



# The Buddha Project

IDMT Year 3 -Term 1

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Shamatha According to Asanga



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## In memoriam Ganden Trisur Rinpoche

For those following IDMT, I forgot to start with the front visualization. I forgot, with a reason. You may know Ganden Trisur Rinpoche (on the right), one of my teachers, passed a way and I had been absorbed in visualization all morning, I was with him in my practice all morning.



I was so absorbed I completely forgot to generate the visualization with you.

### Anuruddha's reminder

In such a moment, it is good to recall the words of Anuruddha at the time of the Buddha's passing. In the famous [Mahaparinibanna Sutta: Last Days of the Buddha](#) in the Pali Canon, there is an interesting tension. On one hand, there is Ānanda—who had been the Buddha's attendant for twenty-three years, but who was still not yet enlightened. He was distraught at the Buddha's passing, and so were many others who were present as the Buddha passed through three jhanas and in the fourth entered final nirvana.

There was a great tumult.

Then Anuruddha spoke, he was an interesting figure; he does not have much of a voice elsewhere in the canon, yet it is clear the Buddha deeply invested in him. Suddenly, Anuruddha said: *Is it not true that the Buddha always reminded us that whatever comes together must also separate? Let us be silent, let us practice the Dharma.*

### Wholesome and unwholesome sadness

I think this is the right approach.

There are wholesome and unwholesome ways of experiencing sadness. Sadness plays a role in our lives, but when sadness revolves around the *self*, it is a burden.

This is something hard to say, as it is strongly culturally determined we should carry grief for a long time after someone passes away. But this does not make sense; no one is benefited by suffering forever, neither the person who passed away, nor ourselves.

Whether or not you accept rebirth, suffering forever is not helpful.

Real sadness is celebratory, it is not a burden, but a kind of joy: when the heart moves with gratitude for having shared a part of your life with the deceased person. When [Ganden Trisur Rinpoche](#) passed away (I was told he had gone into [Tukdam](#), the final meditative state) I was not without feeling, but not as a burden. It was a deep acknowledgement how fortunate I was to have met him. Some of you share that with me.

He was one of the great masters who still received the full classical Tibetan education.

Among all the teachers I met, he was incomparable in depth of understanding and meditative practice. When he said he was [Yamāntaka](#) himself, I believed him. When he was your personal teacher, it was so obvious he was Yamāntaka.

So of course I feel sadness, however mixed with joy.

### **Impermanence and value of the present**

In a way we always separate as we are impermanent beings.

Every moment is unique: moments come and they go. Sadness is important, it gives value to the present. This moment of sadness reminds us we can be present, or we can forget it.

I feel a deep appreciation I met him; he gave me my ordination, my *going forth*, I moved from householder to house-leaver. There is a photo of me coming from the temple hall after ordination, the most beautiful photo of me, it is the photo where I look so happy! Where the translator who came out after me, he looked very unhappy as Ganden Trisur Rinpoche was renowned for being difficult to understand because of his Tibetan accent. In the temple hall I sat close to the translator and the ceremony started to unfold. The translator was very nervous and that made me completely relaxed realizing there was someone suffering more than me; I will be okay. My ordination was arranged on a short time notice and there was no time to fetch new [robes](#) from India. My robes looked like a mini-skirt, while the yellow robe kept falling off when I moved. And yet there is no better photo of me with him.

Moments like this are for celebration and awareness. Celebrating to have been with him and awareness for the fact time is limited, something inevitable; not negative. It is the way things are; even for a great master, time ends.

### **His immense love for the Dharma**

I remember an encouraging story where I was with him in [Sera Monastery](#), while the abbot of my monastery translated, which is about as good as it gets. I asked him directly: *If you knew you would die tomorrow, what would you do tonight?* He looked at me and said: study!

