

# Introduction to Calm Abiding

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Calm abiding is a state of mind that should be present in all meditation practices. Before I give you any specific information about calm abiding, it would be very useful to have an understanding of Buddhist practice in general. The Tibetan term for “Buddhist” is *nang pa*, which means “inner seeker.” The term refers to an inner transformation that is achieved through method and view. A person who attempts to engage in a practice of inner transformation, either through practice or view, is called a Buddhist. Therefore we can claim to be Buddhists on the basis of our conduct or on the basis of our view. If it is through our conduct, it means that we take heartfelt refuge in the Three Jewels. To take heartfelt refuge in them, we must understand their nature. It is similar to having good insurance: in order to have it, you must first understand all details of your insurance policy. It is necessary to examine each of the Three Jewels to form a clear understanding of them. A proper recognition of the Buddha Jewel, the Dharma Jewel, and the Sangha Jewel must come before seeking refuge in them.

The Buddha and the Sangha Jewels come from the Dharma Jewel. The Sanskrit word *dharma*, or *chö* in Tibetan, carries ten different meanings. One of them is “holding back,” in the sense of holding us back from problems and suffering. What really holds us back from pain and suffering is wisdom. This wisdom is the Dharma that is the actual object of refuge. It is similar to the medicine that directly cures us of physical or mental illness. The being who has fully awakened such wisdom is called *buddha*, and the person who is in the process of awakening this wisdom is called *sangha*. What makes the Buddha one of the objects of refuge is not his physical appearance or power. Rather, it is the fully awakened wisdom in his continuum. The same principle applies to the Sangha. This is a brief explanation of the objects of refuge.

The next step is to understand how to go for refuge. Normally in our life we take refuge in food, in clothes, in a shelter, in a relationship, in a job, and so forth. We take refuge in food to protect our stomach from hunger, and take refuge in clothes to protect our body from cold and heat. We might even take political refuge, seeking protection from an oppressive situation. When we take refuge in the Dharma, we seek protection and direction. In essence we are saying that we will endeavor to develop the wisdom realizing ultimate reality in terms of ourselves and all other phenomena. When we are determined to develop the quality of such knowledge in our mind, in order to protect ourselves from pain and suffering, we have taken refuge in the Dharma. We should think similarly in terms of taking refuge in the Buddha. It is said that when we take refuge in the Dharma, we take refuge in a medicine that cures. Similarly, when we take refuge in the

Buddha, we take refuge in a doctor. With the determination to develop such wisdom in our mindstream, we become Buddhists. Whether or not we are Buddhists is not determined by our country of origin, the language we speak, or the type of food we prefer. Even if we do not claim to be Buddhists, when we develop the determination to cultivate this type of wisdom in our mindstream, we become Buddhists. Sometimes people go through an official ceremony with a teacher and take refuge vows. However, this external ritual is not necessary. The moment we develop that determination, we are Buddhists.

Once we have generated such determination, we will engage in activities through a certain conduct. Determination alone will not lead us anywhere. Here we modify our physical conduct—our entire lifestyle, in fact—so that that it will not endanger ourselves and others. Instead we engage in activities that will benefit ourselves and others. This is the advice and commitment that come with taking refuge. With this we become Buddhists by conduct.

We become Buddhists by view when we accept the four great seals of Buddhism. These are recognizing (1) all compounded phenomena to be impermanent, (2) all contaminated phenomena to be suffering, (3) the self to be empty of self-existence, and (4) nirvāṇa to be peace.

The first of these views is that all compounded phenomena are impermanent. This means that everything that has been created through causes and conditions is subject to change. This is true for our environment, such as the hills, rivers, and houses, as well as living beings. None of these things is permanent. They all change from one moment to the next because they have been created by causes and conditions. Whatever is created in this way does not require an additional, external phenomenon to change it. Whatever has caused its creation, its own causes and conditions, also causes its deterioration. The very thing that created it also causes its destruction. To understand this view of impermanence, it is useful to focus on our own body. Many physical changes take place in our body from childhood to adulthood. These changes do not happen overnight. If they did, we would be stunned and overwhelmed! They occur in the course of a year, a month, a day, and finally in the course of a second. Our bodies change every moment. Just as our bodies change, so all other compounded phenomena change in a similar fashion.

The second view is that contaminated phenomena are suffering. Whatever is influenced by afflictions is suffering. We don't need any profound reasoning to establish this. We know from our experience that the moment an affliction arises in the mind, it destroys whatever peace and happiness exists.

The third view is that phenomena are empty and selfless. This is more involved, and we will examine it in greater detail later.

The fourth view is that nirvāṇa is peace. Nirvāṇa is liberation from saṃsāra. To fully understand this term we must first understand what is meant by liberation and what is meant by saṃsāra. In other words, to understand nirvāṇa, we must first understand saṃsāra. You might think that saṃsāra is this world around us—the environment and the fast pace of life—and that nirvāṇa is the opposite of that. In this case you would think that a cave up in the mountains is nirvāṇa. If that were true, it would be very easy to reach nirvāṇa. If you think that saṃsāra refers to our current body, then again it would be easy to attain nirvāṇa. At the time of death, as our consciousness leaves this body behind, we would be free from saṃsāra and spontaneously attain nirvāṇa. It is clear that this body, subject to aging, sickness, and death, is not saṃsāra. So what is saṃsāra? It is a mind influenced by afflictions. Our mind controls us, in the sense that whatever our mind tells us to do, we simply obey. In turn, our mind is under the control of afflictions in our present state. And as long as the mind is under the control of afflictions, we will not find peace and happiness. So this is saṃsāra. Having understood saṃsāra it is easy to understand what it means to be liberated from it, which is the state of nirvāṇa. It is a state where the mind is free from confusion and ignorance, all judgment and conceptual thoughts. This state in which the mind is completely free of afflictions is nirvāṇa. When we are free from afflictive emotions, we have peace. Accepting such views makes us Buddhists by view. Most Buddhists are not Buddhists by view, but Buddhists by conduct.

In brief, the determination to develop wisdom makes us Buddhists. To develop such wisdom we need to know whether or not this is achievable. The Buddha has said that if we realize our mind, we become a buddha. It is pointless to search for buddhahood outside our mind. This means that our mind has the capacity to develop wisdom. This capacity and power of the mind is known as *buddha nature*. Buddha nature has four unique characteristics: (1) the nature of our mind is a flawless nature, primordial, pure, and free from any stains, (2) it has the capability to give and receive love from everybody, (3) it has the capability to know everything, and (4) it has the capacity to accomplish everything that is wished for. In other words, it is an infinite source of wealth and can fully satisfy all our wishes. Most of all, it can fulfill our need for peace.

If that is our real nature, our true face, why do we not experience it? Despite possessing such nature, we cannot presently experience it because it is obscured by four types of obscurations. These obscurations prevent us from accessing our buddha nature.

These four types of obscurations are: (1) the eight worldly concerns, (2) afflictive obscurations that are our afflictive emotions, (3) knowledge obscurations that prevent us from comprehending all phenomena, and (4) obscurations of subtle duality. In order to utilize our maximum potential, we must overcome these obscurations. We can't possibly ask the Buddha to

remove these obscurations. If that were possible, it would already be done since he has unconditional love for all of us and perfect wisdom. Also, there are many among us who have sufficient faith and could make sincere requests to that effect. But it does not work in this way. We need to apply ourselves in order to remove these obscurations. In terms of our aspirations to overcome them, and in terms of the type of happiness we wish to experience, we fall in four main categories: (1) individuals of the small scope, (2) individuals of the middle scope, (3) individuals of the great scope, and (4) individuals of the supremely great scope. These four categories include all individuals.

### **The Small Scope**

Individuals of the small scope aspire to achieve the peace and happiness of human existence. The majority of people fall into this category. In this case, our main hindrance is the obscurations of the eight worldly concerns. These are: (1) feeling happy and excited when we gain money and possessions, (2) becoming anxious and depressed when we lose them or even fear that this might happen, (3) feeling happy and excited when we gain a good reputation, (4) becoming sad when we lose it, (5) feeling happy and excited when we hear some good news or praise, (6) becoming unhappy when we hear bad news or words of criticism, (7) feeling happy and excited when we gain pleasant sensations, and (8) becoming unhappy when we lose them. We constantly experience these in our everyday life. The result of such constant excitement and disappointment is to make our minds weak and fragile. Our emotional fluctuation resembles the graphic of a cardiogram! All this comes from fear, the universal weakness of all unenlightened beings. There is fear of not getting what we want, and fear of meeting with what we do not want. Fear is a natural response to danger. We mostly develop fear in relation to the future, which is uncertain and unknown. Our minds constantly migrate to the future, an area where we have no control. Although we constantly leave the present, we never reach the future. This is a useless type of fear. A more healthy type of fear comes from the wisdom reflecting, "I should avoid this type of activity since it endangers me in such a way."

To find some peace of mind, we have to deal with unreasonable fear and reduce it as much as we can. There are techniques that we can employ that are helpful antidotes. The first of these is to develop *the wisdom of living in the present*. This can be done by taking some time to meditate every day. Even a few minutes of a simple meditation, such as focusing on the breath, will suffice. The important thing is to stay in the present moment without conceptualizing about the past and the future.

The second is *the wisdom that understands the nature of the problem* and knows that if it can be fixed, there is no reason to be upset. This type of wisdom also knows that, if nothing can be done about it, then again there is no reason to be upset.

The third is the *wisdom realizing impermanence*. This understanding allows us to let go of things. Whatever is assembled must disperse. Whatever rises must decline. Whatever comes must go. All this is unavoidable and beyond our control. Even a buddha cannot control these things. Change is part of the nature of these phenomena. This is something positive, since change makes everything possible. With this understanding our lives become light and flexible. When we flow according to the traffic conditions, we move ahead, but if we try to run faster, we feel stuck.

The fourth is the *wisdom that understands causality*, the law of cause and effect. This type of wisdom allows us to reflect that whatever suffering we experience is the result of afflictive emotions. What we need to develop are compassion, tolerance, and other such qualities. All these are already present in our minds. As the Buddha said, everything is preceded by the mind, led by the mind, created by the mind. When we understand this, we stop looking for solutions outside. We turn our attention inside and begin addressing our afflictions. We understand what must be abandoned and what must be cultivated.

These four types of wisdom are antidotes to the eight worldly concerns. In this way buddha nature acts as a resource that provides us with the peace and happiness of human existence.

### **The Middle Scope**

The individual of the middle scope aspires to obtain the peace and happiness of liberation. We have already explained the nature of nirvāṇa. The afflictive states that result from our ignorance are obstacles that hinder us in actualizing nirvāṇa. These are known as afflictive obscurations. To overcome them, we must address their root cause, which is the ignorance grasping at a self. To do this, we must realize that selflessness is the ultimate nature of the self. Here “selflessness” refers to the lack of an inherently existent self. The wisdom realizing the lack of an inherently existent self is the direct antidote to the ignorance grasping at an inherently existent self. This wisdom leads us to an understanding of who we are and how we exist. To generate such wisdom, we must cultivate insight. This requires a stable and clear mind. Such qualities of the mind are acquired through training in *concentration*, which is achieved once we abandon all destructive types of physical and mental engagement. To restrain from discursive engagement, we must train in *ethics*. Ethics support concentration, which in turn supports *wisdom*. Through these three

trainings we overcome afflictive emotions, and as a result we obtain the liberation of nirvāṇa. All this is possible due to our buddha nature.

### **The Great Scope**

The individual of the great scope aspires to obtain the peace and happiness of a fully awakened being, a buddha. The main obscurations to buddhahood are the imprints left by ignorance. These are known as knowledge obscurations. The wisdom realizing emptiness is able to remove ignorance itself but not the imprints of ignorance. To do that it must be enhanced by love, compassion, and bodhicitta. The result that follows from removing knowledge obscurations is buddhahood. This is the practice of a bodhisattva who practices the great scope.

### **The Supremely Great Scope**

The individual of the supremely great scope aspires to achieve the peace and happiness of the union of bliss and emptiness. This is the state of Vajradhara that is obtained through relying on the practices of Vajrayāna. Vajrayāna is also referred to as *Mantrayāna*, *Tantrayāna*, the *Resultant Vehicle*, or the *Method Vehicle*. Each of those names carries a special connotation. There is a lot of misunderstanding about tantra, and for this reason I feel that it is useful to clarify some issues. To properly understand the practice of Vajrayāna, we should look at the etymology of this term. “Vajra” means *indestructible*. It refers to energy that cannot be destroyed by outside forces but can be used to destroy negative forces. It also means *indivisible*, or inseparable. This refers to the inseparability of mind and its potential. This indivisible and indestructible vajra is not something that we can find as an external entity. Everything external, including our body, is subject to destruction. The vajra refers to our mind. Again, there are different types of mind. The five types of sense awareness are not the vajra because they cease easily. As soon as we close our eyes or fall asleep, our eye consciousness ceases. Therefore coarse consciousness is not the vajra. The vajra refers to extremely subtle consciousness, such as the one that manifests during sleep, when all conceptual thoughts have stopped.

In this sense Tantrayāna refers to extremely subtle mind. This extremely subtle mind is our buddha nature and is indestructible. It comes to this life from the previous one. There is nothing else from the previous life that accompanies us in this one. For example, our body is newly established through the reproductive substances of our parents, and in this sense it is newly acquired in this life. The things that we possess right now are temporary, and we will have to leave them behind. This present body is like a hotel: we check in, and later on we have to check out. As for the extremely subtle mind that came from the previous life, it is like the person who

checks into the hotel. This extremely subtle mind will continue, in a stream of lives, all the way to buddhahood. It is the only thing that goes all the way to buddhahood.

When we reach buddhahood, our body becomes a buddha's body and our mind becomes a buddha's mind. We already possess the body and mind that become those of a buddha and do not need to newly establish them. However, the body that will become a buddha's body is not our current body. This body is subject to change, aging, and sickness. Bones and flesh end in a cemetery. Similarly, our conceptual, judgmental mind is not the mind that becomes a buddha's mind. It is our extremely subtle mind, primordially free from stains, that acts as the substantial cause for a buddha's pure, omniscient mind that comprehends all phenomena. This mind is obscured right now, but when its obscurations are removed, its true capacity is revealed and it becomes a buddha's mind. The pure energy-wind that serves as the mount of that pure mind is the substantial cause for a buddha's pure body. That pure body and mind that we have within us are the vajra. This is known as the *base vajra* since it is the base of everything in saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. When we are not able to recognize it and utilize it accordingly, it gives rise to coarse states of mind. The whole point of our life from the perspective of tantra is to discover that base vajra and utilize it for the benefit of ourselves and others.

Our true nature is indestructible yet unmanifest. It remains inactive because our coarse conceptual mind is operational. Currently, all mental activities are fulfilled by this judgmental mind. The more active the coarse mind is, the less chance the subtle mind has to play a role. When the subtle mind becomes manifest, the coarse mind subsides. When the subtle mind manifests, it performs all activities. At that time all activities become pure because the performer is pure. When the subjective mind is pure, whatever it perceives is pure. The coarse mind becomes inactive in our life through the force of meditation and on four occasions. All beings who are born from the womb and possess the white and red elements from their parents experience the melting away of coarse mind and the arising of the subtle mind on four occasions in life, naturally and without relying on meditation: when we are asleep, when we yawn or become unconscious, when we experience orgasm, and when we die. At those times the coarse mind subsides because the coarse wind that supports it subsides. When we fall asleep, all experiences of the day (such as sounds, smells, textures, and so forth) dissolve. The world that we experienced today dissolves because the mind that perceived this world dissolves. This mind that experiences all this dissolves because the wind that supports it dissolves. As the coarse mind dissolves, a subtler mind becomes manifest.

Why do we not experience that subtle mind during sleep? Although it manifests, we remain unconscious and unaware of it because our memory is not strong enough to retain it.

Unfortunately, mindfulness and memory also subside during sleep. This is why there is so much emphasis in Buddhism on developing mindfulness. Not only do we lack mindfulness during sleep, but even during the waking state we are not fully conscious or aware of what we are doing, since our mind is distracted. Despite the subtle mind manifesting on those four occasions, our mindfulness is not strong enough to retain the experience.

This is why the practice of tantra is relevant. Without it we would simply have to wait for one of those four occasions to arise, and even then, when the subtle mind would manifest, still we would not be able to recognize it. As long as we understand the time and reason for the arising of subtle mind, we can try to induce this through our practice. The subtle mind manifests when the coarse mind subsides. The coarse mind subsides because the energy-wind that supports it declines. Therefore in our tantric practice we deliberately cause the coarse winds to subside through the force of meditation. This involves single-pointed meditation on the vital points of the body, the channels and cakras, which causes all the coarse winds to gather in these locations. We know from our experience that if we focus on a specific point of our body, we feel something just in that location. This is because energy gathers there. Wherever we focus, the mind energy converges there because mind and wind are one in nature. Through the force of meditation on the vital points of the body, all coarse winds dissolve, the coarse mind dissolves, and the subtle mind manifests. This subtle mind is known as *clear light*. This exact process is repeated at the time of death. When the clear light manifests, we should recognize it and utilize it for the benefit of ourselves and others.

