

Eight-Week Shamatha Retreat, Fall 2013

Week 2

Day 7, am. 9 September

We now move onto the second cycle, which involves Settling the Mind in its Natural State. There is nothing specifically Buddhist about it. It has been found to be particularly helpful for mental health, emotional balance, understanding the nature of the mind and distinguishing awareness from the activities of the mind. It is on the borderline between Shamatha and Vipassana.

So, in this morning's practice, we'll start with Mindfulness of Breathing and then shift to taking the space of the mind, and whatever mental events rise within it, as the object.

Guided meditation...

Modern science launched itself in parallel with astronomy. If the science of the mind had been launched in parallel with astronomy, it would have involved what we did last week, where the focus was on developing stability and vividness. However, that is not what happened. It is as if for the last 100-150 years, scientists have avoided looking into the science of the mind.

Up until this week, we tried to maintain a peripheral awareness of the body, and the breath within the body. We will now try to maintain a peripheral awareness of what is coming up in the mind – thoughts, images, memories, etc - as we go about our activities during the day, without slipping into rumination. May all your thoughts be lucid!

Day 7, pm

Settling the Mind in its Natural State does not mean its habitual state. Its habitual state is configured by, or locked into, gender, ethnic and cultural background, etc. In this practice, the configured mind (the psyche) melts back into, or dissolves into, the unconfigured substrate consciousness, from which it arose. But it's not a one-way trip, tempting though this may be.

When doing this practice, at times no thoughts, images, memories, etc appear in the mental domain, and you might think there is nothing to focus on. But when this happens, the object to attend to is the space of the mind, but it is more difficult to identify than the body.

The mind does not equal the brain. There is no empirical evidence to support the mind being located within the brain. So, where is the mind? The answer is: wherever mental events occur. Where are the sounds that we hear? When you direct your attention to where the sound is coming from, the size of the auditory domain changes depending on where the sound occurs, whether it is just next to you or far away. Likewise with the mind, the space of the mental domain is wherever the mental events are occurring, whether it be visualising something in the body, outside the body, or far out in space.

As we do this practice, we will spiral in on the mind. You will identify where to focus simply by being selective with your attention. Deliberately giving your full attention to the mental domain means that you will not be focusing on the five sensory domains.

Guided meditation ...

In the Buddhist tradition, there are many methods to achieve Shamatha. All these methods are designed to lead to the dissolution of the coarse mind. Achieving Shamatha prepares you for gearing up to engage in other meditation practices, for example, achieving Shamatha by focusing on a mental image is very good preparation for Vajrayana practices which involve very esoteric and elaborate visualisation. However, in Mahamudra and Dzogchen, you penetrate to the substrate consciousness and afterwards to primordial consciousness, and in both Mahamudra and Dzogchen, the method of Settling the Mind in its Natural State is the method most strongly emphasised.

It's interesting to think about looking into a telescope and seeing images, for example, colourful sun spots. None are out there. They are all occurring in the space of your mind.

To address a question on karma following the teachings in our previous session ...

We accumulate fresh karma whenever we voluntarily act, whether that act is wholesome or unwholesome.

The strength of karma occurs on a spectrum depending on the mental state of the initiator of the act, from the weakest extreme to the strongest extreme. For example, this spectrum can range from a person with a serious mental illness, to someone who is neurotic, to someone who is drunk through to someone who is mentally normal and coherent, right through to someone who is fully realised with a mentally stable, vivid mind. At the weakest end, people do not have normal control over their minds and hence will not accumulate the same amount of karma for committing the same action as those with more control. And this applies for better and for worse, for both positive and negative actions.

The same applies to someone who has a non-lucid dream. This person is ignorant and delusional when dreaming and therefore would not accumulate the same strength of karma for the same action as someone who was awake and lucid. The karmic path involves recognition of the potential to act → the motivation behind the act → the actual enactment of the act → and the fulfillment or outcome. In the case of the non-lucid dream, there is no fulfillment as there are no real sentient beings in the dreamscape. For example, in a dream, giving a thirsty person a glass of water does not result in the sentient being's enjoyment of their thirst being quenched.

The ongoing accumulation of karma does not become increasingly overwhelming over time because virtuous acts negate non-virtuous acts and vice-versa. Thereby, some karma is 'cancelled' or used up. Are we predestined to experience every piece of karma we have accumulated? The answer is 'No'. Where there is remorse over acts committed and a resolve not to replicate them, the karma can be negated. It's unwise to wallow in remorse and guilt. It's better to 'wise up and move on'.

To return to cultivating ultimate and relative bodhicitta...

The first line in the text is: *"Once stability is achieved, let the mystery be revealed"*.

The 'mystery' is the nature of the mind. It is right there, but most of us can't see it. But experiencing the true nature of the mind is not a mystery for everybody! Most of us can't see it because we have not developed the methods to discover it.

What is the nature of mental events? This remains a mystery simply because we are still looking for the answer using the methods of behavioural psychology and the study of brain function.

Stability has two aspects that complement each other:

(i) Stability of motivation. There are different ways of viewing reality that influence the choice of how to set one's priorities. Pursuing hedonic well-being is not going to result in genuine happiness. However, it is a stepping-stone to getting there in terms of acquiring food, clothing, shelter, education, health, etc. Stability is not ideological. It's not about learning the creed or having a suitcase full of beliefs. It's about the values and morality that underpin everything in life. It's not saying "I'm busy right now. I'll get back to Dharma later when I have more time." It is about developing insight that is so deep, where your commitment becomes firm and stable. It's a powerful, irreversible resolve for liberation.

