

How to Practice Shamatha Meditation

The Cultivation of Meditative Quiescence



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of suffering is investigated in detail, the truth of impermanence inevitably appears. The realization of impermanence leads to the realization of suffering, and this, in turn, can lead to a realization of selflessness. In a narrower sense, the same recognition of impermanence can be applied as an antidote to both excitement and laxity.

CHAPTER NINE

How One Performs After Directing the Mind to the Object

The Practice When Either Laxity or Excitement Arises

THE DEFINITION OF LAXITY

LAXITY IS DEFINED as a mental factor which is distracted inwardly, while cultivating virtue, due to a diminishing of the strength of clarity. Its direct function is to obstruct clarity. Its indirect function is to obstruct the attainment of meditative quiescence.

While it is a mental factor, it is not to be found among the fifty-one mental factors. However, you can find it implicitly either under lethargy, which is included, or under distraction, which is also included. Although you could subsume laxity under either lethargy or distraction, it is not either as they are defined. The reason for this is that both distraction and lethargy are unwholesome mental factors, whereas laxity, at least in one sense, may be wholesome in that the mental state during laxity may be benevolent. Thus, it is possible to have a wholesome mind that is, nevertheless, at the same time subject to laxity. For that reason, it cannot be included under the umbrella of either lethargy or distraction.

The aspect of laxity is either some mental darkness, a little bit of gloominess—gloominess in the cognitive rather than the

emotional sense—or simply one of being too relaxed. Having lost its grip, it reacts inwardly.

Gross laxity is a form of laxity, so it fits the preceding definition. However, gross laxity entails a lack of lucidity and lack of strength of clarity, both of these from the subject's side. In other words, the subject, the mind itself, lacks the strength of clarity and lucidity, so that the forceful apprehension of the object has been lost or has largely slacked off.

Subtle laxity is a form of laxity in which you have some lucidity and some strength of clarity—not that there is a big difference between the two—but the force of apprehension of the object is slightly slacked off.

Gross and subtle laxity are spoken of as if there were only two degrees, but one finds in practice that there are many gradations that range from extremely gross—the first type experienced—and extremely subtle laxity, until the seventh mental state, in which you are still subject to the most subtle form of laxity. Complete freedom from laxity is reached in the eighth mental state.

Lethargy is similar to laxity, but it is not the same. Lethargy is a mental factor included within one of the *six primary mental distortions*, the mental distortion variously called “delusion,” “confusion,” or “bewilderment.” Its function is that it obstructs the attainment of shamatha.

Lethargy and laxity are companions. Laxity leads, lethargy follows, and they both run in the same direction. After a heavy meal we often experience a sense of heaviness of body and mind. We want to lie back and get into a horizontal position. Even the face can feel heavy. The mind feels sluggish. All of these are aspects of lethargy.

In meditation the sequence of arising of these various mental factors has a definite pattern: imagine starting with a good strength of clarity of mind, which degenerates to the point where laxity arises; laxity follows its course, giving rise to lethargy; lethargy follows its course, leading into sleep; it is a natural progression.

THE DEFINITION OF EXCITEMENT

Excitement is a state of mind that occurs when focusing upon a sensual object with which one is previously acquainted, and it causes the mind to be scattered outwards. The mental factor of excitement apprehends the object in the mode of craving. Its function is to obstruct shamatha.

Gross excitement arises when the mind does not remain on the object despite the fact that one has applied the antidotes to excitement.

In the case of subtle excitement, the mind is not scattered away from the object, although the awareness does not remain entirely on the object. The awareness is divided.

Just as in the case of laxity, you cannot speak of excitement as having only two degrees. Experientially one finds that there are many gradations between very gross and very subtle excitement, right up to the seventh mental state. At this point there remains only the most subtle excitement, and that is abandoned upon the attainment of the eighth mental state.

Scattering is a mental factor that is similar to excitement. Yet there are distinctions between the two. Excitement, by its very definition, is something that draws attention away from the object of meditation by the force of attachment, craving, and lust. Scattering also draws the attention away from the object, but it is not necessarily propelled by attachment. It may be propelled by some virtuous topic or may be conjoined with some other mental distortion apart from attachment.

