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Laziness

About twenty years ago, my father and I visited the samurai lineage master Shibata Sensei, my Japanese archery (*kyudo*) teacher. Shibata Sensei is the Imperial Bow Maker to the emperors of Japan. His responsibilities include performing a ritualized ceremony at a famous shrine where his family has been making offerings for generations. The year I was visiting, Sensei's son, heir to the family lineage, was going to shoot the ceremonial arrow before the shrine. But he had badly cut his finger while making a bow just days before the ceremony, and was unable to shoot.

At about five A.M. on the ceremonial day I was awakened and told that I was to perform the ceremony as a representative of the Shambhala Buddhist lineage and Sensei's family. I thought they were joking. While I had been practicing archery for many years, I had

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no idea how to perform the elaborately choreographed bows and gestures in this particular ceremony.

By the time I was ready to go, Sensei had already headed over to the shrine. I couldn't believe this was happening. I was going to be the first non-Shibata to make an offering at this shrine, and I had no idea what I was doing. When I arrived, people started dressing me in official robes. It was like being dressed for a play without knowing my lines. There were hundreds of dignitaries, spectators, and photographers out there waiting to begin. I tried to ask for some instructions, but no one could explain the whole thing in a hurry. I decided just to do my best.

As it turned out, Sensei had organized things so that he would be my assistant. He said that if I made the wrong move, he would be there to whisper directions to me—but he barely knew any English. So we went through the ceremony with him whispering "Left, bow, right, bow . . . move fan, bow," and I shot the ritual arrow. In the end it all worked out, and I couldn't believe that I had done it. Sensei was so happy that afterward he took me out to lunch at his favorite noodle shop.

The power of being put on the spot like this was that it took me beyond the limits of what I thought I could do. We need this same kind of challenge in our practice, because our natural state lies beyond the

reach of what we conceptually know. The reason we work so hard to gather our minds is in effect so we can relax. By releasing the web of beliefs and concepts that holds our sense of self solid, we're softening the ground of basic goodness so that love and compassion can break through. If we meditate long enough, we'll discover no shortage of obstacles to this process.

Obstacles are habitual patterns that keep our minds small, fixed, and solid. If we want our minds to be soft and pliable, we will need to know how to work with them. There are outer obstacles like laziness—common laziness, disheartenment, and speedy busyness. These have the power to keep us from ever reaching the cushion. Then, once we make it to our seat, there are inner obstacles such as forgetting the instructions, elation, and laxity.

Like weeding a garden, dealing with obstacles is an ongoing aspect of meditation. Working with these challenges on the cushion is another way we build confidence and courage to go further. We can be grateful for obstacles, because they push us forward in our practice. After a while it is even possible to feel a spark of delight when we see an obstacle coming up, because we know it's an opportunity to keep sharpening our minds. The more obstacles we face, the more confidence we feel to deal with them.

One of the most challenging obstacles for a beginning meditator is laziness. Laziness can be an obstacle even before we reach our seat, because it can keep us from ever getting there. The Tibetan word for laziness is *lelo*, which is pronounced "lay low." In any culture, laziness means lying as low as possible. Laziness has a draining quality, as if we're low in life force. Sometimes it's hard to see it because it feels like who we are. It encroaches on our most intimate ground. It manifests as an allegiance to comfort. We may get plenty of sleep, but we're completely uninspired. We'd rather lie around on a couch watching television, or read a magazine and pass out on the floor.

I have a friend who's particularly susceptible to attacks of basic laziness. For example, one day when we were relaxing together, he decided to take a rest on the couch. He poured himself a drink, placed it on the coffee table, and then lay down on the sofa. After a few minutes of lying there, he realized he'd placed his glass on the far side of the table, out of reach. Instead of sitting up and picking up his glass, he found a clothes hanger that was wedged between the cushions and hooked the leg of the coffee table with it to drag the table closer. Predictably, the drink fell off the table. We often expend much more energy being lazy than it would take to deal with our life straightforwardly.

We have to understand that from a meditative point of view, laziness is a particular way of holding the mind. The mind has withdrawn into itself. In its more extreme versions—when we are *really* lazy—the whole world seems very distant. It seems impossible to do anything. We feel like a snake crawling along the ground. Everything else is in the treetops, up high and far away. If someone says, “Why don’t you *do* something?” we feel irritated and upset. We can’t deal. We’re all dug in, like an animal in a hole. We’re not interested in exterior things. Our mind is encapsulated in itself.

