



# Tranquility and Insight Meditation

an approach  
for beginners

by Michael Erlewine

**Tranquility**

**And**

**Insight**

**Mediation**

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## INTRODUCTION

This series of blogs is loosely organized, but can be read in any order. Most entries are short, so put it on a tablet computer and you can read it a bit at a time.

Most of what you need to learn Tranquility meditation is included here and some beginning information on Insight meditation. However, to properly learn Insight meditation you actually do need a live teacher, someone who has mastered the technique and is authorized to teach it. There are many approaches to Insight meditation, but the one I know and recommend is that taught by the Karma Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, those lamas and rinpoches whose leader is the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje. You can check the website [Kagyu.org](http://Kagyu.org) for recommended teachers.

This is not to say there are no other authentic teachers, but I know for certain that these teachers are among the best. I have worked with the abbot of KTD Monastery (Karma Triyana Dharmachakra) the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche for over thirty years. He is ninety years old, but still teaching. He would be an excellent choice as would one of the lamas who have trained with him.

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## SECULAR MEDITATION

This weeks "Time Magazine" cover story for their February 3, 2014 issue is titled "The Mindful Revolution" and it is all about secular meditation and how mindfulness is finally taking hold in this country.

Of course all of this is easy to foretell since mind training is such a valuable skill that I am certain some years from now proof of mind-training experience and expertise will be as important in your job resume as any college experience. You can do more with it, like: anything. As a former director of a largish company (650 employees), I have hired a lot of people and many college diplomas aren't worth the paper they are printed on. In other words, a college diploma guarantees very little. For many jobs I would hire someone with real mind training expertise over college-paper any day.

As for acquiring mind-training skills, I still don't know of any spontaneous way to suddenly learn meditation. If there were one, it would probably have already happened to each of us by now. With meditation there is a learning curve and you have to pay to play, as they say. And unlike many things in life, where we can just plop down some cash and take it home, meditation progress depends on our own time and effort, something often in short supply. And most of us don't even know how to do it properly. Meditation is not relaxation therapy as many believe.

The guardians at the threshold of meditation, at least most kinds of meditation that I know of, are concentration and mindfulness skills. To meditate, we have to learn to concentrate and be mindful and, like a great wheel, we have to actually turn the wheel to go anywhere. The meditation learning curve will

outlast us and wait until we are willing to make the effort. In other words, we actually have to learn meditation. If nothing else, I know that much, because I sat and twiddled my thumbs for many years hoping meditation would somehow rub off on me without my concerted effort. No chance of that. The good news is that you may have already learned enough discipline in life that requires concentration and mindfulness to skip meditation 101 and get right into it.

As for the spiritual aspects of meditation, as the Time Magazine article shows, they are optional. Recently a student asked the Tibetan Buddhist Rinpoche I have worked with for the last thirty years whether it was morally wrong to use meditation as part of a sports-training program, like for the Olympics. Rinpoche responded, "Of course not. Meditation will enhance any kind of discipline." So, if you have to hold your nose because of the spiritual aspects of meditation, don't bother. Just learn it.

As for me, I find the spiritual aspects of meditation more than just helpful, but I also benefit from the sheer secular mindfulness practice of meditation. I use it every day in all that I endeavor. Otherwise I would not write about it as often as I do.

So, the starting point in learning to meditate is the learning of concentration and mindfulness, which is part of what is called Tranquility meditation. Either you already have developed some discipline that requires concentration or mindfulness or you have not. If you have a discipline already, just apply the techniques of meditation to that discipline and you can skip over meditation 101 and jump right in. If not, you just have to bite the bullet and learn concentration and how to be mindful. It does not take forever, but you actually

have to just do it. Trying doesn't do it. Only doing does it. OK, so what exactly do we have to do?

## **RECOGNITION: SPEED BUMP TO ENLIGHTENMENT**

I grew into Buddhism with the idea that it was a graduated path, probably a linear continuum starting from where I am practicing now straight on to my eventual enlightenment -- something like that. I have since found out, in fact, that the actual path to enlightenment is more like an exponential curve, and that it has a very clear speed bump not far from the beginning, more like a dead stop. I wish I had understood earlier that there is this stepping stone (a full stop) between the dharma practice we are doing today and the eventual road to our enlightenment.

There is what in esoteric studies is called a ring-pass-not, an event which must take place within us before we can proceed further. In other words, between practicing dharma as we now do and the road to actual enlightenment, there is an intermediate stage or major step that, while not enlightenment itself, we must negotiate before we can pass through and onward. It comes up as we get into Insight meditation.

I had been under the impression, as mentioned, that the road from beginning dharma practice to enlightenment itself was a continuum, a graduated path with no real speed bumps, much less a stop sign. Well, it turns out that there is at least one major bump or initiation that we each must negotiate and it is called "recognition," as in: recognition of the true nature of the mind. And it is not optional if enlightenment is our goal.

And let's be clear, "recognition" is not enlightenment or anything even close to it. Recognition is more like the sacrament of Confirmation in my Catholic



upbringing, literally a confirmation and sign that we are on the right path. Only, in Buddhism recognition can't be conferred by rote, and here is the hard part: recognition is a realization each of us has to come up with ourselves from within, albeit with some help. And by definition there is no faking it. We each have to do this, one by one, and it waits for us until we actually do it, forever if need be. I only wish I knew this event existed before I found out that it did. It would have helped the process.

And this "not-faking-it" is important to understand. You can't get an honorary degree in "recognition," slip by the requirements, just read about it, or somehow place out. We each have to realize it personally. And here is another key thought: chances are that we cannot do this alone. The great rinpoches tell us this. We will need the help of someone who has already mastered this, someone who can succeed in pointing out to us the true nature of our own mind, someone who is kind enough to take the time to do this for us. And how rare is that?

