

Eight-Week Shamatha Retreat, Fall 2013

Week 4

Day 21, am. 23 September

We are moving now to a new cycle, Shamatha with a Sign, based on the teachings of Padmasambhava as revealed in a 'mind treasure' by Dūdjom Lingpa in his teaching called *'The Vajra Essence'* (a mind treasure or mind 'terma' (Tibetan) is a gnostic vision – similar to channeling the teachings of someone deceased). He says: "Merge your mind with external space and remain in meditative equipoise for 7 days. Then fix your attention on a stone, a stick, a physical representation of the Buddha or a letter (such as a Sanskrit seed syllable) and remain in meditative equipoise for 7 days. Then imagine a five-coloured (white, yellow, red, blue and green) bindu at your heart and remain in meditative equipoise for 7 days... It's called Shamatha with Signs."

So for the second stage, you first saturate your mind with the visual field object until it is eventually so familiar to you that you can generate the image as a mental object.

This practice is definitely for the gifted if it is to be achieved in 21 days. Some people can get exhausted, wiped out or become comatose doing this method, particularly those who are very intense or easily stressed. If this occurs, simply go back to Settling the Mind in its Natural State.

The term "external space" is not referring to some physical space beyond your mind. Simply don't have a sense of internal space like in the body or in the head. What he is referring to is the relative Dharmadhatu, the space of mental experience or awareness, which is vast. He does not say "focus" but rather "merge" your mind with space. Over the next few days, we will slowly take one step at a time, starting with more elaborate guiding words and pare them back to a method that is very simple.

Guided meditation ...

This practice is related to Tummo, but there are many other Tummo practices. These practices are trying to draw the energies into the central channel, into the heart chakra, into the indestructible bindu. This means the mind is absorbed into the substrate. An alternative is to rest in total inactivity, where there is total release of control over the breath, then without grasping, allowing the breath to flow out effortlessly without expectation – a total release of mental awareness out into 360 degrees of limitless space.

If it is helpful, at the beginning of the inhalation, you can say to yourself "sal" (clear) and at the beginning of the exhalation, you can say "thong" (empty). You can say these words in your native language. It's critical that your mind remains utterly quiet, and although this use of words is an additional technique that Alan created – there is no precedent in the texts - it can be useful to help settle the mind. Use it only if you find it helpful and only temporarily, just like you might use counting temporarily in Mindfulness of Breathing. If there is any rumination, it will influence the breath and involve effort in the cycle of the breath. Try simply releasing the end of the out-breath, as if it were your last. Have no expectation of an in-breath and the breath that comes in is simply a gift. Breathe egolessly.

In response to a question about how past karma, recollections, memories, etc. can be imprinted on the substrate if the substrate is empty.

If you were to look into the substrate, you would see that there was nothing there. Just like you would not see the information being transferred from one cell phone to another. Nevertheless, there is information there in the electromagnetic waves due to its being configured (physical but not material transmission). Similarly, with the substrate. It's not material or physical, but there is a subtle continuum of prana (energy) that is transmitted from one lifetime to the next. We don't have the tools to measure this yet.

In response to a question about minor emptiness versus great emptiness ...

Minor emptiness is a realisation of the non-inherent nature of an object. One discovers that there is a 'non-finding' of the object. Great emptiness is expanding this to the entire universe(s) or reality. The absolute space of phenomena is the space out of which everything emerges and everything dissolves (it's like the 'super substrate') – the ultimate ground of being. But remember, emptiness is empty itself, so do not reify it.

So we can experience awareness at the level of (i) the coarse mind, (ii) the subtle mind, and (iii) pristine awareness.

In response to a question about from which stage of the path can you see your past lives?

In the *Visuddhimagga* in the Pali Canon (there is a good and free English translation on the internet called the '*Path of Purification*'), Buddhaghosa covers this in his explanation of achieving Shamatha, Vipassana, and the first, second, third and fourth dyanas. He states that having achieved the fourth dyana, if you direct your attention like a straight laser beam to the past, you can see your past lives in 3D technicolour. So it would be possible – if there were enough scientific interest - to rigorously research this in a contemplative observatory with subjects who have the ability to rest in the substrate.

The problem is that there are not many great yogis who are scientists and not many scientists who understand meditation, so despite anecdote after anecdote of past life recall, these are not sufficiently persuasive. "The more improbable the claim, the more compelling the evidence has to be". What's not pointed out is "improbable for whom?" The evidence may not be as compelling as in the physical/material sciences, but the evidence is overwhelming, dating as far back as the time before the Buddha. Traditional Buddhists believe this. It is far more probable to them than a story about a man landing on the moon, or a story about the sun being so much bigger than the moon when clearly they can see in an eclipse that they are the same size! So it depends on one's cognitive framework.