No one exactly knows, but it is estimated he memorized around 35,000 pages of text. After my ordination, he gave me an initiation into a highest tantra yoga practice. I then followed him to London, where he was giving a commentary on that same practice, a very complex practice. He would always arrive with a Tibetan text—bundles of loose pages wrapped in cloth. He would carefully unwrap the bundle, turn to page one—and began to talk. From that moment on, he never looked at the text again.

All these texts were in his mind, but he always went through the same ceremony of unwrapping and then start to teach. It might well have been a gesture of humility; as if he needed the book, but he knew the text by heart. He could speak for three days straight, never once glancing at page two.

This great scholar, who studied so deeply and memorized so much, saying he would study on the last evening of his life, reveals his immense sense of wonder and love for the Dharma, his unending curiosity.

One more thing to explore and I hope he studied in his last week!

### **Lessons to learn for us**

It also creates the urgency of asking ourselves: *What are we going to do today?* This may be our final day, we don't know. Death comes hurtling towards us, and there is nothing we can do to prolong our life. The only way to make life longer is by attending to it, not forgetting we have a life, something we usually do. The best way to prolong life is through mindfulness.



Kriya Tantra emphasizes the presence of the Buddha and the presence of gurus is very important. There is a constant cultivation of relationality. That is why gurus matter.

### The role of the guru

The most important role of a guru is to be your mirror, so we need a guru who is clean enough to see our face in the mirror he holds up, rather than their own needs. If a teacher is still seeking renown, money, or recognition, you will not see yourself. Instead, you will see the worst part (the parts this so-called guru is looking for) of ourselves reflected – thus creating a free ride to pride and ambition.

You all know how hard it is when you meditate to *become someone*, it just doesn't work, it will hurt.

We need a guru; and when you look at him you see *no-one*, where in this *no-one-ness* your true self reflects you are free. Then we can pursue meditation because it needs to be done, not because we need to become someone. Then we can relax; the pace is not matter, the freedom matters.

## About the meditation

### Two aspects of visualization

There are two aspects of visualization I like to encourage.

I leave you to visualize the Buddha on your own, be creative. Next year we will practice specific visualizations, but that only makes sense when we have been creative and have a felt sense about the way we symbolize the world and endowing it with meaning.

Two points matter here:

- Visualize the Buddha in the aspect of your teacher  
When you have a teacher you deeply feel connected to, it is worthwhile to visualize the Buddha in the aspect of that teacher. This has many aspects.  
For example such a connection helps you see in a very realistic way your teacher is a manifestation of the enlightened mind. In the tantric tradition it is said Vajradhara, the primordial Buddha, has a commitment to appear in whatever form we need. When you find someone you truly trust, it is important to acknowledge that. Another example is, the more meditation progresses, the more you become *no-one*. When the onion of self is peeled away, the [Dharmakaya](#) begins to speak through you, as we too aspire to become Dharmakaya. When you see your guru as an ordinary person, you receive the blessings that come from ordinary people. And more often than not, those are burdens rather than blessings. This might relate to us in a way we begin to take instructions as though they come directly from the Buddha, the instructions carry pertinence; not about the guru's personal needs, it is not about putting the guru on a pedestal. It is how the mind responds to the way we look at things.  
When we look at someone with kindness, we invite kindness into ourselves. When we look with displeasure, we invite anger. When we look at our teacher as a doorway to enlightenment, we invite bodhicitta, renunciation, the path. The teacher is the gatekeeper, the one who knows how to open the door.  
But again, play with this. We will explore it gradually. This is the way to look at this topic.



- Visualizing a living Buddha

The visualization of the Buddha should never be static, like an image. The visualization should always be alive. When you are unable to visualize the Buddha in the form of your teacher, visualize Buddha Śākyamuni, something His Holiness also advises: it is due to Buddha Śākyamuni we have this fortunate human rebirth, he turned the wheel of Dharma. So visualize him as living, present Buddha. And keep exploring, step by step.