If we’re feeling lazy, even if we somehow make it to our seat, we’ll spend the session avoiding the basic technique. We don’t even have the energy to sit up straight. We can’t practice properly. We think, “I just don’t want to do it. I don’t have time.” Worse yet, “I don’t really need to do it.” Whatever we’re telling ourselves, at the root of laziness lies attachment. We’re attached to the comfort of familiar fantasies and discursive thoughts; we prefer them to the wakeful quality of following the instructions with precision.

This pattern is an obstacle to meditation. If we don’t see it, we can get stuck in laziness for a long time—even years. It’s especially insidious because we lull ourselves into believing that a certain amount

daydream, we usually recognize it and acknowledge it. But one of the symptoms of laziness is that we let a whole middle range of thoughts pass. We feel that it’s just too much to meditate for the whole twenty minutes or half an hour, so we’ll use fifteen minutes to think about what a great time we had at last night’s party, or to plan today’s outing. We think, “No one knows what I’m doing with my mind, so I’ll use the time to plan. Then I’ll meditate for five or ten minutes just to make myself feel better.” It’s like going into a supermarket just to buy corn on the cob and potato chips and then wandering the aisles to look for other items. When we let ourselves hang out in discursive chatter, we’re wandering around snacking in our minds. If we allow ourselves to hang out there for long, our whole meditation will eventually consist of middle-range thoughts that are seemingly not all that harmful.

When my mother moved from India to the United States, she was amazed by the vastness of our supermarkets and intrigued by all the products available. What most surprised her were the aisles of pet food. She was a little shocked at the amount of attention paid to the culinary needs of cats and dogs and the money spent on satisfying them. In India, a dog is fortunate to be given leftover rice. Many a dog in India spends its

If we have a tendency to prowl through our minds in meditation, we should tell ourselves before sitting down that we're not going to be seduced by our discursiveness. When we find ourselves doing it, we need to acknowledge that we're doing something besides meditating, and that it isn't benefiting our meditation. We have to recognize, acknowledge, and release these middle-range thoughts. Unless it's a thought like, "I smell smoke. Is the house on fire?" we should return our mind to the breath. The thoughts, the brilliant ideas, and the decisions to be made will still be around when we've finished meditating.

Laziness also manifests as busyness. Speediness is laziness when we use it as a way to avoid working with our minds. When we first begin to meditate, we're enthusiastic about rearranging our priorities around a daily practice. What we don't count on is the force of habit. Staying busy can be a way to avoid meditation. All of a sudden, right before we mean to meditate, suddenly we need to tend to little tasks—watering plants, brushing our teeth, checking our e-mail. Not only that, we need to do these tasks right now. This is speedy laziness—better known as procrastination. This force can become especially compelling when shamatha practice provides a glimpse of how naturally open and joyous our minds truly are. Resisting our own openness

of "me" is a very old and well-established habitual pattern. Procrastination is one way of choosing to abide in distraction rather than to relax into the peace of our mind.

Another way we procrastinate is by using seemingly worthy activities to avoid meditating. Perhaps we're even helping animals or other people. Even though these activities are beneficial to others, if we want to meditate and we're using them as an excuse not to, we need to look at it clearly by asking, "Is my lifestyle supporting my practice? Are my activities beneficial in terms of meditation?"

Obviously, meditation can sometimes be difficult. We may want to run away from practice, run from the cushion, even run from the word "meditation." We can run as far as we like, but what we'll discover is that there is no better environment than meditation in which to build the stability, clarity, and strength of our mind. At the same time, the difficulty of making it to the cushion, the difficulty of staying with the technique, the difficulty of abandoning discursiveness, isn't going to disappear. In procrastinating, we're avoiding the one thing that really is going to make a difference in our lives. Meditation stabilizes us in our inherent power as humans. It introduces the possibility of living our lives in a continually conscious, confident, and bal-

Another kind of laziness is disheartenment. We feel discouraged, deflated, or outnumbered by the obstacles that arise in our practice. We take them personally. Our belief in the solidity of the obstacles grows, and our belief in our ability to practice shrinks. We say, "How can I possibly develop an ongoing meditation practice?" If we are already meditating, we say, "How can I possibly finish this session?" Before we know it, we feel hopeless about meditating.