The clear light mind is extremely powerful and is utilized to realize emptiness. It is the best type of mind to direct toward emptiness because it has the power to overcome even the fourth type of obscuration, the obscurations of subtle duality. In other words, when the clear light manifests, the mind becomes nondual. This clear light is known as the *path vajra*. When the path vajra is further refined and its potential is fully awakened through the force of meditation, it becomes the *resultant vajra*. This refers to the omniscient mind of a buddha. The person who teaches us how to activate the base vajra, in order to develop the path vajra and actualize the resultant vajra, is known as the *vajra master*.

Therefore tantra is not about elaborate images of deities and *thangkas*; it is not about ritual; it is not about vajras and bells; and certainly it is not about sex. Tantra is meditation on the vajra points of the body, which causes the coarse mind to collapse, resulting in the arising of the subtle mind. The meditation techniques that accomplish this are known as *Vajrayāna*. They are given this name because they cause the base vajra to manifest, they develop into the path vajra, and bring it into completion as the resultant vajra. This is the practice of the fourth type of

individual, the one with supreme capacity. As prerequisites for engaging in such practices, the practitioner must have (1) an understanding of emptiness imbued with (2) strong love and compassion. This compassion reflects, “From my side I can accept suffering and would happily remain in saṃsāra for eons to benefit sentient beings. But I cannot bear the thought that they will have to remain suffering until I become a buddha. I must achieve buddhahood as quickly as possible.” This type of compassion is stronger than the one found in bodhisattvas who follow Sūtrayāna. Once these two prerequisites are in place, we should rely on the instruction of the vajra master, especially in the case of highest yoga tantra. The vajra master explains the meditation techniques that cause the coarse mind to subside and the subtle mind to manifest.

The practices of the individuals of the small and middle scope are known as Hinayāna. The practices of the individual of the great scope—in other words, the six perfections—are known as Bodhisattvayāna or Pāramitāyāna. Mahāyāna includes the Pāramitāyāna and Tantrayāna. The practices of the individual of the supremely great scope constitute the Tantrayāna.

## **CALM ABIDING**

Calm abiding is not a practice that is unique to Buddhism. It is common to other traditions as well. However, in Buddhism calm abiding is practiced in conjunction with wisdom. The combination of calm abiding and wisdom is indispensable in terms of achieving the results of the four types of individuals described earlier. Calm abiding is the capacity of the mind to remain fully focused on the chosen object of meditation with clarity and stability, for as long as we wish, while experiencing the bliss of physical and mental pliancy. Once calm abiding is established, it is then utilized to achieve new levels of realization, in conjunction with other practices. This mind is an instrument, a meditation technique that leads to any type of mental quality and realization.

All four types of individuals need to develop calm abiding. For example, the first type of individual requires the stability and focus of calm abiding to realize impermanence, to learn to remain in the present, and to have the wisdom to deal with whatever situation comes up. The second type requires calm abiding to be successful in the three types of training in ethics, concentration, and wisdom. Similarly, the individuals of the great and supremely great scopes need to rely on calm abiding for their particular training. Without calm abiding, such results are not obtainable.

Calm abiding is a quality of the mind, and as such it cannot be acquired from any external source. It cannot be bought. It has to be developed. Our minds have the seed of calm abiding. No matter how distracted we might be right now, the mind has the capacity to remain on an object.

Similarly, the mind has the capacity to know any object we choose to study. Be it mathematics or something entirely different, the mind has the capacity to concentrate and analyze. Therefore, calm abiding comes from developing the capacity we have to concentrate. When this is developed to the point of being able to remain fully focused on whichever object we choose, for as long as we wish and without any distractions, then we have obtained the realization of calm abiding.

### **The Nature of Calm Abiding**

The practice of calm abiding is an indispensable method for overcoming our obscurations. Insight into the ultimate nature of the self of person and the self of phenomena is what actually strikes at the heart of ignorance grasping at the self. It is what destroys the potent imprints left by this ignorance, and what eliminates any obscurations of subtle duality. This insight is supported by calm abiding. Calm abiding provides us with the clarity and stability that are necessary to investigate the ultimate nature of “I,” and is therefore indispensable in terms of gaining insight into reality.

The nature of calm abiding is the ability of the mind to remain focused on our focal object for as long as we wish, while experiencing the bliss of physical and mental pliancy. One of the characteristics of calm abiding is the capacity to remain focused, not just for an hour or two, but for as long as we wish. A second characteristic is that the mind remains with the object, maintaining clarity and stability. Sometimes we remain for a long time on an object, but we lack clarity; before long, we are overcome by sleep. A third characteristic is that the mind of calm abiding experiences the bliss of physical and mental pliancy.

The stability of the calm abiding mind is extremely firm. Such a mind is often said to be immovable, like a mountain. Nothing can disturb our focus. Even if a train were to pass next to us, it would not disturb us. As for the clarity of this mind, it is said to be so vivid that if we were to direct our mind to the wall, we could count every atom in it. In terms of the bliss of physical and mental pliancy, this pliancy should be understood as serviceability, or lack of inflexibility. Presently, our bodies are limited and not as flexible as we would like them to be. Often the body seems unable to perform what the mind aspires to do. The heaviness of the body makes it easy to become sluggish, tired, to end up exhausted, to fall asleep, and so forth. This heaviness settles down when calm abiding is established, and a new kind of light energy emerges and pervades the entire body. When this energy-wind, which is pure and as light as a feather, first arises in the body, it is very blissful. The presence of this energy is a tactile sensation. This blissful physical pliancy arises first and influences the mind. Body and mind are intimately related, and this physical experience makes the mind more flexible. This stands to reason because the mind is now

based on a new energy-wind that is pure and flexible. Enhancing the flexibility of the mind brings about serviceability of the mind. This is known as mental pliancy.

It is important to understand that physical pliancy comes from calm abiding. Physical pliancy then gives rise to an experience of bliss as a new type of energy arises. This pleasurable sensation is the bliss of physical pliancy. This physical sensation then causes the mind to experience bliss. This is the bliss of mental pliancy. At the beginning, the bliss of mental pliancy is intense and overwhelming. It feels as though it will disturb our concentration, but soon it settles and enhances the strength of concentration of calm abiding.

### *Classification of calm abiding*

Calm abiding can be achieved through instructions of either sūtra or tantra. The nature of calm abiding, with the three main characteristics that we have mentioned, remains the same. Therefore there is no difference in terms of the subjective mind, though there is a difference in terms of the chosen object. When we develop calm abiding in the context of tantra, our focal objects are channels, drops, and winds. When we develop it in the context of sūtra, the focal object can be any object other than the channels, drops, and winds. The profundity of tantric calm abiding is greater than that of sutric calm abiding. Practicing this type of calm abiding that focuses on the vital points of the body requires an initiation into highest yoga tantra. For those who choose to practice it, the suggestion is that they focus on the channels, drops, and winds in their body, while visualizing themselves as the deity.

### *The focal object of calm abiding*

When we develop calm abiding, we must tie the mind to a focal object. Without a focal object it will not be possible to cultivate calm abiding. A variety of objects can be used as focal objects. Those who have received initiation into highest yoga tantra would visualize themselves as the deity and focus on that divine body. There are four types of empowerments that we receive during an initiation: the vase, secret, wisdom, and word empowerments. If we take the vase empowerment as an example, the vase itself and the water in the vase do not constitute the initiation. These are empowering substances. When we come into contact with these empowering substances, we generate a special feeling of bliss, and this bliss is initiation.

Some people have a special feeling during the ritual of the initiation. This is the best initiation. But even if such a special experience does not occur, we imagine that we've had the experience of uncontaminated bliss. This imagined feeling of bliss also counts as an initiation, and those who are serious about receiving an initiation should generate it. The experience of bliss,

either real or imagined, places a potent imprint on the mind. That potent imprint, which is neither form nor awareness but a dissociated formation,<sup>1</sup> is the nature of the initiation. Therefore an initiation occurs through the combination of the mantra, the instructions of the master, and the concentration and visualizations of the students. In the case of the vase empowerment, the bliss that we experience when we come into contact with the vase and its water places a potent imprint on our mind. This is the actual vase initiation. The same is true for the next two types, the secret and wisdom empowerments. In the case of the fourth, or word, empowerment, there is no external substance. It is called the “word” empowerment because the vajra master verbally describes the nature of buddhahood as the union of the clear light mind and illusory body. Based on the master’s words, the students generate an understanding of the state of enlightenment and experience bliss. On the basis of this bliss, the students obtain the initiation.

The function of an initiation is fourfold:

1. *It purifies negativities and obscurations.* In the case of the vase empowerment, these are negativities associated with our body;
2. *It places potent imprints on the mind to awaken one of the bodies of the buddha.* In the case of the vase empowerment, we receive the potent imprint to manifest the emanation body of the buddha whose initiation we are receiving;
3. *It authorizes and empowers us to do certain practices.* For example, when we receive the initiation of Medicine Buddha, we receive the authorization to generate ourselves as Medicine Buddha. Although in general we can visualize Medicine Buddha outside or even inside our body, we are not authorized to visualize ourselves as Medicine Buddha without an initiation; and
4. *It empowers us to engage the methods of achieving mundane and supreme siddhis in relation to that particular deity.* When we receive an initiation, we are authorized to generate ourselves as the deity. From that point onward we are not an ordinary, uninitiated person. We have to visualize ourselves as the deity all the time. Those who have received Medicine Buddha initiation are supposed to be Medicine Buddha twenty-four hours a day. They have to hold the pride of being the deity constantly. Therefore, those who have received the initiation of Medicine Buddha generate

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<sup>1</sup> Dissociated formation (*ldan min 'du byed*) indicates something that is (1) dissociated from form and awareness while being (2) a composite formed by causes and conditions and therefore an impermanent entity.

themselves as Medicine Buddha and use their own body as the focal object for developing calm abiding. This is the benefit of having received an initiation.

In this way the practice of calm abiding becomes extremely powerful. Practitioners constantly familiarize themselves with being the deity, possessing pure body and mind. Such pure appearance and divine pride not only deepen calm abiding but also help us overcome ordinary appearance and grasping at the ordinary “I.” Such is the nature of tantric calm abiding. As for sutric calm abiding, the focal object can be anything but ourselves as a deity. Tantric calm abiding is considered to be more powerful because the object of meditation is inside the body and, more specifically, inside the central channel.

### *The benefits of calm abiding*

The benefits of establishing calm abiding, both temporal and ultimate, are numerous. All spiritual qualities can be achieved on the basis of calm abiding. In this sense, calm abiding is like electricity: when it is available any number of functions are at hand, but when it is missing everything goes dead. Some examples of temporal benefits are the clairvoyance and supernatural or miraculous powers that are developed. Examples of ultimate benefits are the various realizations that are developed, from liberation up to buddhahood. A Buddhist would combine the practice of calm abiding with insight. Here insight (*lhag mthong, vipaśyanā*) refers to the wisdom realizing emptiness. There are three ways to obtain these realizations. Some develop calm abiding first and then use this type of mind to meditate on emptiness. Others realize emptiness first and then use emptiness itself as the focal object for developing calm abiding. Finally, there are those who practice both simultaneously. This involves meditating on calm abiding during the meditation sessions themselves and analyzing the meaning of emptiness in between sessions. Once we develop an intellectual understanding of the ultimate nature of reality, we then place our mind on it, single-pointedly. When we place the mind single-pointedly on the ultimate nature, we practice the two—calm abiding and insight—simultaneously.

Whichever way we choose to develop calm abiding, it is important to remember its true purpose: “I want to obtain this excellent tool that will allow me to deepen my wisdom and realize emptiness.”

The nature of calm abiding is single-pointed concentration. Its focus is nothing other than the focal object. It is a mind that remains focused on its object without entertaining any other thoughts. In contrast, the nature of wisdom that is insight into reality is analytical, discriminating, and examining. The first is single-pointed meditation, while the second is analytical meditation.

Analytical meditation is cultivated through (1) the wisdom derived from study, (2) the wisdom derived from contemplation, and (3) the wisdom derived from meditation.

The wisdom derived from study comes when we study the scriptures or when we listen to teachings explaining them. As we listen to such teachings, we gain intellectual understanding, reflecting: “Now I understand my ultimate nature!” Intellectual understanding alone is hollow and lacks the power to help us overcome our difficulties. When we know something but do not put that knowledge to use, this is similar to medicine that remains in its package on our bedside table. We might know how to prepare this medicine, but if we do not take it, it cannot cure us. Once we gain this type of wisdom, we should contemplate and reflect on it. This results in gaining strong conviction, thinking: “That’s it! That is my ultimate nature.” That conviction is the wisdom derived from contemplation. Once we gain it we should constantly familiarize our mind with it. When we have become familiar with it, we enter single-pointed concentration and the mind constantly meditates on it. As a result, our ultimate nature manifests. These three types of wisdom are relevant to any type of realization, not just that of our ultimate nature.

There are three ways to combine calm abiding with the wisdom of insight, depending on which one is established first. In terms of developing them, insight is something that comes after calm abiding has been established. They are both crucial elements in the development of our mental qualities.

#### *Prerequisites for achieving calm abiding*

If you are earnest in your wish to obtain calm abiding, you must assemble the necessary causes that are its prerequisites. The Buddha has enumerated six causes for calm abiding: (1) a favorable environment, (2) having less desire, (3) contentment, (4) avoiding many activities, (5) maintaining pure morality, and (6) avoiding thoughts of desire toward sensual objects.

The first is (1) *a favorable environment*. An environment that fits this description must possess four characteristics. First, it must be a peaceful place that is free of the noises of people, vehicles, airplanes, and the like during the day. At night it should be free from noises such as barking dogs. At the beginning our minds are very fragile and easy to disturb, and even a small sound disturbs us. Second, it must be a good land. This refers to the location. Ideally it should be a place blessed by a serious meditator earlier. The presence of such a practitioner leaves a positive energy in the location that blesses our mind. Alternatively, we can invite a master into our retreat place and ask him or her to bless it. If that is not possible, we can invite the image of a buddha, thinking that we are inviting the actual buddha. The third characteristic is that it should be a place where it is easy to acquire necessities such as food and clothes. In addition, it should be

a place where the water, earth, wind, and other elements are free of pollution. The fourth characteristic is the company of like-minded friends and practitioners who share the same view and conduct. Keeping such company brings mutual benefit and support. These four characteristics define a favorable environment.

The next prerequisite is an inner condition known as (2) *having less desire*. This means that we are not craving a bigger amount, greater variety, or better quality of what we already have.

The next is (3) *contentment*. This is the attitude of satisfaction that finds what is available, in terms of provisions and location, to be sufficient.

The next is (4) *avoiding many activities*. While in retreat we should avoid the busyness created by meeting people, receiving letters and phone calls, browsing the internet, reading material other than Dharma, engaging in business, and so forth. All these distract our mind, which is very fragile and easy to influence. As we said earlier, the fluctuations of our mind resemble a cardiogram. In particular, we have to be very careful of our reading material during retreat. If we read material about war and conflict, it will increase our anger. If we read material with sexual references, it will increase our attachment. In addition, even Dharma activities, such as prostrations and mantra recitations, should be put aside. The only activity we should be doing is cultivating calm abiding. Our entire time and energy should be dedicated to developing single-pointed concentration.

The next is (5) *maintaining pure morality*. Morality allows us to overcome obscurations that hinder us from attaining calm abiding. We have many negative potent imprints left in our mindstream from nonvirtuous physical, verbal, and mental actions, and all these must be removed in order to obtain calm abiding. Purification is something that is emphasized in Buddhism. Obscurations and negative potent imprints do not allow us to be successful in obtaining what we seek, so they must be removed. A variety of means is available to us. Meditation on Vajrasattva that includes mantra recitation is a very powerful purification technique, but there are other methods also, such as recitation of the names of the thirty-five buddhas, making *tsa-tsas* and other holy objects, prostrating, and making offerings, to name a few. Another practice is to take the eight Mahāyāna precepts. This keeps the mind clean and renders it suitable for calm abiding. We should restore any vows we have taken that have declined. This includes the eight Mahāyāna precepts, vows of individual liberation for ordained or lay practitioners, bodhisattva vows, and tantric vows. We should purify properly each type of vow according to its specific method.

For a purification to be effective, the four antidotes must be present. We should first (a) generate a healthy sense of *regret*, and then (b) make a strong *resolution* not to repeat the action

again in the future. If we do not think that we are capable of abstaining for the rest of our lives, we should think that we will avoid this activity for this year, for this month, or at least for this day. Next, we should (c) develop *love and compassion*. When we break a vow, we break it either in relation to sentient beings or in relation to enlightened beings. If the vow is broken in relation to sentient beings, it must be purified in relation to sentient beings. For this reason it is important to cultivate love and compassion toward sentient beings. The best instrument of purification is compassion.