There is one more point I will keep repeating: once you 'get the hang of' visualizing the Buddha, the Dharmakaya of the Buddha and the wisdom you already develop mingle. The world you perceive is nothing but an aspect of the mind. There is no external world *out there*, that is one of the major wrong views. What you perceive is content of the mind.

As long as we believe the world exists as it appears, we are lost. By visualizing the Buddha, we transform the mind. We use the mind as clay to mold the Buddha from.

This process makes the mind beautiful, and it feels good. At the same time it is crucial to recognize you create this Buddha from qualities you already possess and one day these qualities become fully awakened.

How could you make sense of compassion if you do not have compassion? How could you visualize the Buddha as the all-compassionate one if you have no idea what compassion means? The only way is to draw upon 'the compassion within', and then imagine what it would be like if compassion were no longer restrained.

This visualization of the Buddha paints the very path in front of you. The more you understand the Buddha, the more you understand the path you walk. The more you understand the Buddha, the more you recognize you have the same nature. That is why the relation with the visualization of the Buddha matters so deeply.

It is through ourselves that we understand the Buddha, and through the Buddha we come to understand ourselves.

### Clarity and stability

One additional point, a technique, if you like.

When you visualize the Buddha, remember the Buddha is in the nature of pure wisdom. For lack of a better word, we could call this *wisdom energy*; 'light' may be the best image here: the clarity of the mind. Luminosity and wisdom come together.

This also means there is no stain on the Buddha. That is why Buddha statues always have faces painted with matte gold, the gold shines, but it does not mirror samsara. It shines towards you, but it does not reflect your negative emotions back to you. This symbolizes the Buddha is uninfluenced by our struggles.

We try to imagine what it is like to be without those stains: pure wisdom energy.

The Buddha is also empty. For those who joined last year: you can add to the visualized Buddha it is *empty of the imaginary nature*.

Finally—and this is the practical technique—although the Buddha appears in pure wisdom *light*, also give the visualization a sense of *weight*. Find out what this feels like, it is crucial; it relates to what samadhi is.

Samadhi brings two aspects to the mind: clarity and stability.

Clarity is what Tibetan texts describes as the *mode of apprehension*, the intensity of the



mind holding the object.

Stability means the mind feels like a rock. In Tibetan Buddhism explained by the word *vajra*: the mind becomes like an unbreakable diamond.

In the beginning, it is difficult to get a feel for this solidity, the constancy of mind. One way to cultivate it is to endow the object of your concentration (the Buddha) with a measure of weight. If you do not add this sense of weight and the mind calms, the object of meditation might start to drift, to float up or down or sideways, something unpleasant. When this happens, immediately stop your meditation for the day and freshly return to it the next morning and add weight to the visualization.

Ideally, place the Buddha at eye level, with a sense of robustness. Of course, the robustness is not in the object itself—it is a way of signaling stability to the mind.

## Cūlasuññatasutta

### On shamatha and vipassana

I highlighted earlier there are good reasons to theoretically separate the practices of *shamatha* (calm abiding) and *vipassana* (special insight).

Yet in the earliest layer of the tradition, this separation is absent. The Buddha himself does not make that distinction. In the suttas we saw the Buddha combining the two.

I approach this from the perspective that calm abiding requires investigation. When we practice working with the presence or absence of hindrances for example, we noticed calm and investigation go hand in hand. Investigation requires calm; when the mind is jumping from one object to another, there is no way to investigate.

These two practices are always combined.

The brilliance of the Buddha's instruction is it can be understood and practiced in many different ways. For now, I emphasize the calming aspect, where later this year we will look at the same sutta, but this time from the perspective of insight.

### Illusory baggage of the mind

The first step is to note we bring more baggage to the present moment than we need. The mind does so as it struggles to distinguish between what is real and what it makes up. The objects of our thoughts appear as real things. That is unfortunate, but relatively easy to overcome by training the mind to see that these appearances are not real.