When my father passed away in 1987, His Holiness Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche led the traditional funeral rites. Afterward he recommended that we build a 108-foot tall stupa in the Rocky Mountains to commemorate my father's years of work in introducing Buddhism to North America and teaching meditation to Westerners. A stupa is a traditional sacred structure representing the enlightened mind of the Buddha. Building one involves following many intricate and precise traditional specifications. We felt slightly overwhelmed by the complexity of the project, the first of its magnitude in North America. We started building it in 1988, continuing to work on it every summer.

Each year we had to gather all kinds of resources. Hundreds of hands-on volunteers were involved. The people closest to the project had to dig deep into their own resources, spending cold winters and hot summers

we learned how to build the stupa as we built it. The engineering, the construction, the finances, and the traditional artwork—all of these elements presented daunting challenges. What spurred us on was our trust that this symbol of enlightenment would be of great benefit to everyone. As the stupa took form, our confidence and energy increased. Watching it rise into space little by little, we overcame our doubt and hesitation. In the summer of 2001 the stupa was complete, and we held a beautiful consecration ceremony attended by thousands of people. We had encountered all kinds of obstacles, but our inspiration was an antidote to all of them.

The teachings on obstacles and antidotes come from a very long lineage of meditators in India and Tibet. We're fortunate that they documented the difficulties so well, because even though the conditions in which we practice might differ greatly from theirs, the obstacles that arise on the path of meditation have never changed. Luckily, the antidotes have also passed the test of time and space.

Laziness is a symptom that we've lost connection with the courage that brought us to the cushion in the first place. We no longer understand why we're meditating. We feel slightly threatened by letting go of the comfort of thought patterns. Meditation goes against

time. Most of these habits concern the perpetual creation of "me." We're habitually indentured to fabricating projections, scenarios, opinions, and story lines that we use to hold our creation together. With meditation it can feel as if we're falling apart. Old habits can start to look very comforting, because they represent who we think we are. We find ourselves reverting to ingrained patterns in order to strengthen that self-created concept of "me." Meditation is about seeing through the contrived sense of "me" as the enlightened aspects of the mind reveal themselves. We have to let that fabrication dissipate in order to go forward, and it makes us feel uneasy.

What the meditators of old discovered is that the key to success in meditation lies in connecting with a bigger view. They suggest four ways in which we can inspire ourselves—suppleness, trust, aspiration, and effort.

Suppleness

A lazy mind is a mind that has become small and fixated. Meditation doesn't fit in with our habitual patterns, so we resist it. A supple mind has many more possibilities because it is flexible. It doesn't look at the world from the closed system of "me," so it's no longer

bound by the constrictions of maintaining its own comfort zone. In Tibetan the word for this kind of mind is *shinjang*, meaning "thoroughly trained." Two qualities of the shinjang mind are pliability and interest. This mind is curious. It doesn't fall into laziness and the other obstacles because it knows how to stay open. That's the point of meditation, isn't it? We want to develop an open, interested, flexible mind. When we have a supple mind, obstacles to our meditation don't occur.

Our minds become more supple as we develop ourselves on the meditation seat. Each time we acknowledge a fantasy or thought, we're softening up our mind by becoming less bound to concepts and emotions. Following the technique fosters curiosity instead of dullness, appreciation instead of disheartenment, and imagination instead of limitation.

In order to overcome laziness, we need to have a relatively open mind from the very beginning. We need to be curious, to have a sense of appreciation and imagination. We need to inspire ourselves. For example, we might not feel like going for a hike, but when a friend shows us a picture of an amazing mountain, its beauty inspires us; it breaks through our laziness. Before, our mind was closed—now there's workability. We're rousing windhorse by stepping out of that sunken state of mind. In the same way, we can overcome laziness by being open and imaginative.

Trust

When we've heard the teachings and also experienced their true meaning—that to practice shamatha is to abide peacefully—a certain faith develops. This isn't blind faith. It's based on our own relationship with meditation. We have faith in a practice that we've experienced ourselves.