(ii) Stability of attention where you make your mind serviceable. We have a great expedition to embark on to find out who we are and what is the nature of the mind. Tibetans had not made much progress in external material technologies for many centuries, but they had certainly made great advances in terms of internal non-material technologies for understanding the nature of the mind.

You need both aspects of stability if you are to fathom the mystery – the nature of the mind. And it is astonishing that it has been overlooked in the last 100-150 years of western science.

To address a question on why are Western students not achieving Shamatha ...

It's either not taught, or it's taught incorrectly, or there is a lack of sustained training in a conducive environment. Shamatha is an effect. It comes as a result of practice. Shamatha used to be the core of all Buddhist meditation, but for some strange reason it is rarely taught now, despite all the great Buddhist adepts saying how important it is as a foundation for other practices. There are not many teachers of Shamatha in the world. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has said in many places on his trips around the world that we are neglecting Shamatha. He is currently funding the development of a centre in Bangalore in India, which will focus on Shamatha and Vipassana. And he says that people have the same chance to achieve Shamatha now as they did 1000 years ago.

There is hope for the teaching of Shamatha in the future with a network of potential contemplative observatories starting to form in Bangalore, Santa Barbara, Brazil, Mexico, Australia, Scotland and Thailand.

Tonight when you go to bed ...

For those who take some time to get to sleep, lie in the supine position and practice Mindfulness of Breathing. When you start to lose clarity, roll over and fall asleep.

For those who fall asleep easily, try to practice Settling the Mind in its Natural State. That way, you might fall asleep consciously, fall into the substrate consciousness, then into a lucid dream.

Day 8, am. 10 September

Most of us suffer from obsessive, compulsive delusional disorder. Our minds are obsessive because the rumination we engage in is involuntary. If we are offered the chance of receiving \$10,000 if we have no thoughts for 60 seconds, despite the incentive, we can't achieve that. The thoughts are therefore obsessive. When a thought appears, we latch onto the referent of that thought and get carried away. It sucks you in. Shamatha is designed to cut the obsessive nature of these thoughts as soon as they appear by releasing, releasing, releasing all the obsessive mental junk food that arises. They are also delusional because we believe that what we have thought about is true: however, a thought never captures the whole picture. For example, we might think: that person is a selfish person, as if that's the whole truth and nothing but the truth that captures everything about the person.

In Settling the Mind in its Natural State, we allow these obsessive, compulsive delusional thoughts to flow unimpeded, that is, without editing, censorship or preference. We also have no preference for silence over thoughts. Without grasping, analysing and getting carried away with thoughts, we move from the habit of non-lucidity to the habit of lucidity. We recognise thoughts, not as 'I' or 'mine', but rather as empty events, having no power (they can't harm or benefit you) and we simply release them. They get power only when we identify with them and reify them.

So the strategy is threefold:

- (i) Become 100% lucid of whatever arises in the mind. Observe the thoughts, recognise them, don't grasp onto them, and let them dissolve into the space of the mind. Allow the coarse mind to untangle itself, then become lucid through all the layers of the psyche, all the way down to the substrate.
- (ii) When you have achieved lucidity with respect to thoughts arising in the space of the mind, become lucid in the dream state, so that you can consciously change anything in the dream that you wish.
- (iii) Then do this in the waking state. Once you have achieved ultimate bodhicitta, you can shape your mind as you wish, and then achieve relative bodhicitta. You will see that even the waking state is malleable, as nothing exists from its own side, and one can realise the empty nature of all phenomena. Then you are ready for Dzogchen, where you discover the nature of awareness is buddha-mind. Achieving this outshines any other virtue – so wake up! Then let all your other virtues spill out.

In your daily practice, if you have already established a Shamatha method that suits you, continue to develop that method, but also try, or try again, Settling the Mind in its Natural State so you can develop some competence with this also.

Day 8, pm

In Settling the Mind in its Natural State, the nucleus of the practice is a sense that the awareness is resting in its own place, not grasping, just illuminating. One is simply being aware in stillness and also simply watching the events arising and falling away in the space of the mind but without grasping. Where there is grasping, there is movement. The nature of awareness is knowing.

In this practice, we're not doing more, we're doing less! So from being aware, we add on Mindfulness of Breathing to achieve stability of attention and by that means, do less by setting the restlessness in the body and the gross discursiveness of the mind. From there, we move to focusing on just the space of the mind, then strip down even further to awareness of awareness. It's a process of subtraction, not addition.

We're aware of awareness, then something slips, that is, we start to ruminate. So we shift from being aware to not being aware. It catches you unaware, and then you catch yourself from being carried away further.

Samsara has no beginning, but it does have an end. So the first link to set the sequence in motion in the cycle of existence is a state of 'not rigpa' or 'non awareness'. In science, there are things that are not known, but are knowable. And there are things that are not knowable prior to introducing a system of measurement to measure them – their state prior to measurement is defined as being 'unknowable in principle'.

So, one minute you are resting in rigpa, and the next you are not. When are you aware of a thought wandering off? You can't say, because if you knew the answer, your mind would not have wandered off. The continuity of awareness was broken, so it was not knowable (not knowable in principle). This is like a microcosm of Samsara.

At the minicosm level, in a non-lucid dream, when did the dream begin? If you knew, it would be a lucid dream. In a non-lucid dream, the beginning is not knowable in principle.

Then at the macrocosm level, when did Samsara begin? If we were aware of when it began, then it wouldn't begin. But then it would be rigpa, not mind. If you knew, then it would not be Samsara.

So if returning to Samsara as a bodhisattva, you return not due to a lack of knowledge about a way out, but because you have already achieved rigpa. You return due to your compassion to awaken others.