So when the mind is caught in anger, it is useful to remind the mind: the object of anger is not present: you are arguing with a picture in your head. Or when the mind drifts towards the new iPhone 17 ProMax, you tell the mind: the iPhone is not here. This simple reminder that the mind is chasing its own imagery dismantles the illusion; it crumbles.

### Forgetfulness and mindfulness

When the mind is lost, it is forgetful.

Forgetfulness is a form of attending to an object without meta-awareness that mindfulness provides; we get sucked in. The moment we re-introduce mindfulness, by repeated training until it becomes natural, the illusion is gone. This is very empowering: the ability to step out of desire or anger at any moment.



The karmic imprints that give rise to anger and desire will remain for quite some time. They will keep re-appearing, even on the arya-path.

Increasingly, you will no longer be fooled by them. They arise, you see them for what they are, and in that instant, they are gone. It is that simple, it only takes effort. Never blame yourself, rejoice every time you see through them.

This is why we keep making practicing shamata as the initial step of meditation. Meditation is our laboratory space where we create the habit to recognize desire, aversion, jealousy, bitterness, or depression when they arise, we see them and let them go. These states of mind are not the truth.

### **Noticing the wholesome**

Then the Buddha highlights that, when we find safe spaces, we show the mind wholesome states. This is often difficult for us, because of a strong negative bias. We tend to be very judgmental and as a result we find it hard to see and appreciate what is wholesome.

Of course it is necessary to notice when unwholesome states arise, just as it is equally important to appreciate when they are absent, and when wholesome qualities are present. This is often overlooked, especially since many of us meditate want to achieve for example calm abiding, or some other state – where this desire blinds us to what is already present.

A simple practice is to notice how comfortable it is to sit together, e.g. here in the Tibet House. Recognizing this is a preliminary to noticing a gentle joy starts to arise: we generate an inner safety. If we cannot appreciate good outer circumstances, how will we appreciate wholesome inner ones? Learning to feel this is essential.

Appreciation is an essential ingredient of meditation as it allows us to follow the thread of pleasantness. This matters just as much in daily life; every time you open a newspaper, it relates to your negative bias, because journalists share the same bias. Practicing to appreciate wholesome states of mind is vital for our psychological health. An exception is a columnist of the New York Times who always writes about things improving, for example he reminds us fewer people starve from hunger today than fifty years ago.

Yes, we do have urgent problems, but we cannot address them effectively if we do not also nourish the mind. We regularly need a positive bias to nourish ourselves, and that is true both in the world and on the cushion. If we only focus on hindrances, on the things we did not yet achieved, meditation becomes a job, labor. But when we cultivate appreciation, meditation becomes a joy.

Even when the mind is chaotic, it is still pleasant to simply sit with what is present.

### **Mental objects and stability**

The Buddha emphasizes external objects cannot be the basis for samadhi, as samadhi always requires a mental object.

External objects are impermanent, constantly fluctuating, it is impossible to generate a stable mind on what is in flux. But you can stabilize the mind on a concept, because concepts are *negations*. For those who are not familiar with [negations](#), do not worry. I will explain in time or perhaps add a note in the additional reader.

Mental objects (concepts) are stable. In the Cūlasuññatasutta, the Buddha chooses one that arises naturally from reflecting on the environment: the earth-element permeates the desire realm.



There are other elements as well, but earth is especially prevalent for embodied beings like us. And the quality it carries is exactly what we need: stability, robustness, solidity. For that reason, it is an excellent object to support the higher concentrations.

It takes time to develop a clear concept of what the earth-element really is, but once you do, it is a powerful way to stabilize the mind. When the earth-element is well generated, it feels infinite, boundless.

A simple method is to reflect that the earth-element permeates the entire universe. Even in images of [quasars](#) fifteen billion light years away, the earth-element is present there. In this way, the meditation opens the mind towards boundlessness.