We take trust from clarity and confidence. Perhaps a moment of clarity is what inspired us to practice in the first place. We saw a statue of the Buddha, read a book, or even saw a friend meditating, and we had an immediate sense of clarity about wanting to do this. Having tested shamatha through discipline and precise attention, we know that we can trust the technique. We're clear about how it works because we've done it ourselves. We've seen how stiff, wild, and raw our mind is. We've had moments of peacefully abiding. We've seen that our mind doesn't always have to be a nuisance. We've felt the openness of our hearts underneath the hardness of habitual pattern. We're constantly reevaluating and deepening our understanding of meditation, because it goes awry very quickly. This process builds confidence. We can use this trust to remind ourselves of why we should practice even when we don't want to.

Inspiration is an immediate longing, a sudden flash we can use to recharge our batteries. It's like imagining a cold glass of lemonade on a hot summer day. The thought of the ice, the sharp taste, the frosted glass, even the slice of lemon on the edge rouses us out of our sweaty lawn chair and into the kitchen for refreshment.

In the same way, we can use our longing for the freshness of the mind at ease to bring us to the cushion, to bring us to the technique. We remember the cool peaceful place that underlies the oppressive heat of our bewilderment and suffering. We long to be there. We trust the refreshing and joyous aspects of meditation because we've heard about them, we've studied them, and we've experienced them. This is the support we need to move beyond disheartenment and procrastination.

Aspiration

The next antidote is aspiration. Aspiration is trust with a sense of determination. We're determined to discover our own awakensness. We aspire to be like the Buddha, like someone who has mastered their whole being, someone who realizes the profound truth of things as they are. We've seen the volatility of external

conditions. We've become dissatisfied with hope and fear as a way of life. Now we aspire to depend on our own stability, clarity, and strength.

This determination is strong enough to overcome any resistance. When we're on the meditation seat and find ourselves wandering into laziness, our aspiration to soften the hardness of our mind is what inspires us to apply the technique and go back to the breath. A flash of wanting our mind to be at ease in its own strength can be enough to dissipate our laziness.

No one told us to see ourselves as real, and we're certainly not alone in this basic misunderstanding. Laziness can be a form of letting blame sink us back into bewilderment and suffering: "This culture just keeps everyone asleep. No one else is meditating. Why should I be different? I think I'll just wait it out for a while." The Buddha says that if we look at it that way, we'll be waiting for a very long time. We may never get around to practicing. We have to accept responsibility for the state of our own mind; it doesn't work to blame others for our confusion or expect them to encourage or confirm us in our practice. We have to look to ourselves as the source of our own confusion—and our own enlightenment.

Meditation is like making a friend who gives us good advice about how to live our life, how to handle

It has already begun to untangle our bewilderment. We've seen the power of meditation to restore our sanity, to restore our well-being. Aspiration is a deep desire to go further.

It's as if we're climbing a mountain and we come to a place where we're tired and winded and we think we just can't go any farther. We stop to rest and look back to see how far we've come. We're amazed by how high we are and how far we've climbed. In Tibet, when we reach a place like this, we shout the warrior's cry—"*Ki ki so so, lha gyel lo!*" Essentially this means, "The view is victorious!" The power of the big view gives us the courage to keep going. That's how aspiration overcomes laziness.

Effort

If we think that by simply getting ourselves into the right position, our meditation will take place, we're wrong. Meditation is proactive. We have to be part of the process. That doesn't mean grinding it out. It means the mind must be engaged.

The power of the engaged mind is that it moves toward the act of meditating. That's effort. It's the opposite of laziness, which is holding back. If we don't

effort to pull ourselves out of laziness and get to our seat. It takes effort to follow the technique correctly. Although shamatha is abiding in peace, it takes effort to stabilize our wild mind in that peace. This energy comes directly from our trust and aspiration. The symbiotic relationship between inspiration and effort makes us eager to engage in meditation.

His Holiness Penor Rinpoche is one of the few genuine meditation teachers still alive today. He is always an inspiration to me, particularly as someone who exerts himself continually for others and who seems to find joy and energy in the effort. This is a true sign of an accomplished meditator.

After he and many thousands of people escaped from Tibet into India, there were few places for monks and nuns to find food and shelter, let alone continue meditation practice. So Penor Rinpoche decided to re-establish his lost monastery in India. He had to clear a jungle and raise money in tiny increments, but he eventually built the monastery with his own hands. Now, it continues to grow and thrive with thousands of people benefiting. Penor Rinpoche still works tirelessly, with many administrative, financial, and educational responsibilities.