The story of Asaṅga and Protector Maitreya illustrates this clearly. During his retreat Asaṅga became frustrated because he could not get a vision or a sign of Protector Maitreya, even in his sleep. Disappointed, he gave up his practice and came down the mountain. He did this three times during his twelve-year retreat. Finally he was able to purify his negativity and had a vision of Protector Maitreya. He did not achieve this through his practice of calm abiding, despite having spent twelve years in retreat. The last time he came down the mountain, he saw a dog that was infested with maggots and generated strong compassion for him. He attempted to remove the maggots with his tongue, and at that very point he saw Protector Maitreya. He was both sad and excited, and said, “I meditated on you for twelve years and you did not even appear in my dream. Why?” Protector Maitreya replied, “I was there right from the beginning. It was your obscurations that did not allow you to see me.”

We should generate compassion for all beings in general, as well as any specific sentient beings in relation to whom we have broken our vows. In the case of vows that are broken in relation to our spiritual master or to enlightened beings, the best means of purification is to cultivate faith and devotion. We should then confess, disclosing our negativity in the presence of buddhas, and (d) engage in specific *purification practices*.

The last prerequisite is (6) *avoiding thoughts of desire toward sensual objects*. This is related to the first type of obscuration, the eight worldly concerns. We are beings of the desire realm because our senses are constantly overwhelmed by objects of desire. But calm abiding is not a mind of the desire realm. It is a mind of the form realm, which is a realm of concentration. When we obtain calm abiding, we remain beings of the desire realm but we attain a mind of the form realm. This occurs because the mind is not interested in objects of desire. It is disillusioned with them because it enjoys the bliss of tranquility.

For those who are able to fulfill these six prerequisites, calm abiding is achievable in six months. For those who lack the full set of prerequisites, no matter how hard they practice, the result will remain out of reach. The state of calm abiding is a result that requires many causes and conditions. If any of them is missing, it becomes unobtainable. For example, if you wish to have a

boiled egg, you must assemble a stove, a pot, some water, the egg, and so forth. Even when you have all this, if you are missing the lighter that will ignite the gas you will not end up with a boiled egg. The spark might seem like an insignificant condition, but without it, the egg will not boil. Conversely, when all causes and conditions are in place, the result is unavoidable, even if it is unwished for.

Causes and conditions are a subject that is emphasized in Buddhism. There is a slogan in America that says, “Don’t work hard; work smart.” On the one hand we wish for a result, but on the other hand we are not interested in collecting the necessary causes and conditions. This is a very stubborn and narrow-minded attitude. It causes us to be exhausted and lose our faith. Our mind should be open and seek to find what is required. Once the necessary prerequisites are in place, the result will naturally be established. To get what we wish for, we must first remove all unfavorable conditions and establish all favorable ones. For most of us, it is hard to put together the list of all these causes and conditions. For this reason it is extremely important that we seek correct and authentic instructions upon which we can base our practice. Then, when we have the chance to go into retreat, we should try to fulfill as many of the prerequisites we can.

### **The Actual Practice**

#### *The seat*

Before we begin the practice, we should prepare our seat. It is good to draw the sign of the counterclockwise or left-facing swastika on the place where we sit.<sup>2</sup> If it is not convenient to draw it directly, we can place under our cushion a piece of paper on which the symbol is printed. The swastika, which actually is the vajra, represents stability and auspiciousness. The vajra is an implement of the deities, and as such it is inappropriate to sit or walk on it. To avoid such a fault, we use the swastika as a substitute. The external or interpretive vajra symbolizes immovability and indestructibility. The definitive vajra is our extremely subtle mind that is indestructible. Placing the swastika under our seat creates an interdependence that stabilizes our meditation. On top of the swastika we place *kuśa* grass, the tips of which face the same direction we do. *Kuśa* is unlike any other grass. Its branches are straight and unmixed, and they all point in the same direction. It signifies the mind being unmixed with obscurations and is especially helpful to have during a retreat. On top of the swastika and *kuśa* grass, we place a meditation cushion. It should

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<sup>2</sup> The swastika is an ancient symbol of eternity in Buddhism. In this tradition, the upper arm of the symbol faces the viewer’s left (not the viewer’s right, as in the form adopted as the emblem of Nazi Germany).

be higher at the back, supporting us in the meditation posture. Although these preliminary steps are not crucial, they are part of the tradition and it is good to include them.

### *The posture*

The physical posture we assume includes the eight features of Buddha Vairochana. The first feature is that (1) the legs are crossed in the full vajra posture. There are four types of vajra posture: of the legs, of the channels, of the drops, and of the winds. Here we are concerned with the vajra posture of the legs, which can be full or half. The second feature is that (2) the back should be erect and straight like an arrow. This facilitates the free flow of energy-wind because the channels are in their optimum position. In this way we avoid getting tired easily. The third feature is that (3) the left hand is on top of the right, with the thumbs slightly touching. Bringing the hands together in this way symbolizes the union of method and wisdom because the right side of our body symbolizes wisdom and the left, method. The thumbs only need to touch gently because if they push hard against each other the tension will cause pain in the joints, disturbing the mind. Joining the thumbs together allows the two bodhicitta nerves to connect. For those who practice calm abiding in relation to tantra, it is very beneficial to place the hands in this way at the beginning of the session. Later the hand posture can be relaxed. When we place the hands in this way, we form a triangle that signifies the inner fire of *tummo*, creating an interdependence that is auspicious for being successful in this practice. The fourth feature is that (4) the eyes are directed downward along the line of the nose, without being either fully open or fully closed. The fifth feature is that (5) the mouth, including the lips and teeth, should be left in their natural position. The tongue is turned upward to touch the upper palate. This helps us avoid having either excessive saliva or a dry mouth. The sixth feature is that (6) the head should be slightly tilted to the front, without being too high or too low. The seventh feature is that (7) the shoulders should be kept level, at their natural position. The eighth feature is that (8) the elbows should be kept away from the torso, allowing the flow of air and preventing sweating.

Our physical posture is very important when we meditate. Among these eight features, the most important one is keeping the back straight and erect. Marpa, the teacher of Milarepa, was famous for having very good concentration, which he attributed to his good posture. He used to say that the energy of all the meditators in Tibet put together did not match his energy of adopting the posture of Buddha Vairochana. Posture is very important for our concentration due to the structure of the internal net of channels and cakras. The right posture facilitates proper flow of energy.

### *Our mental state*

Once we have adopted the right posture, we should check our mental state. The usual state of our mind is to be agitated with hopes, fears, and a host of other afflictions, such as anger and attachment. Such a mind cannot immediately focus on the focal object and engage in meditation on calm abiding. We should recognize this and be smart about it. Our first task is to calm down the mind through breathing meditation that places it in a neutral state.

There are three types of mental states: nonvirtuous, virtuous, and neutral. The first is controlled by manifest states of the three poisons. This state of mind is not classified as nonvirtuous simply because the Buddha said so. Rather, it is recognized as such because as soon as those destructive emotions arise in our mindstream, they instantly destroy our peace of mind. They bring anguish and pain that hurt the mind. Therefore they are known as nonvirtuous. The practice of calm abiding involves a mind that is capable of remaining focused on a chosen object single-pointedly. Such concentration is impossible while the mind is under the influence of manifest nonvirtuous states. Our first task is to bring the mind from a nonvirtuous state to one that is neutral, and breathing meditation is a very effective technique for doing that. Once the mind is in a neutral state, we can use it for virtuous activities.

At certain times it is obvious that the mind is distracted due to hormones, in which case the origin is physical. This becomes apparent at the age of fourteen to sixteen years. Food and lifestyle play a very important role at that time. The proper amount and type of food is determined by the constitution of the individual. In general, though, cold and uncooked food can damage the body and cause the rise of winds that distract the mind. Regular sleeping hours, as well as moderation in relationships and all other activities, also have a great effect. We should judge each case carefully and address it appropriately.

### *Breathing yoga*

The nine-round breathing yoga helps overcome impure winds and introduce new and pure winds. In dependence on that, we overcome impure mental states and cultivate pure mental states. Before engaging in this practice, it is important to understand the relation between wind and mind in general and, more specifically, the relation between impure wind and impure mind, and between pure wind and pure mind. To do that we must first identify the nature of the winds and that of the mind.

The definition of the mind is “clear and knowing.” The mind is the clearest phenomenon in the universe. This implies that any and all phenomena can be reflected in the mind. The mind is not matter, and therefore possesses neither form, cells, tissue, shape, nor color. Yet it moves us,

as it allows us to experience and know things. This power of the mind is described by the term “knowing.” It is good to reflect on the meaning of this definition, which is simple yet very meaningful. The definition of wind is “light and mobile.” There is external and internal wind. We are all familiar with the external one. The internal wind does not simply refer to the air we breathe and the gas in our stomach. It refers to our vital energy, or life force, which is the mount of consciousness. Consciousness is like a rider who rides the horse of energy-wind. Wind and consciousness depend on each other to function.

Consciousness has to go to a particular object in order to engage it and comprehend it. The wind transfers consciousness from one object to the next. Despite having the capacity to see and comprehend the object, consciousness on its own cannot engage an object unless the wind transports it to that object. Just as there is an intimate relation between wind and mind, so there is an intimate relation between body and mind. If something happens to our body, it affects our mind, and vice versa. In the past people did not know much about the relation between body and mind, but these days our general understanding is broader. Nowadays we understand that a holistic approach is more appropriate, so we don’t simply focus on one part of the body, like changing just one part of a car. To give you an example of how the mind can affect the body: when we become emotional, tears flow from our eyes, yet it is very hard to produce tears on demand! This illustrates how our mental state affects our physical state. Another example is that of a person who has cancer but has yet to be diagnosed. Such a person might be experiencing some physical symptoms but is otherwise more or less normal, functioning and enjoying life. One day they go to the doctor and are diagnosed. Merely hearing the news that they have cancer has a huge impact on them. There are obvious physical changes and an immediate deterioration, right down to their skin tone. This is an example of the strong connection between the coarse body and mind. This is also true for the subtle body and mind, as well as the extremely subtle body and mind.

The close connection between wind and mind dictates that impure consciousness is supported and moved by impure winds, while pure consciousness is supported and moved by pure winds. The nine-round breathing yoga helps us overcome impure mental states by overcoming impure energy-winds. To engage in this breathing meditation, we assume the sevenfold posture of Vairochana, keeping the spine erect like an arrow. We take a deep breath in the beginning, just to set ourselves at ease. Although we maintain this posture, we should be physically and mentally relaxed.

The nine-round breathing yoga includes breathing exercises as well as visualization. All breathing occurs through the nostrils, and no breath is allowed to circulate through the mouth.

The first three rounds of breathing consist of inhaling through the right nostril and exhaling through the left. The second three rounds consist of inhaling through the left nostril and exhaling through the right. The last three rounds consist of inhaling and exhaling through both nostrils. To inhale through the right nostril during the first three rounds of breathing, we block the left nostril with the back of our index finger. We take in a long, slow breath gently through the right nostril until our lungs are completely filled. To breathe out, we block the right nostril with our index finger and exhale through the left nostril. We exhale gently, as before, in a long and slow way, until our lungs are completely empty.

In the second round of breathing we reverse this order, but otherwise the breathing technique is the same. In the last round we breathe through both nostrils, and since we do not need to employ our fingers, we can place the hands in the usual posture of equipoise during meditation.

The visualization that accompanies the first three rounds of this breathing technique is as follows. When we inhale, we imagine that we draw in the five elements that are the essence of the universe and the blessing of all buddhas. All this enters our body through the right nostril and travels downward through our right channel. At the level of the navel all this makes a U-turn, enters the left channel, and ascends through the body, pushing out all impure winds and states of mind. They leave the body through our left nostril, visualized as black liquid that disappears into space. When we complete the first three rounds of breathing, we should feel that the left side of our body is completely clear.

For the second three rounds the visualization is similar, only this time we inhale through the left nostril and exhale through the right one. When we complete the second three rounds of breathing, we should feel that the right side of our body is completely clear. In the last three rounds of breathing, we visualize the five elements and the blessings of the buddhas entering our body through both nostrils, and then rising and expelling negativities through the center of our body.

### *The winds*

This technique is very powerful and brings almost immediate benefit. As our capacity to meditate increases, this purification actually happens, instead of being a mere visualization. Impure winds and states of mind are actually expelled from the body, and new types of pure energy that support purer states of mind are generated in their place. A detailed presentation of this is revealed in tantra.

There are five types of wind: the life-sustaining, the fire-accompanying, the ascending, the downward-voiding, and the pervading wind, all with different locations and functions. The *downward-voiding wind* is located below the navel and around the secret area. Its function is to discard excrement, urine, semen, and menstrual blood, as it controls the contraction and opening of the lower orifices of the body.

The *ascending wind* is located around the chest and throat. Its function is to facilitate vocalization, swallowing, and the intake of food and drink.

The *fire-accompanying wind* is located just below the navel, and its function is to ignite our inner fire and cause it to blaze. Whenever we intake food and drink, it is processed in seven stages and the essence of nutrients is separated from waste. The waste becomes excrement, urine, sleep around the eyes, earwax, hair, and nails. The essence of nutrients becomes blood; the essence of blood becomes flesh; the essence of flesh becomes fat; the essence of fat becomes bone; the essence of bone becomes marrow; the essence of bone marrow becomes drops [of semen and menstrual blood]. The fire-accompanying wind is responsible for such segregation. Those who have strong fire-accompanying wind have very good digestion, and as result also have a good complexion. When the power of this wind declines, the heat energy in the body declines. At that time the mechanism of segregation does not function properly, and as a result the essence of food goes into waste and impurities go into the blood. This causes various problems.

The *life-sustaining wind* is the wind that actually serves as the basis of consciousness. Its function is to sustain and support consciousness. Life begins when consciousness enters our body, and it ends when consciousness leaves our body. As we said before, it is like checking in and out of a hotel.

The *pervading wind* is located all over the body but in particular it is found in the joints. This wind does not circulate from the time of conception until death. At the time of death, when all the winds dissolve, the pervasive wind also dissolves along with the other four winds. This is the only time it is active. It functions to move the body, to stretch and flex the joints, and so forth. This explains why it is found predominantly in the joints.

I have given you some information about the winds in the hope that this will deepen your understanding, especially in terms of tantric practice. The sutric practice addresses the state of the mind directly, without dealing with the energy-wind. In tantric practice, even if we are not yet able to deal with the mind directly, we have the option of dealing with the wind that supports the mind. The principle is that if we can control the horse, we can control the rider.

*The focus of breathing yoga*

We engage in this breathing yoga while maintaining the sevenfold posture of Buddha Vairochana, without manipulating the breath. While we breathe normally, we focus on the sensation of the breath. This sensation may vary among different people due to differences in our bodies. Some people report that there is a special sensation in the nose, while others notice it somewhere else in the body. Each of us should focus on wherever this sensation manifests in us, without trying to manipulate or create a sensation in a particular area. At times it is useful to simply focus on the inhalation and exhalation without trying to identify an area where a sensation is felt. We simply focus on breathing in and out and ignore any inner or outer sound, physical pain, and so forth. Every time that the mind is distracted, we simply bring it back to the breathing. If conceptual thoughts arise, such as fears and hopes about the past, the present, or the future, we should welcome them. At this point if we try to suppress such thoughts we will lose our concentration. Instead, we should look at these thought patterns and find out where they come from, much like meeting a stranger and shaking hands. These thoughts come from empty space and dissolve into empty space. They disappear of their own accord.

The instruction is to simply focus on the breath, without worrying whether we are doing so in the right or wrong way. Some people find it most beneficial to have short inhalations and long exhalations. Others find that long inhalations are more important. The truth is that the longer the inhalations and exhalations are, the more effective the breathing yoga becomes. However, such long breaths do not come easily, and we should spend some time training to develop them. One week should be enough to train in breathing in gentle, slow, long breaths that completely fill our stomach, and in breathing out equally gentle, slow, long breaths that completely empty the lungs. At the beginning it is not easy to combine the breathing with the visualization. For this reason we train in breathing first, and when we have some familiarity with it we introduce the visualization.

One thing to be aware of here is that this is just the preliminary stage of cultivating calm abiding. Therefore we should not spend too much time with this practice. There are people who experience a deep sense of peace at this point that is very pleasant. However, clinging on to such experiences can easily become a habit that inhibits us from going beyond this point. The whole purpose of this meditation is to neutralize the mind. The mind becomes either positive or negative depending on whether it focuses on a positive or negative object. In this case breathing yoga places the mind in a neutral state, which is neither positive nor negative. Calm abiding also is a neutral state of mind because when it is achieved, manifest and gross distractions are pacified but the mind has yet to become familiar with a virtuous object.

