

## Clarifying the Stages of the Meditative Path

HH Gyalwang Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje at Kagyu Techum Chöling, New Jersey, April 4, 2015

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[Part 1](#) transcript of a video

### Introduction to the Practice of Meditation

First of all, I'd like to welcome all of you who have come here to New Jersey, to hear this Dharma teaching.

This is my third visit to the United States of America, and I'm very pleased to be here and to have this opportunity to visit the New Jersey Karma Thegsum Choling again. When I first came to this country in 2008 I had the hope that I would be able to come back frequently and quickly, but it took three years before I was able to return for my second visit and then another four years before I was able to come back for this, my third. Which goes to show that it's not that easy for me to come here, but nevertheless I'm extremely happy to be here and I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to do so.

This third visit has primarily been a tour or visit to some of America's great universities. Initially the plan was that I visit one or two, and then it kind of turned into visiting a large number of them, and I had to give a talk at each university I visit. And the talks that I've been giving are not exactly traditional Buddhism, although they are connected to Buddhism. So, now here, in this context I have to teach Buddhadharma, which is kind of different direction; it's like pulling a U-turn in a car all of a sudden.

So the schedule today is that this morning I will be teaching, and you've asked me to teach about meditation. And this afternoon I will be conferring the Manjushri empowerment.

### Meditation Is Not for Commercial Purposes

To talk about meditation – meditation is not something that can be explained or taught; it has to be experienced in practice. And frankly I don't practice much meditation, because I would say: "I don't have the time," which of course is really an excuse. I would also say: "Maybe I'm lazy." So, it could be difficult for me to talk about it!

The first place I arrived in the mainland United States this time was California, and I toured in the main offices of both Google and Facebook, and when I did so I discovered that they have rooms dedicated to meditation practice and that the people who work at and run these places are quite interested in meditation and mindfulness.

It seems that nowadays everyone is interested in meditation and mindfulness, whether they are Buddhist or not, which I think is really good. However, given to that meditation by its very nature must be personal individual thing that each person has to experience in their own way based their own needs and dispositions, and based on their own investigation. I think it must never be commercialized or used for commercial purposes. While it's excellent that everyone has the opportunity to practice meditation, each of us needs the freedom to choose exactly how we practice it based on our needs as individuals.

I think it would be best if I begin with a general explanation of meditation practice. To start with there are two types of meditation: analytical meditation and resting or placement meditation. Resting meditation is any practice where the mind is brought to rest of focused one-pointedly on a single chosen object. Analytical meditation is the active and rigorous investigation or analysis or scrutiny of something, practice without distraction.

Most forms of shine, shamatha, tranquility meditation are forms of resting meditation, and most forms or techniques of vipashyana or insight meditation are connected with or forms of analytical meditation. This is not always true; for example there are practices where shamatha and vipashyana are combined into one meditation, as is true in the Mahamudra tradition. But basically there is nothing wrong with saying that shamatha practices are resting meditation and vipashyana practices are analytical meditation. Without the practice of shamatha, however, it's extremely difficult to practice vipashyana, so therefore the practice of vipashyana must always be preceded by the foundation of shamatha.

One of the emphases in the techniques of shamatha meditation is the need for quiet or even an isolated environment in which to practice. However, a quiet or isolated place or environment here doesn't only mean that it is physically isolated or quiet. It also needs to be isolated from conditions of distraction, such as telephones, the internet and so on. It's necessary to be in a situation free from distraction, so that the mind can begin to prepare itself for the practice in state of shamatha. If not, if you attempt to practice shamatha without any preparation of the mind, because of anxiety and distractions and the endless current of thoughts it will be more difficult.

Now I think that in addition to that this type of isolated environment, a special place in which shamatha can be practiced free from distraction is essential in the beginning, during one's initial training, but once one has accomplished some degree of shamatha, I don't think that it is absolutely necessary.

### **Intensive Shamatha Programs for Western Countries**

Experienced masters have taught that the training in the practice of shamatha requires between three and six months of full time isolated practice. It's also taught that if one fails to develop shamatha in one's initial attempt to do so, a subsequent or second attempt will be very difficult.