Despite his constant exertion, he is unwavering in his energy. He's cheerful—always joking and telling stories. He is completely present for a sick and dying

person in one moment, and then in the next for the needs of a young monk in trouble. He doesn't take weekends or breaks, but continually exhibits this joyous effort day after day, filling people with confidence. He once told me that he doesn't worry very much, "Life is more difficult if you worry. It's better to deal with things as they come up."

He is truly an example of someone who applies effort fluidly. Clearly this doesn't mean that he lives a quiet, isolated life. He is constantly busy and faced with obstacles, but he faces them with equanimity, joy, and a strong and stable mind. This is meditation in action. Practicing exertion like this helps us to turn the tide of laziness in our practice and in our daily life and trains us to live with confidence and strength.

Nine

Forgetting the Instructions

The second obstacle is forgetting the instructions. When we first begin to meditate, we're told how to hold our bodies on the cushion and how to hold our mind to the object of meditation. With mindfulness and awareness, we recognize and acknowledge thoughts and return our focus to the breath. That's our basic instruction. As soon as the mind leaves the breath and goes elsewhere, we have encountered the obstacle of forgetting the instruction. This pattern routinely blocks the road of meditation.

When we forget the instructions, what we're holding our mind to is discursiveness. We're on the cushion so wrapped up in thought that we can't remember what we're supposed to be doing. The instruction to stay present seems weak compared to the power of our distractions. Forgetting the instructions can happen

suddenly or it can happen gradually, as if we're losing our grip on a heavy object. No matter how hard we try, we can't stay focused on the breath. The technique becomes blurry. Nothing inspirational comes to mind. We can only remember a couple of words: "sit," "breath," "thought," "mind." Apart from that, we can't remember anything. Not only have we forgotten the simple instructions, we might also have forgotten the view—the reason we're meditating.

One reason we forget the instructions is that we're approaching meditation simplemindedly. We think it isn't that complicated—only a point or two to keep in mind. It's possible for simplicity to work, if we're able to follow the instructions. However, with a simple-minded view, our meditation becomes weak. When we're just waiting for thoughts to pop up like clay pigeons so we can shoot them down, we're forgetting our view and our intention. We're forgetting that we're here to cultivate the mind's natural stability, clarity, and strength. This isn't simplicity, it's lack of perspective. All we have is technique; we've forgotten the reasons for following it. We've forgotten that the view of meditation is to be one-pointed and spacious. That's how we begin to purify our habitual patterns and discover our true nature. If we're employing the technique without the view, then all of a sudden, we can't figure out how to do it at all. Out of pride and lack of

time, we may even start inventing our own little meditation technique.

When we look at what actually *happens* in meditation, we see that it isn't simple. In fact, the power of practice comes from the details and the depth: the posture, the breath, the placement of our mind, the intention, and the view. If we lose even one of these threads, the fabric of our practice comes unraveled and we forget what we're doing.

The antidote to forgetting the instructions is mindfulness—in particular, remembering. We need to remind ourselves continuously of the details. If you've forgotten what you're doing with your mind, almost inevitably you've also forgotten what you're doing with your body. Start by remembering your posture. Is your spine still upright? Are you relaxed, or are you holding tension in your shoulders and arms? What are you doing with your gaze? Simply checking your posture and starting your meditation over—"Now I'm placing my mind on the breath"—can be the most direct way to invoke the instructions when you've forgotten in the middle of a session.

The reason we practice every day is that it's easy to stray from the view; everything else in our life pulls us in different directions. We can regard forgetting the instructions as an integral part of our practice. Mindfulness as an antidote means to learn it again. We need

to keep remembering what meditation is, why we do it, and how. We need to study and contemplate. Without having a clear idea of what we're doing and refreshing it regularly, our meditation will never be successful. When we reread a meaningful book, for example, our take on it is often completely different from the first time. Obviously the words haven't changed; our understanding has deepened.