Guided meditation ...

If you achieve Shamatha in this life, then there is only a slim chance that you will lose it in the next life, unless you are exposed to brain damage or some other major mishap.

Shamatha can help you to experience the substrate consciousness in life. This experience places you in a good position to die consciously, knowingly. If you move through the dying process lucidly, you will probably move through the bardo lucidly, which means you can make wise choices when it comes to the next life. You may also be born lucidly and therefore take Shamatha with you into the next life. At the very least, it will be easier when you 'get back in the saddle', that is, when you pick up a Shamatha practice again in the next life.

The importance of meta-cognition for mental health, balance and flourishing is well known. Psychiatrist David Galin states: "It is more damaging to a person's integration to be out of touch with the dimensions of 'personal' reality through loss of self-monitoring than to be out of touch with the externals through sensory loss or paralysis". And William James says "...the faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character and will... An education which should improve this faculty would be *the education par excellence*...". He stated that he did not know what type of education this would be but, in Eurocentric culture, he was ahead of his time in recognising its need.

Consciousness is central to Buddhism. If, as in the western scientific tradition, you are only studying behavior and the brain, you will be the last to know, because you'll be looking in the wrong place. Consciousness can be studied scientifically, for example, there have been studies done on past life recall and 'post death experiences' (which is a more appropriate term than 'near death' experiences).

One author who wrote on all the major discoveries over the last 5000 years stated that he believed the biggest obstacle to discovery is not ignorance. It's the illusion of knowledge. You think you know, but you don't, and therefore you stop looking. The western scientific tradition is cloaked in this. Academics know there are correlates between the brain and the mind but, although they don't know the nature of those correlates, they don't borrow the rigorous and replicable first-person methodology from the eastern traditions to find out.

The Dhammapada: "All phenomena are preceded by the mind, issue forth from the mind, and consist of the mind". "The mind" here refers to the substrate consciousness, which precedes the configured mind we end up with.

Ratnameghasutra: "All phenomena are preceded by the mind. When the mind is comprehended, all phenomena are comprehended... by bringing the mind under control, all things are brought under control."

The Buddhists and the Materialists have quite different perspectives on this and both can't be right. One has to be wrong!

Day 9, am. 11 September

We'll preface the practice this morning by going back to the third thought that turns the mind – the reality of suffering. If we ask about the reality of suffering and the causes of suffering, why is this suffering necessary? What is at its core?

The deepest dimension of suffering arises directly because of our relationship with our body and mind. We are continually creating and re-creating ourselves from lifetime to lifetime. We are closely holding onto our body and mind with the identification of 'I' and 'mine', which actually is not 'I' and 'mine'. None of the constituents of my body or psyche are 'me'. They are not ear-marked as belonging to me, hence one can swap any number of body parts with others. It's all just made up of cells.

The same is true of the mind. There is nothing that makes thoughts, feelings, emotions, etc. inherently 'mine'. It is the identification with 'I' and 'mine' that makes us vulnerable to suffering.

What's the alternative? The answer: Settling the Mind in its Natural State. Shamatha involves a process of withdrawal from 'my body' and 'my mind'. However, having achieved Shamatha, if you return to the phenomenal world, the same old habitual behaviours will arise because no irreversible transformation has yet occurred.

So in the practice this morning, we'll attend to the body while maintaining a spacious awareness, trying not to closely hold onto 'my body'. Then we will do the same thing for the mind, trying not to grasp onto memories, feelings, emotions, etc.

Feelings and emotions come up because we impose a subjective interpretation or feeling on an objective appearance. For example, we can think: "I like Suzie's red shirt. It's attractive. It's my favourite colour. It's pretty, etc". The fact that someone else doesn't like Suzie's red shirt, and doesn't find it attractive or pretty, indicates that these feelings are not inherent characteristics of the shirt. They are simply subjective perceptions of the beholder. We cognitively fuse the feeling or emotion with the object.

So in this practice, it's not about dissociation from our thoughts and feelings. It's about not grasping and instead releasing, being totally present - just observing thoughts and feelings as they arise and then letting them go.

Guided meditation ...

During the day, keep your awareness spacious, wide and open, as well as very luminous in terms of ascertaining what arises in the mind.

Day 9, pm

Many people are feeling a bit disoriented with the practice of Settling the Mind in its Natural State. It is not as grounded as the Mindfulness of Breathing methods and there is no solidity to it. So, how do you get more familiar with it? There are two images that might be helpful:

- (i) Think of a falcon hovering in mid air, remaining relatively stationery, just observing the space below and responding to the currents of the wind. It may appear that the falcon is motionless in the sky but it is actually constantly making very fine adjustments so that overall it remains still in space. Like the falcon, we need to be so sensitive in the present moment, so that if a memory comes up, we don't drift back; or thinking of the future, doesn't draw us forward. But we need to be really loose, relaxed, without grasping. Grasping will draw you to the future or back into the past.
- (ii) Think of your dream vacation on a tropical island - clear water, sun shining, not too hot. You decide to take an air mattress out beyond the wave break to where there is just a gentle swell. You lie there, at ease, relaxed, not sleepy, totally within your body, just gently aware of the constant rise and fall of the ocean swell. After half an hour you take your face-mask and snorkel, roll over on the air mattress, and poke your head down into the water. You are breathing normally through the snorkel, but most of your body is on the air mattress and you are enjoying the view of life beneath the surface - watching things come and go. So you are mostly still aware of being gently rocked up and down by the ocean swell but also aware of the sights coming and going below the ocean surface. After a while, you decide to slip off so you can float on the surface still watching the view below, but with one hand still on the air mattress. Then later, realising that you can float easily in salt water, you decide to take your hand off the air mattress and continue watching the events under the surface, observing the depths below and the sea creatures as they come and go. This is a good analogy for demonstrating the smooth transition from Mindfulness of Breathing to Settling the Mind in its Natural State. If you keep getting dragged away with thoughts, images, feelings, etc, (in Settling the Mind in its Natural State), just get back on the air mattress (with Mindfulness of Breathing). Then when you're ready, make the transition again. This image gives you a sense of the mood or ambience when making the transition.