We should contemplate the disadvantages of getting caught up in strong emotions until we reach the conclusion that, as a precaution, we want to stay away from such states. This is a very helpful preventative measure, and as such, it only works before strong emotional states overcome us. When strong emotions are already present, we should try to remember this: “Do nothing, say nothing, think nothing.” At times like this we have to stand like a tree, unresponsive. It is impossible to transform the negative into positive straight away. If we act, our response will be negative. This will most probably make things worse. There is wisdom in leaving the room without responding. When the emotional turmoil has settled, we can deal with the situation in a calm way. Obviously the problem will not be solved by itself and we will still have to deal with the situation.

When we have problems in a relationship, emotions run high. At that time it is best to practice patience and avoid talking about the issues involved. When the atmosphere calms down, there can be discussion. Patience is not something that comes naturally, but it can be cultivated. When we are trained in patience we can apply it immediately, as needed. There are psychologists who advise that we should express all our emotions. I feel that this is wrong. When I am angry with someone, it is my responsibility to take care of my anger. Expressing that anger will cause the other person to react, causing my anger to increase even more. In addition, this reaction creates the habit of giving in to anger. Therefore it is best to leave the scene.

Another method that is helpful is to examine the emotion itself: where does it come from? Although such emotions appear to be concrete, in reality they are without essence or substance. There are two types of anger: one that arises circumstantially, and one that is deeply rooted and manifests as soon as conditions allow. In both cases, anger comes from inside. It is the result of underestimating the qualities of the object of our anger. There are three factors that combine to give rise to any affliction: (1) an outer object, (2) an inner consciousness, and (3) a magnifying attitude. If any of them is missing, the affliction will not be generated. For example, if consciousness does not come into contact with the object, neither desire nor anger will arise. Similarly, even if the object is present and consciousness engages it, if the magnifying attitude is lacking, the affliction will not be generated. Here, the magnifying attitude is either overestimating the good qualities of a desirable object or underestimating the qualities of an object of aversion.

Our fantasies play a crucial role in generating desire. Without that overestimation, desire would not arise. There is a Chinese expression of love that says, “Even if the sky falls and the earth is destroyed, I will still love you!” This is what we actually think. But it is unrealistic and becomes the source of chronic pain and agony. The next step is to start thinking, “This is mine. No one else can have it.” This is a false idea because there is nothing that is ours. Things come

and go, and no one can change this. This distorted attitude initially gives rise to grasping, and to anger later on. In this way, all painful feelings come from inside. There is nothing that comes from outside. Therefore, when I say that we should examine the origin of such strong feelings, I do not mean that we should go over the events again and again. We are used to pointing the finger outside and blaming others for our experiences. Rather than do this, we should turn our attention inward and investigate our mind instead.

At times, people become attached to their own mistakes. They can't let go and forgive themselves for something that went wrong in the past. This is a hundred times worse than the original action. I feel that this attitude is very common in the West. The truth is that unless we are able to forgive ourselves, we will not be able to forgive others. It is part of our Buddhist practice of purification to rely on the four antidotes. One of them is regret. Here regret is not the attitude of being attached to our mistake. Instead, it is the attitude of being detached from it: recognizing that we have done something inappropriate, we regret it and resolve to avoid it in the future. We recognize the action as a mistake, but we do not identify with it, or think that it is part of our nature. It is useful to reflect on all the good things we have done as a means to overcome the sense that our actions are unforgivable.

It is also useful to consider the ten characteristics of our buddha nature, and to recognize that our nature is primordially pure and free of stains. Whatever afflictions we experience, they are just temporary, and simply come and go. All of this will help us overcome the sense that we are worthless and stained. If we identify with the positive, we are positive. If we identify with the negative, we are negative. There is no inherently existent good or bad. Normally, we identify ourselves with limited phenomena, thinking, "I am tall"; "I am short"; "I am overweight." In this way we identify ourselves with something purely physical. We impute ourselves onto our body and identify with that body. Then we identify ourselves with our emotions thinking, "I am very happy"; "I am depressed." At that time we impute ourselves onto our emotions. In the worst case, we identify ourselves with our bank account and our material possessions, reflecting, "I am very rich"; "I am poor." All of these are limited phenomena, and when we think in this way we give rise to negative emotions. Many people have the tendency to identify themselves with their emotions. Therefore it is very important to understand how we exist. When we identify ourselves with the infinite, we are infinite. When we identify ourselves with the limited, we are limited.

### **The Development of Calm Abiding**

To achieve the liberation of nirvāṇa and the enlightenment of buddhahood, we must conjoin the realization of calm abiding with insight. What actually carries us to the state of liberation and

enlightenment is insight into the reality of the self and other phenomena. To gain insight into the ultimate nature, we need to have a clear and stable mind, which is just what calm abiding provides. To have a clear reflection of the moon on water, the water must be calm and clear. If the water is agitated or muddy, the reflection of the moon will not be clear. These desired qualities of clarity and firmness are produced through the cultivation of calm abiding.

The nature of calm abiding is the capacity of the mind to remain on a chosen object of meditation for as long as we wish, while experiencing the bliss of physical and mental pliancy. The mind is endowed with the capacity to focus and analyze, but at present these qualities are underdeveloped, and we do not have the power to penetrate the nature of reality. When calm abiding is developed, the clarity and focus of the mind reach their full potential.

Calm abiding is developed through a gradual process that involves the attainment of nine types of mental placement. These are attained by overcoming five faults with the use of eight antidotes and by relying on six powers and four types of attention. This is presented in three parts:

1. What we need to do to focus the mind on the object of meditation
2. What we need to do when the mind is focused on the object of meditation
3. What we need to do after the mind is focused on the object of meditation

#### *What we need to do to focus the mind on the object of meditation*

Before focusing the mind on the object of meditation, certain things must be in place. To begin with, it is very important to have an overview of Buddhism and its practice because this enhances our faith and aspiration. Next, we engage the nine-round breathing yoga to overcome impure states of mind by overcoming impure winds. Breathing meditation places our mind into a neutral state and makes it flexible enough to allow us to place it on a chosen focal object. These steps have already been presented.

The next step is to overcome laziness in relation to the practice of concentration. The actual antidote to laziness is *pliancy*. Pliancy describes the state of physical and mental bliss. When our body and mind have pliancy, laziness has no opportunity to settle in. However, at present we do not have such pliancy and therefore the antidote for laziness is not readily available. Physical and mental pliancy is the result of cultivating continuous *enthusiasm* in terms of putting effort into the practice of concentration. Pliancy does not arise without putting in any effort. What makes us continuously put effort into developing concentration is the *aspiration* to engage in such concentration. This strong urge comes from inside and is not something that can be imposed externally by someone else. Such strong urge and aspiration result from having seen

the benefits of calm abiding. The more fascinated we are by the qualities of calm abiding, the more we aspire to cultivate this state.

Confidence that recognizes the benefits of calm abiding, and is fascinated by its qualities, is *faith*. In general there are three types of faith: clear, aspiring, and that of conviction. In Buddhism, “faith” refers to a mind that recognizes qualities. In this particular case, faith in concentration refers to the mind that can appreciate the qualities of such concentration.

Therefore there are four antidotes to overcoming laziness: faith, aspiration, enthusiastic effort, and pliancy. This is also applicable in our everyday lives. To accomplish any purpose in our life we rely on these four, either consciously or unconsciously. They are relevant for internal as well as external accomplishments. At our stage, it is important to develop faith. In this context, faith is the mind that recognizes the qualities of concentration, and is therefore based on wisdom.

It is important that we make a list of all the qualities of concentration we can think of, and go through it. For example, one of the benefits of developing calm abiding is that we enjoy a mind full of delight and a body full of bliss. Another benefit is that engagement in any virtuous activity we choose becomes very powerful because we engage in the activity with a mind that is clear and firm, without being distracted. On the basis of calm abiding we develop clairvoyance and other types of superknowledge. These include developing the divine eye, divine ear, knowing the mind of others, understanding events that happened in the past, and knowing what will occur in the future. In dependence on those we develop miraculous powers. Gifted with such capacity we will be able to achieve the peace and happiness of higher rebirths as gods and humans, of liberation, and of enlightenment. These are but a few of the benefits we could include in this list.

It is very beneficial to spend some time reflecting on these qualities and to personally compile a list that includes more qualities. When we make such a list, we appreciate the qualities. This is faith. Having made such a list, we would not discard it but rather bring it to mind repeatedly. The more we reflect on it, the stronger the urge to cultivate concentration becomes. Making such a list and reflecting on it provides the mind with a great sense of satisfaction. Here, we want to take advantage the mechanism that induces a strong urge through familiarity. Usually we compile lists of shortcomings of ourselves and others, and familiarize our mind with that. Familiarity with such faults is similar to handling garbage that makes us unclean. The same is true for afflictions such as attachment. We already have a list of qualities of a particular object in our mind, and we constantly engage it and fantasize about it, exaggerating the qualities. In this way desire increases. The mechanism is the same for other emotions as well. This point also indicates that cultivating calm abiding is not about emptying the mind of any conceptions and

spacing out. To overcome laziness, it is very important to have faith reflecting the qualities of concentration.

Here, we reflect on the qualities of concentration, and that generates a strong urge to cultivate concentration. This strong aspiration naturally leads us to put effort in concentration, happily and enthusiastically. Despite exerting ourselves, it does not feel like hard work due to our enthusiasm and delight. With effort we are bound to develop both physical and mental pliancy. All this is based on faith. This is what we need to do before setting the mind on the object of meditation.

*What we need to do when the mind is focused on the object of meditation*

To place our attention on an object, we must first choose a suitable object. Once we identify the object, we tie the mind to it, as if it were a pole. The Buddha has taught four objects of meditation: (1) universal objects, (2) objects for purifying behavior, (3) objects for purifying afflictions, and (4) objects for scholars.

(1) There are four types of *universal objects*: discursive, nondiscursive, the limit of phenomena, and accomplishment of our purpose. The first two objects are from the perspective of the observer. Those who wish to achieve insight for the sake of wisdom need to engage a *discursive object*. To develop wisdom, we need to analyze rather than stay focused, whereas for calm abiding we need a *nondiscursive object*. An object, such as emptiness or impermanence, can be discursive or nondiscursive depending on the need of the meditator.

If the meditator wishes to understand impermanence, he or she needs to analyze the nature of causes and conditions, how they combine, how change comes about, and so forth. In this case, impermanence becomes a discursive object.

If the meditator already knows about impermanence, he or she might want to simply place the mind single-pointedly on it. In this case, impermanence becomes a nondiscursive object.

So the object of meditation here is similar to an object that belongs to the husband: at the same time it also belongs to the wife! For example, the Buddha is endowed with five types of pristine awareness. These are one in nature, but when the omniscient mind performs different functions, they are given five different names. Another example is John, who is a male, a father, and the CEO of a company. When John is introduced as a “father,” we understand that he is not childless, but we do not know anything about his work. When he is introduced as the “CEO,” we understand that he has a high position in a company, but we do not know anything about his family, and so forth. This example also illustrates how our conceptual thoughts follow from

various labels, since phenomena merely exist through the process of imputation. As a result, the same object can be categorized as discursive or nondiscursive depending on the observer.

The *limit of phenomena* can refer to either conventional or ultimate phenomena. The Buddha has indicated that there is a limit to how many conventional phenomena exist, as well as a limit for the ultimate nature of phenomena. He stated, “Just this is all there is; there is nothing more.” Conventional phenomena are understood to be included in the five aggregates, the eighteen constituents, and the twelve bases. The aggregates make us have the feeling of “I.” The form aggregate is inwardly the body and outwardly the material world. For the aggregate of feeling there are three types: pleasant, unpleasant, and indifferent. The aggregate of discrimination, or perception, is the mental factor that distinguishes one object from another and allows us to know the identity of an object. Every day we come into contact with forms, generate good, bad, or neutral feelings about them, and finally discriminate relying on the five mental factors of feeling, discrimination, intention, contact, and attention. To give you an example of this process in relation to vanilla ice cream: to understand its distinctive features we need to rely on the mental factor of discrimination. First of all, we need to come into contact with the external, observed condition, which is vanilla ice cream. Second, we need to be there to observe that object, and for that we also need the internal, dominant condition of the eye sense power. For eye awareness to comprehend vanilla ice cream, we must have both the observed and the dominant condition. Next, mental discrimination discriminates. This will determine how you experience vanilla ice cream—whether you like it, dislike it, or are indifferent to it. On the basis of this we develop attachment, aversion, or confusion with respect to the object with which we come into contact.

An easier way to describe the five aggregates is to say that they constitute our body and mind. When we understand them in this way, we understand that the self is nothing other than these five. There is no self that is other than the body and mind, and by seeing this, we eliminate any misapprehension about the self. With this example we also understand the second statement of the Buddha about the ultimate nature of phenomena: “This alone is how things exist; they do not exist in any other way.”

Universal *objects for the accomplishment of our purpose* are posited from the perspective of the result. When we focus on our meditation object, we gradually gain stability and clarity. Through familiarity with these objects, we overcome our afflictions and complete the path.

(2) *Objects for purifying behavior* deal with behavior that is influenced by afflictions such as attachment, aversion, confusion, pride, and so forth. Otherwise, not all types of behavior need to be pacified. When attachment is predominant, ugliness becomes the object of meditation.

In this case we reflect on the ugliness of our desired object. When anger is predominant, love becomes the object of meditation. When confusion and ignorance are predominant, dependent arising becomes the object of meditation since it sharpens the mind. I recently read in a scientific magazine that the average person uses only up to 3 percent of his or her mental capacity, while Einstein used about 10 percent. The Buddhist perspective is similar: we use a very small portion of our mind. The less we use the mind, the rustier it becomes. The more we use it, the more it shines. When pride is predominant, the recommended objects of meditation are the eighteen bases and twelve constituents. The twelve constituents are the six sense organs of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, tactility, and mind, and their corresponding objects of external forms, sounds, aromas, tastes, textures, and mental objects. When the organs come into contact with their respective objects, they give rise to a specific type of awareness. Therefore, if we add the six types of eye, ear, nose, tongue, tactile, and mental awareness to the previous list of twelve, we end up with the eighteen bases. When the mind reflects on these, our pride—which unrealistically thinks we are in control of everything—diminishes.

When distraction is predominant, the Buddha suggested that it is helpful to focus on the inhalation and exhalation. Therefore, there are many objects of meditation to choose from, according to our need. Different people are dominated by different afflictive emotions: some by attachment, some by hatred, others by pride, jealousy, or a discursive mind. It is up to the individual to judge in which category he or she belongs. When we become familiar with a particular emotion and express it frequently, we end up being dominated by it. For example, for those who are dominated by a particular affliction, such as attachment, it only takes a small object to trigger attachment, and the affliction remains manifest for longer. Those who feel that all these afflictions have equal strength in their mind, without any of them being predominant, can choose any of the objects mentioned above.

(3) *Objects purifying afflictions* mainly deal with desire that is generated toward the six objects of desire of the desire realm. There are two stages in overcoming such desire: to reduce its strength, and to completely uproot it. To reduce our desire for objects of the desire realm, we meditate on the coarseness of the desire realm in contrast to the refinement of the form realm. The form realm is not a physical location but is, rather, a mental state.

(4) *Objects of meditation for the scholars* include many of the topics we have already mentioned, such as distinguishing between the five aggregates, the twelve constituents, and the eighteen bases; distinguishing between what is to be adopted and what is to be abandoned; and the presentation of the twelve links of interdependence. These are applied internally, to our body, or externally, to the body of others.

For those who choose to examine these in terms of their own bodies, they should see themselves in the aspect of the deity, instead of in their ordinary form. Meditating on ourselves in the aspect of divine bodies is useful in terms of overcoming ordinary appearance and grasping. Meditating on the aspect of a skeleton is useful in terms of overcoming attachment to the present body. When we focus on the body, we can concentrate on the channels or on the inner resonance of a mantra to develop a peaceful and happy mental state. We then use this peaceful feeling as the object of our meditation. These are *internal* objects of meditation.

Calm abiding is about clarity, stability, and intensity of clarity. To have an indication of all three, it is best to work with a visualized object. Some people choose to focus on the breath. Breath as an object provides the opportunity to monitor the stability of the mind, and at the beginning this seems to be easier because there is nothing to visualize. However, in the long run it is harder to train the mind because we are not able to check any progress in terms of the clarity and intensity of clarity of the object.

For the practice of calm abiding, it is highly recommended that we use an *external* object, namely, the form of the body of Buddha Śākyamuni. The reason for choosing this particular object is that it is associated with many benefits, in addition to being conducive to developing calm abiding. When we choose the image of the Buddha as the focal object of our concentration, we constantly cultivate familiarity with it. As a result, this image becomes clear and stable. This means that it will be present when we make prayers, present offerings, confess, dedicate, and so forth. In this way the mind is constantly becoming familiar with a virtuous object, and we accumulate merit. Such familiarity means that, even at times of danger, we will remain mindful of the presence of Buddha. Even at the time of death, we will be able to bring to mind the image of the Buddha.

Since there are many such benefits, most Tibetan masters recommend that we choose the image of the Buddha. I will therefore explain how to develop calm abiding by choosing this image. Of course, the meditator could choose a different object, such as a flower. But developing familiarity with a flower will not bring about the blessings that come from becoming familiar with a virtuous object.

