

Also by Lama Dudjom Dorjee  
*Falling Off the Roof of the World*  
*Heartfelt Advice*

# Stillness, Insight, and Emptiness

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*Buddhist Meditation from the Ground Up*

Lama Dudjom Dorjee

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THE NINE STAGES OF SHAMATHA MEDITATION.

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witness consciousness. Then we will gradually achieve the perfection of shamatha meditation.

### STAGE ONE: PLACING THE MIND

We can think of our mind as a wild elephant being led along by a mischievous monkey. In this first stage, we simply do our best to try to catch up to that elephant in the hopes of someday taming it. The wildness of the elephant is represented by the darkness of its hide, which at this stage is completely black.

The first stage of resting the mind is called *sem jok-pa*, “placing the mind.” This first stage of shamatha involves simply placing or resting our mind on a particular object or form. This might be an external object or an internal visualization. Regardless of what object is used, the first step is to simply place our mind’s attention on that object.

This first stage could be compared to someone who is in the midst of a violent seizure trying to take a cup from a shelf to place it on a table. As beginning meditators, our minds jump and jerk much like the body of the seizure victim. However, if such a person repeatedly tries to tame her movements just long enough to bring that cup from the shelf to the table, eventually she can assert more and more control over her physical being. Similarly, if we try, just for a moment, to focus our mind, to concentrate our awareness on one object, that jumping and jerking mind becomes more tame.

This idea of form meditation can be approached two different ways. One may choose an object that is mundane, such as a candle, a rock, a color, etc. However, it is more traditional to use a sacred object such as a statue or thangka painting of a meditational deity as a support for our shamatha meditation.

### STAGE TWO: PLACING THE MIND AGAIN AND AGAIN

At this second stage of shamatha meditation, we should notice a very small amount of improvement in the state of our mind; thus, we can think of the wild elephant as having a small white patch on its head. It is still wild, but less so.

This second stage of resting the mind is called *sem gyun-du jok-pa*, “placing the mind again and again.” Initially, we are only able to place the mind on an object for a brief moment before our mind’s attention wanders. This

is the first stage of shamatha meditation. In the second stage, we realize that our attention has wandered, recognize this without judgment, and then simply bring our mind back to the object, continuing to attempt to hold it there with mindfulness.

At this stage of the development of our meditation, our mind's attention will continue to wander, over and over again, and each time we simply bring our attention back so that we are *placing the mind again and again* on the object of our focus. This second stage trains our mind to rest in a way that is a small improvement over the effort used in the first stage, when we simply brought our attention to the object and it immediately wandered away.

### STAGE THREE: CONTINUOUSLY PLACING THE MIND

In the third stage of shamatha meditation, we can think of the wild elephant's head as turning completely white. This symbolizes the fact that the untamed mind has made some significant improvement, that it is actually becoming tamer after all.

This third stage of resting the mind is called *sem len-te jok-pa*, which means "patching the mind," but we could say that this means that the meditator is now able to engage in *continuously placing the mind*. Once we have developed the mindfulness to recognize when our mind has wandered from the chosen object of our attention, we then learn to recognize distracting thoughts as soon as they arise. As soon as thoughts do arise, we identify them without attaching to and interacting with them. We then simply allow these newly arisen thoughts to dissipate naturally without allowing our mind's focus to wander from the original object of our attention. Great meditators recognize that the arising of thoughts in the mind stream is not a problem for the quality of our meditation. However, problems do occur when we cling to these extraneous thoughts, for this clinging (or chasing) breaks our focus and destroys our meditation. For this reason, we must not allow these other thoughts that arise to distract our attention from the object of our meditation. We are then *continuously placing the mind* on one object for any chosen duration of time, thereby further refining our mind's attention.

In these first three stages of shamatha, our mind is so agitated that even the smallest successes are incredible improvements. This can be explained using two analogies.