Among the twenty secondary mental distortions, remove excitement and you are left with nineteen, all of which are various forms of scattering: scattering conjoined with pride, with anger, jealousy, laziness, and many others. In addition, if thoughts of *bodhichitta*, meditation on emptiness, thoughts of developing renunciation, or an emergent mind arise during the cultivation of shamatha, all of those, too, would be forms of scattering.

Cultivating Vigilance That Recognizes Laxity and Excitement

It is essential to have an understanding of the definitions of laxity and excitement, and yet mere intellectual understanding is not enough. In addition, one needs to ascertain each mental factor as it arises during meditation. Even beyond that, it is important to acquire the more subtle capacity to recognize laxity and excitement when they are on the verge of arising.

It is through the gradual cultivation of vigilance that one is able to recognize laxity and excitement, first as they arise, and second when they are on the verge of arising. As the practice progresses, vigilance increases in its effectiveness until, upon the attainment of the sixth mental state, one's powers of vigilance are strong enough occasionally to recognize both mental factors on the verge of their arising. In the seventh mental state one knows they are on the way well before they arise. It's a little like waiting for a train and knowing it is about to pull into the station before you can see it on the tracks. Not only can you hear it, you can also see the conductors, the porters, and the engineers move into action.

The power of mindfulness is developed in the third and fourth mental states, and attained upon the completion of the fourth. It is during the fifth and sixth mental states that the power of vigilance is developed, and it is upon the attainment of the seventh that it is perfected.

In terms of the practice, it is essential to maintain mindfulness—firmly holding onto the object—at all times. The logical question is: Is vigilance something that you also maintain constantly? The answer is an emphatic *no!*

It is said that vigilance is something that is to be applied only intermittently. Especially at the beginning stages, you need to be very aware of how frequently and when to intrude in the meditation, watching and checking up with vigilance. You must quickly

become sensitive to the general condition of the mind. When it is pretty well free of laxity and excitement, leave it alone. When it is more likely to be prone to the laxity and excitement, that is the time to bring in your guardian, vigilance.

Vigilance can arise casually or intuitively as well. If the force of one's mindfulness is quite strong, vigilance easily arises on its own. Similarly, if vigilance is strong, it is easy for mindfulness to be maintained. In *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* Shantideva says that if mindfulness is strong, even when it is not manifesting, vigilance will be nearby and will easily manifest.

If one places a high value on the Buddha's teachings and on the instructions of one's spiritual mentor, and if one has a fear of rebirth in lower realms and also an appreciation of the excellent qualities of bodhichitta, the path of awakening, and full buddhahood, then mindfulness is easily generated. Laxity and excitement are listed jointly as the third of the five faults that act as obstructions to shamatha. The antidote for this fault is vigilance. Therefore, it is said that upon the recognition of either laxity or excitement, one should generate vigilance and apply other more indirect antidotes which will be discussed a little later.

The Fourth Fault: Nonapplication

Nonapplication is the failure to apply the antidotes when laxity or excitement arises. In this case, the problem has arisen, you have recognized that the problem has arisen, and you respond with nonapplication, that is, you do not respond at all. This is a fault.

The Antidote to Nonapplication

Very simply, the antidote to nonapplication is *application*, or just *doing something about it*. What is the nature of application? When one has recognized the arising of either laxity or excitement, but does nothing, the function of application is to move

the awareness right back to the object, where it can pick up the continuity of mindfulness. The *intention* to redirect the awareness is the immediate, first-stage remedy. Essentially it says, "Come back!" If the mind obeys, it is back on track. If the mind does not come back to the object, then additional antidotes have to be applied.

THE DEFINITION OF INTENTION

Intention is a mental factor having the function of directing the mind and the mental factors with which it is conjoined towards a given object. It is the "mover of the mind." Intention directs not only the principal consciousness itself, but all of the concomitant, or simultaneously arising, factors of the mind. They all occupy the same vehicle and go in the same direction, and the driver is intention.

When with vigilance one suspects the presence of laxity, one must clearly distinguish between the objective and subjective strength of clarity. Refer back to the original discussion of this subject and remember that clarity of the object is not something that is likely to occur at the beginning of the practice. It will come about very gradually. However, the subjective strength of clarity of awareness is something that must be present right from the beginning. If one fails to make that distinction, it will be hard, if not impossible, to develop stability.