Despite traditional Buddhists and western scientists being like ships passing in the night, could there be a meeting of the two? To date, the little research that has been done has involved the yogis as the subjects and the scientists as the researchers. Could there be a true collaboration in the future? There would appear to be a need to 'grow' yogis who speak the same language as the researchers and contemplative observatories that are appropriate venues for such research to take place.

Day 21, pm.

Guided meditation ...

This afternoon, we will be moving to the fourth Immeasurable – equanimity. It's important that the cultivation of equanimity is even for all sentient beings, whether attractive, disagreeable or for whom you feel indifferent. Most of our suffering comes from a lack of evenness. This *lojong* practice is a way of getting over this.

The false facsimile of equanimity is cold indifference, that is, not caring about anybody or sentient being at all. In relating to the same sentient being over time, you can be attached, then lose the attachment, which can become an indifference and even flip over into aversion. Even with the same awareness of the other person's behavior, we can arouse compassion.

So when reading or listening to the news, instead of reacting with indifference or aversion, feel compassion for those afflicted. If this behavior could be adopted world-wide, think of the freedom it would bring. When His Holiness the Dalai Lama was asked "Do you ever feel lonely?" he responded: "No, never. I always feel connected to everybody". When asked: "Who do you see as your peers?" he responded: "Everybody".

Equanimity is not restricted to your time on the cushion. It's better to practice it evenly 16 hours a day where everything that occurs – on and off the cushion - is thereby transformed into the practice.

Ego-grasping and competition can be good for survival, for example, to get to the food before another does, but beyond this, it is a mental affliction. It completely shatters the attainment of genuine happiness. It is so easy when mental afflictions dominate that you become small-minded. Instead, expand your view to see that others are experiencing the same mental afflictions. Have the aspiration: "May we all be free of this mental affliction." Mental afflictions are relentless. We have to learn how to free ourselves from the grip of the mental affliction by seeing that it is self-generated; it's not someone else's fault. Mental afflictions carry through into your dreams, into the bardo after you die, and into the next life. So we need to be bold, courageous and intelligent to overcome them.

When faced with indifference or aversion, have the aspiration: "May this be the end of ignorance in all living beings" and "May they all have the happiness that arises from being free of this mental affliction." So, when interacting with another person, be present, and mindfully focus on them. Use mindful introspection when viewing other people's behaviour to determine if you are experiencing attachment, aversion or indifference. If you feel compassion for yourself as opposed to self-loathing, it's possible to feel the same for others with mental afflictions.

"To attend to" means 'to tend to', 'to look after', 'to watch over' 'to care for'. Keep a panoramic vision, attending to others. As William James wrote: "That which we do not attend to fades from our perspective or reality". What you don't attend to doesn't exist and that can include people you feel indifferent to.

The ones that are the most skilled at seeing your mental afflictions, such as high lamas, are the ones with the greatest compassion. They don't love the mental affliction; they love the person. An understanding and a practice of this aphorism can transform your life.

In response to a question about what is the difference between karmic imprints and tendencies ... Imprints are configurations of the flow of consciousness or prana that influence and are influenced by subjective experiences we have from moment to moment. Imprints are like a karmic historical record, stored in the physical field of energy, which may or may not ripen to fruition, depending on the complex interactions between karma and circumstances. Habitual propensities are like perennial seeds stored in this prana and when they are catalysed by circumstances, then you see that tendency arise in the mind and in behaviour. Afterwards, when the circumstances pass, they become quiescent again, so that they are not observed in the mind or in behaviour. However, they lie dormant, and will arise again if the appropriate circumstances occur again. These mental afflictions are a habitual tendency of an individual.

All the imprints and habitual propensities carry through to the bardo and the next life. People who commit suicide think that they will be free of their mental afflictions after their death. Unfortunately, this is not an option.

Day 22, am. 24 September

We will continue with the practice of Merging Mind with Space (sem (mind) namkha (space) bsrespa (to merge)). In *The Vajra Essence*, which is a complete guide to enlightenment, there are lots of practices, but four are considered indispensable: Shamatha, Vipassana, and the two Dzogchen practices of 'break-through' (to rigpa) and 'direct crossing-over'.

In the *Intent of Samantabhadra*, which is a more concise version of material in *The Vajra Essence*, there are three paths, each for people of different ability:

- For individuals with supreme faculties, they proceed within themselves by way of direct crossing-over. That is, they just hear the teachings, go through the substrate, realise emptiness of mind and realise rigpa (the relative ground of Samsara and Nirvana).
- For individuals with middling faculties, "Merge your mind with empty external space and remain in meditative equipoise for 20 days." By so doing, those with middling faculties will proceed by realising the primordial ground, recognise themselves and all phenomena as empty of inherent nature, then proceed to direct crossing-over.
- For individuals with inferior faculties, they will start with Settling the Mind in its Natural State, then proceed step by step to Shamatha, Vipassana, break-through then direct crossing over. If this is still too difficult, simply return to Mindfulness of Breathing.