In our situation for example, in western countries there are many Dharma centers and study groups where people get together and they practice meditation. Usually they get together once a week and they meditate together for several hours at the most. I have some doubt that this is enough, that they are putting enough time in to develop authentic meditation, and I also feel unsure as to whether the necessary conditions for that are even present.

I think up to now dharma camps where people can focus exclusively on shamatha training or practice training for several months are very rare, if they exist. There seems to be up to now to have been very few of them. By saying all this I'm trying to encourage you to actually institute or create such venues, such opportunities for several months' long shamatha intensive programs in western countries.

Without the practice of shamatha there can't be any authentic samadhi or meditative absorption, and while one may develop an intellectual understanding of the view of emptiness and one may cultivate to some degree an experience of loving compassion, there will not arise authentic vipashyana or insight. And without shamatha and vipashyana there is simply no way to progress to the paths and stages of the Buddhist path, because the very ground of such progress is one-pointedness of mind, which can only be gained through shamatha practice. And I think this is one reason why people don't progress lack of one-pointedness of mind through shamatha practice.

My description up to this point of shamatha is basically what we would call common shamatha, which is the usual practice of shamatha, as it's widely known. There are also ways of practicing it such as found for example in the Mahamudra tradition and in the Chan and Zen traditions, where there is not so much requirement that the practitioner live in a state of isolation, but the practice is done as a daily practice and furthermore integrated with post meditation activities, such as walking, eating and even conversation, during when all of which one attempts to sustain one's recognition of the mind's nature. Such approach to meditation is primarily shamatha, but it does include an element of vipashyana, so therefore you could call it a combination of the two.

We all like to hear about the practice of the uncommon meditation, in which shamatha and vipashyana are integrated. It sounds very, very good and we find it encouraging, because after all most of us simply don't have the time or opportunity to take six months off to spend in shamatha camp. However, as good as the uncommon practice of unified shamatha and vipashyana sounds, I think that to actually do it is quite difficult. Especially I think it would be very difficult to sustain recognition of the mind's nature in post meditation for someone who has not undergone any training in the common practice of shamatha.

In such a practice one sustains the recognition of the mind's nature and simply relaxes naturally within that recognition. But this is quite difficult for us. It is difficult for us to rest the mind without alteration or fabrication, because we are so used – too used – to alteration and fabrication of our mind, which makes it very difficult for us to suspend such alteration. It's like for example when you go to a doctor and you are being given an injection and the doctor says: "Take it easy, relax," and that just makes you more anxious and causes more trepidation.

There is a story about this. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Gyalwang Karmapa Rangjung Dorje had many students who had achieved siddhi, who were great practitioners. And one day someone asked the 3<sup>rd</sup> Karmapa: "Is there any Dharma that one does not need to practice, that does not require practice?" And the Karmapa said: "Oh, definitely, there is, certainly." And so the student said: "Well, would you teach it to me?" And the Karmapa said: "If I taught you the Dharma that does not require practice, it wouldn't help you, because you would try to practice it!" To attempt to practice something in which there is nothing to practice, would be a mistake. And I take this conversation to be primarily about the difference between the natural absence of alteration or fabrication and the introduction of alteration or fabrication.

### **Using Meditation to Weaken Anger**

The practice of shamatha including the practice where one relaxes in the mind's nature cannot by itself eradicate the kleshas, the mental afflictions. It can, however, help to weaken them, lessen them and give one more control over them.

To use anger as an example; practice needs to be applied really before the anger arises. Once full blown anger has arisen, it's too late. So we need to cultivate or sustain a degree of mindfulness and alertness or vigilance that will enable us to know that we are becoming angry just before we actually do. And if we can do that before the anger becomes a full blown or forceful, then if you can simply look directly at the anger without judging it, without attempting to get rid of it that is how to apply practice.