Guided meditation ...

Returning to the text ...

We now focus on making the transition from achieving stability to ultimate bodhicitta. If you are immersed in Settling the Mind in its Natural State for 12 hours a day for a year or longer, and in between sessions maintaining a peripheral awareness, what is it like after 10,000 hours of practice? What happens? When you are deeply saturated while you are immersed in Samadhi with whatever comes up in the space of the mind, you know directly (not just as an intellectual concept) that nothing can harm you. It's like being thoroughly lucid in a dream. You know that all objective and subjective appearances are empty. Because you know this, you are fearless. So after 10,000 hours, you become lucid with respect to the mind and its contents. It's true freedom. What's it like when you get off the cushion? In between sessions witnessing the world around you, you see all appearances as empty, all in the nature of dependently related events. Your way of experiencing appearances is very different.

What is real? It's directly related to what we attend to. What we don't attend to slips out of our category of reality into non-existence. Those things don't matter. So when you develop a strong habit of attending to the space of the mind in retreat, this habit carries over into the time between sessions.

So, if we return to Suzie's red shirt. The red colour is not out there objectively. Colour arises relative to our visual perception. So where is the red colour? The answer: In the space of the mind. The same applies to sound, smell, taste, etc.

Steven le Berge (?) states: "Waking experience is dream experience, with some physical constraints" and "Dream experience is waking experience without physical constraints".

In the waking state, you can see that Gonzales has a grey shirt. You like the shirt but you would prefer it was green. However, given the physical constraints, you can't change it. In a lucid dream, if you saw Gonzales and you wanted to change his shirt colour, you could, as there are no physical constraints when dreaming lucidly. In fact, you could change anything you wish.

So in examining the line "*Regard all phenomena as if they were dreams*", after having done 10,000 hours of Shamatha, you will regard all phenomena as dreams. You will see nothing but appearances to the mind. The appearances out there have lost their credibility. Your waking reality is a lot less substantial.

In some systems of Buddhism, this method of enquiry starts with yourself. Am I really here? Was I here prior to, or independent of, my or anyone else's conceptual designation? No. In this other approach, you continue by applying the same question to other objects and you see that they are not anymore 'out there' objectively than they are in a dream. They are right where they are – in the space of the mind.

So, as you are walking around the Retreat Centre, just be present, free of grasping. And imagine you are still. It's a bit like sitting in an iMax cinema watching an action movie. You are sitting still, yet the images may suggest that you are on a roller-coaster. But actually, you're not moving. It's just a bunch of appearances that are empty. This is just the start to viewing appearances as dreams.

You can kill a person in the dream state and you can also kill a person in the waking state, the latter having much more serious consequences, but in the space of the mind, neither was more real than the other.

What's out there when we are not looking?

What's out there before you take a measurement?

We'll look at these questions tomorrow.

In response to a question...

All the buddhas are expressions of your own awareness, none of them are 'out there' objectively to bless you or to curse you. Don't think of them out there doing things to you. All these buddhas who have continued to appear over the centuries are all emanations of one's ground awareness, rigpa or pristine awareness. The difference between buddhas and sentient beings is buddhas know who they are (rigpa) and sentient beings don't. As long as you continue to reify 'I' and 'mine', you will remain in Samsara, so you will be prone to suffering and you will suffer because you fail to recognise who you really are.

Day 10, am. 12 September

Today we will examine the theme of observer-participant. Obviously we are watching our thoughts, images, memories, etc as they arise while we maintain an on-going flow of awareness. It's an integrated system. The awareness is entangled with what we are observing.

When you get caught up in rumination, your attention is on the referent of the thought. You are not aware that you are thinking of the thought. You only realise this afterwards. But as soon as you focus on the thought itself, it disappears.

So, some thoughts and images come in real-time, others happen only after we have become aware of them.

When a thought comes up, we can simultaneously focus on:

- (i) the appearance of the thought (its coming, dwelling and disappearing), and
- (ii) the image of it (its content).

We perceive the appearance and the image of the thought in real-time.

We certainly can observe thoughts and images in the dream state. But it's not only objective appearances. They can also be subjective impulses. When you think of a thought, and a desire or an aversion arises in relation to that thought, it has a referent. When you realise that it was a desire/aversion and you become aware of that desire/aversion, this is actually done retrospectively. They did not happen simultaneously, as the recognition of the response of desire/aversion is done with hindsight.

We are seeking to maintain a constant flow of awareness on the space of the mind. If you are getting caught up in rumination or you are becoming spaced out, you can deliberately generate an image, a discursive thought or even a subjective impulse (e.g. a desire). Let it come up and then observe it, watch the impact of your observation, and see what happens.

Guided meditation ...

In response to a question about getting confused between events in the sensory domains and events in the mental domain ...

Each of the five physical senses has its own unique and non-overlapping perception. In addition, we have a sixth domain, mental consciousness.