And recognition is quite wonderful. Recognition of the mind's true nature is the point where we begin to see for ourselves how the mind works and (perhaps more important) that we actually can work it, just as we are. Without recognition, there is no seeing the particular dharma path before us that we have to walk. Until recognition, we are in a very real way blind to the future because we have never seen and cannot see where we are going. Recognition gives us a glimpse of the actual path we must walk, plus (equally important) confirmation that WE can walk it. We can do it ourselves, in fact we must.

So, no matter how clever we are, no matter how much intellectual understanding we have accumulated, we

are left standing at the threshold of enlightenment without first actually recognizing the true nature of the mind for ourselves. No one can confer it on us or do it for us.

With recognition, we begin see just how to traverse the long (and I imagine arduous) path to enlightenment itself. Remember that recognition is not enlightenment, but only the ability to see where we are walking, to see the actual dharma path to enlightenment that we personally must travel. And that "seeing" is crucial, especially also seeing that we have what it takes to do the job. This is the point where diligence in dharma practice turns into joy in practice. There is no work-around for recognition, but only the actual act of recognition itself. So, it is very precious indeed.

Recognition is part of the process in learning Insight meditation and is the gateway to the more advanced forms of practice like Mahamudra, Dzogchen, and Maha-Ati meditation. In the Zen tradition, recognition is called Kensho. I find it very worthwhile to have some understanding of recognition, at least that it is required and that we can do it with a little help from our teachers.

## STRAIT IS THE GATE

We learn and practice Tranquility meditation, along with other practices like Tong-Len, in preparation for experiencing "recognition," getting at least a glimpse of the true nature of the mind. In fact, all of the various Buddhist practices are preparation for one thing only, recognizing the true nature of the mind. Period.

The above statement is worth reading until it sinks in, because it says a lot, that basically every kind of Buddhist practice leads to and funnels down to our recognizing the true nature of the ordinary mind, what is called "thamal gyi shepa." We can pussyfoot around as much as we like (or have to) in preliminary practices, but sooner or later it all comes down to "recognition." After recognition of the mind's true nature, real meditation can begin.

And "recognition" is not enlightenment, not even close, not that I know what enlightenment is. Recognition is exactly what the word means, recognizing the true nature of the mind and how it works. Given "recognition," all else follows, including perhaps actually meditation for the first time. So what are the priorities?

As I understand it, all dharma practice is the process of continually removing obscurations until our kleshas become transparent enough for us to see through them and recognize the true nature of the mind. That's it. So our priority is to undertake whatever dharma practices are necessary for us (and we are all different) to be able to recognize the true nature of the mind, nothing more and nothing less.

What this takes (obviously) will vary from person to person tremendously but, in general, we all face the

ring-pass-not threshold of recognition of the mind's true nature. There is only one way to cross this threshold and that is "recognition," and no way to fake it because, without recognition, there is no apparent dharma path aside from the preparatory practices themselves. Without it, we literally can't "see."

This sounds kind of scary, but it also is perhaps a blessing in disguise. No matter how clever we are, even we can't sneak up on a mirror. It reminds me of Matthew 7:14, "Strait is the gate and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life." There is no other way toward enlightenment aside from the transformative process of recognition. Like death, recognition is something each of us has to go through for ourselves, sooner or later, this lifetime or another, so we might as well get on it.

Therefore, all the stages on the path lead up to recognition of the mind's nature, an experience that is beyond description or words, and one that cannot be intellectualized. Finally, each of us has to get it together, find a qualified teacher, and have the true nature of the mind pointed out to us. And that is a delicate equation that does not lend itself to a cookie-cutter template. It is personal in the extreme and no white knight will ever come and just find us. With some pointing out by our teachers, we have to find ourselves. That's the whole point!

## MEDITATION: DOING IT

The basic meditation technique is easy. Most traditional methods for learning how to meditate require an object of some kind to focus on. Often it is as simple as the breath, following your breathing in and out. But any object will do, a pebble, a small stick, a spot on the floor. In any case, we don't focus on the qualities of the object, like that it is a brown stick, made of wood, however long, and so on.

The meditation object is only there as a place to rest our focus, not for how it can be described. Once you have selected an object, simply let your gaze rest on it and just relax. You don't have to sit cross-legged as yogis do. Sitting in a straight-back chair is fine. The important idea is to be comfortable, but not so comfortable that you become sleepy. It is best to sit up and keep the spine straight. There are other posture considerations, but you get the idea.

Sitting with the object (pebble, stick, etc.) in front of you, allow your gaze to come to rest on the object. Look at it, but only as a place to rest your attention. Simply allow your mind to rest on the object undistractedly, if you can. Let your focus rest there. Go ahead and try it on something right now, if you can. We can read about it forever.

If you find yourself distracted (unable to concentrate), thinking this or that, daydreaming, or what-have-you, then the moment you realize you have been distracted, gently bring the mind back to rest on the object. Don't bother commenting to yourself or feeling bad (or good) on how you are doing. Just regain the focus, rest the gaze again, and continue. Every time you find yourself not on-focus, gently bring your mind

back and rest on the focus. Do this again and again and again.

That is about the whole of the practice, allowing the mind to rest on the object without being distracted. Of course, this is easier said than done. Our mind from old habits tends to wander and we wake up in one kind of distraction or another, no matter how hard we try. In fact, the harder we try, the more difficult it is to meditate. That is usually the first thing we learn, that we can't just "do it." It will take practice for it to become effortless.

