right now you can say that there is a feeling of mind, of who we are. Again, we can divide mind in many ways. There is the mind that we can acknowledge is wild, we can see it. Then there is a self who is riding this wild mind. I think in this phase of meditation we are not interested in going back, in terms of the nonself, egolessness, and all that. The point is, everybody already knows there is a mind and it is wild—so how do we deal with it?

At the same time, you could ask, “Ultimately, is mindfulness different than the mind? Are the thoughts different?” The thoughts *are* mind, they are produced by mind. The whole thing is mind, in this way. However, thoughts feel different. When we say, “I had a

thought,” we separate it. The thought is there and the mind is here. In the same way, when we are meditating and we have the thought, “I am meditating”—we have now divided into three. We have a thought; we have the self or person who is thinking and meditating; and we have the person who notices that he or she is meditating. So we have many, many stages, although they begin to work together. But right now we are not getting into Buddhist metaphysics of what is the self and not the self. It is more important that we have enough stability of whatever mind it is to go to the next level. It is really the beginning stage that we are in right now.

S: Thank you.

SMR: Okay, thank you. Bon appetit!

AUDIENCE: Bon appetit!

[Dedication of merit]