The earth-element can take us all the way up to the fourth concentration. But at that point, the object becomes a burden, an elaboration. Then one lets go of the form-aspect, and the mind turns from an object-aspect to a subject-aspect. It releases all objectivity and turns towards the mind. The first thing the mind encounters, when form has been abandoned, is space.

We have spoken about this before, and we shall return to it again: the mind is like space. The word 'space' still is an analogy, a way of making sense of the mind. The next step is to even let go of the analogy, and to focus directly on the two aspects of mind itself: clear and knowing. That is where we stopped last time.

### Refining practice

When you practice this, do not force the mind, do not be judgmental. Simply keep refining the object. It will gradually figure out by itself. It just takes time.

This sutra will remain important throughout the year, and it is also central in generation Mahāmudrā, which we will explore next year. From next week onwards, once we know something of what mind is, we begin to colour the mind with a felt sense and to give the mind directionality.

For most of us the directionality is chaotic, like a compass needle spinning around. While meditating, we prefer the mind to point one way and to keep the mind pointing towards the same point. You want the mind in the same direction every moment: directed towards the object you cultivate.

In calm abiding we coloured the mind with peacefulness, for where we are heading we need something more robust. Here *bodhicitta* comes in: the wish to become a Buddha for the welfare of all beings. This is the greatest motivator and once you can generate bodhicitta, everything becomes easy and the most pleasant of all motivations. Bodhicitta profoundly nourishes the mind. And that is exactly what we need.

## Five obstacles, eight antidotes

This session marks the end of my review with you of tools for calm abiding.

Last week we looked at one classical set: the awakening factors. Today we look at what [Asanga](#) defines as the five obstacles and the eight tools to overcome them.

### Laziness

I never liked the word laziness as it feels personal. Many English and other European words carry a normative connotation which the original term do not have, where the Buddha is



never judgmental.

A better term is *unserviceability*: the mind is not serviceable.

Unserviceability points to the heart of what we call *saṃsāra* where the mind does not serve us, and that is the great paradox: we want to be happy, yet the mind does not lead us to happiness. A confronting discovery: the moment you sit down to calm the mind and the mind replies, *I do not think so!*

A mind that does not serve you is an unserviceable mind. The mind creates your world, it underlies every experience and this mind fails to meet your needs is unacceptable.

We often complain about the world: family members can be challenging, colleagues perhaps even more so. But no problematic person in life compares to the problems of the mind. Discovering the mind does what it pleases makes your worst enemy look like a good friend.

Asanga points this out not in a normative way, but just as something to acknowledge. When we want to practice, we need to be adults, as they are able to hear bad news.

Asanga gives us bad news but only because there is also good news.

If it would be impossible to train the mind, why would he be talking about it? He highlights three initial forms of unserviceability, which we all know very well:

- **Procrastination**

Why doing today what we can do tomorrow?

- **Attachment to distractions**

Doomscrolling, Facebook, Instagram, binge-watching . . . All these activities will never add to your well-being. Once you get caught in them, they seem to make sense; the moment you stop, you realize they never made sense and still the mind will go there. One of the reasons we do so is because this attachment gives the illusion of power, where in reality it is disempowering.

- **Underestimation of self**

The '*I cannot, I cannot, I cannot*'-mind

### **Procrastination**

Procrastination comes from believing we are permanent. We act as if moments can be repeated, what can be done now, can also be done later, but this moment will never return. Your life is like an hourglass: with every instant, a grain of sand is lost, and no grain ever comes back. Life is running out.

That is simply the way it is. No matter if you are ten – twenty – or eighty years old: the story is the same. We have no idea how much time remains. You might be twenty years old and still only have three grains left, who knows? Because we are reluctant to look at time going by directly, we fail to recognize the preciousness of every moment. This blindness does not help the mind to do what it is supposed to do, the mind is blindfolded.