Meditation is not taken by storm. As beginners, we can't just force awareness and willfully bring our mind to attention, but rather we have to learn to allow the mind to naturally come to rest and for awareness to spontaneously arise. This is something that takes time and lots of practice. A traditional analogy is that of holding a raw egg in our hand. Squeeze it too hard and it breaks, hold it too loose and it falls and breaks. It takes just the right handling to hold the egg. Training the mind is like that.

As mentioned, trying (making effort) to rest the mind does not rest it. Only allowing the mind to naturally rest rests it. This takes practice and that is the long and the short of learning basic meditation. Of course, it is a long journey from sitting down for the first time and attempting to allow the mind to rest and the time when we can actually allow the mind to rest naturally, whenever we wish. That is the learning of it. That's what we practice to achieve.

In brief, learning basic sitting meditation requires that we do something that requires concentration and mindfulness on our part, repetitively. Like anything that demands mindfulness on our part, this can take

time and effort. You may already have a discipline that involves concentration and mindfulness and thus qualifies, like tying flies, doing puzzles, building model airplanes, etc. This can give you a head start. Check your accomplishments to see if any qualify, and apply the meditation technique while doing one of them.

It is difficult to convey in words how transformative simple mind training can be in our lives. It is all about being present, not just now-and-then, when something striking happens, but present more of the time. As the old 1960s slogan points out "Be here now!"

## THE RESULTS OF MEDITATION

As for looking for results from your meditation practice, it is best not to expect any, at least not in the beginning. In fact that is a sure way to get nowhere fast. You first have to learn the basic technique of sitting meditation and then practice that technique until it is transparent or habitual, and "practicing meditation" is not meditating. That is called "learning to meditate" or practicing meditation. In general, actual meditation does not take place until the rote muscle memory required to do the technique is learned and becomes automatic, and then some. It takes time to learn meditation.

Meditation practice, like any other form of practice, is just that: practice. It not only takes time, of course, but also effort, and then later we have to remove the effort (stop trying) because actual meditation by definition is "effortless."

Meditation is nothing more than allowing the mind to rest in its natural state "AND" being conscious of this. Tibetan meditation masters state that we all spend time each day resting our minds in the natural state, but are not aware of it. The awareness is what is missing for most of us and it takes an effort to develop that awareness. After all, the Sanskrit word for Buddha just means "aware" or "the one who is aware."

On the other hand, effort of any kind (even to learn to meditate) is just another obscuration. We practice meditating until we finally get the hang of the technique and can then just do it. The we stop practicing and just do it. This is a two-step process. It is like the team that pushes the bobsled in the Winter



Olympics and then hops on and tucks in. Pushing the bobsled is the practice. Riding the bobsled without pushing is the meditation. Many never get beyond the pushing stage – trying.

We all want to meditate, but it takes effort on our part to learn how. That learning process is for many just a bridge too far. The bridge is the practice it takes to learn the basic technique of meditation; the time and effort it involves is not trivial.

## **THE EAST IS PART OF THE GLOBE**

Meditation mostly appears to be coming from the East, from Asia. What may appear now as foreign and strange is really our birthright too, the mind at rest. It does not just belong to or come from another country. Not too many years from now, everyone will be learning basic meditation, not because of any spiritual conversion, but just because it is useful.

The middlemen, the business folk, are already glomming onto meditation and figuring how they can make a profit from it. That may be the only way it will propagate, by our paying for it, as sad as that is. Like air and water, what is available now for free will become more precious when we have to purchase it.

## **SHAMATA: TRANQUILITY MEDITATION**

Beginning meditation, what is called Tranquility Meditation is an important first step, but not an end in itself. Basic mindfulness is meant to be a foundation (and prerequisite), at least in Tibetan Buddhism, for a second form of meditation called Vipassana or Insight Meditation. It is through insight meditation that we really begin to see the benefits of meditation.

Basic sitting meditation is the ground or base upon which insight meditation can be practiced. The Tibetans have an analogy that embraces the two kinds of meditation, tranquility (Shamata) and insight (Vipassana) meditation, that of a Tibetan prayer flag fluttering in the wind. You can't read the letters on the flag because of the motion in the wind. Shamata meditation calms the wind so that with insight meditation we can read the letters. I have my own analogy that I like, that of threading a needle with shaky hands.

Shamata calms the shaky hands so that with Vipassana (insight) meditation we can thread the needle. Although these two kinds of meditation work together, it is insight meditation where real inner change can take place.

## THE SEVEN POINT POSTURE

It is important to sit comfortable, preferable in a relaxed position. However, traditional there are seven points that should at least be considered.

(1) If you can comfortably, cross your legs in full vajra posture. If this is not possible, then sit in the bodhisattva posture, with legs half-crossed. You may be able to sit in full vajra poster for a short time, and then switch to bodhisattva posture. Over time, you may be able to hold the vajra posture more of the time. As for me, I tend to sit in the bodhisattva posture.

(2) Place your hands four finger-widths below the naval in what is called the gesture of even placement, with the right hand on top of the left, with opposing thumbs barely touching.

(3) Ty to keep your spine straight as an arrow, not leaning forward or backward, or to either side.

(4) Press you Adam's apple slightly with your chin, like an iron hook. In other words, tuck your chin ever so slightly.

(5) Your tongue is placed gently against the upper palate.

(6) Your mouth remains with lips slightly parted. Let the mouth rest naturally.

(7) You gaze should be slightly downward, toward the tip of your nose. The eyes remain open.

For mahamudra meditation the gaze is straight out and very slight elevated, eyes open, but not focused

on anything except the meditation. The gaze will maintain itself, but this is not the eye position for Tranquility meditation.

## EXPECTATIONS ARE NOT OUR FRIEND

I realize that if you are just starting out with meditation, all of this may be Greek (or Tibetan) to you. Worse, since there is no way of sampling or actually previewing the results of meditation experience, you have to take it on faith from folks like me or preferably from high rinpoches that the effort to learn to meditate is worthwhile. Trust me, it is worthwhile, but you will have to work for it. I had to, and am still working, but also getting somewhere.