First, we need to become familiar with that image, so having a nice statue or picture is useful. We should spend some time looking at that statue, paying attention to its details. Then we close our eyes and try to visualize it. Here we are not really focusing on the external object of the statue or picture, however. The external object is perceived by our eye consciousness, and this is not an exercise to train our eye consciousness. Since we are training the mind, we need to form a mental image instead. It is important to gain that image, even though at the beginning, and for a

long while, it will remain unclear. It becomes clear when we achieve calm abiding. In terms of its size, in general it is best to make it smaller. But we can adjust the size according to our capacity to focus. The image will become sharper and refined through the process of searching for it, finding it, and finally relying on it.

When we gain the image in our mind, we have found it. It is important that we remain with that image: whatever we chose at the beginning, this will be our object to the end. If we keep changing the object and its characteristics, such as its shape, size, color, and so forth, our concentration will not be stable. The mind will play those tricks: if we choose the image to be one inch tall, our mind will tell us to change it to two inches; if we choose to focus on yellow color, our mind will tell us to change it to red. We should recognize that this is happening, remain with our initial object, and discipline the mind.

In terms of size, a smaller size is preferable, and in terms of color, yellow is better, but the practice is flexible and we can determine the object and its characteristics ourselves. Some prefer to focus on Medicine Buddha, in which case the color is blue. For Buddha Śākyamuni the color is yellow, and for Buddha Amitābha it's red. The main thing is to choose the image of a buddha. If we have chosen Buddha Śākyamuni, it will be a figure with one face and two arms, yellow in color. Most people place the image either in the space in front of them or on the crown of their head, but it can also be placed at the throat, the heart, and so forth. With this we have gained the object of meditation.

*What we need to do after the mind is focused on the object of meditation*

At the beginning, we should be satisfied with whatever appears to the mind, no matter how vague it might be. Although the image is unclear at the beginning, if we persevere with our meditation, details will begin to emerge. Eventually we will be able to perceive the thirty-two marks and eighty signs that grace the body of a buddha. As we become more familiar, we will be able to perceive not only the image of the buddha but also the celestial mansion in which he resides. Next, we will be able to reduce the entire visualization of the pure field and the buddha to the size of a sesame seed. All this is possible because the mind is clear and knowing. Therefore this clarity in the definition of the mind is subjective clarity, and it does not indicate the quality of the image itself.

When we choose the image of a buddha as our focal object, we should reflect that the Dharma Body (*dharmakāya*) of a buddha is everywhere: it is the ultimate quality and nature of the mind. Since the ultimate nature is everywhere, the omniscient mind also is everywhere. Just like the moon, the Dharma Body is always there. However, the reflection of the moon will only

appear if there is a body of water. The moon from its own side does not discriminate, thinking, “I will cast my reflection here but not there.” When the water is clear, the reflection will appear clearly. Similarly, when we remove obscurations from our mind, we will experience the reflection of the Buddha [who is our focal object]. At the beginning the mind will be partially open, so the reflection also will be partial. When the mind becomes fully open, the Buddha will be reflected fully. The image of the buddha that we visualize should be understood in this way, rather than appear as something heavy, like a statue, or static, like the two-dimensional image of a *thangka*. When we bring this understanding to our practice of calm abiding, the training becomes meaningful and powerful.

### **Calm Abiding in the Context of Tantra**

Those who can combine calm abiding with their tantric practice should do the practice while visualizing themselves as the deity. For example, for those who have received the initiation of Cittamaṇi Tārā, it is best to choose as the focal object themselves in the aspect of Tārā. Alternatively, they can visualize Tārā anywhere in their body: at the crown, the throat, the heart, the navel, or the secret area. Another option is to choose the mantra of the deity, or the seed syllable TĀṂ. For those who wish to combine calm abiding with the practice of Vajrayogini, the focal object becomes the syllable BAM. This can be visualized anywhere in the body, but I would recommend that it be placed at the navel, which is the seat of inner fire. Beginners often make the mistake of placing mantric syllables at their heart, but since a lot of energy gathers there it can make us nervous. This is the opposite of our desired effect!

When placing a seed syllable of the deity at the navel, we have to be certain that we place it inside the central channel. If we focus outside the central channel, the inner fire will be ignited outside the channel. That fire is not genuine *tummo* and can cause burning. It blazes intensely for a short duration, causing the heat element of the body to degenerate. Genuine *tummo* ignites when we focus inside the central channel. It begins as a very small flame inside the channel, and the meditator has the feeling that it comes from deep inside the body. It is small but steady and supports digestion. It is called digestive bile and breaks up the food we consume into essence and waste. When the digestive bile is strong, there is good separation of essence and waste. It has the power to segregate because it is supported by the heat energy. When the digestive bile is not strong, impurities enter the blood.

To engage in these sorts of practices, it is important to rely on instructions that are authentic and unmistakable. Otherwise the risks are great. In general, people are categorized in three groups according to their constitution: those who are dominated by bile, those who are

dominated by phlegm, and those who are dominated by wind. In a bile-dominated person, the heat element is predominant, and when they focus their mind on a particular location in the body, they feel heat at that spot. A phlegm-dominated person will feel cold when they focus their attention on a certain location. A wind-dominated person should be very careful when attempting to engage in these practices. It is best that a wind-dominated person avoid focusing at the heart altogether and instead focus at the navel.

### **The Role of the Nine Mental Placements**

All Buddhist teachings are included in the Mahāyāna, which consists of the mind generation practices, the practice of the six perfections, and the progression along the ten grounds. These are subsumed under the five paths of accumulation, preparation, seeing, meditation, and no more learning. These are the paths leading to the peace and happiness of enlightenment. It is similar to a railway leading to buddhahood that passes through five train stations. It is necessary to reach and go through each of those five stations in order to arrive at the city of enlightenment. The actual train that goes through these five stations is the wisdom realizing emptiness. The speed of that train depends on calm abiding, the force of compassion, and the power of bliss. Calm abiding deepens and enhances the wisdom realizing emptiness, and it is much like the fuel that keeps the engine running. It is a powerful and efficient fuel that allows wisdom to realize emptiness in a more profound and direct way. It is the capability of the mind to remain on the object of meditation with clarity and stability, while experiencing the bliss of physical and mental pliancy.

Calm abiding is developed through a series of mental placements: (1) placing the mind on the object of meditation, (2) continuously placing the mind, (3) re-placing the mind, (4) closely placing the mind, (5) subduing the mind, (6) pacifying the mind, (7) thoroughly pacifying the mind, (8) placing the mind single-pointedly, and (9) placing the mind in equipoise. Calm abiding is achieved after the ninth mental placement is established.

Once we have found the object of meditation, the next stage is to place the mind on it. This constitutes the first of the nine types of mental placement. Those who choose to practice by visualizing themselves as a deity should first visualize the master from whom they have received initiation into that deity, and appreciate him or her as inseparable from the deity. Sometimes people are confused, having received many initiations, and are not sure which one to choose. Despite having received initiations into the practice of many deities, we should choose one of them as our personal yidam, and then engage any level of practice—Hinayāna, Mahāyāna, Sutrayāna, or Tantrayāna—with that deity alone. In this way, all our energy is concentrated on one deity and the practice becomes very powerful.

If we choose to focus on Tārā, for example, we should first visualize the guru, who is indivisible from Tārā, at the crown of our head. Focusing on the guru, we should generate strong faith and devotion and also feel the love and affection the guru has for us. We request of the guru-deity: “Please bless my mind to be able to achieve my spiritual goals, and in particular to generate the realization of calm abiding.” When our request is sincere, the guru responds with his blessing. As a result of such deep feelings from both sides, the guru melts down into nectar. The nectar enters our body through the crown of the head. As it enters our body, it gives rise to uncontaminated bliss. This bliss causes our ordinary body to shrink. The body becomes smaller and eventually disappears into empty space, which is our ultimate buddha nature. This space is empty of inherent existence. We feel that the extremely subtle mind realizes emptiness. That mind that realizes our ultimate nature appears as ourselves in the aspect of the Green Tārā, with one face and two arms. We should try to cultivate clear appearance of ourselves in that state: we are sixteen years old, our skin is green in color, we are adorned with ornaments, wearing celestial garments, and radiating infinite rays of wisdom from our body. We should observe our body in that aspect, scanning it a few times. Our body as Green Tārā is our object of meditation for developing calm abiding. The same technique applies to all yidams, such as Vajrayoginī, Yamāntaka, and so forth.

#### *The five faults and eight antidotes*

As we progress along these nine mental placements, we will face certain obstacles. We can overcome all of these obstacles since they do not exist inherently and only arise temporarily. When obstacles arise, we should examine them carefully. For some, we should apply an antidote straight away, while for others it is best to not engage an antidote. Sometimes, in our effort to apply an antidote, we make the problem bigger than it really is. In such cases, not applying an antidote allows the obstacle to disappear on its own. When we are in the process of developing the nine mental placements, all obstacles are included in the five faults of developing meditative stabilization. The five faults are: (1) laziness, (2) forgetting the instruction, (3) mental sinking and excitation, (4) nonapplication of antidotes, and (5) overapplication of antidotes. There are eight antidotes to the five faults. To apply the antidotes correctly, we should first identify the faults properly.

(1) We have already discussed *laziness* and the way to overcome it. In general, there are three types of laziness: disliking meditative stabilization, being attached to nonvirtuous activities, and having a sense of inferiority that thinks achieving such levels of concentration is unlikely. The actual antidotes to laziness are: (i) *faith* that appreciates the qualities and power of calm

abiding, (ii) *aspiration* generated from that faith, (iii) *effort* imbued with enthusiasm induced from that aspiration, and (iv) *pliancy* that results from such effort.

(2) The second fault is *forgetting the instruction*. When it occurs, the object of meditation does not appear in the mind. For example, when the focal object is the body of the Buddha, we forget the instruction when we lose the image of the physical form of the Buddha. The antidote is (v) *mindfulness*. Mindfulness is the power of the mind to hold a familiar object of meditation tightly. It has three characteristics, the first of which is that the held object must be something we already know. Unless we already know that object, there is no point in saying that we forgot or lost it. We could not possibly forget an object that we do not know. Therefore, the object must be something with which we are already familiar. This is why, prior to placing the mind, we must have already looked carefully at an image of the Buddha and tried to visualize it. When we attempt to do this in the beginning, we should be satisfied with just a rough, initial image. It could be as vague as a yellow patch. Despite lacking definition and precision, we have to be satisfied with that. This is our starting point. The second characteristic of mindfulness is the mode of apprehension of the object of mediation: the object should be held tightly. The third characteristic is the function of mindfulness that does not allow our mind to be distracted by other internal or external objects of desire. In this way, mindfulness is the fifth of eight antidotes and counteracts the second of five faults, namely, forgetting the instruction.

(3) The third fault is *mental sinking and excitation*. Mental sinking includes states such as lethargy, drowsiness, laxity, and darkness. It is heaviness of the mind and body. There are two kinds of mental sinking: coarse and subtle. Genuine meditative stabilization must have the three characteristics of stability, clarity, and intensity of clarity. Stability indicates that the mind remains firmly on the object of meditation without moving. The second feature, clarity, does not refer to clarity of the object but to the clarity of the mind that views the object. Therefore, this is subjective clarity. The mind should have a quality of clarity that resembles that of rays of light. The third feature of meditative stabilization is the intensity of the clarity, which should be vivid and sharp. When the mind remains on the object firmly but lacks clarity, we are dealing with a case of coarse mental sinking.

Subtle mental sinking occurs when the mind remains on the object with stability and clarity but lacks the necessary intensity of clarity. This subtle mental sinking is quite difficult to overcome because it is difficult to identify. It closely resembles meditative stabilization. The cultivation of this type of concentration will even cause breathing to slow, and the meditator can remain absorbed for days and months, mistaking it for a genuine concentration. Cultivating such

concentration is like having an enemy within our inner circle. It is like holding a cup, but not tightly enough.

When mental excitation is present, the mind flees to an external object of desire. There are two kinds of mental excitation: coarse and subtle. In the case of coarse mental excitation, the mind becomes totally distracted, and as it moves to another object we lose the body of the Buddha. In the case of subtle mental excitement, the image is not completely lost, but part of the mind drifts to an external object. As a result, we cannot say that 100 percent of the mind is on the object of meditation. This is something that happens a lot on a daily basis. For example, when we drive we also think about a number of things, but somehow we reach our destination. This means that part of the mind is focusing on the road and part of the mind is thinking about other things. This is a case of subtle mental excitation.

There are a few antidotes available for excitation and sinking. The first antidote is (vi) *introspection*. This introspection is not the actual army that fights off mental sinking and excitation; rather, it is like a spy who monitors the enemy's movements. It is like a watchdog that watches to see if any burglars have entered the property. If you live in a place where burglaries are common, you will certainly keep a watchdog. Similarly here, when we know that there is the danger of sinking and excitation, we will employ introspection. Ideally, the moment subtle sinking begins to settle, introspection should warn us about the lack of intensity in terms of clarity. The reason for subtle sinking is that we have failed to hold the object with enough tightness. In this case, we should hold the object more tightly. When we hold tightly, we increase the strength of clarity of the object. But as tightness increases, the mind becomes excited; likewise, as tightness is loosened, the mind sinks.

When this occurs, we need to adjust and find the right balance between tightness and looseness, avoiding the two extremes. This adjustment can only come from personal experience, and the meditator needs to understand whether the mode of holding the object is too tight or too loose. The Buddha gave the example of the strings of a guitar: when they are too tight or too loose, they produce an unpleasant sound; at the right tension, they produce the best sound. If you have a pet, such as a small chick, you know that you have to handle it properly: if you hold it too tightly, it will die, and if you hold it too loosely, it will run away. The function of introspection is to check and indicate which type of action we should take.

If we fail to overcome the problem at this stage, there is danger that coarse mental sinking will arise. When this occurs, the mind stays with the object but there is no clarity. In this case we should hold the object tightly and check whether or not clarity improves. In most cases there is an improvement. If there is no improvement after increasing tightness, we need to either

brighten or enlarge the image. To avoid mental sinking, we view the image of the Buddha's body as a body of bright light.

When the obstacle of sinking is present, we initially apply various measures, but we do not need to break our session or change the object of meditation. We try to remain on the same object while we make it brighter. If that doesn't work, we should consider the qualities of our human rebirth and our buddha nature. Should these means fail, we need to apply a forceful antidote. We visualize the clarity of our mind appearing in the aspect of light, or in the form of the Tibetan letter HA. In doing so, we have changed our object of meditation: instead of focusing on the body of the Buddha, we focus on light or the letter HA. Next, we pronounce "PHÉ" forcefully and visualize our consciousness exiting through the crown of our head, either in the aspect of light or the letter HA. We project our consciousness into space. The two merge and become indivisible: there is no duality of object and subject.

This visualization here, in the context of developing calm abiding, is for the sake of uplifting the mind. There is no danger or fault associated with this practice. The visualization should not be confused with the practice of *powa*, or transference of consciousness. When we prepare for *powa* we practice until we have the signs of having reached proficiency. One of these signs is the blissful sensation we experience when we press slightly the point of our head that corresponds with the upper opening of the central channel. This indicates that we have reached the point where we can send our consciousness to a pure land of our choice and leave our body behind. Once we reach that state we stop doing the practice, but we remain mindful of our capacity and the instructions. When the signs of imminent death occur, we try our best to avert it. If death is unavoidable, we should have no fear. After all, death is the phase of checking out of the hotel that our body has provided. At that time we can engage the practice of *powa* and direct our consciousness to a pure buddha field, at will.

This is a very powerful method for uplifting the mind and overcoming mental sinking. If it brings no result, there is no point in pushing any harder. We need to end the meditation session. It is best to have many short sessions of good quality rather than get into the habit of having longer sessions during which we struggle. At this point we should refresh our body by having a shower or washing the face and sitting in a cool place. Ideally, we should go to sit in a place with an extensive view, either by the sea or at the top of a hill. All these measures will take care of our mental sinking—unless we have a chronic case of mental sinking, which is the result of not being able to let go of things we have done in the past. People who cannot let go keep revisiting past unpleasant events until they push themselves into a low and pitiful state. To overcome this, it is helpful to meditate on our buddha nature, our infinite spiritual potential.

When introspection checks and reports that there is mental excitation, we should take the necessary measures. When subtle mental excitation arises, part of the mind remains with the body of the Buddha while another part drifts away. If that is the case, we should take measures to make the mind remain fully focused on the object. Sometimes holding the object too tightly might cause part of the mind to wander off. This means that we need to loosen up, and as a result the mind will naturally return to the object. If we loosen up the mode of apprehension of the object and still the mind does not return, this is an indication that there is danger of coarse mental excitation. The mind is about to be fully distracted to another object, and we will completely lose the image of the Buddha. To counter this, initially we loosen the object of meditation, and it is not necessary to change the object or break the session. If that doesn't work, we need to let go of the object of meditation and instead reflect on death, impermanence, and the suffering of other sentient beings. If the mind is distracted to another object of desire, we should think about its impermanence, the suffering it induces, and so forth. This causes our mind to become disenchanted. When the mind becomes disillusioned, it naturally returns to the focal object.