### **Attachment to distractions: pleasure and desire**

This has much to do with pleasure. Pleasure is nothing more than temporary relief from discontent. Take smoking as an example: although it applies to all pleasures, all smoking does is giving rise to an unpleasant desire. Lighting the cigarette relieves the unpleasant desire for a very short time and in this relief you think '*I did something good for myself.*'



Shantideva beautifully says: *of course, scratching an itch feels good, but it would be better never to have an itch in the first place?*

This is not a condemnation of worldly pleasures. It is simply to show desire and aversion steal our contentment. And when they do, it becomes impossible to enjoy the world as it is. Everyone knows that I love my iPad, however from joy and contentment, not out of attachment. When I am with my iPad, I am not restless or distracted. I am at ease, and so I can have fun with the iPad fully. That is something worth considering.

### **Underestimation of self: negative self-stories**

Underestimation has to do with the sense of 'I am.' We not only generalize instances into disempowering stories and on top of that we carry a strong negative bias. This sense of self is based on negative stories and is the reason many of us struggle with impostor syndrome, where we doubt our skills and accomplishments, feeling like fraud that will be discovered. And this is just a story.

Something went wrong yesterday, and the mind jumps to the conclusion 'I am like that', and we hardly ever balance a mistake with something wholesome.

### **The antidotes to Laziness**

Fortunately for us Asanga also has a cure to overcome unserviceability.

the cure is not to sit and hope unserviceability will stop on its own. When you sit in darkness and want to walk around, you do not keep bumping into walls hoping to eventually find the door; you turn on the light.

#### **- The light of faith**

That light Asanga calls *faith*—although once again this is a difficult word in our languages, 'trust' might be better.

Faith here specifically refers to have encountered the Dharma. The Dharma allows us to see what we could not see before. It allows us to question the content of our mind. That we can talk about the mind being unserviceable is already unique in the world. Most people do not realize their mind is unserviceable, they assume it is someone else's fault. The very thought '*perhaps the problem is inside me,*' is rare and founded by the grace of the Buddha.

Each of us at some point encountered something, perhaps a book, perhaps His Holiness, or another teacher, that opened a new perspective. All at once we saw the world differently, our interest was sparked, something moved us, and we began to explore and this exploration deepened into trust. Asanga calls this *conviction*. A once heard statement does not make a source reliable so we then perhaps read a second Dharma book, we visited another teacher. Step by step, we grew in conviction realizing '*This is something else, this is the Dharma and it perform functions I need, the Dharma meets my needs.*'

From conviction arises what Asanga calls *wishing faith*, the genuine desire to pursue, you want to continue your search and it no longer feels like work. The mind itself is drawn to investigate and you become more and more inclined to the Dharma, to teachers, to deepen practice; without effort, but with joy.



### - **Aspiration and joyous effort**

From faith arises aspiration.

Aspiration refers to a rising understanding of the qualities the Buddha speaks of. *Calm abiding* starts to make sense, *liberation* starts to make sense, *Buddhahood* starts to make sense and you aspire to develop these qualities as they can bring what you truly seek.

- With *calm abiding*, many of your needs are met. The mind itself becomes a temporary refuge.
- With *liberation*, happiness can never be taken away again.
- With *Buddhahood*, blindness is gone and you can serve the well-being of all beings to whom you feel gratitude; you can repay their kindness.

As aspiration does not feel like work, it can bring *joyous effort*.

The mind wants to pursue happiness and it does not matter how long this takes, or what challenges appear. You feel empowered by knowing where it can lead to. You do not know how long the journey will take, but you know how important it is; it is everything.

If it takes a million years, that is fine, that is what needs to be done.

Over time, aspiration dismantles the blindness of the mind. And yet the mind often struggles, this is called *spiritual doubt*: meditation or Netflix? 😊

The mind is not yet pliant and unable to discern clearly what truly benefits it.

We know the mind feels unwell after binge-watching, but we still keep doing it; like the adolescent who, 'on Monday morning', promises never to drink again. Only to forget by Friday evening.

That is not pliancy, that is an unserviceable mind.