And, as a nation, we are so ignorant of what meditation is and how to go about learning it. Sadly, the greatest obstacle is that most people think they are already meditating, when in fact at best they are just "practicing" meditation, still learning the technique.

I made the greatest leap in progress with meditation when I finally figured out (and admitted to myself) that all this time I had been just practicing or trying to learn to meditate and not actually meditating. I wanted to meditate so badly that I just talked myself into believing I was meditating and left it at that. In actual fact, I was not meditating, but at best was attempting to relax some, while just sitting there. It was not all 'that' relaxing either.

Meditation is something that, when we finally experience it, we want to do as much as possible thereafter, and out of joy, not obligation. Joy, or the absence of it, is our best guide to how we are doing with our meditation training. I don't need to ask you about joyful meditation, do I? Probably not yet.

## IS MY LIFE IS MORE INTERESTING THAN YOURS?

Well, actually it's not. I just make the most of what I have. I celebrate whatever is going on. You can too.

I am told this is selfish, vain, and egotistical. Perhaps it is. So be it. I know enough about the self to not take it quite that seriously. The self is a part of life that is not about to go away, ever. It is attachment to the self that is the problem, so please note the difference.

In most ways my life is perfectly ordinary. I don't even go out much or anywhere. I do have the ability to make a mountain out of a molehill, I admit. But is that such a bad thing, after all? And who is harmed, other than me?

I love those people who never talk about themselves. So, who do they talk about? Not themselves, which is just the reverse of talking about oneself, and so essentially the same. The accent is still on me, myself, and I, just reversed.

I feel it is fine to like yourself, and who else do you have to talk about anyway? You are yourself, after all.

I love Shakespeare's sonnet #13, which expresses the Buddhist view perfectly.

"O, that you were yourself! but, love, you are  
No longer yours than you yourself here live"

The self is not something that can be eradicated or removed, and for that matter, even denied. The fact of a self is undeniable. If we suddenly didn't have a self, we would have to invent one. Like the tar baby in the Uncle Remus tales, the more you struggle with yourself, the more you are stuck on it.

What you can do is take yourself less seriously, and gradually thin out its reality so that you can begin to see through it. The self can become more transparent. A little humor is helpful in self-appreciation or deprecation.

The idea is that struggling with or against oneself is doomed to failure, by definition. Developing a sense of humor about yourself, not taking yourself so seriously, is the only way I know to take the onus off.

Of course, I like the way I explained it to myself many years ago. I said I just put my self out to pasture like you would an old cow or bull, gave it plenty of hay to eat and room to roam around it, and let it enjoy itself as much as it can, which is not all that much for most people.

And to the people that worry I like myself too much, I say: "It would be OK for me to like your self, just not my own self, right?" To me, it is all the same.



## THE TWO MEDITATION TECHNIQUES

At some point, it will be important for you to understand the two quite different types of meditation techniques and how they work together. That point might as well be now, so here goes:

These techniques go back at least 2500 years and probably even farther. In Sanskrit the two meditation types are called "Shamata" and "Vipasanna," with Shamata often translated as "Tranquility Meditation," and Vipasanna translated as "Insight Meditation." The two are most often taught in succession, with the instructions for Tranquility Meditation given first and, once that is learned, Insight Meditation then being taught.

Sometimes they are taught together, but there are reasons why Tranquility is taught before Insight Meditation. Before Insight Meditation is taught, the mind has to be calm, and this is the reason that Tranquility meditation is first taught and, once the mind is calm, then Insight Meditation is introduced.

There are other reasons, as well, but the most important of them is the fact that Tranquility meditation as the name suggests calms the mind, but by itself it does not lead to knowing the true nature of the mind. That is what Insight meditation is all about, seeing the true nature of the mind, so in that respect, Insight meditation is superior, if we can make that comparison.

It is a simple fact that many never persevere to learn Tranquility meditation and therefore never get to the point of learning Insight meditation. These two types of meditation work together, but in general we have to

be skilled in Tranquility meditation before we can learn Insight meditation.

The Tibetans have an analogy that relates the two types of meditation, Tranquility and Insight, and that is the image of a Tibetan prayer flag waving in the wind. The wind is moving the flag so much that it is not possible to read the prayers written on the flag. Tranquility meditation is said to remove the movement of the wind on the flag and make it calm enough to read the prayers, which is then accomplished by Insight meditation. I have my own analogy, that of trying to thread a needle with shaky hands.

Tranquility meditation calms and removes the shakiness of the hands, after which Insight meditation allows us then to thread the needle. Any way you spell it, Tranquility meditation calms the mind and Insight meditation allows us to see clearly.

Clearly, we have to learn both, and you can't learn Insight meditation (it is very difficult) without mastering Tranquility meditation. However, Tranquility meditation by itself, while bringing mindfulness, does not lend itself to the clarity of insight. In other words, to enjoy the full benefit of meditation, we need to reach the level of mastering Insight meditation. Tranquility meditation is not complete in itself.

In very advanced meditation practices, such as Mahamudra meditation, a combination of Tranquility and Insight meditation is used, but the greater emphasis is on gaining the effects of Insight meditation. In practice, we have to learn both types of meditation, and Insight meditation stands on the shoulders of Tranquility meditation. We need to learn Tranquility meditation first.

## COMPARING TRANQUILITY AND INSIGHT MEDITATION

You have to learn both forms of meditation to progress, preferably learning to concentrate and have mindfulness with Tranquility meditation, followed by sheer clarity by learning Insight meditation. But in my experience the bottom line is that Insight meditation is where we want to be. In my opinion, there is no comparison between the rewards of Insight meditation and those of Tranquility meditation, although they do work as a team.