In this practice of Settling the Mind in its Natural State, we are trying to get the mind to stabilise in the mental domain. We are not concerned with the five sensory domains. If you are distracted by things coming up in the sensory domains, just come back to the mental domain and focus on what is arising right now in the present moment in the space of the mind.

So, distractions can comprise a referent of a thought that carries us away, or they can be events that arise in the five sensory domains. In this practice, we are selecting to focus on one whole domain - the mental domain. But this doesn't necessarily mean a narrow focus. It can be expansive also, for example, if we are focusing on loving kindness and compassion for all sentient beings.

In response to a question about where is the line between observing a thought and getting caught up with the referent of a thought...

Alan used the example of his mother. He can take an image of his mother, which he attends to in real-time in the space of the mind. Then he can slip into loving kindness for his mother and attend to her care of, and kindness towards, him over 63 years. The former is attending to his mother in real-time; the latter is attending to the image of his mother caring for him, which is based on memories, emotions, feelings, etc, that is, the referent. There is a sharp line between the two.

Awareness doesn't move. It is still. But as soon as you get caught up with the referent of a thought, your mind moves. So, you need to sustain the flow of awareness, not grasping but instead maintaining a clear flow of cognisance or clarity. This is difficult simply because we are used to filling our minds with grasping and aversion and both of these focus our attention. But the cultivation of non-grasping doesn't mean cultivating a state where you are spaced out, like in a stupor. This is a bad excuse for meditation. The skill is to be very focused on the space of the mind and its contents but without grasping.

So, in the next session, we will be moving to the next stage, when you might see no contents in the space of the mind. It's easy in this situation to become spaced out. We need to be able to sustain the flow of cognition - knowing the space of the mind and its qualities - and doing so with clarity. It can be ascertained when it has no competition, that is, when thoughts, images and memories have subsided.

Day 10, pm.

The object of mindfulness in Settling the Mind in its Natural State is the space of the mind and the mental events arising within it. So when nothing is arising in it, you still have the space of the mind as the object. There is still something to know. You are sustaining "a flow of knowing".

The mind and its contents can be likened to a theatre where the actors that arrive, play their role then exit the stage. Our focus to date has been on the former, the actors. This session, we are going to shift our emphasis to the space of the mind, the stage. When we cannot discern anything discrete coming up, we are going to linger there, that is, in the intervals between the thoughts. What is the space of the mind? What are its qualities? Is it nothing or is it something with characteristics?

In 2003, the Hubble telescope with its ultra-deep space probe, found a tiny portion of the night sky that seemed to be empty or dark. The telescope took the equivalent of a one million second exposure of that dark area (this took a sustained period of actual observation as very few photons were being emitted by this dark area), compiled the data, and found 10,000 galaxies. This expands our concept of what can be found in apparently empty places!

So what about when we explore the space of the mind? If we can't observe anything coming up, is it empty? Like the Hubble telescope, there is value in gazing for a sustained period. Seemingly empty periods of thoughts may be as vast as physical space.

Guided meditation ...

When we are observing the space of the mind and our awareness is still, sometimes thoughts or images will shoot up like fireworks then dissolve back into the space of the mind. They have virtually no impact. They are random and don't set up a chain of thoughts. They simply dissolve. They are what are called 'virtual thoughts'. So, there are thoughts like these that seem to come up from nowhere and others that are more substantial, the latter carrying a heavier karma.

"Regard all phenomena as if they were dreams."

In Tibetan geshe training, as with karma, this line is also the subject of four years of study.

Metaphysical realists believe the whole task of understanding the world 'out there' is to investigate objects that are already there. The chief proponents of this view have been Christian, based on the belief that God created the world in six days or God created the world by evolution over a longer period. Either way, their view is fundamentally physical as everything already objectively exists materially and all that remains is to discover its detail and properties. They also have an anthropometric view of reality, so what we are seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching is human-centered. Yet they have never faced the question as to where consciousness comes from. A neuroscientist acquaintance of Alan's recently said: "When we're in the lab, we don't use the 'c' word."

This is the antithesis of Buddhists' thinking, who had, and still have, a different frame of reference. Everything in physical space is not objective 'out there' independent of one's frame of reference.

So how do you go beyond appearances to what is really there? The metaphysical realists position is that "A clock-maker has to first understand the clock." – that reality is like a machine that will be fully understood if its constituent parts are known with sufficient detail. However, when examining physical matter, right down to the tiniest particles, when you probe independently of conceptual designation, you come up with a 'non-finding'. In other words, they are empty of inherent existence, independent of conceptual designation. This conclusion is the result of adequate investigation done so carefully that were something to exist, they would definitely have found it.

Alan used the example of asking the question, 'is there an elephant in the room' – it is possible to definitely know that there is no elephant in the room. On the other hand, sometimes we cannot adequately investigate whether something exists or not, to make an informed judgment, as we do not have the appropriate means of investigation. Alan gave the example of using physical measurements to determine the existence or non-existence of ghosts. Just because you can't measure them physically doesn't mean they don't exist. Making such a conclusion would be irrational.

In a dream, the appearances have no physical attributes. One physicist who was also a lucid dreamer discovered that the Laws of Physics do not hold in dreams. Why? Because there is nothing physical in dreams. But in fact, all appearances, whether in the dream state or the waking state, are non-physical. All the visual appearances, sounds you hear, smells, tastes, colours, etc. are comprised of information that is not physical – they have no space, time, mass or energy. Yet based on the common scientific materialist perspective, we think the entire universe 'out there' is physical.