This point cannot be emphasized too strongly. First concentrate on stability. When stability is fairly good—not *very* good, just pretty good—then slowly shift the emphasis to the strength of clarity of the apprehending mind. If you have no stability and try to make the shift with nothing but sheer determination—because that's what it boils down to—you will destroy the possibility of getting any stability at all. Please hold this very, very firmly in your mind. Don't lose it. And when you sit down to meditate, apply it!

Additional Remedies for Laxity

When the mind has wandered off due to laxity, and intention does not bring it back to the object of meditation, you must temporarily set the object aside and do something else. You might begin by visualizing your body filled with light.

Another way to counteract laxity is to broaden your mind, cheer it up, give it more space, uplift the spirit. It is important to apply this technique by focusing upon wholesome objects, not something that merely stimulates your mental distortions. Wholesome objects could be the excellent qualities of fully awakened beings, demonstrations of kindness of the fully awakened beings, the benefits of bodhichitta, the value and rarity of a fully endowed human life, or the qualities of one's spiritual mentor.

It is better not to interrupt the meditation for an extensive analytical meditation. In order to avoid that necessity, it is helpful to have a little nugget of something to think about, not very elaborate, but something that takes the essence of the subject. Use this to uplift your mind. If you have difficulty finding the right nugget, consult your mentor and ask him to help you come up with something concise.

It is my impression that Westerners are not too interested in meditating on suffering. On first impression it is a practice that seems depressing. The trouble is that when one does not meditate on suffering, but looks only for happy things to think about, later, when it comes time to contemplate the kindness of the Buddha or the benefits of bodhichitta, these topics do not have much power. As one meditates on the excellent qualities of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, one finds joy in them because they are so effective in eradicating suffering. If suffering is not an issue, they are just a waste of time.

In using this meditative remedy, don't expect immediate results. They may appear, but don't expect them. Nevertheless,

when you are confronted by the repeated arising of laxity, continue to meditate on uplifting subjects. You may not feel the effect in the next meditation, but very likely the next day you will feel it.

Other remedies to laxity relate more to physical conditions. Stay cool. If you find heat is making you sluggish, you might want to wear lighter clothes or increase the ventilation in your room. Another remedy is diet. Some people find that the mind goes lax when they are eating rich foods, but it can also happen when your food is not nutritious enough. Extremes either way can cause laxity. You must check it out for yourselves. Be mindful of what you eat and watch how it affects your meditations.

It is also said that it can be of benefit to gaze out over a distant horizon, something far away. Look at the sky. Look at light, anything that is bright. Make sure that your room is bright, that you do not sit in gloom. Be certain to shower often enough. If you do not bathe frequently enough, it can give rise to laxity, not to mention complaints from your fellow meditators. There are limits, of course. If you find yourself getting drowsy, you shouldn't spend all your time in the shower.

There are gentle and forceful means for dispelling laxity. One forceful means is to follow the practical guidance from Pa-dampa Sang-ge. You visualize your mind as a little sphere of radiant white light at your heart. Then, with a forceful exhalation from the diaphragm, very vigorously send it right up through the central channel and out through the crown of your head. As you do this, say the word *Phat!* Of course, if you are meditating within earshot of other people, either say "Phat!" silently to yourself or just imagine the light going up into space and merging with it.

Another visualization that can dispel laxity is to imagine yourself sitting on top of a telephone pole. That should wake anybody up. But if even that doesn't work, then imagine yourself sitting on top of a telephone pole during an earthquake.

Additional Remedies for Excitement

Just as is the case with laxity, when intention does not subdue excitement, additional remedial measures require you to leave the major object of meditation. Here too, meditative or reflective remedies can be effective. As it has been stated in *The Essence of the Middle Way* by Bhavaviveka, the mind can be pacified or calmed in the face of excitement by directing the attention to topics such as the suffering nature of the cycle of existence, the suffering nature of the lower realms of existence, impermanence, or compassion. The purpose of all these reflective meditations is to sober the mind, to bring it down.