First, our mind's focus is like a candle flame, delicate and easily extinguished. A single candle flame unprotected from the wind can be blown out by the gentlest puff of air. Therefore, it is almost useless for lighting a

darkened room. In the first three stages of shamatha meditation practice, our mind's attention can be compared to this candle flame. The smallest puff of distraction extinguishes our attention and the candle of focus must be continuously relit. Eventually, in the third stage, we have enough of the winds of distraction blocked so that we can focus the mind's flame of attention just long enough to see some improvement in our ability to be truly present from moment to moment.

In the second analogy, the mind is likened to a river. Before beginning our meditation practice, our mind is a raging river, with whitewater rapids and waves that completely cover its surface. When we begin practicing shamatha, we develop enough presence of mind to at least realize that our mind is like this raging river and see the waves on its surface. By the time we begin to experience the third stage of shamatha, the waves have settled enough that we can actually see into the water, if only a little way below the surface.

### STAGE FOUR: THOROUGHLY SETTLING THE MIND

As you can see in the illustration of the nine stages, when moving into the fourth stage of shamatha meditation, the white patch on the elephant's hide has spread from its head down onto its chest and legs. This further emphasizes the idea that the more time we spend practicing shamatha, the more controllable the mind becomes. The elephant continues to become more controllable, tamer; likewise, our mind becomes tamer because we are learning to intentionally assert control over it.

This fourth stage of resting the mind is called *sem nye-war jok-pa*, which means "thoroughly settling the mind." Because we have begun to stabilize and direct the mind in the first three stages of our shamatha meditation practice, our mind is now further clarified and rests more evenly. In this fourth stage, when we meditate and have brief experiences of samadhi (concentrated meditative absorption), we experience our mind becoming more open and spacious.

Before we began to refine the mind through shamatha meditation, we didn't even notice the gross distractions in our meditation practice. However, as the mind's concentration improves, even those distractions that are the most subtle, and therefore previously undetectable, can sometimes be recognized at this fourth stage. These subtlest distractions constantly escape from our samadhi, so in order to tame the wild mind even further, we actually constrict our focus to these subtle movements of the mind. We observe them continuously in order to *thoroughly settle the mind*.

### STAGE FIVE: PLACING AND TAMING THE MIND

Continuing our analogy of the wild elephant, in this fifth stage we see that the entire front half of it has gone white. At this point, we could say that the mind is finally approaching being halfway toward this goal of becoming perfectly tame. Unfortunately, at this stage, halfway is still the very best that we can do, and some days not even that!

This fifth stage of resting the mind is called *sem dul-war jok-pa*, which means “placing and taming the mind.” We already realize the extraordinary benefits from meditation for ourselves and for others. This is like realization of the benefits of taming a wild horse. A wild horse, even when corralled, does no good for anyone, and although potentially extremely dangerous to others, continues to use resources, such as food. However, once this horse has been tamed, the resources allocated to it show a return in that the horse can be used in a variety of ways, whether to do work, be ridden for pleasure, or even win races.

Just so, realizing, remembering, and reflecting upon the qualities of the stabilized mind generates a spontaneous experience of joyfulness, lightness, enthusiasm, and relaxation. Thus, it becomes a natural part of our practice to encounter distractions and disperse them by remembering the value of retaining focus and then settling deeper into that focus. Reflection on these good qualities that manifest as a result of our meditation practice causes the mind to rest and stabilize even more deeply. We then remain in this state of samadhi as long as we are able to maintain it, allowing us to even further *place and tame the mind*.

### STAGE SIX: PACIFYING THE MIND

Returning to our elephant, we now see that it is mostly white; the only parts that are still black, or wild, are its hindquarters, legs, and tail. At this stage of shamatha meditation we can consistently rest the mind on our object of focus for at least half of our meditation session. This is because, like our elephant, the mind is now more tame than wild.

This sixth stage of resting the mind is called *sem zhi-war je-pa*, which means “pacifying the mind.” We tamed the mind somewhat in the fifth stage in response to the lightness, joyfulness, and enthusiasm we felt in meditation. Yet there is still a tendency for the mind to wander.