But when conviction grows, effort grows. The mind becomes pliant, truly serviceable, genuinely pursuing well-being. When the mind is truly pliant, it is called *calm abiding*.

It is important to understand calm abiding is not something one achieves. It is what remains when the unserviceable activities of the mind fall away. It is the mind finally knowing what it needs.

## Excitement and laxity

Once we have a measure of initial freedom, we may become more inclined to sit on the cushion and meditate. Then we encounter the next problem, which Asanga identifies in two forms: excitement and laxity.

The mind is either doing far too much or far too little, it is rarely balanced in the middle.

Meditation can feel like walking a tightrope. The chances of falling are much greater than the chances of staying on. With familiarity, balance develops, but at first it is unstable.

There are many antidotes to these two extremes. I have provided examples for you in the additional material document, and we have discussed them before.

As time is limited, I would like to highlight one simple antidote here.



### Seeing excitement and laxity for what they are

The most important antidote to *excitement* and laxity is the capacity to see them for what they are and to recognise they are not wholesome.

To deeply know excitement does not bring you anything. It is a dangerous and out of control mind. Today your ruminations may seem pleasant, but you feed an animal that eventually will bite you. Today's obsession might be with something pleasant, tomorrow the obsession may be depression. They are the different sides of the same coin.

Rumination as excitement comes with a massive price, and rumination is entirely illusory, it does nothing for you.

The same for *torpor*. The mind often sinks because we impose far too much upon it, the mind sinks because it is tired of judgement and pushiness.

We are not the owners of the mind, we are caretakers of the mind. Meditating by forcing the mind, trying to make it do what it does not want to do, will lead to torpor.

The mind will simply close the door saying 'Enough. I am on holiday.'

So we must learn to see excitement and laxity for what they are. When distraction arises, recognise it as it is costly; it brings nothing. Worrying for example is the best way to ensure the problem you worry about will not be solved.

If you have a job interview tomorrow and want to make sure it goes badly, then worry a great deal. What you worry about will not happen anyway and you undermine yourself, you will not sleep, and you arrive with dark circles under your eyes, too upset to speak calmly. The best way to approach a job interview is not to feed worry. Instead, care for the mind, protect the mind and give the mind what it needs.

When the mind sinks, look for the reason. Perhaps you have been unkind to the mind, perhaps you have been pushing, judging. Then simply stop.

Care for the mind. Look at it appreciatively for a moment and luminosity picks up on its own.

There are many more tools, but we do not have time to explore them all here. What matters is excitement and laxity will continue to arise, and they will matter increasingly as we go deeper.

This connects to the *Cūlasuññatasutta*: when excitement and laxity arise, the key is to see they are empty; both only have illusory power. We believe they are real, but the moment we see they are not, their power is lost. That takes time and practice, bit by bit.

## Forgetfulness and mindfulness

I am presenting the obstacles in a different order than Asanga does.

Forgetfulness is the second obstacle and is the opposite of mindfulness.

The mind always attends to something, but in two very different ways:

- When the mind has a virtuous, wholesome, or neutral nature, it can be mindful.
- The very moment the mind grasps or desires, mindfulness transforms into forgetfulness.

Both attend to the object, yet there is a clear difference: forgetfulness lacks meta-awareness, there is no space.

Through investigation you will see that, when the mind becomes distracted, the mind feels as if it implodes into itself; you get sucked into a simulation. You become forgetful of yourself, and there is no agency. Investigate your experiences: when the mind dreams, you don't do anything, you are only watching movies.

It would scholastically not be entirely correct, but I would almost say that when we are forgetful, we are not persons: we perform no function. A person has agency, the ability to choose. In forgetfulness, there is no choice.

Mindfulness gives us choice.

Thich Nhat Hahn, whom I greatly appreciate, expressed says: *'We become alive when we become mindful.'* Mindfulness and life are synonyms.