Many events and circumstances of worldly life attract our attention. Just by watching television we can see accounts of the slaughter of animals and fish, the savagery and killing that goes on in the animal kingdom, animals fighting each other and eating each other, and the human mistreatment of animals. The TV is a window to the extent of human suffering as well. Without even going into the street to see homeless and hungry people begging in doorways, the evening news forces us to witness the tremendous hardships and travails of famine, of war, revolts, revolutions, demonstrations, imprisonment, torture, brutality. The contemplation of these aspects of suffering combined with the cultivation of compassion for the beings experiencing that suffering will sober the mind and allow awareness to be drawn in once again.

There are many different ways of meditating on impermanence that will also draw the mind inward. One of the foremost is the meditation on death—of close friends and family, and your own death—as one manifestation of impermanence. Another is the fourfold theme:

All acquisition ends in dispersion,
All building ends in destruction,
All meetings end in parting,
All births end in death.

Let us examine just one of these four themes—"All meetings end in parting." Take this meeting as an example, or a gathering of a few friends. The usual response to this kind of event is one of delight, the happiness of being together; but usually that delight is tainted with attachment. If, on the other hand, we look at this same event with wisdom and intelligence, we will recognize that in the simple event of gathering, the cause for parting is simultaneously born. Separation does not have to wait for another cause to arise. The cause is already there and parting is inevitable. This being the case, if we look at the gathering in its fullness, we realize that it is not a cause for rejoicing, attachment, or excitement; neither is it a cause for remorse or unhappiness. We simply see it as it is, in its entirety.

Armed with that insight of wisdom, one realizes that "All births end in death." There is absolutely no question that all of the participants of the gathering are going to die. This obviously includes the inevitability that they are going to be separated. That does not require any further logical analysis. This clear insight will act as an antidote for the attachment-delight arising from gathering, as well as the aversion-unhappiness that comes in the face of parting. The antidote to attachment and aversion is to see the whole picture with clarity and wisdom.

Another antidote to attachment is simply to focus on change—not impermanence, just gross change. See the various events of this world and recognize that they have arisen from causes that are at this very moment in the process of change, and moreover that the process of change must and will continue. As it is for the things around us, so it is for the planet as a whole. It, too, arose and is in a continual process of change. Focusing on that change dissolves attachment which derives from viewing phenomena in their static or immutable aspect.

In *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* Shantideva states that every person is an ever-changing sequence of events, that

other people are ever-changing series of events. Then he asks: How can one phenomenon that is in a continual state of change be attached to another phenomenon that is also in a continual state of change? That and many other antidotes to attachment can be found in the eighth chapter of that text. The first chapter discusses the benefits of bodhichitta quite elaborately. The latter part of the third chapter goes into the many ways to view impermanence. It is a good guidebook for meditative remedies to laxity and excitement.

If you find that the reflective meditations are swiftly helpful in subduing scattering and excitement, immediately return to the object of meditation. However, just as in the case of meditations designed to counteract laxity, you should not expect them to be immediately effective. Be patient with them. Give them some time. Spend some time in these reflective meditations at your leisure, or just before you go to bed at night. Become more accustomed to them and you will very likely find that the excitement and scattering will diminish the following day. The more you become familiar with reflective meditations, the more benefit they will bring to your practice.

There are physical antidotes to excitement as well. You might try wearing warmer clothes, or make your room darker by dimming the light. Increase the oil and fat content of your diet. This will help counteract excitement, but don't overdo it or you might find yourself getting very sleepy.

As a forceful method for counteracting excitement, Pa-dampa Sang-ye's advice is to visualize your mind as a small sphere of darkness at your heart, to send that out of your body through the lower orifice of your own choice, and to see it dissolve into the ground. If you repeat the process a few times, it should help.

If your object of shamatha is not breath awareness but the Buddha image or anything else, counting breaths can immediately help to counteract strong excitement and scattering. However,

while focusing elsewhere is, like a good band-aid, of short-term benefit, for overcoming excitement in the long run the reflective meditations are the most effective.