We should think about cleansing the mind of its distraction as we would

clean our dirty laundry: simply rinsing a soiled article of clothing in a little water will wash away the most obvious dirt and smudges, but the smaller, deeper stains require more work and focused attention, whether it be more direct scrubbing, the use of special chemicals and cleansers, or even utilizing the assistance of a specialist such as a dry-cleaning shop. Just so, once we have cleansed our minds of the most obvious and gross distractions, we must address the finer and more subtle obstacles to properly focusing our attention. The principal problem at this stage is that we are attached to the entertainment provided by those distractions and wanderings of the mind. The specific method we use to break that attachment and cleanse ourselves of distractions is not only to observe them as they arise but also to recognize the fact that they are harmful to the blissful and beneficial meditative state that we established in the previous stage of the development of our shamatha practice. When we recognize the faults and disadvantages of such distractions, they are naturally and spontaneously pacified and dispersed through the power of mindfulness and awareness. This allows us to *pacify the mind*.

### MOVING DEEPER INTO SHAMATHA

The first six of the nine stages work mainly with the gross wildness of the mind. The last three stages pacify the most subtle aspects of mental dullness and agitation. It is important to understand that there are two aspects to the refinement of our attention in shamatha practice: first, our ability to focus and concentrate our attention on any one object, whether form or formless, continuously improves. Second, as our focus increases, our distractions decrease both in number and size. Not only are there fewer distractions but those distractions that do remain are smaller, subtler, and finer. They are in essence much harder to detect, requiring more and more from our constantly improving attention, as well as finer and subtler methods. These most refined methods are addressed in the seventh, eighth, and ninth stages of shamatha meditation.

### STAGE SEVEN: MORE DEEPLY PACIFYING THE SUBTLER MIND

The image for the seventh stage of shamatha meditation shows the elephant now almost completely white. The only black that remains is on its lower

legs and feet, and on its tail. At this stage of shamatha meditation, our mind is so tame that it can be used even more powerfully to finish the task of taming itself. Our attention can be brought to bear so powerfully that our focus is unimaginable unless one has actually experienced these profound depths of samadhi.

This seventh stage of resting the mind is called *sem nam-par-zhi-war je-pa*, which means “more deeply pacifying the subtler mind.” At this stage we move past working with that gross wildness of the mind described in the first six stages, and we begin to focus on subtler distractions. Whereas before, in the first six stages, we have had some glimpses of these extremely subtle distractions from time to time, it is at this point, in the seventh stage, that we become capable of consistently recognizing those subtlest of distractions and smallest faults of the mind that occur during meditation. Because of the highly advanced nature of our practice at this seventh stage, even these subtlest distractions and obstacles are spontaneously liberated simply as a result of our awareness of them, and our meditation remains stable, as we are able to *more deeply pacify the subtler mind*.

At this level of shamatha, merely being aware of the obstacle is enough to disperse it. This is because, as explained in the sixth stage, we have already reached a point in the development of our practice where we are no longer attached to the distractions as a source of entertainment. We are able to let go of them immediately due to recognizing their appearance as well as realizing that they are harmful to our meditative absorption.

#### STAGE EIGHT: FOCUSING THE MIND ONE-POINTEDLY

Our elephant is now completely white. This symbolizes that, although there are still a few particularly subtle obstacles to perfect samadhi, the mind’s attention has been perfected to such a high degree that all of its focus, all of its power, can now be directed to completely finishing the task of clearing away the very last distractions during the eighth stage of shamatha meditation.

This eighth stage of resting the mind is called *sem tse-chik-tu je-pa*, which means “focusing the mind one-pointedly.” At this point, meditation becomes nearly effortless due to our familiarization with the practice of shamatha during the first seven stages of resting the mind. Those first seven stages were achieved through the power of mindfulness and awareness, and,

as explained above, the result is that we begin to consistently notice and eliminate the subtlest of distractions.