If the problem persists, we should apply a forceful method. This entails visualizing a jet-black drop at the navel, which causes the mind to withdraw [from the object it has been distracted by]. If this forceful method doesn't bring the desired effect, we should employ breathing as a skillful means for overcoming excitation. Breathing is a powerful and useful technique, not only at the beginning of the session but also here. In this context we don't need to focus on the breathing sensation. We just breathe normally, without manipulating the breathing pattern, but count the inhalations and exhalations. A set of an inhalation followed by an exhalation counts as one breath. Usually, by the time we have counted up to six, we are able to bring the mind back to the object of meditation.

If all this fails, we need to break the session, take some rest, and stretch out the body. The best treatment at this point is to massage our body with warm sesame oil. The mind escapes through the nine doors of the body and every pore. When we are distracted, it is easy to get tired and we find it hard to focus. This results in problems with sleep and digestion. The body becomes heavy and the mind unclear.

When we experience such problems, we can apply warm sesame oil at the upper opening of the central channel, located eight finger widths beyond the hair line. Further, we can rub the oil around our ears, on the soles of the feet, and give a good rub all over the body. By applying oil we block the openings through which our wind and energy tend to escape. If the wind cannot go out, the mind also cannot go out. Often this results in a deep and relaxing sleep, as the mind withdraws and we overcome mental excitation. By applying all these techniques we overcome the

third of five faults, mental sinking and excitation, by applying the sixth of eight antidotes, namely, introspection.

(4) The fourth fault is *nonapplication of antidotes*. When we meditate on the body of the Buddha, introspection is actively checking to see whether any type of mental sinking or excitation is present. If introspection detects their presence, we should apply the relevant antidotes straight away. Failing to do so is the fault of nonapplication. The antidote is (vii) *application*, which is the seventh of eight antidotes.

(5) The fifth fault is *overapplication of antidotes*. When mental sinking or excitation do not arise, or when they have already been eliminated, it is a fault to continue applying antidotes because they are unnecessary and will cause the mind to be distracted. At that time it is necessary to exercise equanimity. The antidote to overapplication is (viii) *nonapplication*, which is the eighth antidote. Dealing with these five faults by applying the eight antidotes is crucial as we cultivate the nine types of mental placement.

#### *The nine mental placements*

The first of nine mental placements is *placing the mind* on the object of meditation. To do this we must first find the object, and to find the object we must first of all search for it. If the chosen object is the body of the Buddha, we search for it by first acquiring a good representation of it, such as a detailed picture or a good-quality statue, or by receiving a description and instructions from a qualified master. It is excellent to receive some teachings on the thirty-two marks and eighty signs of the Buddha. The more we can focus on the qualities of the object, the more pleasant the experience will be. But even if all this is not possible, we should not think that we cannot begin searching for the object. A good picture will suffice. We should have a good look at the picture, put it away, and try to visualize the image. If the image does not appear, we should look again carefully at the picture and try once again to visualize it. When we are able to visualize the image of the Buddha, the phase of searching for the image ends because we have found the image.

Once we have found it, we should place the mind on it. During the first stage of placing the mind, we are successful at placing the mind, but we cannot do it continuously. When we can remain with the object, without distraction, for the duration of twenty-one breaths, which is approximately fifty-two to fifty-three seconds, we have completed the first of nine mental placements. During that time, distractions become obvious. It almost seems that placing the mind causes us to be more distracted than before. Of course, this is not true. What happens is that we become aware of how distracted we are. Previously, we did not pay any attention to the patterns

and movement of the mind, but once we begin paying attention, we become aware of how distracted we are. For example, every day there is heavy traffic across Golden Gate Bridge, but normally we don't pay much attention to it. If we read a report mentioning the number of cars that travel across the bridge on a given day, we suddenly realize how heavy the traffic is. Similarly here, the first type of mental placement is a time during which we identify our many distractions.

The second mental placement is *continuously placing the mind* on the object of meditation. Here the duration of the placement is extended. Our mind is able to remain with the object for more than twenty-one breaths. We can now remain with the object for the time it takes to recite one mala of *Oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ*, which is about one-and-a-half minutes. Yogis of the past did not have watches, so counting mantras with a mala was often given as a measure of time. When we can remain for one-and-a-half or two minutes on the object of meditation, without being distracted by mental sinking and excitation, we have completed the second of nine mental placements.

Here the mention of the mantra is only relevant as an indication of time. It does not mean that we have to count mantras with a corner of our mind. If we were to do that, part of our mind would be distracted by the recitation, instead of being 100 percent focused on the object. As we move from the first to the second level, we will know that our concentration has increased. It is best to avoid checking immediately. After a few sessions on the second level, when we feel more stable and confident, we can check the time using a watch.

In terms of the faults, they are all present during the first placement and we should be ready to apply the appropriate antidotes. During the second placement, laziness is still present at the beginning. As for the remaining faults, they are all present because we tend to forget the instruction, experience mental sinking and excitation, and alternate between nonapplication and overapplication.

The third mental placement is *re-placing the mind* on the object of meditation. At this level we are capable of continuously focusing the mind on the image for about two minutes without the distractions of sinking and excitation, but after that the mind wanders off. Introspection recognizes this immediately because during the first and second mental placement we develop the power of mindfulness. During the second mental placement, we have the feeling that distractions arise occasionally, as though they are taking a rest. This is due to the increased power of our mindfulness and introspection. Even if we lose focus, we recognize it immediately and are able to re-place the mind on the inner object of meditation. During the third mental placement, all five faults are present, but we begin to sense that distractions and obstacles caused

by mental sinking and excitation are weakened. They are becoming exhausted and don't cause so much trouble. The more we enhance our mindfulness and introspection, the stronger the antidotes become and the weaker the obstacles. This is good news for the meditator!

The fourth mental placement is *closely placing the mind* on the object of meditation. Here the word "closely" indicates that we have become very familiar with the object of meditation. We are so close to the object that mindfulness is developed to its full potential. From this point of the fourth mental placement we will never again lose the object of meditation. Whatever the circumstances might be, they cannot interfere with our mind to the point of causing us to lose our chosen object. If the chosen object is the form of the Buddha, this means that the image of the Buddha will always appear in the mind. At this point laziness is still present, but is very weak. Forgetting the instruction, which amounts to losing the object of meditation, will not occur any more. This means that coarse mental excitation does not bother us any longer. The rest of the faults still appear, however, and we have to apply the necessary antidotes.

The fifth mental placement is *subduing the mind*. This indicates that during the first four mental placements, the mind gradually withdraws from external objects. When the mind withdraws to the focal object, there is danger of mental sinking. If this occurs, subtle mental sinking that resembles meditative stabilization arises. Stability and clarity are present, but the intensity of clarity is missing. We are aware of this fault straight away because our introspection is very strong at this point. We are mindful that we must tighten the mode of apprehension, and we do so immediately.

When we overcome this, we move to the sixth mental placement, which is *pacifying the mind*. During the fifth mental placement we had to counteract the danger of mental sinking by tightening the mode of apprehension. This can lead to excitation and distraction. Once again, introspection is aware of it, and we become mindful of this fault. Therefore we adjust the way we hold the object, avoiding coarse excitation.

The seventh mental placement is *thoroughly pacifying the mind*. At this level, mental sinking and excitation have become weak. It is as if the general of our army has become very strong. From this point onward, neither sinking nor excitation can interrupt our meditative stabilization.

The eighth mental placement is *single-pointed placement of the mind* on the object of meditation. At this level, we still need to put in a little bit of effort at the beginning of the session. After that, there is no effort required for the remainder of the session. The mind stays on the object of meditation with stability, clarity, and intensity of clarity, without any distractions. The difference between the seventh and eighth mental placement is that, during the seventh stage,

effort is required at the beginning and throughout the session, but during the eighth level a small amount of effort is required only at the beginning of the session. At this stage we are very familiar with the object of meditation.

From that point it is easy to transfer to the ninth mental placement, *placing the mind in equipoise*. At this level, our meditation on the form of the Buddha comes effortlessly, with stability, clarity, and intensity of clarity, without any mental sinking or excitation. There is no effort required, not even a slight amount at the beginning of the session. This process is similar to singing a song. At the beginning we have to invest some time in learning the lyrics, but once we become familiar with them we are able to just sing the song, naturally and effortlessly. In practical terms, this means that simply hearing the name of the Buddha directs our mind there. We do not need to reflect on anything: we enter meditation on the Buddha spontaneously. Normally, we need to go through a threefold process of studying, reflecting, and then meditating. Here, when we reach the ninth mental placement, we skip all this and enter meditative stabilization just by hearing the name of the Buddha. Yet this is still not calm abiding. Despite having achieved such amazing concentration, this level is missing the experience of the bliss of physical and mental pliancy, and is not qualified to be called calm abiding.

### *Pliancy*

There are two types of pliancy: physical and mental. There are also two types of bliss: the bliss of physical pliancy and the bliss of mental pliancy. In terms of pliancy, mental pliancy is achieved first and physical pliancy later. In terms of bliss, physical bliss is achieved first and mental bliss later.

First we achieve mental pliancy. When we achieve the ninth mental placement, our mind remains focused on the form of the Buddha without any interruptions of mental sinking or excitation, and stability, clarity, and intensity of clarity come spontaneously. This type of meditation overcomes the heaviness or unserviceability of the mind. As a result, the mind becomes very flexible and we can use it any way we want. We can send the mind to any object and it will immediately go there. In other words, we have control over the mind. At present we lack such control: we are under the control of our mind, and our mind is under the control of afflictions.

As the mind becomes flexible and refined, the wind that is one in nature with it also becomes flexible. Due to that, the unserviceability or heaviness of the body also subsides. The body becomes very light and serviceable. Whatever work we wish to do, the body does it, exactly

as the mind wishes, without becoming exhausted. When the heavy energy of the body dissolves and the body becomes light and flexible, we have achieved physical pliancy.

As the heavy energy dissolves, a new kind of refined energy-wind begins to develop and eventually powers the entire body. This energy is tactile and gives rise to the feeling of bliss. This is known as physical bliss. Therefore physical bliss is experienced first.

This causes the mind to experience mental bliss. At the beginning, this bliss is very intense. The mind almost quivers, and we feel that we might lose our meditative stabilization. But after a few minutes it stabilizes, and when mental bliss becomes stable, that meditative stabilization becomes calm abiding.

Calm abiding is a mind of the form realm, which is a higher realm. Although the meditator is still a being of the desire realm, his or her mind is of a higher realm. This is because at that stage such a mind has no interest in objects of desire and is fully satisfied with inner peace.

### **The Six Powers**

In general, whatever we accomplish in terms of mundane and transcendent achievements, we say that we have achieved it ourselves. Actually, it is the mind that accomplishes all this. The creation and subsequent destruction of everything in the universe occurs through the power of the mind. We might say that we have been successful in a project or in our business activities, but all this is accomplished through the power of the mind. Initially, we must have the intention to achieve such goals; next, we must have the technical knowledge; and, finally, we experience the satisfaction of having done it. All three occur through the power of the mind.

In our current state, we utilize less than 3 percent of the power of our mind, while the Buddha utilizes 100 percent of his mind. He has developed the potential of the mind to its fullest, and then utilized it to fulfill the needs of sentient beings, as well as his own purpose. Such development of the mind is achieved through cultivating calm abiding and insight. Another way of saying this is that single-pointed meditation and analytical meditation techniques enhance the mental potential we already possess. This negates the idea that we need to acquire a new quality, externally. At present, our potential lies dormant and we must awaken it. Calm abiding and insight are listed as supreme among the techniques that awaken our potential.

In terms of establishing calm abiding and insight, calm abiding is established first, through the process of the nine mental placements. [To recap and explain these nine further, in terms of the six powers rather than the eight antidotes per se:]

The first mental placement, *placing the mind on the object of meditation*, is achieved through the power of listening to teachings or studying. This is necessary because we must first

search for and find the object before we can place the mind on it. Therefore the first mental placement is obtained through (1) *the power of studying*.

At this stage we experience many distractions when we place the mind on the object of meditation. This is because as soon as we try to place the mind there, we become more aware of being able to remain with the object of meditation for only for a second. At this stage we cannot abide continuously on the object of meditation. When we are able to place the mind on the object of meditation for the duration of twenty-one breaths, which amounts to fifty-two to fifty-three seconds, we have completed the first mental placement.

By continuously placing the mind on the object of meditation, we are able to extend the duration of our abidance to the time it takes to recite one mala of *Oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ*, which amounts to about one-and-a-half minutes. With that we have completed the second mental placement, *continuously placing the mind*. This stage is achieved through (2) *the power of reflection* because we keep contemplating our object. At that time the meditator senses that the distractions are taking some rest, because they arise only occasionally and so are not normally there [as they were before].

From the second mental placement onward, we become aware of the fact that we have lost the object of meditation as soon as this occurs. Our introspection warns us, and we are able to immediately bring the mind back to the object of meditation through mindfulness. During the first two mental placements, mindfulness is not strong enough, and as a result we are not able to immediately recognize that the mind has wandered off and bring it back. However, during the third mental placement, we immediately *re-place the mind on the object of meditation* through (3) *the power of mindfulness*. At that time, the meditator senses that distractions are becoming tired, or too exhausted to cause real trouble. In brief, during the first mental placement we are able to identify distractions, during the second we feel that they are taking a rest, and during the third we feel that they are becoming exhausted.

From the fourth placement, *closely placing the mind on the object of meditation*, we have such familiarity with the object of meditation that we will not lose it again, even for a second. This familiarity is developed through the training of the first, second, and third mental placements. This makes us confident that the mind has withdrawn from any external objects into the internal object of meditation. Understanding that we will not lose the object from that point onward makes us relax. This relaxation might develop into mental sinking. When mental sinking arises, we are able to identify it immediately through (4) *the power of introspection*. Vigilant and mentally alert, we immediately apply the necessary antidotes.

It is important to recognize mental sinking as a fault and identify its cause: it occurs because we loosen our grip on the object of meditation. When identified immediately, it is easy to handle because it is not very powerful at the beginning. If we fail to recognize its presence, it settles in, becomes a habit, and is more difficult to overcome it later on.

During the fifth mental placement, *subduing the mind*, mental sinking still occurs, but we identify it immediately since our introspection is like a watchdog. We tighten the mind without needing to break the session or lose the object of meditation. Due to this additional tension, mental excitation arises, and to overcome it we loosen the mind. It is all a matter of balance between tightness and looseness, just like finding the right tension for the strings of a guitar. This balance is important not only in the context of calm abiding but in anything we normally do: diet, life, and work. When we avoid extremes and find a balance, the activity becomes pleasant.

During the fifth mental placement, the main action we take is to tighten the way we hold the object. If this does not rectify the fault we should employ more drastic measures. We do not abandon the session, but we change our focal object. We begin to focus on our mind being in the aspect of light or in the aspect of the syllable HA, at the heart. The syllable radiates infinite light. We pronounce PHÉ forcefully and project our mind through the crown of the head. The mind goes into deep space and merges with it, becoming spacious and open. This practice helps us uplift the mind from mental lethargy and sleepiness, and it is applicable in general, beyond the context of cultivating calm abiding. With such a visualization we can refresh the mind, whether at the office or at the end of a day. If this second method does not bring any results, we should break the session, have a shower, go to the beach, and so forth. The important thing during the fifth mental placement is that we should be ready to apply any of these three antidotes immediately, by recognizing the presence of faults straight away.

The sixth mental placement, *pacifying the mind*, is achieved through the power of introspection. During the fifth mental placement, our mind becomes withdrawn. The mind is constantly on the inner object of meditation, as opposed to being distracted by the discursiveness of hopes and fears. As a result of that withdrawal, subtle mental sinking arises, but we are instantly aware of it. We apply the third antidote and uplift the mind. Once the mind is refreshed, however, it has the tendency to escape to an external object. What characterizes the sixth mental placement is the acute introspection that immediately notifies us that the mind has left the object of meditation, so that we can then loosen our [mental] grip on the object. Excitement has arisen because we are holding the object too tightly. If this first antidote fails, we should resort to more drastic means. We change the object of observation and instead focus on a black drop at the navel. With this, the mind begins to withdraw [back to the focal object] again. An alternative is to

focus on breathing meditation. Even counting up to six inhalations and exhalations is enough to bring the mind back. If this fails to bring the mind back, we have to break the session and massage our body with warm sesame oil. Closing the gateways through which the mind escapes brings a sense of relaxation because the mind remains internal rather than escaping. Although the mind escapes through every pore of the body, as well as the nine gateways, it is very important to block the main gateway of the upper opening of the central channel, located at the crown of the head, where there is a slight depression in the skull. This measure will bring additional benefits such as reducing our tiredness and restoring our sleeping pattern.