Anger is an extreme state of mind and it is fundamentally deceptive, because the state of anger does not really accord with reality. So therefore, if you can rest in your mind's nature and look at the anger you will expose the deception or lie that is embodied in the anger. Many people have told me that when they first met the 16<sup>th</sup> Gyalwang Karmapa, he would look at them with his eyes in a way that felt like a scan, scanning them inside and out, which usually caused them to recollect all the things that they wished he wouldn't see, their faults and so forth. We need to do that sort of thing with our minds. If you scan the anger, scrutinize it, scan it with your mind you will expose its deceptiveness, its lie, and that will weaken it.

The aim of shamatha practice is not simply to achieve peace of mind, to feel comfortable and relaxed in one's mind. The aim of shamatha practice is actually to improve our minds, improve or change our personalities for the better by weakening and finally remedying our kleshas. Some people think the point is just to feel good, relaxed and be comfortable. But that's not it; the function of shamatha is to serve as a remedy for kleshas.

So that's the practice of meditation, and while I can't speak from experience, I've introduced you to the practice of meditation based on my understanding of it.

In the practice of shamatha it is not enough to practice it only in one's meditation room or shrine room, sitting on the cushion. It's necessary to bring the practice of shamatha into all post meditation activities, work and so forth, so that you'd not be disturbed, and especially so that you will be able to apply it when you become highly emotional.

We cannot, however, deal with the kleshas through forceful suppression. Sometimes people have this problem: they lack the intention or the willingness to actually apply remedies to the kleshas, but they seek to suppress or conceal them. For example, someone would say: "I get angry, but because I'm Buddhist I'm very ashamed, when I do, so I try to conceal it, because if I reveal my

anger, my family says to me: 'Aren't you Buddhist, you are not allowed to get angry.'" In such cases we are concealing or suppressing the klesha out of shame, but not actually applying the remedy.

We should not force ourselves not to get angry simply because we are Buddhists, but for our own individual very good reasons. The reason not to get angry is because it is destructive: it is destructive to our minds, our bodies, our situation, and to those around us. Those are the reasons not to get angry and in that way we need to carefully understand the right reasons for overcoming the kleshas, and not simply do it out of shame or because we feel that as Buddhists we should.

If we try not to get angry simply because we are Buddhists, this really just becomes an excuse, and we really need to know the valid reasons for not getting angry. In order to do that we need to know ourselves and we need to befriend ourselves.

### **Meditation and Relaxation Are Different**

Nowadays many people are interested in Buddhism and especially meditation, but they think of meditation as some kind of spiritual therapy, like spiritual massage. They hope that by practicing meditation they will be able to reduce the stress and pressure that they feel in their busy lives and relax, so they practice it. This is fine, but it is not the complete practice of meditation as taught in Buddhism. That requires more exclusive or intensive training. And I think that the hope that meditation will put you at ease and make you more comfortable may cause some dissolution, because I think that the intensive practice of meditation will probably make you initially very uncomfortable. Because old habits die hard and in the practice of meditation we are attempting to replace many of our old negative habits with new ones, which goes against the grain of our personalities and therefore we will probably be very uncomfortable.

### **Questions**

I'm going to stop talking, but now we could have some questions. I ask that you only ask about our topic today, about the practice of meditation. And so, I will point to people.

Question: Nowadays it's very difficult to find an isolated environment, no matter where you go there are still going to be disturbances and distractions. Would you please speak more in detail of how to create or select an isolated environment for practice?

HHK: In this 21<sup>st</sup> century because, or along the tremendous material progress that we have achieved, we have developed extreme habits of consumerism and greed. This is of course encouraged by some of the media so that in our craving for stuff we are prevented from having mental isolation in sense of having un-distractedness. Even if we don't want or crave one thing, there will be something else that we will crave, because the commercialism makes extensive use of psychology in order to beguile us.

I think if someone had offered Jetsun Milarepa an iPhone it might have kept him busy for a few hours! The problem of our external luxuries and all our devices and so forth really forms a net that we are caught in, and it's very hard for us to escape it.

I think that if we can relax our minds and look carefully at the unreality of consumerism, we can regain our independence. We have to ask ourselves the question: what do I really need? And we have to learn to tell the difference between what we want and what we need. By thinking carefully about this we can become independent and I think that independence is the starting place from which we can begin to develop that mental un-distractedness or mental isolation that is required for shamatha practice.