What's really out there independent of our systems of measurement? What was there before measurement? What was out there yielding the information prior to, or independent of, our observation and measurement? It's unknowable in principle. It's a black box because the causal relationship (effect comes from cause – "where there's smoke, there's fire" because we have unfailingly observed that smoke only comes from combustion) cannot be observed. And the entire universe is a black box! Sure, you can come up with a range of possibilities or probabilities. But be careful not to reify them, otherwise you'll make the same mistake all over again. But likewise, you have to be careful not to reify emptiness too.

From information, which is not physical, scientists create physical constructs and labels (space, matter, time, energy) and present these to the world as truths. But these are conceptually designated and do not exist

independent of the minds that conceived them! So the whole universe is based on this – ‘its for bits’ – conceptual designation (its) based on pieces of information (bits). They are not looking at nature itself, but at nature relative to their mode of inquiry. So information gives rise to physical constructs, which in turn give rise to information, and so on – a self-perpetuating loop.

There are three parties in this process: those being informed, the information, and the thing which the information is about. If you take out one party, the other two vanish. This implies that they have to be empty of inherent nature.

All knowledge about the past is based on systems of measurement that come out of the present. So, in contrast to the metaphysical realists’ perspective, this alternative perspective infers that there are multiple possibilities to explain the history of the universe. Each possibility depends on the conceptual framework you started with, the questions you posed, the mode of observation you used and the system of measurement you chose. So knowledge is relative to the observer’s activities, even if the measurements are 100% accurate. So there is no one true story. We are each in the centre of our own mandala. If you shift your mind, you can shift your reality and your whole world of experience. It’s more than simply changing your attitude.

Day 11, am. 13 September

We have been focusing on the simultaneity of the stillness of the space of the mind and the movement of thoughts, images, memories, etc within it. But there is another simultaneity, that of the stillness of awareness and the movements in the space of the mind.

When we want to check our progress, there are four sequential modes of mindfulness that are helpful to understand the evolving process:

- (i) Single-pointed mindfulness (on the stillness of the space of the mind and the mental events that arise within it, and the stillness of the awareness and the movements in the space of the mind). One achieves this by being very attentive and by releasing all grasping, remaining still and present. The method doesn’t change. With progress, one just becomes more relaxed, stable, still and clear.
- (ii) Manifest mindfulness. Once achieved, single-pointed mindfulness is repeatable with little effort, slipping into a flow of mindfulness, resting in one’s own stillness. If thoughts, images, memories, etc come up, one doesn’t identify with them. One is free of coarse excitation and dullness (equivalent to about Stage 4 on the path). One simply continues with the practice. It’s happening to you, rather than you doing something to it.
- (iii) Absence of mindfulness. One achieves this when one’s senses have imploded (so you are no longer aware during meditation of events in the other sensory domains - Stages 7, 8, 9). One has a sense of being disembodied, like in a lucid dreamless sleep. The movements within the space of the mind are gradually subsiding. Eventually there is a total calming of the movements in the space of the mind, so there are no longer any mental events. These were derivatives of your coarse mind and that has dissolved. So one is aware of the sheer vacuity of the mind, which has with it no recollective cognisance. However, one’s mental state is still bright.
- (iv) Self-illuminating mindfulness. As one focuses single-pointedly on the space of the mind, everything else fades out, so there is a 3D vacuity. But now one inverts one’s awareness in on itself instead of resting there. One discovers sheer luminosity of consciousness and cognisance, stripped down to the bare essentials. Many people think they have achieved Nirvana when they reach this stage. It’s blissful, serene and luminous. But this is just the ground of one’s ordinary mind. It is not the ground of your pristine awareness. You are no closer to enlightenment and if you do not continue along the Dharma path, eventually the positive effects in your mind-stream will fade out. That is because there had been no irreversible, evolutionary shift in one’s view of reality. So the major challenge facing the meditator is not to get stuck here. You have a choice here: to keep going to achieve Vipassana and further, or return to Samsara. To choose the former gives one access to the path where one can achieve insight, which is true evolution.

So this is the whole trajectory to Shamatha.

Guided meditation ...

In response to a question about why it is useful to make offerings to the Buddhas if they are manifestations of your own Buddha nature (pristine awareness)....

Tara, as an example, is a personification of compassion of all the buddhas’ minds. It’s a symbol for that facet of one’s own pristine awareness. The expression ‘...of your own pristine awareness...’ is a vehicle to banish the thought that it’s somebody else’s awareness (as would be the theistic interpretation). By bringing to mind the image of Tara, then this arouses the love, the gratitude, the compassion, which stirs one’s heart. Honouring this is of ultimate value

worthy of deep reverence. So, when one makes an offering to Tara, such as a mandala offering, it's symbolic of offering everything that you have, materially and non-materially, with a heartfelt wish to fully and experientially realise this Tara aspect of oneself.

What impact can buddhas have on others?

Even though when we probe deep into a person, we reach a non-finding (emptiness), in the context of this life, the person is there. This is a meaningful level of discourse, so we need to find the balance.

The impact of the Buddha has been huge in India, across Asia over the last 2500 years and globally in the last century. Others like Jesus, Nagajuna, Ghandi, Desmond Tutu, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, they have all had enormous impact. So the more we can evolve along the path, the greater the impact we can have.

How can one help others now? How can the buddha-nature aspect of each of us help, no matter how limited our current realisation of that buddha-nature is? One can help to the extent that as one's afflictions are subsiding, one can bring more and more benefit to sentient beings. It comes from one's practice by continuing to purify one's mind. The more hemmed in we are with our mental afflictions, the less we can help others. The more we can liberate ourselves, to eventually reach our buddha-nature, the more service we can be to others.

Day 11, pm.

