

Shamatha Meditation – A daily training guide

The reason for making time to practice shamatha meditation is this:

“Mental peace and physical pliancy occur ever so swiftly, when our mind is perfectly drawn in, settled and focused even for a minute.”

“If our daily activities are lead by sessions of calm abiding meditation, our mind becomes serviceable and from which cheerfulness and lightness of the mind in engaging in perfect attention arises and our mind will function free from the operation of afflictions. Our body will also become serviceable and from which lightness and buoyancy arise in our physical actions and our physical body will be free from dysfunction.”

“Individual practitioners who are endowed with daily Shamatha meditation find ease in proceeding with their mundane or supramundane activities.”

“Any activity one engages in will be sustained, increased, expanded and broadened through the mental focus and joyfulness even if it may take years to the result.”

“When you achieve the mind of (Shamatha), you will not easily fall under the influence of the mental faults or secondary afflictions that you have previously been habituated to. Even if these appear, they can be dispelled easily, allowing you to settle in the absence of such obstructions.”

Lama Tsongkhapa states in Great Lamrim, *“When your mind is serviceable, energy and mind combine as one and thereby the energy becomes serviceable. At that time, extraordinary physical pliancy occurs and when this happens, exceptional concentration arises in your mind. This, in turn, brings forth an exceptionally serviceable energy.”*

(A) Preparatory steps to engaging in a shamatha retreat

- (1) Conduct the retreat in an appropriate place conducive to practice, where the ground has been blessed and/or having inspirational/spiritual companions around.
- (2) During the retreat have no desire in seeking material comforts and be contented with whatever is available.
- (3) Avoid engaging one's body, speech and mind in worldly activities such as business and socialization with others.
- (4) Dispel thoughts of desire, anger, jealousy, ego/pride, self-centeredness etc.
- (5) Observe pure ethical discipline. Abide by whatever vows one has received e.g. individual liberation vows, bodhisattva vows, tantric vows. As a minimum, one should observe the 10 virtues. If you violate any of these through carelessness, purify them and restore them promptly.
- (6) Best to observe silence throughout the retreat.
- (7) Setup the altar and arrange offerings according to what is available.
- (8) Ready the comfortable seating arrangement.

(B) For the retreat sessions: You can divide the retreat day into 4 longer sessions of a couple of hours each or many shorter sessions of shorter periods like 24 minutes or one and half hours each, as it suits you (Refer to the sample retreat timetable at the end of these Notes).

(a) Every session starts with: Seating comfortably in the Vairochana 7-point meditative posture:

1. Sit comfortably with your legs crossed in the full-lotus posture, the half-lotus posture or whatever position is most comfortable for you.
 2. Sit with your awareness directed inward, keeping your body upright, without leaning too far back or bent too far forward.
 3. Keep your shoulders relaxed and even. Set the right hand over the left with thumbs meeting and rest the hands on the thigh.
 4. Your eyes should be slightly open (neither wide open nor closed), and they should be fixed on the tip of your nose.
 5. Do not raise or lower your head nor turn it to one side; set it such that your nose and navel are aligned.
 6. Set the tip of your tongue upwards to the palate (behind upper teeth).
 7. Let your teeth and lips rest in their usual, natural position.
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(b) Quieten the body and mind and focus on the present moment while breathing in and out. The breathing should be natural and gentle, not noisy, forced or uneven, without directing your breath in any particular way but simply being aware of your inhalation and exhalation.

(c) Do the Refuge practice.

(d) Generate the altruistic motivation to make the meditation session most effective and meritorious.

(e) Contemplate on renunciation by reflecting on limitations of samsara and its causes i.e. delusions and karma.

(f) Develop joyous effort by contemplating on preciousness of the precious human life and the temporary and ultimate benefits of the Shamatha mind including that of full enlightenment.

(g) Set a strong motivation to overcome faults of LAXITY and EXCITEMENT during the meditation sessions (be familiar with the signs and causes of laxity and excitement).

(C) Starting of the actual placement of one's attention in single pointed concentration on a chosen meditational object.

Start the actual placement of one's attention in single pointed concentration on a chosen meditational object with full MINDFULNESS that carrying 3 special features and INTROSPECTION that help to overcome the five hindrances during the meditation.

The 3 features are:

- Vivid intensity: Intense mental clarity on the object of meditation.
- Non-discursive stability: Staying one-pointedly on the object of meditation.
- Quality meditation session will lead to a level of physical and mental bliss/pliancy i.e. the suppleness/serviceability of the body and mind due to the cessation of physical and mental distraction/dysfunctions that removes obstructions. At the start, the occurrence of mental and physical pliancy is subtle and difficult to discern. As one approaches concentration, mental and physical pliancy increase, in the manner of a chain reaction, they lead to a one-pointed mind and mental and physical pliancy becomes obvious and easy to discern.