In the eighth stage we develop the unshakable absorption that is required in order to work with and pacify the very last of those subtlest of the subtle distractions. This results in the near perfection of a subtle clarity and stability that moves us toward the ninth stage. Dispersing these last few subtlest distractions, doing this finest work with our own mind, allows us to truly find a meditative absorption in which we finally *focus the mind one-pointedly* almost without fail throughout the entire session of our shamatha.

#### STAGE NINE: SETTLING THE MIND IN EQUIPOISE

In the final image of our illustration, there is an important change in our elephant: not only is it completely white, it is also being ridden. This signifies that the mind has now been brought under such a high degree of control that it can be used with perfect consistency. A truly tame animal will never turn on or run from its master; just so, a truly tame mind will never wander or experience negativity.

This ninth stage of resting the mind is called *sem nyam-par jok-pa*, which means “the mind settles in equipoise.” This is the stage when we become free of all distractions, whether subtle or gross, when our mind is resting completely evenly and balanced in samadhi. At this stage, the mind simply rests in perfect and unshakable equipoise beyond any concepts of good or bad, unswayed by desire or aversion. Reaching this stage, our mind’s attention and focus are completely unaffected by circumstances external to the mind. These circumstances could be outer distractions present in our environment, or even internal distractions such as hunger or thirst, loneliness or boredom. At this stage of resting the mind, such distractions have completely ceased to appear at all.

In this ninth stage of shamatha, our samadhi is so deep that a sense of timelessness is developed such that the meditator can maintain the meditative absorption of this perfectly refined attention indefinitely. At this stage of the shamatha meditator’s development, the state of arhat has been reached, and the root of the negative afflictive emotions has been not just cut but dug out forever.

It is important to note here that at this ninth stage of shamatha, the point at which a meditator reaches this state of arhat, full enlightenment and

buddhahood have not yet been reached. In fact, due to the bliss of resting in perfect equipoise, the arhat is still tied to the three realms of samsara by his attachment to the state of samadhi he has attained. Granted, the arhat has indeed reached a neutral point, creating no more negative karma and unfettered by negative thoughts or actions. However, he also accumulates no positive karma, no merit from positive actions of compassion and wisdom. The arhat may rest in this neutral state of deep absorption for a seemingly infinite time until awakened by the compassionate action of the outreach of a great buddha or bodhisattva. Once this connection with the sources of refuge is established, the arhat realizes that only part of the journey toward true liberation and enlightenment has been made.

### **SUBTLITIES IN THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE NINE STAGES**

When one first hears the nine stages of shamatha meditation being explained, it may seem incredibly difficult to discern a clear line of demarcation between each of the nine stages. However, with practice and contemplation we come quickly to the realization that searching for that line is futile. The search itself illustrates a lack of understanding of the concept of the nine stages as well as of the practice of shamatha and the experiences that result from dedicated practice. There will be times when our practice goes smoothly and easily. At other times, our practice may be a struggle and the very idea of samadhi seems completely foreign to us. Until we reach the very highest levels of advanced practice, our experience of tranquility in meditation leaps forward and slides backward in fits and starts. We are never really completely at just one of the nine stages. Our practice tends to overlap several of the stages at once, depending on where our monkey mind is during that particular session of that particular day.

### **THREE GROUPS OF THE NINE STAGES**

We can think of the nine stages in terms of three groups of three. In the first group we have the first three stages of shamatha. At this point in our practice, we may have days when we feel the experience of the third stage, and other days when we can barely make it into the first. Regardless, compared to the state of samadhi experienced at the ninth stage, when we are

struggling in these first three stages we really haven't even begun to tame the monkey mind.

In the second group of stages we have the fourth, fifth, and sixth. At this point, we do begin to really bring the mind under control and have some small experiences of stability in the samadhi of the higher stages. We also still have other times when our practice is very much a struggle, more like the first three stages. We have smooth times, and we have rough times.

In the third group of stages we have the seventh, eighth, and ninth. At this much more advanced level our practice of shamatha has reached a point where samadhi is always easily attained and we are simply refining our practice to a degree so subtle that we cannot even imagine the subtleties unless we are actually already operating at those highest stages.