Release your awareness into space, merging your mind with space rather than taking the mind as the object, while sustaining an on-going flow of knowing. It requires a total unraveling of any tightness or tension and a 'joyful surrender' to the vast openness of space. If you are unable to stop grasping, the cause will be a continued grasping to I, me, mine. Relaxation is critical. Release and rest in the stillness of your bare awareness.

When you eventually come to rest in the substrate and realise bliss, clarity and non-conceptuality, it's important to settle there first. But don't get too attached to this. You need to release all attachment, a much deeper challenge, before you can achieve 'break-through'.

The phrase "with empty external space" means the domain of mental experiences. But it's empty. So you are not interested in its contents, just the objectless, open expanse of space. While doing so, you are not getting off your throne. Your awareness is still resting in its own place. It's not going out to an appearance, but staying 'home', ready to release any grasping to any thought that might come up. If you are 'home', you don't need introspection because you are already there.

Guided meditation ...

In the Dzogchen view, the working hypothesis is that in the 'normal waking state', we are dreaming from the perspective of being truly awakened. What would be the most direct route to waking up? Adopting a process of elimination. That is, don't do anything that will reinforce your sense of being a sentient being - hoping for this, grasping at that, etc. Similarly, if you do this in the dream state, you reinforce your non-lucidity.

There are two fundamental reasons for why we are still suffering. The first is the grasping onto phenomena that are not inherently real as inherently real. The second is self-centeredness, putting as a priority one's own well-being over everyone else's.

It's essential to understand that your 'truth given joy' is independent of whether or not your hopes, dreams, desires are fulfilled or not. You have to see yourself as empty and say to yourself: "A sentient being does not live here". Instead, know that you are Buddha-mind and wake up to that. This is a more direct route than engaging in Vajrayana practices where, as an intermediate step and using the power of imagination, you dissolve yourself as a sentient being and re-create yourself in the form of a deity to practise the qualities of Buddha-mind, and eventually directly realise non-duality and emptiness.

Day 22, pm.

We will continue with the *tonglen* practice, which is at the heart of cultivating bodhicitta. What is the highest impact image of *tonglen* for most of us? The very famous image of Jesus Christ on the cross. He took upon himself the evils/sins of everyone with the heartfelt aspiration: "May their sins ripen upon me". It provides tremendous inspiration with him as an embodiment of loving-kindness. His Holiness the Dalai Lama refers to Jesus as an 'awakened being'.

St Francis of Assisi tried to follow in Christ's footsteps. He gave up a comfortable life to live in poverty, but he embodied joy wherever he went. After a particularly intense retreat, he developed the stigmata of scars on his hands and feet in the same locations as the nails in Christ's hands and feet.

So this image of Christ suffering on the cross for the sins of the world is one interpretation of the end of his life. But there is an alternative and that is an interpretation of Jesus on the cross, laughing and joyful. Which is the right one? Both are, depending on the quality of awareness you bring to it. From the Buddhist perspective, although there may be some pain on the surface of his mind, Christ is not identifying with his body and the pain, but instead is experiencing immutable bliss which is coming from a much deeper place (*rigpa*).

In the explanation of the *tonglen* practice, it says: "Practise *tonglen* starting with yourself". This is familiar to those who have practised cultivating loving-kindness and compassion for oneself and then expanding outwards to others. It involves taking upon oneself willingly, gladly, one's own suffering and then giving one's virtue and joy to oneself. If you look at this from a purely horizontal perspective, it doesn't make sense. But if you look at it from the Buddhist perspective, oneself is not one dimension. There are many dimensions: sentient being, human being, man/woman, substrate, primordial consciousness/ground of being. So the human being dimension can give his/her suffering to the primordial consciousness dimension and receive virtue and joy in response.

Start by gladly taking on one's own suffering from the past, present and future symbolised as a dark cloud, taking that into the inexhaustible orb of white light at one's heart where all the darkness is instantly incinerated, then sending out from one's orb rays of brilliant white light infused with one's virtues and joys to the whole body. Then do the same thing for others. "May this person's/others' suffering ripen upon me" then "May my virtues ripen on this person/others". In doing so, experience the joy and happiness in giving it away. (This is not the same as the circumstance where someone is stuck in an abusive co-dependent relationship. In such a relationship, it may be that the abused person similarly thinks that the abuse is OK – because they must have deserved it – that they should take all blame and only their partner should get benefit from their relationship. Here the experience is the opposite to joy and happiness. This is not *tonglen* practice arising from bodhicitta, this is the tolerance of abuse due to low self-worth. In this situation, the best thing to do is to get out of the relationship, as it is harmful to both parties – physically and/or emotionally for the recipient, but also karmically for the abuser).