Settling the Mind in its Natural State is particularly good for enhancing clarity. There are two types of vividness:

- (i) qualitative vividness, where you can detect subtler and subtler events that previously you wouldn't have noticed;
- (ii) temporal vividness, where you detect briefer and briefer events that previously you would not have perceived.

Your stability becomes finer and finer, the flow of mindfulness becomes smoother. That is, you become less frequently disengaged from the flow of mindfulness. We are fine-tuning the practice and applying the antidotes where required: loosening up if we feel some excitation, pitching it up when we start to feel spaced out.

Guided meditation ...

We will move on to studying another aphorism: "*Examine the unborn nature of awareness*".

The Pali Canon – describes consciousness according to the five skandas (composites of our body and mind) and a continuum of conditioned consciousness until eventually we become an arhat. After an arhat dies, the coarse mind will never come back. It's a termination of Samsara. If that were all there was, the achievement of Nirvana would mean complete annihilation but that is not the case. When the Buddha was asked what happens to an arhat after death, his response was noble silence. How an arhat continues is beyond our conceptual framework. But given we know what happens on the earlier stages of the path to enlightenment, where there is less and less craving, delusion and hostility, and more and more wisdom and compassion, it must be good. We can assume that it is beyond suffering, it is total irreversible freedom and it involves immutable bliss. This occurs when consciousness is completely signless, boundless and all-luminous – when there is no bifurcation between name and form, subject and object, and where earth, wind, fire and air elements find no footing – when you come to the end of Samsara. But there is 'knowing', and because this knowing is not conceptually conditioned, it has to be 'unborn'. When the continuum of consciousness has ceased, all that will be experienced is unborn awareness. It didn't start when the person died. It was there before the person died and it's not someone else's. It's been there through all the person's lifetimes.

Although not stated in the Pali Canon, Alan's interpretation of this is that this unborn awareness is pristine awareness (rigpa).

The Mahayana – says the mind does not exist inside or outside nor can it be observed between the two. The mind is unfindable, therefore it's unobservable, and it does not arise in the past, present or future. All that we can directly know is appearances and awareness. But what is beyond appearances? Where do appearances come from? Theists would say God. Darwin came to the conclusion that there is no sign of God in the evolutionary process, just adaptation to different environments, He appears to have thought that if God doesn't seem to have a role, maybe he doesn't exist. That is one answer. But if you take God out of the equation, what's left? Matter, time, space, energy. That is the Materialists' view. But these are unknowable because they are all based on non-physical appearances. They are physical constructs imposed on the world. But we are talking about something that is beyond human constructs. All we know is the mind and appearances to the mind - the only things that are absolutely real.

The Dzogchen view - is to say to the Materialists "if that's what is there, find it!" It doesn't exist inside, outside or in between the two. It is unanalysable, undemonstrable, non-appearing, unknowable and without location. Even the

Buddhas can't find it. So, it can't be found. It's unfindable, unobservable and therefore does not arise in the past, the future or the present. Mind must be unarisen. If you have the ability to 'break through', and investigate the substrate consciousness, you will find it is empty.

Nagajuna – states 'the mind' is a label. He also said recognise 'awareness' as a label. If you look for it, you won't find it by way of its characteristics. It has no intrinsic nature. Even 'a label' is empty. The mind has the nature of an apparition. When you look, it's not there at all from its own side.

In *the Vajra Essence* - which is a Dzogchen text, there is a distinction between mind and rigpa/pristine awareness. And it warns not to confuse them as it will set up obstacles to your liberation. The mind has three types:

- (i) the deluded mind – that clings to appearances is the ordinary mind of sentient beings who do not seek the path, get old and die
- (ii) the mind that seeks the path – is said to take the mind as its path. It's observing the mind on a conventional level. Just as is Settling the Mind in its Natural State, when you see a thought, you think you are seeing the mind, even though the mental events arising in the mind are not the mind. Thoughts are observed with a conceptual mind.
- (iii) the mind that takes consciousness as the path – the ground of the mind, but it is not the realisation of pristine awareness. Taking consciousness as the path can be done by way of practising awareness of awareness. Since appearances are taken to be real, reification is not counter-acted.

If you experience pristine awareness (rigpa), then you experience the emptiness of Samsara and Nirvana. You see all appearances as dreamlike. Pristine awareness is actualised by correctly recognizing that things appear even though nothing exists from its own side. All appearances of the physical world and its sentient inhabitants have no existence apart from the ground sugatagarbha (pristine awareness). You gain life force over Samsara and Nirvana. You see equal purity of Samsara and Nirvana.

There is an asymmetry between realising emptiness and experiencing pristine awareness. One might realise the emptiness of all phenomena but not experience pristine awareness. However, if you experience pristine awareness, you will definitely realise emptiness.

Day 12, am. 14 September

Another mindfulness method not commonly taught involves gentle vase breathing. Sit upright, allowing your breathing to flow unimpeded. Keep the belly loose and relaxed. As you breathe in, the abdomen expands, and as you breathe out the abdomen contracts. The modification is that as you breathe in, you form a pot-like shape or mild protuberance in the abdomen, and when you breathe out you continue to gently retain some of this pot-like shape. It gets a bit fuller on the inspiration.

What is the reason for this method? It loosens the abdomen, in particular the naval chakra, which can hold the feelings of craving and aversion. It can get blocked with energetic knots that need to be opened up, and by increasing its spacious quality, the energy or prana flows more easily up the central channel. So this supports samadhi, and helps to avoid getting caught up in craving and aversion. Initially you might feel surges of energy, but eventually this settles down to a smoother flow. So there is a synergy – prana to mind and mind to prana.