Recognizing the Causes of Laxity and Excitement

It can be said that failing to restrain the sense doors acts as a cause for both laxity and excitement. If, for example, you become attached to visual form, you can exhaust yourself. Then when it comes time to meditate, you are tired, and tiredness gives rise to laxity. If it doesn't cause exhaustion, becoming attached to a lovely visual form can give rise to attachment, and when you sit down to meditate, the mind will go out to the things to which you are attached. The same is true for all the other senses—sound, taste, smell, touch. Lust and sexual fantasy will also exhaust your faculties and lead to laxity.

Diet is something you have to experiment with. Too much food generally leads to laxity, but in some cases it can lead to excitement as well. Too little food generally leads to excitement, but the opposite possibility also exists. If one has a tendency to develop tension, or subtle energy disturbances, it is likely that excitement will arise. If one does not have tendencies toward tension, the danger will be laxity. Your own experience will let you know what you must do.

A Tibetan proverb says that one should fill one-third of the stomach with food, one-third with water, and one-third should be left empty for the movement of energy. That can be difficult if one is strictly following the monastic rule which prohibits eating after noon. The tendency is to gorge at lunch, to feel stuffed most of the afternoon, to be empty and hungry at night, and to be famished in the morning.

One of the antidotes to excitement is meditation on a subject that depresses the mind. Reflecting on mind-depressing subjects

when excitement is not prevalent can be a cause of laxity, just as a generally gloomy attitude can.

It is also said that perseverance in association with laziness can cause either laxity or excitement. What exactly does that mean? One example would be looking at your watch and saying to yourself, "Oh, in the next minute I'm supposed to start my next session. I don't really want to, but I guess I should." If you start out under those conditions, it won't be long before laxity or excitement has you in its grasp.

The failure to cultivate vigilance can cause laxity as well, so it is very important to be working on that between sessions. At the beginning of a long retreat there can be a tendency to be a little depressed between sessions. So don't bear down too hard in the first weeks. Give yourself some space. After a month or so, you can start to enhance your vigilance and have tighter discipline between sessions, to be close on guard for the arising of anger and attachment towards the various sense fields.

It is also important not to enter the retreat with too high a flame of enthusiasm, for this can lead to a state of excitement, followed by exhaustion. Then, later on, the tendency to give up or procrastinate might arise. You might begin to think, "Well, I won't do it this time. I'll just wait until the next retreat. There's bound to be one some day." It is much more effective to extend your enthusiasm to encompass the entire duration of the retreat, whether it be three months, six months, or a year.

In the West we have so many wonderful buttons to push. We push a button and a message pops out of the fax machine, or we push a button and in three minutes a fully cooked dinner pops out of the microwave oven. We are accustomed to the push-button approach, we are used to getting fast results. But there is no button to push for shamatha. If you try to find one you are wasting your time. The attainment of shamatha requires a very relaxed, patient attitude from the outset. Thinking in terms of

continuity and a protracted practice will, in and of itself, act as an aid to realization. The experiences themselves will arise in accordance with your own ability, but that attitude will aid any ability you have for the fruition of your practice.

In general, it is said that the absence of serenity and the absence of a disciplined or subdued quality of mental, verbal, and physical actions can act as a cause for excitement.

On the physical level, the more slowly you move your body, the greater the aid to the cultivation of stability. However, if you have been accustomed to engage in a daily routine of physical exercise and feel that cutting it off would be harmful, discontinuing the exercise itself could lead to laxity. This is something you have to check out for yourselves by means of your own experience.

In terms of mental attitude, reflecting on family and relatives or thinking about all the fun and activities you might be missing out on while you are in retreat acts as a strong cause for excitement.

Intention is that faculty of awareness which moves the mind. Whether it moves the mind to obstructions or to the application of antidotes, it is intention. Vigilance is that faculty of awareness which is on guard for the arising of obstacles, both excitement and laxity. Both of these faculties must be applied with moderation and balance. An excess of intention can cause flaming enthusiasm, whereas devoting oneself exclusively to vigilance—constantly checking, analyzing, investigating, and probing—will lead to excitement. Both will deter the mind from the cultivation of meditative quiescence.

The Fifth Fault: Application

When either laxity or excitement arises and has been discerned by vigilance, if you just sit there watching the process, that failure of intention to apply an antidote is nonapplication. In that case, nonapplication is a fault, and its antidote is application.

When neither laxity nor excitement arises and out of little

more than habit you unnecessarily apply antidotes, the very application is, in and of itself, a fault.