At this point diet is important, and we should avoid light food (which is raw, uncooked food) and cold food straight out of the fridge. When we are dealing with situations like this in our meditation, we need to eat rich food that includes onion and garlic. In general we avoid garlic and onion, the so-called “black” foods, because they induce laxity, which causes mental sinking. These types of food are not inherently good or bad, but depending on the situation they can have a positive or negative result. The Buddha never proclaimed, “This is the medicine that cures everything.” For those who have heat problems, the physician suggests that they avoid meat. Those who have cold bodies are advised to eat meat. When we are too excited we need to bring the mind back through proper food. At this time, it is beneficial to have a meat broth with garlic and onion, and to have a massage. This results in a good sleep, and that brings the mind down. When the mind has become heavy, again this is recognized as a fault. It is therefore important to learn to recognize each of these states and faults from our own experience, as this is a crucial part of training our mind. In the context of the sixth mental placement, massage and correct diet become the antidotes. The fifth and sixth mental placements are achieved through the power of introspection.

The seventh and eighth mental placements are achieved through (5) *the power of effort*. At this point, there is no danger at all of coarse mental sinking and excitation, and there is only slight danger of subtle mental sinking and excitation. We are so familiar with the object of meditation that only a small amount of effort is required to find the object at the beginning of the session. Once the mind is placed on the object, we require no extra effort to keep it there. The mind is very obedient and remains where it is placed.

When we reach the ninth mental placement, we do not have to make any effort even at the beginning of the session. Merely remembering the object directs the mind there, and the mind remains on the object with stability and clarity. Merely hearing the name of the object of meditation places the mind on the object, spontaneously and without any effort. We can remain in equipoise for days and months. Known as *placing the mind in equipoise*, this ninth placement

occurs spontaneously, and is achieved through (6) *the power of familiarity*. It is similar to being fully familiar with a song: we do not require any effort to sing the lyrics or remember the tune. We can simply sing the song while we carry out another activity.

Despite the mind being so powerful in terms of clarity, stability, and intensity of clarity, we have not achieved calm abiding yet. At this point the heaviness, lack of flexibility, roughness, and coarseness of the mind have been completely pacified, and the mind is extremely flexible. We can choose one object and the mind will focus and stay there for as long as we wish. Alternatively, we can choose to focus on a hundred different focal objects, and the mind will immediately engage them. If we choose to engage a thousand different objects, the mind simply goes there and remains with stability and clarity.

### **The Bliss and Pliancy of Calm Abiding**

The mind is capable of developing this type of dexterity. Presently, my mind engages a host of objects: I can see the room we are in, the garden through the window, and the faces of those present today. Simultaneously, I can hear sounds, smell aromas, and be aware of the texture of anything I touch. All this takes place while my mind is choosing the appropriate words to express the meaning I want to convey. A single moment of consciousness includes such a level of complexity! All these objects appear in our minds at any given moment. This indicates that we are placing the mind on these objects. In our case, the duration of the appearance of each object is short. When we develop the stability and clarity that are necessary for calm abiding, our mind will have the power to focus on a hundred different objects and stay there. This serviceability of the mind is known as *mental pliancy*.

Presently, a hundred objects appear to the mind, but their appearance is neither stable nor clear. When mental pliancy is achieved, we can place the mind on any object we wish, for as long as we wish. The mind is clear, stable, and refined as all impure mental states dissolve. This implies that all impure winds have dissolved. The coarseness and heaviness of winds that prevent physical flexibility dissipate. As a result, the body becomes very flexible. This flexibility is known as *physical pliancy* and makes the practitioner more flexible than a gold-medal athlete! With such pliancy we can engage in any physical activity without tiring. Presently, the mind might wish to accomplish certain things, but the body cannot cope. According to some, the coarse winds dissolve, while others say that they exit the body through the upper opening of the central channel. When this occurs, the meditator feels a slight tingling sensation, which is tactile. Those who shave their head completely for the first time report such a pleasurable, tingling sensation. This is the sign that impure, heavy winds are leaving the body.

Once the impure winds have left, a current of new and pure winds manifests and pervades the entire body. This generates physical pleasure that is known as the *bliss of physical pliancy*. Therefore, the bliss of physical pliancy comes first. This physical bliss causes the mind to experience bliss also. When the mind that is in equipoise during the ninth mental placement has this experience, it almost quivers with bliss. However, after a minute the bliss stabilizes, and instead of interfering with the clarity and stability of our meditation, it deepens and enhances it. This bliss that the meditator experiences while in the ninth mental placement is known as the *bliss of mental pliancy*.

When the ninth mental placement experiences the bliss of mental pliancy, we obtain calm abiding. With this type of concentration, or *samādhi*, not only we can focus on a desired object for as long as we wish with clarity and stability, but this clarity and stability are further enhanced and deepened by bliss. The stability we achieve when we obtain calm abiding is such that no sound can disturb our concentration. We would remain immovable, like a mountain, even if a train were to pass next to us. At this point we feel that our entire body, speech, and mind—our entire being—is merged with the focal object, the body of the Buddha. It is as if we have melted away and we see nothing but the form of the Buddha. In fact, we *are* the form of the Buddha. This is the fully qualified calm abiding.

Non-Buddhists reach calm abiding and remain in the experience of deep inner peace, enjoying it for years on end, even for eons. Their bodies become as hard as rocks exposed to the elements, while their minds remain in meditative equipoise. There are places in Asia where such stone-like bodies of meditators can be seen. While the mind remains within the body, the structure of the body that is the receptacle of such mind changes over time. For as long as there is karmic connection between that body and mind, the mind will not leave the body. Some meditators who gain control over the mind can direct it to leave the body at will. Once they purify any karmic obscurations between the present body and mind, they can separate the two. However, these stone-like bodies that are still inhabited by consciousness.

Having entered such a state, meditators experience a very fine and subtle sense of peace. After enjoying it for a very long time, they eventually wonder if there is some other type of concentration that surpasses their current experience. They realize that the meditation absorption on the form realm is more blissful than calm abiding. The desire realm is coarser, while the form realm is more subtle. The form realm is characterized by clarity, stability, and happiness of the mind. Seeing the faults of the desire realm, the meditator seeks to achieve the four types of concentration available in the form realm. Then the process is repeated, this time comparing the

form with the formless realm, and, perceiving the latter to be more refined, the meditator aims for the four types of concentration of the formless realm.

### **The Absorptions of the Form and Formless Realms**

Once calm abiding is obtained, the meditator proceeds to develop the absorptions that are characteristic of the form and formless realms. From calm abiding, the next level of concentration to achieve is the *first absorption* of the form realm. This is driven by the thought that there must a state that is more refined than the one currently obtained. Once the first absorption is obtained, the meditator seeks the *second, third, and fourth absorption* as well.

Having reached the limit of meditative absorptions in the form realm, the meditator begins to think that all these states are coarse because they focus on an object. The aspiration to focus on space alone arises, and through that the meditator obtains the first absorption of the formless realm, called *infinite space*. Next, even this is considered to be coarse, and the aspiration to focus on consciousness itself arises. Through that, the meditator obtains the second absorption of the formless realm, called *infinite consciousness*. After a while, even consciousness becomes a coarse object, and the aspiration to have no object at all arises. Through such practice the meditator obtains the third absorption of the formless realm, called *nothingness*.

Next, even this is considered coarse, and is abandoned in order to achieve the fourth absorption of the formless realm, called *peak of existence*. As the name indicates, at this point one has reached a limit and there is no higher place to reach within saṃsāra. The meditator who reaches such a state mistakenly thinks that this is liberation because no suffering or afflictive emotions are manifest. In time, the positive karma that supports such an experience is exhausted. The meditator perceives that he or she will have to be reborn again in saṃsāra. This is because the root of saṃsāra is not destroyed merely by obtaining such levels of absorption. It is only the suffering that is symptomatic of saṃsāra that has subsided. When we do not experience any pain, there are two possibilities: either there is no pain, or the conditions for experiencing pain are incomplete. The meditator at the peak of existence does not experience afflictive emotions because they have all subsided due to the profundity of meditative stabilization. But since the afflictive emotions are yet to be uprooted, the meditator still remains within saṃsāra and will continue to take samsaric rebirths.

The majority of Buddhist practitioners use calm abiding as the basis from which to investigate the ultimate nature of the self. They do not use it as the basis from which to cultivate the absorptions of the form and formless realms. Insight into the nature of the self destroys afflictions permanently, rather than suppressing them temporarily. Calm abiding on its own does

not have the capacity to uproot self-grasping. The cause of suffering is afflictions, and among all afflictions the most predominant are the three poisons of attachment, hatred, and ignorance. Ignorance is the root of the other two poisons. This ignorance is not just any type of ignorance, but misapprehension of the self and a distorted idea of how the self exists. It is the ignorance grasping at a truly existent self.

Such ignorance cannot be removed by focusing on the form of the Buddha. To overcome it we must understand that there is no substantially existing self. Only the mind has the power to uproot the ignorance grasping at the self. Calm abiding cannot do it, even the Buddha cannot do it! If it were possible, the Buddha would have done it already. Through the combination of our faith and his unlimited compassion and wisdom, it would have been achieved. The Buddha has said, “I am not a liberator; I can show you the path to liberation but you have to follow it.” The Buddha has said that he cannot wash away our ignorance, or remove it with his hand as if it were a thorn. He can show us the way to San Francisco, but he cannot carry us there. Despite the power of this love and compassion, he cannot overcome our ignorance. Love strongly wishes all sentient beings to be free from suffering, but it has no power to overcome ignorance grasping at the self. It is like a mother whose only child falls into a river. If she does not know how to swim, she cannot help the child, despite her love. Similarly, if we only develop love, compassion, and bodhicitta, all we can do is cry—but we cannot remove ignorance.

Suppose that you come back home from watching a movie and catch a glimpse of a child’s toy snake under the bed. Mistaking it for a real snake, your heart skips a beat. What are you to do with this fear? Pray to the Buddha, requesting that he remove your fear? That doesn’t work. Would you run away? But this is your house. In the end you realize that you have to face the snake and personally take care of it. When you face it and examine it, you realize that it is not a real snake.

The mind that realizes this to be a fake snake is the mind that overcomes fear. The mind that mistakenly apprehends a toy to be a snake is overcome by the mind that sees the fake as a fake. In the same way, wisdom realizing selflessness is the only thing that has the power to overcome ignorance grasping at the self. When we have the stability and clarity of calm abiding, it is easy to develop insight into the nature of the self: whatever the mind chooses to investigate, it gets immediate results.

### **Emptiness**

The essence of all Buddhist teachings—Hinayāna, Perfection Vehicle, or Tantrayāna—is emptiness. The ultimate intention of the Buddha was to lead disciples to discover the ultimate

nature of the self. In the analogy of the train that passes through five stations before reaching the city of enlightenment, the wheels running along the train line are the wisdom realizing emptiness. The speed of the train is determined by the engine, which in our case is calm abiding. Calm abiding and insight are inseparable factors that lead us through the stations of the five paths and transport us to enlightenment.

Emptiness is the ultimate nature of phenomena. Emptiness negates the presence or existence of something, and our first step in realizing emptiness is to discover what is missing, or negated. When I say that my stomach is empty, I am saying that food is lacking from my stomach. When I say that my wallet is empty, I am saying that money is lacking from my wallet. When I say that the glass is empty, I am saying that water is lacking from the glass. In a similar way, it is important to recognize what is lacking when we say that the self is empty. Emptiness of the self refers to the lack of an inherently existing self, the lack of an independent or self-sufficient self, the lack of a solid and findable “I.” All these expressions convey the same meaning: they describe a self that has never existed.

#### *The object of negation*

To be able to say whether or not the “I” exists, we must have a very clear picture of the “I.” If someone asks whether Peter, the thief, is in the room, we can’t reply one way or the other unless we are able to identify Peter. The more details we have about Peter’s appearance, the more confident we will be when we give our answer. Similarly, without being able to correctly identify the inherent, independent, self-sufficient self, we can neither confirm nor negate its existence. This is known as *identifying the object of negation*, and it is the first, crucial step toward realizing emptiness. Without identifying the object of negation, we have no means to approach the ultimate nature of the self. Without identifying the target, we can’t hit it.

Once we understand the importance of this first step, our next question is how to actually identify the object of negation. To begin with, we must receive an explanation of what it means to have an inherently existent, findable, solid “I.” Such an “I” would not depend on causes and conditions for its existence. It would appear independently of our body or mind. It would not rely on the mind imputing it for its existence. It would exist objectively from its own side, having nothing to do with the subjective mind that imputes it. It would be solid and findable, and we would be able to point to it, saying, “Here it is!” Such a description is necessary, but only leads to intellectual understanding. Its value is limited, and is similar to going to the doctor, being diagnosed, obtaining medicine, but then leaving it on our bedside table rather than taking it as prescribed. Such actions will not bring relief, and our situation will probably worsen.

We have to find this sense of “I” from our personal experience. We talk about “I” and “me” more than a hundred times a day. It is the mantra we recite the most! Still, we have no clear picture of the “I,” and we have to search in order to find a personal feeling that corresponds to the description of the inherently existent “I.” Our best chance to get a clear picture of the “I” is when we have a strong emotional reaction, such as when we experience strong fear, great joy at receiving good news about being promoted, and so forth. Another good opportunity is when we are accused of something in front of many people. Typically, a strong sense of “I” arises when we are hurt or praised, and we can use such an opportunity, or even a memory of such an event, to look at this “I” with a corner of our mind. When we observe it, it appears to exist from its own side—solid, important, independent, substantial, and findable. This is the inherently existent “I.” In this way we have found the object of negation.

### *The investigation*

The next step is to examine whether or not the “I” exists in this way. In our example, first we must obtain a clear picture of Peter, the thief, and then examine to see if he is among the people present in the room. Our investigation should be honest and unprejudiced. We should not start from the point of saying that the “I” does not exist. Such intellectual understanding becomes an obstacle. We must investigate free of any bias: if such an “I” exists, what might be a possible location for it? If it exists, there are only two possibilities: it either exists inside our body and mind, or outside. If Peter exists, he is either inside the room or outside the room. There is no third possibility. Therefore we search within our body and mind.

We begin by searching for the “I” within the body. Is it my body? Is it the skin? The blood? The organs? The bones? The bone marrow? Is all this “me”? Is my body “me”? This could not be the case because we say “my body” instead of “me body.” The use of the personal pronoun—*my*—indicates that I am the owner and the body is my possession. This is a relation similar to that existing between the king and his subjects. It indicates that “me” is not my body, and that my body is not “me.” If the skin is me, then the blood is me, and similarly, the heart is me. This results in many “I”s. This clearly shows that “me” is not my body. Having searched from the top of the head to the tip of the toes, we cannot find the self within the body.

Once we investigate the body, we turn our attention to the mind. Perhaps the mind is “me.” But which mind? We have so many types of virtuous, nonvirtuous, and neutral states of mind. Even within one of those—the nonvirtuous states of mind—there are many types of mind, such as anger, jealousy, pride, miserliness, and resentment. There are infinite states in the realm of the nonvirtuous mind. The same is true for virtuous states of mind: there is love, compassion,

tolerance, respect, and many more. Even within the neutral states of mind, there are many instances, such as “There is a movie on tonight,” and so forth. Which one should be identified as the “I”? Again, since there are infinite states of mind, there would be infinite “I”s. In addition, the expression “me mind” is meaningless. Instead, we say “my mind.”

Once we have investigated the body and the mind and failed to find the “I” there, we consider the next possibility, which is that it exists somewhere besides our body and mind. If that were true, how could we identify ourselves? How would we introduce ourselves? If the “I” existed as a separate entity besides our body and mind, it would make no sense to say “I hurt” when the body hurts, it would make no sense to say “I am hungry” when the stomach is empty, “I am thirsty” when the mouth is dry, or “I am happy” when the mind is happy. Besides our mind, there is no other way to be happy. We say “I am happy” because we relate to that state of mind. If the “I” existed somewhere besides the body and mind, it would have a different identity and a different nature. It would be similar to a dog and a cow, which are different animals: hurting one does not affect the other because they are separate entities. If the “I” existed somewhere besides the body and mind, it would be an entity separate from them. But it is obvious that this is not the case.

So far, we have not found the “I” either inside the body and mind, or outside of them. Where is this “I” to be found? We have searched in every possible location and have not found it. This means that it is absent. This not finding, or lack of “I,” is our ultimate nature. The Buddha has said that not finding is the supreme find. We should remain within this unfindability and allow the mind to rest in our ultimate nature. For those who have calm abiding, this unfindability becomes the object of meditation.

### *The paradox*

Prior to investigating the self, we feel that it is something solid and findable. Yet upon investigation, we cannot find it. This is the paradox of appearance and reality. If the “I” really existed as it appears in the mind, solid and findable, then the more we search, the clearer it would be. Yet on the contrary, it becomes more unclear and elusive. It is a deception. It is like the experience of a woman who dreams she has a baby and is overjoyed, only to be devastated when the child dies in the dream. In reality, there was no real child who either was born or died. This is the contradiction between appearance and reality.