Q: Your Holiness I have a question. Like Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche always said, ngöndro is the foundation of all the practice. So, my question is if it's necessary to complete the ngöndro and then practice meditation or how to balance foundation practice and the meditation? I think to have a better result from meditation is to finish the ngöndro and have better control of your heart. Sometimes it's hard to balance which one you should practice more and which one less. So here is my question Your Holiness.

HHK: First of all, the ngöndro, or preliminary practices are of two types: the common preliminaries, the Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind, and the uncommon preliminaries which usually people mean when they talk about preliminaries. They usually the Refuge, Vajrasattva, Mandala Offerings and Guru Yoga. But I think actually the common preliminaries are actually the more important of the two categories. The reason why people prefer to spend more time on the uncommon preliminaries is that there is counting, you count numbers of them, and because you count numbers, you feel a sense of achievement, which people like. The contemplations of

the common preliminaries are contemplations without anything to count, so therefore there are no markers that give you a sense of achievement. The sign of achievement is that your mind and personality improve. I think however, that the contemplation of the common preliminaries... HHK in English: "That is boring." ...which idea we find boring, something that we would like to defer until some future time. The contemplation of the four common preliminaries I think is very important, and furthermore it should be continued throughout one's whole life and one's whole practice. Because we use the term ngöndro, or preliminary or prelude about these practices, some people have the misconception that they are something you do as a beginner and then throw away once you get to the so called main practice. But the reason we call them preludes or preliminaries is that they must be practiced, especially the common preliminaries, from the very beginning but not only at the beginning; at the beginning, middle and end of the path.

In the early Kadampa tradition of Lord Atisha when one engaged in one of these contemplations, such as for example death and impermanence, one was not allowed to move on from that contemplation, from that meditation, until one gained realization of it. And so people would spend their whole lives doing it. And then, at the time of death they would make an aspiration to continue that same contemplation in their next life, and so they gradually gained realization. This may in a sense be too tight or rigid, but it does give us an indication of how important these contemplations are.

Q: Among them there are so many Dharma gates, so many aspects or practices of Dharma, so many methods. Among all of the Dharma gates that exist, which method is best for increasing one's wisdom?

HHK: I think there are many ways to increase wisdom; both what we could call artificial or outwardly directed wisdom and inwardly directed wisdom. Outward directed wisdom is basically knowledge which one requires through study.

Usually our minds become learned about everything except themselves. We are wise about everything except our own mind, which usually remains utterly ignorant of itself. So I think the most important thing is to gain wisdom that is recognition of the mind itself. I think that is the basis of true wisdom. We call this knowing one and liberating everything, because when you gain that kind of insight, it is all-inclusive and therefore will allow the power or intensity of your wisdom and learning to increase naturally.

Our minds are a little bit like our eyes: our eyes see everything except themselves, and if we want to look at our face we need to use a mirror. I think we need to do the same with our mind, we do so many meditation practices, but in my experience the most effective thing is in daily life to always examine or scrutinize one's own mind, so that one gradually becomes closer and closer to recognition of its nature.

Q: [in Chinese]

HHK: This question was probably based on misunderstanding. His holiness said that what I said was that shamata alone cannot eradicate the kleshas. I didn't say "basic practices are insufficient to eradicate the kleshas." We need to do the practice that causes the eyes of wisdom to be wide open. That is now exactly what I said. What I said is that the practice of shamatha alone is insufficient; in addition there must be the practice of vipasshyana or insight.

Q: Thank you so much for coming out and seeing us and talking to us today. This is a time when teenagers are extremely emotional and we all seek how to remediate such emotions but we don't know how to get there. So my question is: do you think it's important for us...

HHK: Can you slow down; my English is not that good!

Q: I'm sorry! Okay. This is a time when teenagers are often highly emotional and we oftentimes have the intention to remediate those emotions. My question is: do you think it's important for teenagers to be exposed to meditation and practice meditation? Thank you.