The difference between forgetfulness and mindfulness is easy to see, but you must learn to recognise the difference, just as you need to recognize the cost forgetfulness brings: forgetfulness is the thief of your life.

We are all afraid of death, but what we should truly fear is forgetfulness. Death does not steal our lives, that is an illusion; forgetfulness does.

So in every moment we have a choice: to be alive or dead.

When the mind is forgetful, we are not here as persons, we then are as interesting as a television

## Non-application and active engagement

Non-application means we have all the tools, and even feel inspired to use them, but for some reason we do not use them. Many meditators fall into this trap because of a misunderstanding of calm abiding.

Often we hesitate to apply antidotes because we fear disturbing what we are doing. That is why I always emphasize, especially for beginners, calm abiding requires a very active engagement with the object. Calm abiding is not passive, it is always an active, alert, investigative mind.

Often we just 'hang' with the object, but that is laziness.

The key is to observe when you actively engage with the object and when you are not. For example, when darkness descends or when the mind begins to drift, the moment you actively notice and re-engage, absorption naturally follows.

Passive staring at the object does not lead to absorption, investigation and analysis bring about calm abiding.

In fact, the first concentration is characterised by investigation and analysis.

Learn to apply, learn to see how, when you actively work with a concentrated mind, the sense consciousnesses gradually fade, and you become increasingly involved with the object.



## Over-application and familiarity

Sayadaw U Pandita used felt words for investigation and analysis.

- He described investigation as *holding* something as if it were precious to you (which is very different from grasping).  
Whatever you stabilize the mind upon is of immense importance.
- He described analysis as *rubbing*: you keep approaching the object actively: ‘What is this? To the left, to the right, above, below?’ You look deeply, from every angle.

When you reach the final obstacle, rejoice. You are almost there.

This last obstacle is called *over-application*. It arises when the mind truly starts to become good at concentration, but you do not have full confidence in yourself.

The mind becomes calmer and calmer, but you lack experience in this new state. Out of habit, you keep checking: *Is this really correct?*

The antidotes become obstacles, you need to learn to let go.

The antidote to over-application is often described as *non-application*. But it might be better understood by *familiarity*. You come to know the state of mind well enough and you can relax into it. The mind sustains this state on its own and you can ease into it.

Stay with it for a while and at one point it induces an intense, liberating wave through body and mind. Pliancy arises: the mind becomes enormously supple, and a profound sense of well-being arises.

At that point the mind is fully self-sustaining, and you have achieved calm abiding. Or, in other words, you have let go of everything that prevented you from abiding calmly.

That is it, easy.

## Closing reflections

Please enjoy this practice for the rest of the week, it is a good basis. From next week onwards we will move through the beginning more quickly, and then use that as a foundation to gradually develop aspects of bodhicitta.

We will need bodhicitta in order to do the same practice with respect to emptiness.

I hope this has been inspiring, and above all empowering.

In 2027 it will be forty years since I first encountered the Dharma and it still astonishes me. For the first time I had found a tradition that did not tell me what I should do, it told me how to do, and why it was worth my while.

The Dharma did not simply say ‘*be a good person*’, it showed me *how* to be a good person, and why that mattered.



Sometimes these teachings may seem complicated, but foremost they are deeply empowering. They allow you to navigate the mind. They are like Google Maps for the mind, really.

Many of you know I meditated for quite some time in the forest tradition. There I saw the difference between those who had studied the teachings deeply and those who had not. Those who know the architecture of the mind, who studied the manual, find meditation more joyful and manageable. If you do not, meditation can become frustrating.

## Prayers

## Final words

If you would like a detailed and complex exposition of this topic from the Tibetan tradition, I advise you to read [Meditative States in Tibetan Buddhism](#) translated by Jeffrey Hopkins..

To all of you online and on Zoom: thank you for being here, and thank you for your practice. May our fortunate karma bring us together again next week, whether live or by recording. Know that my prayers are with you wherever you go. May we find awakening soon.



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