I know, it is foolish to compare the two, because proficiency in both is needed. Still, you should be told that there is no real comparison between the two. Insight meditation is a key technique to liberating the mind, while Tranquility meditation (while important is gaining mental stability) is limited to what its name suggests, calming the mind and making it tranquil.

On the other hand, Insight meditation opens the door to true mental liberation and recognizing the true nature of the mind. Not enough can be said about Insight meditation to do it justice. About all I can say is please be encouraged to persevere to experience Insight meditation for yourself.

## THE VALUE OF MEDITATION

What is amazing to me, and the reason why I blog on and on about the value of meditation, is that here we sit in the middle of our various mental turmoil when, separated from us by only a little effort on our part is the key to opening the mind forever. Of course I want to recommend meditation to you.

For myself, I was such a slow learner, someone who tried every which way but loose, as they say, to effectively avoid learning meditation properly. I can't get over the fact that there actually is a pot of gold at the end of the meditation rainbow. Mastering our own mind has to be the last remote adventure on the planet or in the universe. We have been to the bottom of the sea and to the top of the highest mountain in the world, but have not yet looked into the natural reaches of the mind itself.

There are so many things in my lifetime that have appeared difficult at first, like learning the various Adobe products, computer programming, or the Internet itself. If there is interest on our part, we master challenges as we can, and they become transparent tools, languages we learn to speak, sometimes fluently.

But I have never encountered a tool as earthshaking and mind opening as meditation, in particular Insight meditation, which has been very difficult for me to learn, much less master. With meditation, I didn't have the right can-opener to get into it, and spent many years just fiddling around on the fringe of meditation. Thanks to the kindness of my dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, I finally was able to get something out of meditation practice.

Once I began to understand something about how the mind actually works, I was able to take some responsibility for my own training. Thank God or Thank Buddha for that. Seeing for myself that the mind is workable made all of the difference for me, the difference between groping around in the dark for clarity and actually seeing how things work.

If I can learn to meditate properly, anyone can. Yet I also understand well why learning meditation is so difficult for westerners. That's where, perhaps, I can be of use. Certainly, I have made about every mistake possible.

I have done a lot of things in my life, but nothing compares to the rewards of meditation, and I am not talking about what I thought the rewards were supposed to be, which were nowhere near correct. The reality of Insight meditation and Mahamudra meditation are beyond words, beyond what books, sangha members, and most teachings can convey, certainly beyond any and all of my expectations.

Meditation and any realization that might come from it can't be known beforehand. It's not like learning music, where we can hear what we are trying to sound like through a CD. With meditation, there is no CD, DVD, or anything that can give you a taste or true idea of what realization is. The first thing I realized when I began to understand Insight meditation is that I had no idea all this time, and that my own expectations were perhaps the greatest obstacle to clarity.

I didn't reach enlightenment, but I did get enough of a glimpse of how my mind works to realize that all of my expectations, thoughts, assumptions, etc. were just

plain wrong – simply incorrect. What a shock that was!

Worse, all that time I had been comparing my meditation experiences against my expectations and assumptions, and they were not even in the same ballpark as the reality. We have no way of knowing (and can't have) what enlightenment, realization, or even glimpses of the nature of the mind will be like. If we knew, we would know, but we don't know, so it is anyone's guess. However, as Chogyam Trungpa used to say "Your guess is as good as mine."

## WHEN TO MEDITATE?

The short answer to that question is: meditate all the time, if you can, but how would we do that? Whether we meditate a little or a lot, we still have to learn the basic technique of meditation until it is transparent and automatic, and that takes time and lots of practice. It is no different from learning to play a musical instrument like the guitar. We practice until the chords, scales, and fingerings are automatic and the music can just come through us. Practicing meditation is no different.

And practice takes effort and effort is counter-intuitive to actually meditating, but still it has to happen. We have to learn HOW to meditate (the technique) before we can just meditate, and learning takes time. So how much time?

In the early 1970s, probably because of the influence of Zen meditation's preference for extended sitting, the emphasis was on a lot of practice, like sitting all day, or for a week, or a month. And the Tibetan Buddhist Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (whose influence was pivotal) also recommended long stints of sitting as well. For the most part they were referring to Tranquility meditation. However, this was too much for many (most) Americans that I knew. Worse, we assumed this was what was required and many gave up.

But the great Mahasiddhas, the most-enlightened masters, almost all of them, recommend many short sessions of practice, rather than long tiresome bouts. The idea is not to stain your meditation sessions by pushing yourself to sit when you don't feel like it. Forcing ourselves to sit only results in instilling an

approach-avoidance syndrome so that when we think of sitting practice, our knee-jerk reaction is one of avoidance.

There is a bit of a Catch-22 here because if we don't train and practice meditation, we will never learn it. However, if we continually force ourselves to practice, we will learn to dislike practice, and instinctively want to avoid it. The key to practice is to enjoy practicing, but joyful-practice has to be some kind of oxymoron, because for most of us rote practice is seldom joyful. So, what to do?

This is a real problem because, as mentioned, if we don't practice at least enough to learn the basic technique, true meditation will never dawn, and we will be practicing forever and never actually meditating. For most of us, the practice of anything is not all that much fun. And if we push too hard, we develop an antagonism to practice and eventually will find ways out of the whole endeavor. So we have to tread gently here. This is a real problem.

As mentioned, the great Mahasiddhas speak of a practice session as being the time it takes to raise a cup of tea to our lips and take a sip, but they are referring more toward Vipasanna and Mahamudra meditation. Here we are talking about Shamata, basic sitting meditation, learning to concentrate and be mindful. Rote learning tends not to be joyful, by its very nature, so it is best not to push it too hard, especially in the beginning. Many short sessions are probably better than pushing one long session beyond what we feel like doing. Here's the deal, as I understand it.