HHK: In my recent visit to several universities I have seen that there is a growing enthusiasm for the practice of meditation. And I think that one does not have to be a Buddhist in order to practice Buddhist meditation techniques. When the Buddha taught dharma he taught it in different ways according to individuals. He did not always teach the Mahayana directly, sometimes he led people indirectly to the Mahayana. So in that way I think that it's appropriate for people to use techniques of Buddhist meditation employ them, if they are helpful to their minds, even if they are not Buddhist. This is becoming more and more common nowadays. We see there is extensive research into the benefits of meditation in universities and so on. I think this is appropriate and very helpful.

Q: Thank you so much Your Holiness for coming today. Earlier you had mentioned about consumerism, or commercialism, and with that in mind that is often a choice, very much. What would you recommend how would we live our lives, when we have obstacles from distractions? We have no choice, those obstacles are not an optional anymore and it's like an avalanche. And the more I seem to practice – I am a daily practitioner – I get more obstacles!

HHK: Many dharma practitioners have the expectation that because they practice dharma they are going to collect vast merit, experience every success, have long lives and good health. And sometimes people would ask when a Dharma practitioner is struck by sudden adversity: "They are such a good practitioner, why is this happening to them?" [HHK in English: You can learn more lesson.]

From the point of Dharma itself it's actually better when practitioners experience adversity, because it gives them opportunity to learn more lessons and to actually apply their practice, so that they can mix the experience of the adversity with the practice of Dharma.

However, don't worry, I'm still going to pray for your health and longevity and happiness. I'm not going to pray: "May they all become sick and have troubled lives!" The point is how you view adversity. And if you can view adversity as an opportunity for practice, then that seems to be the best way to use it. Because once adversity has occurred, once a problem has arisen, if you could have prevented it, you would have done that, and that's obviously the best thing to do. But once it has arisen, you no longer have the option to prevent it. You'd better make good use of it; there is no point in just resenting it. So I think what's most important is how we view adversity and to see it as an opportunity.

Q: Thank you Your Holiness for being here and gracing us with your presence. When we know that we cause harm with the klesha of anger and some of the best anecdotes for that and how do we remedy that. Part 2: What are the thoughts – I'm a daily practitioner too, and student of Lama Norlha Rinpoche, what are the thoughts around medication, for anxiety and depression? Whether that's a conflict for our Dharma practice or... best view of that?

HHK: To answer the second question first, there is a difference between the common or usual emotional states and the actual illnesses of depression and anxiety. And when depression or anxiety is more than just a mental state but actually a pronounced illness, it is really a physical thing and therefore requires a physical remedy, one can't overcome it probably by working with the mind alone. So therefore, not only is there no contradiction between the taking of antidepressants or anti-anxiety medication under medical supervision, but it is unwise to stop just because you become a practitioner. Sometimes people who suffer from depression become Buddhists or begin to practice Buddhism and initially, in their initial burst of enthusiasm the practice of Dharma seems to serve as a remedy for their depression and then they stop taking their medications and become very unwell. It's unwise to do that. Of course one doesn't want to take these medications because they all have physical side-effects, so one takes them because one has to. Ideally one wants to develop to a point when one no longer requires them and one can gradually get off them, but don't do so prematurely.

I'm going to address the question about the remedies for anger this afternoon. Last question. There will be an opportunity to ask questions tomorrow. So those of you whose questions I have not been able to take will have a chance then.

Q: How can we practice meditation continuously throughout the 24 hours of each day while walking, talking, sitting, standing, throughout everything we do?

HHK: I think that it won't help to try to force oneself to practice meditation 24 hours a day. It's impractical to attempt to engage in formal meditation practice throughout the entire day and night. But one might be able to remain in a meditative state of mind continuously. The key to this is to begin each day by forming the intention to do so dedicating the day and making the goal of the day the maintenance of the meditative state.

With that kind of commitment or that kind of aspiration to periodically remind oneself to do it, for this purpose smartphones are very helpful, because you can set them up to buzz or ring or sing an alarm at you wherever you want. So if you set up every two or three hours your smart phone to remind you that you are supposed to be in a meditative state, because you formed your intention in the beginning of the day and reminded yourself of this intention throughout the day, it should be possible to sustain the momentum of meditation.