So this provides some context for the *tonglen* practice.

Guided meditation ...

Returning to the text ...

"During all activities, train with phrases" e.g. "May the suffering of all sentient beings ripen upon me".

There are two approaches to cultivating the deep impulses of loving-kindness and compassion. Both are complementary.

(i) The developmental approach, where you sincerely arouse these yearnings, which might then arouse deeper and deeper empathy and caring. These are spontaneous and genuine (like a mother taking on the suffering of her child. Although the mother may suffer, she is happy because her child is free of suffering). So you don't have to be the Son of God to experience this. But what about other people's children? What about your neighbours? People you don't know, etc? Compassion for these people doesn't come naturally or biologically like it does with a mother. Compassion then takes on a different form. It needs to be cultivated. It's called Dharma. It breaks down the barriers.

It also breaks down self-centeredness of thinking “May all the suffering ripen on others, and all the good stuff ripen on me”.

(ii) The discovery approach, where you develop such deep awareness that there is a spontaneous out-flowing of loving-kindness and compassion. This is not deliberately cultivated and some people experience this simply emerging from their experience of the substrate. Relative bodhichitta arises spontaneously from ultimate bodhichitta. This is readily demonstrated amongst the great Dzogchen masters who have realised rigpa, who say it, write it, sing it, enact it, live it.

Keep practicing *tonglen* until you can see signs of success in the form of tangible evidence of a shift in your experience.

All mental suffering comes from two sources:

- (i) cognitive –suffering stemming from ignorance and reification of ‘I’ and ‘mine’ and grasping onto things that are not there at all, which makes us vulnerable.
The antidote is ultimate bodhicitta – using ethics, samadhi and wisdom (including the realisation of the emptiness of phenomena and of dependent origination).
- (ii) self-centeredness – putting one’s own interests ahead of others’ interests. This includes the pursuit of one’s own liberation, and not caring about others.
The antidote is relative bodhicitta.

Day 23, am. 25 September

In Settling the Mind in its Natural State, during the third of four modes of mindfulness, the aim is to achieve an absence of mindfulness, by dissolving the coarse mind (the senses having imploded), to experience the sheer vacuity of the substrate. Then in the fourth mode, to invert the awareness and achieve self-illuminating mindfulness. In that state, there will be no explicit difference between the luminosity of the substrate consciousness and the space that is illuminated.

Whereas, in Shamatha without a Sign, one is not attending to anything except non-grasping. The clear, luminous nature of awareness simply becomes more and more unveiled. Eventually the coarse mind dissolves and slips into the substrate consciousness. One experiences the light of awareness all the way down to the substrate. So both practices take you to the same place.

In Merging Mind with Space, there is no withdrawal of awareness and one is not taking only awareness as an object, instead one is dissolving awareness and the space of the mind. This non-duality arises from mastering non-grasping. So this practice is the one that best fits with “taking the fruition as the path”.

So in the meditation session to follow, remove three things:

- (i) the “*sal*” and “*thong*” as soon as your discursive mind settles.
- (ii) the oscillation of arousing the awareness on the in-breath and releasing the awareness on the out-breath.
Release the rhythm with the in- and out-breath and allow the oscillation to continue at its own rhythm disconnected to the breath.
- (iii) the oscillation altogether when it no longer influences the quality of the open expanse of awareness.

Guided meditation ...

The following is a text from The Vajra Essence:

“The rope of mindfulness (which connects your awareness to the object of meditation), which finely monitors the attention, is dissolved by the power of meditative experience. So the ordinary mind of an ordinary being disappears. Consequently, compulsive thinking subsides and roaming thoughts dissolve into the space of awareness (the substrate). Then slip into the vacuity of the substrate in which self, others and objects disappear. By clinging to the experiences of vacuity and luminosity while looking inward (by inverting, one slips into non-duality), the appearances of self, others and objects vanish. This is the substrate consciousness.

Some teachers say the substrate to which you descend is ‘freedom from conceptual elaboration’ or ‘the one taste’. Others say it is ‘ethically neutral’. Whatever the term, you have come to the essential nature of the mind” (the relative nature of the mind, that is, the substrate, not rigpa).

The four yogas of the Mahamudra are:

- (i) the yoga of single-pointedness

- (ii) the yoga of freedom from conceptual elaboration
- (iii) the yoga of one taste
- (iv) the yoga of one meditation

So with respect to (i), “the yoga of single-pointedness or the launching stage, occurs with the accomplishment of Shamatha, where one single-pointedly attends to one’s own awareness (which is unceasing and luminous)”. This makes it very clear that Shamatha is absolutely essential for Mahamudra (and for Dzogchen).

Day 23, pm

3. Transforming adversity into an aid to spiritual awakening

We now move on to the third point of the Seven-Point Mind Training.