The job of INTROSPECTION mind during the meditation is this: From the start to the end of the meditation session, when MINDFULNESS dwells in concentration, introspection is the VIGILANT MIND that stands at the gate of your mind, protecting it from distraction and faults. Introspection is this vigilant mind that examines again and again the states of the mind using the tools of 8 ANTIDOTES, 6 FORCES and the 4 ATTENTIONS.

The eight antidotes are 1.Faith 2.Aspiration 3.Joyous perseverance 4.Pliancy 5.Not forgetting the object of meditation 6.Recognizing laxity and excitement 7.Application to eliminate them 8.Equanimity when they have been quelled.

To help the MEDITATIVE mind to maintain the quality of one pointed concentration throughout the dedicated time for meditation session and to achieve the perfection of Shamatha mind is through overcoming the FIVE FAULTS by EIGHT ANTIDOTES:

1. Overcome the obstacle of laziness by the antidotes of faith, aspiration, perseverance and pliancy
2. Overcome the obstacle of forgetting the object of meditation/instructions by the antidote of recollection/mindfulness
3. Overcome the obstacle of laxity and excitement by the antidote of vigilance
4. Overcome the obstacle of non-application/lose focus on the object of meditation by the antidote of application/bringing mindfulness back to the object of meditation
5. Overcome the obstacle of over application by the antidote of equanimity.

The six forces are 1.The force of hearing 2.The force of reflection
3.The force of mindfulness 4.The force of vigilance 5.The force of enthusiasm
6.The force of thorough acquaintance.

- With the FORCE OF HEARING, you accomplish 1/9 mental placement. This refers to following the instructions that you have learnt on Shamatha development and train to focus your attention upon the object of meditation.
- With the FORCE OF REFLECTION, you accomplish the mental state of 2/9 continual placement. As a consequence of continuing the fixation of your attention upon the object of meditation, you are able to achieve some level of continuity.
- With the FORCE OF MINDFULNESS, you accomplish the mental states of 3/9 patchy placement and of 4/9 close placement. Patchy placement is where your attention gets distracted away from the object of meditation but you are mindful of this and draw your attention back to the object. And in the case of close placement, it refers to your establishing mindfulness from the beginning and this prevents your being distracted away from the object of meditation.
- With the FORCE OF VIGILANCE, you accomplish the mental state of 5/9 taming and of 6/9 pacification. The state of taming is where by reflecting on the advantages of concentration, you develop delight in it and with vigilance, you recognize the faults of having a scattered mind due to laxity, excitement and the signs of the secondary afflictions and attachment to sensory objects and see them as disadvantageous. For the state of pacification, right from the outset, you regard distraction as disadvantageous and you quell any dislike for concentration. With vigilance you recognize the faults of the scattered mind due to laxity, excitement, and the sign of secondary afflictions and attachment to those concerning sensory objects and you do not allow your attention to be drawn to those obstacles.
- With the FORCE OF ENTHUSIASM, you accomplish the mental state of 7/9 complete pacification and of 8/9 single-pointed attention. In complete pacification, you strive to eliminate even the subtle thoughts of laxity and excitement and secondary afflictions and this result in the fine pacification of attachment, gloominess, depression, dullness, sleepiness, etc. Even if the earlier mentioned faults arise as a result of forgetfulness, you do not submit to them and instead eliminate them swiftly. Hence, laxity, excitement, etc. do not interfere with your concentration and you achieve continuous concentration. By the application of the FORCE OF ENTHUSIASM you gain powerful joyous effort and have no hindrances. You are able to establish the steady concentration that leads to single pointed meditation.
- With the FORCE OF ACQUAINTANCE, you accomplish the mental state of 9/9 balanced placement. Due to great familiarity with all the above, you develop effortless, spontaneous, natural concentration of the fully developed Shamatha.

The four attentions/focus are:

1.Tight focus 2.Intermittent focus 3.Uninterrupted focus and 4.Spontaneous focus.

Help the MEDITATIVE mind to maintain the quality of one pointed concentration throughout the dedicated time by overcoming the five FAULTS which are: 1.Laziness
2.Forgetting the instructions 3.Laxity and excitement 4.Non-application
5.Over application.

During the first TWO (of the 9) MENTAL STATES there is a great danger of intrusion by the faults of laxity and excitement that hijack the meditating mind away from the object of meditation, so the ATTENTION of mindfulness must be strenuously applied and TIGHT FOCUS for the meditation to be successful. Then during the phases of the next FIVE MENTAL STATES there are occurrences of interference by gross to subtle laxity and excitement, such that you may not able to maintain quality continuous meditation within the designated sessions, so you need INTERMITTENT FOCUS in order to successfully meditate. In the EIGHTH MENTAL STATE you are able to sustain long meditation sessions without interference from laxity and excitement, so merely through continuous joyous effort, you are able to stay in lengthy meditation sessions with UNINTERRUPTED FOCUS. Since in the NINTH MENTAL STATE there are no interruptions of any faults plus the meditative mind is well trained, there is no need for continuous effort to maintain EFFORTLESS FOCUS on the object of meditation, where one's meditation can be as lengthy as one wishes.