Ultimately we will want to practice because it feels so good, and the clarity that comes with Insight



meditation is something we want to keep close all the time. But "ultimately" is not now, and the joy of practicing in my experience comes with Insight meditation, not so much with Tranquility meditation, which is where we each have to find our start. We can't just start out with Insight meditation because learning it depends upon the stability of our Tranquility meditation.

The benefit of Tranquility meditation is the ability to stay focused, to be present, and that too is wonderful. But in the beginning, when learning Tranquility meditation, there is no way I know of avoiding the rote practice of simply learning the technique. I mentioned earlier about breaking it up into many short practice periods, and not pushing any one period beyond what we can manage happily. Finally, in my opinion, it is useful to just accept the concept of practice, like we would with a music instrument, and the fact that we have to learn the basics by rote, like it or no. I have not figured out any way to perfume the rote part of learning meditation. Just do it, like you would at school, but try not to stain your desire to learn with undue effort.

We all have to make the effort to practice and learn the technique, knowing that effort, the trying itself, is counter-intuitive to actual meditation. In other words, once we have actually understood how to meditate, we will have to unlearn the effort and walk it back. It is much like the scaffolding used in erecting buildings. Once the building is up, we take the scaffolding down. In a similar way, once we get the hang of Tranquility meditation, we know how to do it and no longer need to push or practice. We just do it. We meditate.

## TIME OF DAY

In practicing and learning basic Tranquility meditation, I find it helpful to meditate around the same time each day, rather than just randomly. It is a bit like taking your mental temperature for that day. If we practice at a certain time each day, we will instantly see just where our mind is at. Often, we don't know that we are already upset or perhaps feeling extra quiet. A short Tranquility practice session will let us know up front just how we are feeling, and we can make adjustments to our attitude, if needed.

Having a place where we can quietly practice, especially in the beginning, is also helpful. You know, some quiet corner, tucked away out of the swing of the general business we tend to accumulate around us. It can be as simple as a cushion on the floor and some time to sit on it.

## LEARNING MEDITATION

Meditation is the hardest to learn at the beginning. That is when most of us fall down and eventually give up. I wish there was a way to just skip that part, but there is none that I know of. Learning the technique of basic Tranquility meditation is the gauntlet that we all have to run and those of us with more experience can do what we can to encourage and support you, but finally each of us has to do it for ourselves. That's the whole point.

I always had difficulty learning a musical instrument for the same reason, that I found the boring desert of learning scales, chords, and fingerings too hard to cross. Of course, I just wanted to play music, and all this practice got in the way. Often I just gave up.

With learning meditation, it is the same deal, learning the basic technique, paying our dues, etc. Only with meditation, we really, really, really need what it can bring us, the ability to more effectively use our own mind, so I encourage you not to give up. It is never too late to learn meditation.

As for me, I didn't know how to learn meditation properly and spent a very long time twiddling my thumbs and basically imitating what I thought dharma practice must be all about, yet without any results. It was all my fault plus the fact that early on there were not many teachers available. We don't have that excuse now. Even people like me can be of help with the basics. Just ask questions and don't be private about basic techniques. There are no secrets here.

## NO SECRETS

When I was coming up, there was an unwritten taboo against talking about your spiritual activities, meditation or what-have-you. I believe this caused terrible damage, in that everyone kept everything spiritual to themselves and refused to talk about it. This notion appears to have come from the fact that in advanced vajrayana practice, where the bond (samaya) between teacher and student is so strong and personal that we don't talk about what our guru shares with us. But learning Tranquility meditation is not that. It is common to all students and should be discussed.

I would agree that we don't talk about what is whispered, so to speak, from mouth to ear by the teacher to the student in advanced practices. But that has nothing to do with learning basic Tranquility meditation. There are no secrets in beginning practice. It is an open book and if we have questions we should ask them of anyone we feel has more experience than we do.

I witnessed an entire generation close-mouthed about personal practice when we all thought everyone else knew what to do and only we were silent because we had no clue what to do or if we were doing anything right. It would be funny if it were not so damaging.

We needed to ask questions. We needed to be able to confess our own ignorance, and the like. But instead, we all were silent. Back then, spirituality, especially your personal practice was private, not something you shared with others. For the most part, this is still true today. A lot of people posturing, but mighty few people know.

And, as mentioned, I am not talking about advanced sadhana practices, which are generally kept private. I am talking about basic Tranquility meditation, which is what most of us are trying to learn, mostly ineffectually. If we could have shared our ignorance, we could have taken steps to remedy it. Certainly in Tibet, at monasteries, everyone is helping everyone else to learn the basics. There is no shame in not-knowing, but we need to know if you don't know. Ask questions and share your experience as beginners and get the answers you need.

## WHAT MEDIATION IS

In the beginning, meditation is something we know little to nothing about. We not only don't know how to meditate, even worse we don't know what meditation is, other than whatever idea we have put together from books, friends, teachers, and what-have-you? By definition, when we set out to learn meditation, we have never actually meditated. Meditation for us is an unknown. We really have no idea what it is about.

It is an unknown in the beginning and for many people it continues to be an unknown for many years because we still don't know how to know it. It is not like learning music, where we can put a CD of our favorite music on and remind ourselves what music is like. With meditation, we have no actual idea, much less a taste, as to what the results of meditation are, call it enlightenment, realization, recognition or whatever. We just don't know.

And that would be a good place to start, knowing that we don't know, but even that is not common. Instead, we think we know what enlightenment is like when, by definition, we don't. As we practicing meditation, we constantly compare our meditation experience to our expectations, which expectations are just whatever we have accumulated in our minds on the subject or made up out of whole cloth. This is a scenario doomed from the start to disappoint, and it is almost the universal experience for beginning meditators.