“When the physical world and its sentient inhabitants are enslaved by vices, transform adversities into the path of spiritual awakening”.

One commonly hears people say: “When I’m more financially secure, then I’ll get back to the Dharma”, “When I’ve finished working, then I’ll get back to the Dharma”, etc. They’re missing an important point. Dharma can be practised in every activity in one’s day.

When adversity comes, it is a sign of ripening of past karma, either in this lifetime or in previous lifetimes. These adversities can become reified and then they become obstacles. People don’t realise that we are full participants in this. We sowed the seeds at some time in the past, so it’s pointless blaming someone or something else.

Alan told a story of transforming adversity into the spiritual path. The example he used was the Tibetan refugees living in Dharamsala after the Chinese invasion of Tibet. Most were incredibly cheerful despite having lost everything. They demonstrated a deep conviction in karma and an understanding of the nature of refuge. Their view was that at least their karma was getting purified! They weathered the genocidal transition with grace.

The common view is to see mental afflictions as ‘human nature’, not mental afflictions that have been reified. People fail to realise the true causes of their suffering are self-grasping and self-centeredness. Once you identify these, at least you have an opportunity to try and overcome them.

Self-centeredness can come into your Dharma practice as well. Doing your Shamatha practice, studying the Dharma texts, etc. can all be driven by self-centeredness. The strategy to address this is to become very aware of the eight mundane concerns - all of which come under the umbrella of pursuing wealth, power and reputation - and strive to overcome them. Self-centeredness has played a key role in the survival of the fittest, but if we continually step back to allow others to get there first, will we be seen as total losers? Are we imperiling our very well-being? Isn’t self-centeredness our best friend? Hedonically, yes. Eudemonically, or in terms of achieving genuine happiness, no. But generally, in stepping aside in the interests of others, reality rises up to meet you and you are adequately provided for.

In response to a question about how does one display a rainbow body ...

The most common way, according to the Dzogchen masters, is that you come to the end of your life, your body de-materialises into five-coloured rainbow light, leaving only your hair and your nails. The body dissolves into primordial consciousness. The mind first dissolves into rigpa, then your body follows into the clear light of death, then into primordial consciousness.

The much less common way, or ‘Great transference rainbow body’, can manifest in very highly realised yogis. They don’t die, they may be in perfect health, but they choose to de-materialise their own body at will. They can disappear from one place and manifest in another time or place or form. They can do this, because karmically and experientially, there is no sentient being left there anymore. They maintain a body just to be able to live and interact in the world of sentient beings, but in fact their body and mind is Dharmakaya.

Day 24, am. 26 September

When moving along the path of Shamatha, grasping gradually subsides, until you can rest for sustained periods in clear, luminous awareness. Shamatha is critical for achieving single-pointedness so that you can rest in meditative equipoise. If you have not yet gained access to the form realm (access to or achievement of the first dyana), then you are not yet on the path of Mahamudra. You are simply still practising Shamatha in the desire realm.

When one achieves Shamatha, one experiences a sequence of experiences:

- One experiences a gentle pressure on the top of one's head. So something is happening in the brain. This is not unpleasant (analogously, it is a bit like when a woman's waters break just prior to giving birth – you know that something significant is about to happen).
- One then experiences an unprecedented lightness, buoyancy, and pliancy of mind. This sets up a domino effect.
- This triggers a shift in the prana in the body, not similar to the pranic events one might have experienced in the earlier stages, but like a dam breaking. The prana courses up through one's body, like a huge charge of energy. It renders one's body serviceable, such that "you feel like you can jump over mountains".
- Then there is an unprecedented degree of physical bliss (physical pliancy).
- This triggers mental bliss, which is equally overwhelming. All one can do is sit and enjoy it.
- The rush of prana then tapers off to settle into a quiet flow of well-being. One feels that one can do anything, while maintaining that sense of joy (mental pliancy).

If these somatic or physiological shifts do not take place, then one hasn't achieved Shamatha. If all one achieves is fleeting stability, then one does not have the platform for the union of Shamatha and Vipassana.

Day 24, pm.

The next aphorism is "*Blame everything on one culprit*" which refers to self-grasping.

This is the reification of 'I, me, mine' that becomes a habitual tendency. It is closely related to self-centeredness.

Self-centeredness is sometimes translated from Tibetan/Sanskrit as self-cherishing. However, this is quite different from loving-kindness directed towards oneself, which could be an alternative interpretation of the English 'self-cherishing'. One starts with oneself and when loving-kindness begins to flow towards oneself, it is easy then to expand this to loved ones, and beyond. In contrast, self-centeredness is the prioritisation of one's own well-being separate from, over and above others' well-being. One actually turns one's attention away from the other person.