Our normal reaction is to grasp strongly on the “I” or “my” that appears, and this leads to suffering. Those who have 100 percent grasping also have 100 percent problems. Those who have 50 percent grasping only have 50 percent problems. Those without any grasping are free of pain.

We constantly try to grasp at something that is as unsubstantial as a bubble, thinking that it is solid. The more we grasp at it, the heavier our life becomes. The more we loosen up, the lighter everything becomes. In reality, we torture ourselves; no one else can torture us.

When we grasp at the “I” as existing in the way it appears, we develop a strong sense of ego. When we have a strong sense of “I,” it will naturally give rise to a sense of “others.” Once we create this division of self and others, we open up the way to afflictive emotions. This is also true for “my” and “their.” When we perceive someone as hurtful or threatening, we label them as an enemy and develop anger and hostility toward them. When we perceive someone as beneficial, we label them as a friend and develop attachment and grasping. At the same time, we remain indifferent to those who neither harm nor help us. All these emotions arise from grasping at “I” and “my,” but the more we investigate, the less we can find any self as such. This absence of the self is a *nonaffirming negation*. This means that, while we negate the self, we do not affirm anything else.

There are two types of negation: affirming and nonaffirming. An example of an affirming negation is, “John is not eating during the day.” This sentence negates that John eats during the day but it affirms that he eats at night. The sentence, “John is absent,” however, simply negates his presence without affirming anything else. The second sentence is a nonaffirming negation, and similarly, emptiness is a nonaffirming negation. This unfindability is our ultimate nature and ultimate truth. When we reach this point, we should let the mind rest in it, and remain in clarity and stability, without excitation or sinking. This is the wisdom realizing the emptiness of the self.

### *One in nature*

From the point of view of being empty of an inherently existing self, all phenomena are equal. From the perspective of our ultimate nature, we—ordinary beings—have the same taste as the Buddha. Similarly, saṃsāra and nirvāṇa have the same taste. When we contemplate the Buddha, we are amazed and begin looking for his inherent existence. When we contemplate Hitler, we look equally for his inherent existence. Yet from the ultimate point of view, they are both equal since they lack any inherent existence.

The space inside a clear crystal glass and the space inside a dirty glass have the same nature. Yet our response to them is different: we admire the space inside the clean crystal and are disgusted by the space inside the dirty glass. However, space is space: it is simply the lack of obstruction.

If our nature is the same as that of the Buddha, why are we still suffering in saṃsāra while he is enjoying the bliss of nirvāṇa? To put it simply, it is because we are ignorant about our

nature while he has awakened to his. We suffer because we are unaware of it, and we become liberated when we are aware of it. There is a big difference between knowing and not knowing. This is a key point in all Buddhist teachings. The four noble truths that were the first teaching of the Buddha are just that: the truth of suffering, of the origin [of suffering], of the cessation [of suffering], and of the path. While we remain ignorant about our ultimate nature, this ignorance is the truth of suffering. The mind that has the wisdom knowing this reality is the truth of the path. When it is realized, we obtain the truth of cessation of suffering.

The Hinayāna teachings emphasize emptiness as the main objective for attaining liberation, and attachment as the main object of abandonment. Therefore the main practice of the Hinayāna is the path of nonattachment. Attachment originates from ignorance grasping at the self. To overcome it, practitioners must engage the three higher trainings of ethics, concentration, and wisdom. In the context of the Hinayāna, the three higher trainings, and in particular the training in wisdom, are the core practice. The wisdom realizing emptiness is able to cut the root of the tree. The higher training in concentration is similar to the person who takes the axe and hits at the root. The higher training in ethics is like the vitamins that boost the body. In the context of the Perfection Vehicle, generating bodhicitta and engaging in the six perfections is based on understanding emptiness. In the context of the Tantric Vehicle, also, the practices make sense when they are rooted in emptiness. Therefore, in terms of the view of emptiness and the ultimate nature, the three vehicles are the same. Ultimate nature is just that—ultimate. Tantra can't change it, a bodhisattva can't change it, even the Buddha can't change it. It is as ultimate and definite as the fact that if you want to go the east, you have to go where the sun rises.

#### *Allowing the mind to rest on the ultimate nature*

To reach this point of unfindability, first we must identify the object of negation and then analyze, honestly and without prejudice, first inside and then outside the body and mind. When we reach the point of unfindability, we should remain with our ultimate nature without any thoughts, maintaining clarity and stability. At that point we should not be thinking, “I am meditating on emptiness.” We should just rest the mind on it, without any conceptual thought. At the beginning, this takes a lot of effort because it is something that is foreign to us. Our ultimate nature is not clear initially, but the more we meditate on it, the clearer it becomes. At the beginning we think that it is fabricated, but eventually we see that it is unfabricated. Eventually the nature of the self appears clearly: empty of an inherently existent “I.” During the meditation session, it appears very clearly in the mind. When we rise from meditation, conventional appearances will be present. We will perceive beautiful forms, sounds, aromas, and so forth, as before. The difference

is that now we know the true nature of all that appears. Our reaction to appearances changes, and we see them as illusions.

An illusionist creates appearances. Although he recognizes them as illusions, the audience believes that whatever appears is real. If he creates the illusion of a tiger, the audience generates fear, thinking that it is a true tiger. The tiger will appear to the illusionist, but he knows that this appearance is deceptive, and because he does not grasp at it he is not afraid. Similarly to the illusionist, we also have tiger-like appearances when we rise from meditation, but as our grasping diminishes, our ignorance begins to shake. When ignorance shakes, it falls apart, and since it is the root of saṃsāra, saṃsāra also falls apart. Still, appearances remain because we have eons of familiarity with grasping at them. This familiarity deeply stains our mindstream, and we naturally have appearances. During our meditation we continue to reflect, “It does not exist the way it appears,” and gradually we begin to feel that appearances lose their power. Our problems decrease as our peace and happiness increase. The more we rely on this wisdom, the happier we become. Other sources of happiness are good at the beginning, but quickly become problematic. The more we rely on them, the more our problems increase, and this becomes like a chronic disease.

### *Reaffirming existence*

With such wisdom we come to understand that until now we have been grasping at things in the way they appear, but in reality things do not exist the way they appear in the mind. This, however, does not mean that they do not exist at all. We do not end up with nothingness. Nothingness is an extreme, but emptiness does not mean that nothing exists. If the self did not exist at all, what would be the point of striving to achieve liberation?

The “I” does exist. We have feelings and thoughts: when we are hungry, we eat to satisfy our hunger; and similarly, we drink to quench our thirst. It is evident that the self exists, but we have to carefully define how it exists. The “I” is a mere appearance in the mind. It is merely labeled upon the body and mind. Just like the case of the woman who had a dream of a child, there is no true mother, but there is an appearance of the mother in the dreamer’s mind. The person “John” is merely labeled upon his body and mind. Normally, when we are introduced to John we are satisfied with the name, and we do not investigate to see if he is merely labeled upon his body and mind. We do not try to locate John.

We all have a sense of “I” and think “me” many times during the course of a day, but it changes constantly. Who we are depends on what we identify with. When we identify with something limited, we are limited. When we identify with something infinite, we are infinite.

People often say, “I am fat,” “I am tall,” “I am short,” and so forth. When we have such a feeling we identify ourselves with nothing but the body. When we say, “I am happy,” or “I am sad,” we identify ourselves with nothing but the mind. Other times we identify ourselves with good or bad results, saying, “I am successful,” or “I am ruined.” In the worst case, we identify ourselves with how much money we have in the bank and say, “I am rich” or “I am poor.” Our sense of “I” changes all the time. One minute we think, “I do not have anything,” “I am a failure.” The next minute we think, “I have this precious rebirth,” “I have buddha nature,” “My nature is primordially pure and free of any stains,” “I have an infinite resource of wealth.” We do not exist inherently, and we are merely projected and labeled by the mind. We exist through a combination of causes and conditions.

### *The basis of designation in tantra*

In the context of tantra, it is very important to have this understanding of the way we exist when we receive an initiation or engage in practice. When we receive the initiation of a deity, such as Amitābha, one minute we are ordinary, and the next we are empowered to generate ourselves as Buddha Amitābha. When we do not know how we exist, this makes no sense. When we normally identify ourselves with the limited phenomena of our body and mind, it is hard to fathom how we can be the deity. When we identify ourselves as ordinary, we project ourselves on the ordinary body and ordinary mind. However, when the basis of this designation changes, that which is designated upon it must also change. For example, when we are born we have a small body and an undeveloped mind. At that time we are referred to as “the baby,” and we are treated as such. This is valid cognition. When we are eighteen years of age, we think differently: we want our independence, we want to drive a car, and so forth. Others treat us differently as well. When our body ages and the mind declines, we think, “I am old.” The “I” changes from a baby to a young adult to a senior because the basis of designation changes.

During the ritual of the initiation, when we see ourselves as Buddha Amitābha, we do not identify ourselves with our ordinary body and mind. The basis of imputation changes because our ordinary self dissolves into emptiness and is gone. What remains is the extremely subtle mind that realizes our ultimate nature, and that mind arises in the aspect of the deity—the body of Amitābha with an extremely subtle mind, primordially pure and free from stains. On the basis of Amitābha’s body and mind, we impute ourselves as “Amitābha.” This is valid cognition based on clear appearance and divine pride. If it was not valid, it would be false, and could lead us nowhere. At the beginning, all this is imagined, but eventually, through the force of tantric meditation, the extremely subtle mind and mind become manifest. They establish a new type of

mind and body that are pure. With such a pure body and mind we have a new sense of identity, thinking, “I am Amitābha.”

In this sense there are two types of “I”: the temporary, coarse “I” of this life, and the subtle, pure “I” that continues uninterrupted. The temporary, coarse “I” is based on a temporary basis of designation, our present body and mind. The meaning of the statement that “through meditation we become buddhas” is that our body becomes a buddha’s body and our mind becomes a buddha’s mind. This does not mean that the present body becomes a buddha’s body. Our present body is a temporary result, the product of the reproductive substances of our parents. When consciousness departs, this body is burned and discarded. Therefore it is not possible that this body will become a buddha’s body, no matter how hard we try. Also, our present mind does not become a buddha’s mind. How could this judgmental, conceptual mind become the fearless and compassionate mind of a buddha?

What, then, is the meaning of this statement? What we need to find is the substantial cause of a buddha’s body and mind and whether we possess it at present. The substantial cause for a buddha’s mind is the extremely subtle mind. It is primordially pure and free of any stain but is presently obscured by three obscurations. Being obscured by coarse, judgmental thoughts, this pure mind does not get a chance to become active. Conceptual thoughts are active twenty-four hours a day. It is clear that one type of mind is active and the other remains inactive. The extremely subtle mind becomes active only when the coarse, conceptual thoughts subside. When it manifests and becomes fully active, it is known as the mind of a buddha.

As for the substantial cause for a buddha’s body, it is the extremely subtle body. This is pure wind that carries pure consciousness. It also manifests fully when coarse, impure winds have subsided. When the extremely subtle body and mind become manifest, we have a natural sense of purity, thinking, “I am Amitābha.” This is natural because normally we identify ourselves with whichever component of our body or mind is manifest.

This is something that is induced through the force of meditation. Therefore it is not something that we experience immediately after the ritual of the initiation. However, the initiation authorizes us to engage in certain meditation techniques. When the visualizations are carried out with the understanding of these issues, they become a very powerful and potent practice. They have a different effect when we understand what we are doing. As the power of the visualizations increases, it does not take long for the coarse “I” to dissolve and the subtle “I” to manifest, since the subtle body and mind become prominent.

The practice of tantra is based on the tool of emptiness. This is also true for all other teachings of the Buddha.

### *How to approach emptiness*

We should approach emptiness in a systematic way. In a sense, we should have a very extensive filing system: when we listen to any teaching on emptiness, we should place it in the relevant file. In addition, we should include all our daily experiences in those files and recognize how they are relevant. This deepens our knowledge, and before long we develop the realization of emptiness. There is no other way to realize emptiness.

The first step is to identify the object of negation. This is file A. In this phase we should study the object of negation, gain an intellectual understanding, and form a generic image. Next, we try to make it an experiential object by recalling situations during which we had a strong emotional reaction. This is when we have the strongest sense of “I.”

File B is searching for ourselves, first within and then outside our body and mind. This investigation is carried out with the wisdom we have gained by listening to teachings.

File C is the unfindability that we reach after searching. Initially, we study about the absence of the self, and when we gain this unfindability, we remain with it.

File D is finding out how we exist, outside our meditation session. This involves study of various texts that deal with wisdom. Again, we should relate this knowledge to the feelings we have about ourselves.

When we have such a system in place, we can listen to any teachings and relate them to any of the A, B, C, or D files. This is how our knowledge, both intellectual and experiential, increases. In this way we get closer to emptiness and farther away from ignorance. The process that is involved is threefold: (1) we gain an initial understanding from listening to the teachings, and (2) we further process this by reflecting on it. This can be done informally, while we relax and have a cup of coffee. Instead of contemplating our usual hopes and fears, it is much more satisfying to contemplate emptiness. This experience of satisfaction is due to the fact that emptiness is a virtuous object: as the mind becomes familiar with it, it brings peace. The more we contemplate it, the more we gain conviction, thinking, “This is how I exist!” Having found this certainty, (3) we develop further familiarity through meditation.

Normally, when we engage in such an activity with a mind that is distracted and weak, we do not get anywhere. But if we investigate on the basis of calm abiding, our progress is swift. This is due to the fact that we are utilizing a mind that is focused, stable, and clear. When we investigate with a weak mind, we quickly lose interest, even though we might have been enthusiastic about this subject at the beginning. The weak mind begins to investigate and then loses interest. It starts on something else and again loses interest. Calm abiding is a mind that is

capable of remaining on a chosen object, with clarity and stability, without the distraction of mental sinking and excitation. Therefore insight on the reality of the self must be based on calm abiding that has been established earlier on.

Having said that, we should not wait until we develop calm abiding before we begin investigating the self. We can begin reflecting about the self right now, and approach the subject by studying the chapters on wisdom in [Śāntideva's] *Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, as well as the chapter on calm abiding and insight in the *Lamrim*. When we use our energy in this way, we deepen our understanding and get rid of doubt with regard to our practice. When we file away this information, we will not lose it. In the monastery we do this by memorizing detailed outlines. Then we can see, for example, that the first outline belongs to the file A, and we place it there. Later on we add some more reasons, any relevant examples, and so on. We gather information every day, during every teaching, and file it away. We accumulate wisdom and come closer to emptiness.

### **The Union of Calm Abiding and Insight**

Insight is the indispensable method for achieving the peace of liberation and the awakened state of buddhahood. Insight refers to the realization of who we are and how we exist, in other words it is the wisdom that realizes the ultimate truth in relation to ourselves. To develop such insight we need to focus the mind internally and analyze systematically, without leaving any points unchecked. This is done through analytical meditation. Once we realize the ultimate nature of the self we stop cycling in saṃsāra and begin our journey toward nirvāṇa. The teachings of the Buddha are vast but they can all be reduced to one point: knowing and not knowing. If we do not know who we are, we are ignorant. If we know who we are, we are enlightened. If we don't know who we are, we are in saṃsāra. If we know who we are, we are in nirvāṇa.

To perform such thorough and comprehensive analysis, we need to rely on a mind that is extremely clear and stable, free of any distractions. For as long as we investigate with a mind that is unclear, unstable, and distracted, it is very difficult to get any results. To get such mental qualities we cultivate calm abiding. Unlike analytical meditation, calm abiding involves single-pointed concentration while the mind focuses on an object, without analyzing or being distracted. Eventually the single-pointed meditation of calm abiding must be combined and practiced together with the analytical meditation of insight. This is a unique Buddhist practice. When calm abiding is united with insight we can practice calm abiding from *within* insight and insight from *within* calm abiding. In effect this means that the mind can investigate without disturbing the stillness of calm abiding, much like a small fish that swims without creating any

ripples in the surface of water. At present such practices are beyond our capacity. If we try to analyze while our mind is placed single-pointedly on an object, the mind will get distracted and the concentration will be lost. This union of calm abiding and insight is cultivated in stages. Calm abiding is obtained first but it is not the end of the journey for a Buddhist practitioner. It will cause manifest afflictions to subside but it has no power to uproot them. In other words, calm abiding can treat the symptoms but cannot address the root cause.

Buddha Śākyamuni received teachings on calm abiding from other teachers. When he obtained that realization he saw that the coarse, manifest level of suffering and its causes subsided and he remained in a state of peace. At the same time he realized that calm abiding was not able to uproot the ignorance of self-grasping that is the root of all delusions. He therefore continued searching until he found that the realization of the ultimate nature of the self is the direct antidote to the ignorance grasping at the self. In this way he not only addressed the symptoms but he also uprooted the cause. Therefore in order to achieve liberation and enlightenment we must engage in the practice that combines the single-pointed meditation of calm abiding and the analytical meditation of insight.

THE END