No matter how easy meditation practice may sound, once we've tried it, we see that it's a challenging thing to do. There's an element of bravery involved every time we take our seat. Letting go of laziness and applying ourselves with mindfulness takes courage. It means that we are willing to leave our habitual patterns behind and move into new territory. Even though the voice of resistance is telling us, "Forget about it. Go do something else," we persevere, because we know there's no other way to make our mind an ally. At a certain point in our meditation, we know exactly what we're doing. We've burned through enough fantasies, thoughts, and scenarios that we no longer believe them. We realize that all the ways we've kept ourselves asleep have led nowhere. Our wisdom is ripening. We quite gladly meditate, because we see that there is no better way to dissipate bewilderment and suffering.

Ten

Not Too Tight, Not Too Loose

My golf instructor, Norrie, says that most of us are "outgainers," always looking to outer conditions for success instead of creating the proper conditions within. He considers golf a game of cause and effect in which we're both the cause and the effect: We get mad, and no matter how much we want to cast blame elsewhere, it's we who are to blame. His point is that before taking a swing we have to center ourselves—recognize what we're feeling and come to inner balance—if we want to make a good shot. Otherwise we'll be at the mercy of inner volatility as well as the wind blowing across the course. If we're too wound up or too relaxed, our ability to make the shot is compromised. If we've stabilized ourselves first, we'll naturally be able to make our best swing. In order to do this, we need awareness. Awareness is the ability to know what is

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going on in our mind at present. It's important in meditation as well as in golf.

The point of awareness—and the point of meditation, for that matter—is to know what's happening. We have to be awake. Otherwise we fall into lethargy, which is one step away from sleep. Without awareness, meditation will lead nowhere. In the first stages of peaceful abiding, awareness acts as a spy who watches us meditate, alerting mindfulness to bring us back to the breath when we stray. For a while it might be clumsy and intrusive, because as beginners we need to be watching constantly. But as we practice, awareness continues to develop. The mind becomes more stable, and our ability to know what's happening becomes stronger. Awareness becomes the sheriff who can sense that our mind is about to become distracted and remedy the situation before it even occurs. We don't see the sheriff running around everywhere; we just know he's there. Because we have more confidence, awareness no longer feels intrusive.

Mindfulness and awareness also have roles as antidotes. For instance, when we face the obstacle of forgetting the instructions, the antidote is to trigger the remembering aspect of mindfulness. In the same way, when facing the obstacles of *göpa* and *chingwa*, elation and laxity, we're calling on awareness as the antidote.

As our practice deepens, we see intricate levels of discursiveness: discursiveness within fantasies, discursiveness within emotions, discursiveness within thoughts, and discursiveness within discursiveness. Conversely, the way awareness comes in and looks at our meditation also becomes subtle. In the beginning it was very hard to see how that level of subtlety might develop. But as time goes on, because mindfulness takes less effort, we have greater awareness to oversee our practice.

Encountering an obstacle is a signal that we're holding our mind to some form of distraction. Elation and laxity arise once we have some stability in our practice. They are mid-level roadblocks. It's possible to get a brief taste of elation and laxity in the earlier stages, but because our mind has to be well gathered in order to experience them fully, these obstacles are signs of progress. They indicate that our mindfulness is strong and our mind is stable. The horse is always staying on the trail, and now we must work with its gait. Occasionally it's taking off after something to eat, and sometimes it's stubbornly spacing out. Because it's no longer rearing or bolting, however, we might hardly notice these other behaviors. It's important to work with them, though, because it's how we begin to find the middle ground of the balanced mind—not too tight and not too loose.

In both elation and laxity, we experience the movement of the mind that keeps us from being fully present. In elation, we're holding our mind so tight that it begins to panic, just as a horse does when we're reining it in too hard. In laxity, we're holding our mind so loose that it drifts away.

In elation, we're focused too tightly on the breath. With no warning, our mind protests by suddenly taking off after some enticing little pleasure: a thought of ice cream, pizza, a cup of coffee, a pleasant past event, romance, sunshine—it could be anything. Suddenly we're no longer in charge. The horse is out of the gate. Why pleasure? After stability is established, it's more common for desire than aggression to disturb our meditation. No matter what stage of practice we're in, it always feels better to want something than to feel anger, jealousy, or pride. We eventually arrive at a place where anger and jealousy and pride no longer arise so much, but pleasurable little desires still hook us. And we don't know we're hooked until our mind is gone.