The Antidote to Application

The antidote to application is equanimity, of which there are three specific types. (1) Emotional equanimity is that intermediate emotional state which is neither pleasure nor pain. (2) Immeasurable equanimity is the evenness of mind which occurs in the absence of hostility towards the enemy and attachment for a friend. (3) In the context of shamatha, equanimity in terms of application is the nonapplication of antidotes. It is simply not applying antidotes when antidotes need not be applied.

Equanimity is not an antidote you will find yourself applying in the early stages of the practice. It does not come into play until the eighth mental state, when the power of both laxity and excitement have been exhausted, and there is no tendency for them to arise. Applying them then is a waste of time and energy which simply obstructs and intrudes into the practice.

The chief period of application of equanimity (the application of nonapplication) is in the eighth mental state. At this point, it entails the release of the antidotes to laxity and excitement, which are no longer bubbling up.

A Brief Summary of the Five Faults and Eight Antidotes from Tsong-kha-pa's Great Exposition of the Stages of the Path of Awakening

As one first begins the practice, the first fault is laziness. One does not apply oneself to concentration, one does not meditate. To overcome laziness, apply the four antidotes: pliancy, enthusiasm, aspiration, and faith.

Once one is meditating, the fault is forgetfulness. The meditator forgets the object of meditation and does not maintain

concentration. That being the case, one should apply oneself to the cultivation of mindfulness, which acts as the remedy for forgetfulness.

When the mind is concentrated, the faults that arise are laxity and excitement. When the mind is subject to these faults, it is said to be dysfunctional or unserviceable. To overcome these faults, one should apply the antidote of vigilance.

When laxity and excitement continue to arise because one is not applying the remedies, the fault is nonapplication. To overcome this fault, one should devote oneself to the antidote of application, which is the antidote to nonapplication.

When one is free of laxity and excitement, the fault is application, because if one applies the antidotes when it is unnecessary, it distracts from concentration. The antidote for application is equanimity (nonapplication).

At the outset of the practice it is difficult to gain any stability whatsoever on the object of meditation. At this initial level one should give major emphasis to the cultivation of mindfulness.

In the second phase of the practice, as mindfulness becomes stronger, gross scattering and excitement subside and one is likely to become vulnerable to gross laxity. At this time one must confront that fault with the application of vigilance.

In the third phase gross laxity subsides and is replaced by the occurrence of a more subtle level of excitement and scattering. Here again, the remedy is mindfulness, and as mindfulness increases, this allows a more subtle level of laxity to occur.

Once that subtler level of laxity has subsided, then there is still a problem of effort because one has become so accustomed to applying the antidotes. It is hard to break that habit. As the antidote to that effort, one must apply equanimity. It is by this means that one attains the ninth mental stage.

As one cultivates that ninth mental state with continuity, pliancy eventually arises. First it is dynamic pliancy, then it transforms into nondynamic pliancy.

It is in this sequence and by this means that one attains meditative quiescence.

Questions and Answers

Q: One person suggested the possibility of choosing subtle impermanence or emptiness as an object for shamatha. If the mind follows that route and veers off in terms of excitement, how does one recognize when subtle laxity arises, especially so since those objects have no clear boundary?

A: First of all, regardless of one's object of meditation, it would be very, very difficult at the outset to recognize subtle laxity. It is something that one can recognize only after one has progressed well in one's meditation.

It would be extremely difficult for emptiness and subtle impermanence to appear to the mind as objects. As an object for shamatha, the image of the Buddha is many times easier. So, on that basis alone it would be more advisable to focus on the Buddha image.

If one were to disregard that advice and choose either emptiness or impermanence as an object, one would have to precede the shamatha practice with a great deal of investigation and analysis by using reasoning to get them to appear to the mind in the first place. And how would they appear? Through the *generic image* of either impermanence or emptiness; and even getting the general image, let alone the actual phenomenon itself, is very, very difficult.

Moreover, these objects can appear in the mind only after one first of all negates something else. To have that complex process as your mode of shamatha is a very difficult feat.

For example, if one were focusing on the subtle impermanence of a specific phenomenon, then first of all one needs to recognize that there is already the appearance of permanence of that