Some people find it helpful, others don't. So try this method for at least one session. It is not recommended for the supine position, but it can be done while sitting, standing or walking. It is also not recommended for Mindfulness of Breathing, but it is compatible with the other Shamatha methods we cover during this retreat.

Guided meditation ...

In response to a question 'If all buddhas and deities are not 'out there', but instead are expressions of your own ground awareness, how does 'prayer fit into the picture?' Prayer is coarse mind speaking to subtle mind. You are speaking to pristine awareness, so you are having a dialogue with your inner most being.

After this retreat when we go back to our busy lives, can we continue to progress with Shamatha? The answer to this lies in whether you are adding or subtracting. If you do 30 minutes practice each day, that's a good thing to do, but you won't progress. However if you adopt a 'rounded diet' of heart (developing loving kindness and compassion), mind (acquiring wisdom and knowledge and adopting the six perfections), and attention skills (Shamatha practice), you may progress well. So, it doesn't mean you have to head off to a cave. It is not binary. But

it's a good idea to withdraw from or reduce addictive habits like watching TV, movies, and spending hours on the internet, as well as getting over rumination by adopting a constant background of Mindfulness of Breathing - particularly before going into a retreat. Continuing to practice Shamatha in a fully engaged life will reduce stresses and strains and increase your sanity.

Day 12, pm.

We are coming to the end of this phase on Settling the Mind in its Natural State. This practice is similar to the Vipassana technique of the close application of mindfulness to the mind. This is one of the four Vipassana applications of mindfulness to the body, feelings, mind and phenomena. But there is an important difference. While insights can arise when practising Settling the Mind in its Natural State that is not its primary intention. In Shamatha, you are placing your attention on an object to cultivate relaxation, stability and vividness. These lead to exceptional attentional abilities of a non-dysfunctional mind. However, the practice of Vipassana always involves some kind of inquiry which is designed to result in profound transformative insights. Vipassana immeasurably transcends mere attention but it is greatly facilitated by exceptional attentional abilities. Settling the Mind in its Natural State involves selective attention, withdrawal of judgment, withdrawal from obsessive, compulsive thoughts, and in this way, it is a vital stepping-stone to Vipassana.

Over the last 50 years, the 'Mindfulness' movement has emerged in the West and sometimes in this movement Mindfulness is used synonymously with Vipassana. However, they are definitely not the same.

Guided meditation ...

Back to the aphorism that we started yesterday ..."*Examine the unborn nature of awareness*"... Padmasambhava refers to the numerous terms for 'the mind': the mind-itself, the Self, the middle way, the perfection of wisdom, Mahamudra, ordinary consciousness, sole bindu, sphere of reality, atman, Dharmadatu, the substrate, and others (refer to the SBI website for the complete quotation. Only excerpts have been included here and below). There is no single term universally used to refer to the mind. However, although different spiritual pathways approach the mind from different conceptual frameworks, methods and starting assumptions, they appear to be converging toward the same common reality. The approaches are different and therefore the labels (terms) given are different, but they seem to be pointing at the same thing.

Are these terms all originating from the same degree of depth, insight, and clarity? Definitely not. There are different degrees of depth in the realisation of the ultimate reality of the mind. Here is an analogy about realising substrate consciousness, which is a useful early stepping-stone on the way to realisation of the ultimate reality of the mind. Ascertaining the substrate when attending to the space of the mind is like seeing the moon in the night sky behind three layers of clouds. Are you seeing the moon or not? Well, yes, you are, because you can point to it in the sky. But the clarity only sharpens if and when layers of the clouds disappear. So when you are observing the space of the mind, it is configured through your coarse mind, but as you progress along the path of Shamatha, you eventually see it naked because there is no filter between the awareness of the substrate and the substrate itself.

So similarly, some of these methods may be veiled by varying amounts of clouds obscuring the full realisation of the ground of the mind (labeled rigpa in Dzogchen). If you are fortunate enough to have a highly realised teacher who can point out rigpa directly to you, and you are 'a suitably prepared vessel', you may realize rigpa right there on the spot (a Vidyadhara). It's like the lama gives you 'the scent'. You pick up the scent and trace it to its source.

Rigpa - when you are staring at it, nothing is seen. It's not permanent, not nihilistic, not one, not manifold, its none other than self-awareness. It is your very own present consciousness - which is self-arisen, self-illuminating and unceasing. It is empty without basis. Your mind is intangible like empty space.

If Alan were stranded on a desert island and he could only have one book, he would choose Dudjom Lingpa's book 'The Vajra Essence'. Dudjom Lingpa states that everything needed to realise the level of rainbow body in this current lifetime is contained in that single book - it is not the only way but it is a complete way. He says that what is perceived as 'out there' in the external world as real, firm and solid comes from dualistic grasping. This grasping 'freezes' our perception of reality into a 'solid'. A metaphor is that the ground of our being is homogeneously like water in its fluid state and when it freezes, it crystallises and thus has structure. Dualistic grasping reifies the structure and overlooks the difference between the two. In this powerful metaphor, our minds are like frozen water and Dzogchen is designed to melt our minds. His Holiness the Dalai Lama stated: "However solid ice may be, it never loses its true nature, which is water."

Is it only religious people/contemplatives probing deeply into the nature of the inner world who might be gaining insights into this common reality or might similar insights be gained by probing deeply into the nature of the external world? There are a number of well-recognised academics, especially in the field of quantum physicists, whose findings appear to reach similar conclusions about the relationship between mind and the perception of reality. So maybe it is possible to gain similar insights looking outward (physics) to those looking inward (contemplatives).