In short, develop the single-pointed 9 STAGES OF SHAMATHA mind through MINDFULNESS and INTROSPECTION by overcoming two faults of LAXITY and EXCITEMENT.

Laxity: Slackness, sleepiness, heaviness, unserviceable state of the body and the mind, like a person entering a dark place, like your mind does not able to see and hold the object vividly and firmly, the state of mind that is classified as a derivative of delusion, it works to assist all root afflictions and secondary afflictions.

Excitement: It is the state of a discontented mind that is distracted or scattered and leaning outwardly towards sensual objects; intense grasping, an excessive mental-hold on an object of attachment, considered a derivative of attachment that pursues pleasant objects and acts as an obstacle to single pointed concentration.

Sample TIME TABLE for longer meditation session during the retreat:

5am – 7am	First Session
7am – 8am	Breakfast
8am – 9am	Do Karma Yoga Like: Cleaning the retreat environments or conduct preliminary practices like Water bowl Offerings, prostration and etc. or do one's daily sadhana commitments
9am – 11am	Second Session
11am – 1pm	Lunch
1pm – 2pm	Do discussion on Shamatha practices, help each other to clear doubts on the practice or read teachings on Shamatha
2pm – 3pm	Tea-time
3pm – 5pm	Third Session
5pm – 6pm	Dinner
6pm – 7pm	Do Karma yoga and Preliminary practices like: Clearing water bowls offerings, light offerings, prostrations, daily sadhana commitment practices and etc.
7pm – 8pm	Fourth Session
8pm – 9pm	Do purification practice accordingly with Vajrasattva practice or purify negativities by reflecting on the 4 opponent powers. – Cultivate a mind of rejoicing – Do supplication prayers never to be separated from the care and blessings of Guru Buddha – Express sincere requests to Guru Buddha to always turn the wheel of Dharma until end of samsara for the benefit of all beings. – Do final dedication of the day with Bodhicitta and Emptiness
9.30pm	Go to bed: • Lay down comfortably on the bed in the reclining Buddha posture. • Set altruistic motivation to undertake sleep time for the benefit of sentient beings. • Try to fall asleep by focusing on the natural breathing inhalation and exhalation. • Or better still, fall asleep while doing TongLen practices, i.e. when inhaling, think of taking upon oneself, all the sufferings (and the causes of suffering) of all sentient beings to destroy one's self grasping and self-cherishing; when exhaling, think giving all the happiness and merits of the 3 times to each and every single sentient beings and cause them to abide in the everlasting peace and happiness of full enlightenment. • Or try to fall asleep in meditation on emptiness, on deity yoga etc.

Conclusion: Train the mind in one-pointed meditation until physical and mental pliancy arises, continue in training until one achieves a serviceable body and mind in virtue; when these arise, it is serenity. When your attention is able to focus on the object of meditation for as long as you wish with the sustained pliancy of body and mind, without needing to resort to an antidote, you have perfected Serenity or Shamatha.

Lama Tsongkhapa states in great Lamrim:

“Therefore, in summary, first of all follow the personal instructions that you have heard, and correctly apply the method for setting your attention in a balanced fashion. Then repeatedly reflect on the way of setting your attention, and as you are able to bring together a little continuity, sustain a continuous stream of attention. Then if your mindfulness declines and you become distracted, swiftly draw your attention back in and quickly become mindful that you have forgotten the object of meditation. Then generate powerful mindfulness and bring forth the force of mindfulness that prevents distraction away from the object of meditation from the outset. By accomplishing forceful mindfulness and by seeing the faults of laxity, excitement, etc., which distract the attention away from the object of meditation, develop intense vigilance to monitor your attention. Then when you are distracted by even subtle forgetfulness, recognize this immediately and stop it short; and upon eliminating it, generate the power of effort to lengthen the flow of attention that is uninterrupted by hindrances. Once that has arisen, you master familiarity by meditating with effort, and you accomplish the ninth mental state, in which your concentration becomes effortless. Therefore, until yogis attain the ninth mental state, they must exert effort to apply their minds to concentration; but upon attaining the ninth mental state, even if they expend no effort for the purpose of settling the mind in meditative equipoise, their minds automatically become concentrated”.

When you achieve such concentration that is adorned with bliss, clarity, and one pointed awareness, you have to move forward in utilizing the sublime wisdom of insight in EMPTINESS that integrates meditative equipoise and the post-equipoise state to the gradual progress on Ten Grounds by eliminating delusional and obscurational obstacles to omniscience.

Note:

This simple guideline on preparatory steps to Shamatha meditation is prepared for my personal meditation, so it might not suit everyone but anyone is most welcome to use it if it can serve to offer benefit.

May peace prevail in all sentient beings.

Geshe tenzin zopa