In modern psychology, you often hear the phrase "We need to fully accept ourselves" instead of engaging in self-loathing; and "Accept others as they are" instead of standing in judgment. Such phrases sound sweet on the outside but they can also be interpreted foolishly. If a doctor tells you that you have a cancer that is localised and it can be removed through surgery, it's foolish to say "No thank you. This is part of me", as the cancer will kill you. Likewise, when mental afflictions of malice, greed, enmity, lust, etc arise, you are foolish to accept these as part of you, as part of human nature. It's essential to recognise what is wholesome and cultivate it. Feel loving-kindness and compassion for yourself unconditionally. Similarly, recognise what is unwholesome and takes steps to counteract it, and heal yourself. Do whatever is necessary to protect your mind from mental afflictions.

There are two approaches to this:

- (i) One can take a developmental approach by engaging in the many practices and following the ethical guidelines contained in Buddhist or other religious/philosophical traditions and behave according to the intentions cultivated by those practices and guidelines. This is the approach of cultivating antidotes.
- (ii) Practice Settling the Mind in its Natural State where you sustain an on-going flow of discerning (not judgmental), intelligent, alert awareness of whatever comes up in your mind. You need to become familiar with your mental state. In authentic Mahamudra practice, your mind melts into rigpa. You still discern any thoughts that come up, but you don't grasp them or identify with them. Therefore, antidotes are not necessary because there is no grasping onto wholesome or unwholesome impulses in the mind-stream. From that perspective, these impulses are inherently non-toxic because they do not have any control over the mind nor can they reactively manifest as behaviour. Because there is no grasping, the meditator simply observes these impulses arise and dissolve back into the space of the mind as displays of rigpa. Whatever behaviour does manifest is simply, and appropriately, motivated by bodhichitta. Similarly in Shamatha, you are trying to emulate the perspective of the substrate consciousness. As thoughts come up in your coarse mind, you simply release them. By not grasping onto them, they are inert. They only become toxic when they enter your mind-stream and are grasped. This is the approach of non-grasping.

This is where introspection comes in. Monitor when your self-centeredness arises. Look back through history to those who always seemed self-centered and to those who always seemed to embody the cherishing of others. The two will appear as black and white. Then ask yourself the extent to which you display similar behavior. This is not being moralistic. It's just being sensible. Practice this introspection to become more skilled at discerning when you engage in self-grasping or self-centeredness. And remember it's just an impulse in the mind. It's not you.

In response to a question about cultivating loving kindness for people you dislike...is it inappropriate to want to withdraw from them and their negative influence in your life or should you try to transform your perception of them ...

You can't cultivate loving kindness for someone you hate, but you can cultivate loving-kindness for someone who hates you. An unhealthy relationship can continue to arouse mental afflictions. If these are unwholesome, then it's better to discontinue the relationship for the sake of both parties. Does this mean banish them from your mind? No. Rather, wish them well, from a safe distance cultivate loving-kindness and compassion for them and move on.

Day 25, am. 27 September

Guided meditation ...

The culmination of Shamatha is not simply having a calm mind in the desire realm (like a band-aid for Samsara). Rather, it is to create the platform for irreversibly entering the Buddhist path through the union of Shamatha and Vipassana. The culmination of Shamatha is characterised by the natural implosion of the five sense domains and the gross mental domain, which all dissolve into the substrate, and you rest in the absence of appearances (However, it is not an absolute cut-off of appearances, as one can still respond to cues e.g. for the yogi who rested each night in Samadhi and was aroused each morning when he heard "Tea's on!" Like a mother who can sleep soundly through all manner of external noises, but the instant her baby cries, she wakes up).

The first bench-mark is when you become a 'stream-enterer'. This will only occur through the fusion of Shamatha and Vipassana. But the prerequisite for this is the achievement of Shamatha.

Very few people achieve Shamatha. This was the case even in early times when Dharma was truly flourishing. Of the 7 billion people in the world today, how many are really practising Dharma versus pursuing hedonic pleasures? Of those practicing Dharma, how many have authentic teachings on Shamatha? Of those who do, how many have access to skilled teachers who teach Shamatha? Of those who do, how many have teachers to guide them in their practice over a sustained period of time? Of those who do, how many have a conducive environment in which to practice with spiritual friends who share the same vision? The answer: Not many!

Even if you achieve Shamatha, you are still not 'on the path'. To achieve this, you need to combine Shamatha with Vipassana and bodhichitta. Then you are on the path to true spiritual evolution. A foundation in ethics, refuge and motivation is essential. Bodhichitta is the thing that will orient your whole life to Dharma. It will be the hook of compassion that you will karmically use to catch yourself in every lifetime thereafter. It needs to become your inner refuge. (Reference: *Lam Rim*, which covers all the stages on the path)

All of Dharma can be summarised into three key components:

- Teachings and practices to prepare you for cultivating bodhichitta,
- Teachings and practices that actually cultivate bodhichitta, and
- Teachings and practices that are an expression of this bodhichitta.