Years go by while this scenario plays out and nothing changes. We don't talk about our meditation experience with others because it is somehow "private," and we don't ask questions for similar reasons. What we have is a closed system, an almost

perfect machine to progress nowhere -- airtight. Sure, some relaxation may emerge, but Tranquility meditation was never meant as an end in itself, but rather only as the basis or platform upon which Insight meditation might be learned. Unfortunately, many students never learn Tranquility meditation, much less Insight meditation.

So how do we get out of this recursive Catch-22? To begin with, we might open the windows and air our mind out. We might share what we are experiencing with those who we feel actually know how to meditate. And we might ask questions of our self and of others. Most of all we need to realize and acknowledge that while we may be practicing meditation, we are not yet actually meditating.

And most of all we should examine whatever idea we have as to what the results of meditation are supposed to be. Where did that come from and how do we know it? And are we comparing what we expect against what we actually experience while practicing meditation? Frequently our own expectations become the greatest obstacle to actual meditation.

## **NGONDRO: DHARMA BOOT CAMP**

In Tibetan Buddhism there are many dozens, perhaps scores, of different practices. Ever wonder what they are for, and why so many?

As I understand it, all of the many practices exist for one end, to introduce us to the true nature of our own mind. Nothing else.

Frequently, when we start out to learn basic meditation we run into obstacles, for the most part obscurations and emotional storms that make it difficult to just learn meditation. In fact, in Tibet, traditionally, basic Tranquility meditation is not taught until an extensive series of arduous practices are accomplished. This series of practices is called ngondro, and it amounts to a kind of dharma boot camp. What is the purpose of ngondro?

It is very simple. Most of us are coming into the dharma from a lifetime (or lifetimes) of heavy obscurations, out-of-control emotions like anger, jealousy, attachment, etc. The list could go on. The way the Tibetans say it is that the sun is shining all the time, but it can be obscured from our view by clouds. Practices like ngondro are designed to blow the clouds away (remove the obscurations), so that we can see the sun.

So, rather than endlessly plow forward through all of our obscurations, trying clear our mind, it makes sense to take a step back and work through some of our heavier obscurations, rather than just push them before us forever. Ngondro is a series of profound exercises that make this possible.



I have to confess that when I first heard about ngondro, it seemed Medieval in nature, a throwback from the past that makes no sense in this modern day. Of course, as happens more frequently of late to me, I was wrong. Ngondro is perhaps the most efficient way to prepare the mind for learning meditation. And that is why the ngondro is taught before basic meditation is introduced in Tibet, to better allow meditation to take hold by first preparing the soil.

I am not going to introduce you to ngondro. That is not my intention, but it may be important for you to at least hear something about what is involved in this set of five practices. The word "ngondro" in Tibetan simply means "that which goes before," and thus these are practices preliminary to learning basic meditation. They are often just called the "Extraordinary Preliminaries," and extraordinary they certainly are.

Each of these five practices is performed 111,111 times, so ngondro takes a while. The first two practices are simply taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, while performing 111,111 full-length prostrations on the ground. I can personally assure you this definitely loosens up your body, big-time.

These prostrations are followed by 111,111 recitations of the 100-syllable mantra of Vajrasattva, which is a form of purification practice. Then follows 111,111 mandala offerings, in which precious substances are carefully placed on a copper plate in different directions and offered. This practice accumulates merit. And last, but not least, there are 111,111 invocations of the guru to be performed, the most important practice of them all, requesting a

blessing from the gurus. You can perhaps see why I think of it as a dharma boot camp.

It is little wonder that Americans like me are initially horrified by the thought of such an undertaking as ngondro. And doing it was no walk-in-the-park, either. It took me some years, although I am told lamas in closed retreat can do the entire thing in a few months. More power to them.

As for me, there is this funny story. When I finally finished my round of ngondro and had an interview with my Tibetan teacher, I asked him, as I always do, if there was anything special he wanted me to do. He always says that there is nothing special for me to do. Just keep practicing!

However, this particular year he responded with a question: "Do you want to know what I would do if I were you?" Hmmm, well, yes, said I, what is that? "I would do another ngondro." Well, that hit me like a hammer, and of course I did another ngondro.

So, ngondro, which appears like an unsurmountable mountain of practice actually was a kindness because it helped me to clear away enough obscurations for my mind to actually (eventually) learn to meditate. I did not intend to do it twice, but who is counting? Me, of course, every step of the way.

## THE TRUE NATURE OF THE MIND

There are many kinds of dharma practice other than basic meditation, but they all have one thing in common, to point out the true nature of the mind to us. Once that is done, once we recognize the true nature of our own mind, we become responsible for our own dharma practice. Let's talk about what that means.

Sitting meditation, Tranquility meditation, ngondro, deity practice, mantras, offerings, and the myriad of other Buddhist practices exist only for one thing, to help us realize the true nature of our own mind, the same mind we have with us this very minute and have always had.

Once we have recognized the true nature of the mind, or have even glimpsed it, our dharma practice drastically changes. For one, dharma practice is no longer an effort, something we are trying to do, but rather it is something we can and want to do more than anything else. And I am not talking about enlightenment, either, something I personally know next to nothing about. I am speaking of something much more mundane and practical, just recognizing how the mind works, what is called the mind's true nature, the actual or true nature of our own mind.