Laxity is the opposite of elation. In Tibetan the word for laxity is *chingwa*—the word that's used when someone's drowning. It means "to sink." The mind sinks into itself. Our relationship to the breath is loose, fuzzy, and distant. We lack freshness and clarity. We blank out. We've lost our taming power. "Too loose" may feel as if we're not thinking, but what's really

happened is that we've deadened our mind. We've suppressed the mind's movement. Because thinking is so neurotic, marauding, tedious, and obnoxious, we've decided to boycott it. That's what laxity feels like. We go to the extreme of trying to do nothing, even though that's not possible: the mind is always generating and being generated.

What's happening in that state, when mind nullifies itself? One scenario is that the thoughts and emotions cancel each other out. Another is that we're trying so hard to be mindful, our mind sinks. When we sit down, we just fall asleep. This is connected with boredom. We're frustrated because we're used to constant entertainment, and now the mind can't even produce remotely interesting thoughts. So it's bored—seemingly with meditation, but actually with itself.

The antidote to both elation and laxity is awareness. We have to look at what's going on in our mind. Once awareness has told us that we're too loose or too tight, we have to learn how to adjust. If the obstacle is elation, we might try relaxing the technique, giving it a bit more room. We could give our outbreath more focus than our inbreath so that the mind has more freedom. Or we could lighten our focus on the breath altogether. In that space, the agitation might settle down and we can go forward with a strong and clear meditation. If the obstacle is laxity, we need to tighten up our

practice. We can bring more of our mind to the breathing overall. We could focus on the inbreath. We can stabilize our posture. We might try to perk up by removing a layer of clothing, opening a window, or raising our gaze.

Another obstacle is that at times of great stability the mind does not apply the antidote. For example, we might be feeling relaxed, soothed, and content with our meditation, not recognizing that we're in a state of laxity. Everything feels good, we're in a good mood, and we think we've achieved perfection. Since we don't realize we're facing an obstacle, it's hard to apply an antidote. Yet the appropriate antidote in such a situation is to apply the antidote.

Equally subtle is the obstacle of *overapplying* the antidote. Once when I was camping in a beautiful mountain meadow, some of my neighbors were playing a radio. Here we were in a quiet and peaceful place, and they thought they could make it better by adding one more thing. This is overapplying the antidote. It's sometimes best just to let our practice be. If we fiddle with it too much, we'll only be stirring up water that has settled. The antidote for overapplying the antidote is known as resting in equanimity. In this case it's best to rest as you are.

For thousands of years, teachers have provided us with many tools, but it's up to us to learn how to use

them. It takes experience and maturity to be intimate with the intricacies of our mind. We have to be able to see exactly what is going on: "Ah, I'm not just distracted, I'm stuck in elation." Then we can apply some practical advice. Working with obstacles like laxity and elation is a process of trial and error. Even as our practice is becoming subtler, we're still discovering the ways to hold our mind to the breath.

In fact, as we practice shamatha, most of the time we'll be learning how to recognize laxity and elation and then overcome them by applying the appropriate antidote. When a musician asked the Buddha how he should meditate, the Buddha asked him, "How do you tune the strings of your guitar?" The musician answered, "Not too tight, not too loose, so it makes the right sound." The Buddha said, "Similarly, you should hold your mind in meditation." Just as in playing a musical instrument, holding the mind "not too tight, not too loose" takes practice.

When our awareness is very strong, we can deal with obstacles as they arise while continuing to hold our mind to the breath. As soon as we detect an obstacle, we first relax our focus on the technique. We're still applying it, but it's not as clear, crisp, or tight. At the same time, we're able to deal with whatever trouble is arising. It's like answering the phone while we're cooking.

In this way the meditation continues without being interrupted. It's not as if we stop, deal with the obstacle, and come back. This is how awareness begins to extend the process of mindfulness. The combination of mindfulness and awareness is like walking across the room holding a cup full of water. Mindfulness maintains the proper angle and degree of pressure; awareness makes sure that it doesn't spill.

Mindfulness is a helpful tool; in the chaos of our daily life, we need to be mindful of many things. It's awareness, however, that becomes the bridge between the cushion and our everyday life. Who's paying attention to how we're using our body, speech, and mind as we move through the day? Awareness. With awareness we can understand our conduct in any situation. It's how we know we're being a jerk and need to be more kind. It's how we know we're scared or fearful—or *fearless*. It is this knowing quality of awareness that will ultimately lead to the development of our enlightened mind.