Day 25, pm.

Guided meditation ...

To continue with "*Blame everything on one culprit*"...

When we engage in self-grasping, it involves the bifurcation of subject and object. The person does not recognise that: "This mental affliction is not me when it is torturing me so much", and instead points at somebody or something outside of themselves to blame as the cause of their suffering. But you can stop this thinking and shift your perspective and say to the mental affliction: "Wait a minute. I recognise you as a mental affliction. You pretend that you'll make me happy but you are really an enemy. I've had enough." Then, just note the difference in the location of the source of your displeasure. The fool seeks hedonic pleasures in the search for happiness; the sage knows how to be genuinely happy (by recognising and eradicating mental afflictions).

It's easy, particularly at the start, to think that Dharma and your mental afflictions are like David and Goliath. But there are three things that you can do to shift the balance:

- (i) Adopt the Mao Tse Tung approach with respect to the arising of mental afflictions: "When the enemy advances, I retreat. When the enemy retreats, I advance." When a mental affliction comes up, get some distance from it, apply an active antidote such as practice *tonglen*, meditate on impermanence, meditate on non-self, etc. so the mind is no longer dominated by the mental affliction.
- (ii) When the mental affliction comes up, immediately rest in awareness, don't do anything, remain loose and without grasping, and observe the mental affliction dissolve into the space of the mind. There is no target. Mental afflictions are called 'maras'. They're looking for you but when they can't find you, they disappear. This is because they are parasites. They suck the life-force out of you in order to sustain their own life-force.

- (iii) When you are assaulted by a mental affliction, just re-direct your attention and do something else, for example, go for a walk, eat some chocolate, turn on the TV, etc.

When mental afflictions are in retreat, although they might still be simmering quietly in the background, it's the time to practise Shamatha, *tonglen*, realising emptiness, etc. One criterion to measure the success of your practice is the extent to which self-grasping and self-centeredness are diminishing. Another criterion is the degree to which mental afflictions have been subdued and there is evidence of better mental health and balance. But keep in mind, they might be subdued but they'll come back unless you eradicate them through Vipassana. From there, you can keep going to eventually completely unveil your Buddha-nature.

In response to a question about which Shamatha method is best ...

Padmasambhava advocated progressing from one method to another in the recommended sequence which Alan has exposed us to, from the coarse to the subtle, while monitoring your mind with introspection. Certain methods seem to suit particular personality types. For example, for those prone to rumination, Mindfulness of Breathing and attending to a mental object seem to be preferable. Therefore, check out which method seems to suit you best and stick with it all the way to Shamatha. Rotation of the methods is OK in the early stages, but sooner or later you'll settle on one method that works. Remember you can always come back to the infirmary (to Mindfulness of the sensations of the body in the spine position) or walking meditation when you need to reconnect with the earth element. Tsongkhapa said that when your outer and inner mandalas come together (the conditions occur in your life that allow for serious meditation practice), don't mess around with all the Shamatha methods, simply find one that suits, continue without stopping with your chosen method, and take it all the way to the end. He used the analogy of rubbing two sticks together to make fire (don't pause – just keep going).

Day 26, am. 28 September

Alan provided a broad framework within which we could place Shamatha. For some, it may be relevant now; for others it may be relevant later this life or in future lifetimes. But he wanted to plant the seeds in our consciousness that would ripen at some future time. In doing so, he provided a map of the five paths and ten bumis.

The first part relates to Dzogchen and the stages of realisation. There are four levels of Vidyadhara – one who has a non-dual, non-conceptual view of rigpa. He or she knows who he or she is – and that is dharmakaya.

- (i) First level: Mature Vidyadhara. Between tregchö /break through and tögel/direct crossing over, you have a vision of direct perception. You achieve the first of the 10 bumis. You see an alternate reality. So, for a bodhisattva, you've achieved the third path (the path of seeing) of the five paths and realised the emptiness of the inherent nature of everything. When you come out of meditation, you engage in a dream-like reality. A mature Vidyadhara also has direct realisation of emptiness of phenomena in a dream from the perspective of being a dream. So he knows he is awake. However, there is still a lot of work to do.
- (ii) Second level: Mastery or power over life. This is the path to freedom from conceptual elaboration. You achieve the first stage of tögel/direct crossing over and progress in visionary experience. You can cross over to the fifth of the 10 bumis, known as 'difficult to purify', where you attain control of your lifespan.
- (iii) Third level: Mahamudra Vidyadhara. You are reaching consummate awareness, and you cross over to the eighth of the 10 bumis, known as 'the immovable'.
- (iv) Fourth level: Spontaneous actualised Vidyadhara. You have a vision of extinction into ultimate reality. You still have pure appearances, but all impure appearances that are generated by the power of karma dissolve and vanish forever into dharmadhatu. You cross over to the great tenth of the 10 bumis, the cloud of Dharma, and become a Buddha.

The four yogas:

- (i) the yoga of single-pointedness – engagement in the outer (for example, the four thoughts that turn the mind) and inner (for example, guru yoga) practices, which are needed to attain the two paths of accumulation and preparation.
- (ii) The yoga of freedom from conceptual elaboration – where you have some degree of emptiness and some degree of realisation of rigpa (for example, during pointing out instructions), which are needed to reach the path of seeing.
- (iii) The yoga of one taste – you achieve direct realisation of rigpa and view all phenomena from the perception of rigpa, where you have the one taste of both Samsara and Nirvana. You have no preference for felicity or adversity as they have equal purity. This is needed to attain the path of meditation.
- (iv) The yoga of one meditation – where there is no more learning and you achieve Buddhahood. This is needed to reach the path of non-meditation.

The critical point to understand here is not to mistake a lower level of achievement (such as Shamatha) for a higher level (such as realisation of rigpa). They can all contain aspects of spaciousness, bliss, clarity and luminosity but to different degrees. This has been a real issue for centuries. So, settling in the substrate consciousness is not resting in rigpa.

Day 26, pm.

We move on to the next aphorism which involves non-dually cherishing sentient beings "*Reflect on the kindness of all those around you*".

There is both an unintelligent way and an intelligent way of viewing this. The unintelligent way is to think everyone around you has kind thoughts, including murderers, robbers, rapists, etc. This is crazy. You can't feel cruel and kind at the same time. Instead therefore, recognise that there is no one out there who is inherently a sentient being. It's similar in a lucid dream. Even when you are lucid, there are no other people there and you're not there either. They are simply creations of your mind. As they are part of your dream, they have to be equally you. So, approximate this insight in the waking state.

The intelligent way to view this aphorism is to interpret 'kindness' as the benefit you receive from another person's actions, not his or her motivation behind those actions. A person who is angry towards you is not being kind, but you are required to show great patience and tolerance in their presence, and hence you are benefiting from their kindness. Their gift to you is the opportunity to practise Dharma off the cushion. Without these sorts of mental afflictions being expressed by others, you would not have the opportunity to develop the six perfections. When you think about all the sentient beings who contribute to your well-being either directly or indirectly, you benefit from their kindness. When you view all beings as kind, it directly blocks another thought such as "All of these people are irrelevant to me", which creates aloof indifference. So substitute one thought for another.

Try to view all sentient beings as if they were your kin. This is central to this aphorism. When people harm you, think they did it out of delusion and misconstruing reality, and feel compassion for them. The practice of *tonglen* is helpful. Also, reflect on the wide range of experience in all six realms and recognize how fortunate we are to be born in the human realm (the realm with the widest range of experiences and opportunities) where we can know and practice Dharma and move closer to achieving enlightenment.

In response to a question about tracking the in-breath and out-breath ...

When practicing mindfulness of breathing, as you move along the various stages of the path to Shamatha, you spend more and more time focused on the breath, and less and less time where your focus shifts to rumination. You may think that at times you are doing both simultaneously but in fact, you are not. You are focusing on one then the other but the shift occurs so rapidly, that you are unaware of it. Eventually all your very short bursts of mental cognition are all going to your chosen target in a smooth flow and you are attending to the whole body of the breath, free of subtle excitation. As William James said: "What you don't attend to fades out". Eventually, there is no competition for your attention. All the currents of your awareness are channeled into the mental domain. So on the higher stages of the path you are soothing, calming the whole composite of the body, and eventually you achieve Shamatha. Your mind is subtle, your body is subtle and the energy of your body goes into free flow. On achieving Shamatha, it's like a pot of water boiling over, then it settles down to just a simmer.

In response to a question about shifting the method in a given session from Mindfulness of Breathing at the apertures of the nostrils to Merging Mind with Space, and whether you can keep your eyes closed ...

When your breathing becomes so shallow, that you cannot detect any sensation, then this means that the awareness is not sufficiently tuned or subtle to pick it up. If you are not in the womb, not dead or not at or beyond the fourth dyana, then you will still have some sensation at the nostrils, even if it is just a light tingling. This tingling is your baseline and it is there even if you are not breathing. So attend to the target area and monitor closely.

The same can occur if you are focusing on the tactile sensations of the whole body. The tingling throughout your body becomes your baseline. The more subtle the breathing, the more you need to attend, which brings with it deeper relaxation and deeper stillness. If the acquired sign emerges in your practice, shift from the breath to the acquired sign and stay with that as your target. Then if a counterpart sign arises (which is far more subtle than an acquired sign), target this until you eventually rest in the bavanga. If you start Mindfulness of Breathing with your eyes closed and shift mid-practice to Merging Mind with Space, you can continue with your eyes closed.

Day 27, am. 29 September

No teachings.