What is remarkable about such a glimpse of the mind's nature is that from that moment forward we are no longer on a blind Odyssey to reach enlightenment, whatever we might imagine that to be. Instead, this is a turning point that perhaps even we did not expect, a point where we begin to actually respond to our own practice naturally instead of out of obligation. Let's call it responsibility. To our surprise, we find that we now

have the ability to respond at this point and suddenly we own our practice. We finally see how to do it and why we are doing it, and assume that responsibility gladly, with joy. And that is news, joy at last!

Feeling our way through the endless expectations and comparison of dharma results is over. At that point we can see what needs to be done in the way of dharma and, more important, we see that we can do it, just as we are, and that we already have everything we need to move forward toward enlightenment, realization, or whatever you call it.

And we are no longer simply practicing meditation, but we begin to actually meditate at this point. I don't want to paint this change as too rosy, but it's pretty rosy. Now, how do we get to this rosy point? What is involved? I will lay it out, as best I understand it.

The first step is that we have to actually learn and master Tranquility meditation. If that proves too difficult, then take time out (a few years) and do a round of ngondro, the preliminary practices. It will actually save time in the long run, which is the run we are on.

Once we learn Tranquility meditation properly, we are ready to be introduced to Insight meditation. And by Insight meditation, I am talking about Insight meditation as practiced by Tibetan vajrayana Buddhists. I can't speak to any other forms of Insight meditation because I don't them. Learning Vipassana (Insight) meditation may involve our finding a teacher we respect that actually has mastered Insight meditation and train with them. What we want is what is called the "Pointing Out Instructions," as in pointing out the true nature of the mind. Usually, there is

considerable preparation necessary before the pointing-out instructions can be grasped.

And, the pointing-out instructions are in my understanding something quite personal to you and to whomever is teaching you. An instructor's job is to point out the nature of the mind and have you actually get it. This takes real cooperation between instructor and student, and it does not always work the first time.

I have had a very high lama attempt to point out the nature of the mind to me personally and I did not get it. And on another occasion I have had my own teacher give the pointing out instructions and I did not get it. I tried, but I did not know how to correctly receive the instructions, so nothing much happened.

On the third time I had the pointing out instructions, I got at least a glimpse of how the mind works, and that was for me a breakthrough. Now, please don't mistake the glimpse I am referring to here for enlightenment. I have had no enlightenment experiences. I have had a glimpse of how the mind works and that, followed by three years of fairly intense work on my part, resulted in the stabilization of what I glimpsed. From there it has been a gradual working toward even greater stabilization, and some real progress.

Of course, for me it is a long and personal story and I have told that story in a couple of books, so it is out there. My intention here is only to give you some idea of how the flow of dharma practice can go. There are such things as key or pivotal points in practice that you might want to be aware of. I am sure there are other scenarios, just as useful to the one I know, but I

don't know them. This is all I know, so I hope this can be helpful.

To recap, Tranquility meditation is our ante in, the place to begin. If we are too obscured for that (can't learn it), then do some heavy lifting by undertaking the ngondro practices. They really help, but are no walk in the park.

Once you actually learn Tranquility meditation, you are ready to consider being introduced to Insight meditation by itself or as part of Mahamudra meditation, which is how I approached it. Of course there is a theoretical approach and an intellectual understanding of Insight meditation. That is a place to begin, but even more important there is the more direct approach of actually looking at the mind itself. That is the one I suggest. We can read and study literally for lifetimes, while attempting to directly look at the mind itself will actually work much sooner.

After we can actually meditate using Tranquility meditation, to properly learn Insight meditation, we need an instructor, a live teacher. Don't imagine that you can do this by yourself. Forget-about-it. Get with an Insight meditation expert and follow their directions. That is what it takes. In my opinion (and according to the teachings), trying to learn Insight meditation by yourself is a fool's errand. Don't waste your time on that. Get off your duff, find a real master (and they exist), and get some actual training in Insight meditation.

IMO, learning Insight meditation is more valuable than any other single act I can imagine.

## WHAT RECOGNITION BRINGS

Once you have experienced recognition, even a glimpse of it, you are good to go. That glimpse is accompanied by a response that is precious beyond words because you are finally responding dharmically. It is like a baby's first breath, and the beginning of breathing. As I understand it, from that point onward we are awake and responsible for our own dharma path. Our teacher's is job, which was to point out to us (and we get) the true nature of the mind.

Of course we continue practicing, but practice is no longer just a wild shot in the dark. Instead, we are in charge of our own dharma training from that point onward because we can see what needs to be done and just how to do it. And from then on there are not enough minutes in the day to practice dharma. The joy in dharma practice we always dreamed of having, we now have, and then some.

And there is so much to do, everything and all the time – dharma. That's how it is. We live and breathe dharma because finally we are awake to our own simple needs. We can see what to do from this point onward.

## MOVING THE MIND: INSIGHT MEDITATION

We have to move the mind, and not just intellectually either. Intellectual understanding is indirect experience and it is abstract. We need also to have direct experience of the mind itself. Usually Insight meditation (Vipassana) instruction has two main components, although the two are in reality the same.

The first is called the analytical meditation of the paṇḍita and it involves intellectual analysis, while the second is called Kusulu meditation, which is direct nonanalytical meditation, looking at the mind itself.

Often, beginning instruction in Insight meditation has what appears like an intellectual component. This is the analytical meditation referred to above. For example, we may be asked to examine the mind abstractly, with questions like where is the mind located or what color is the mind? Let's take an example.

We are asked to find out if the mind, our mind, is the color red. When I first encountered this, I intellectually understood instantly that the mind is not the color red. Forget about finding anything out. I instinctively knew this to be true: the mind is not the color red.

So, I was mostly bored by this approach and did my best to ignore this part of the instructions and wait it out until something more juicy (and less abstract) was taught. I went into a kind of mental hibernation. Years passed and whenever this IMO intellectual approach to the mind was presented, even by my beloved teacher, I kind of zoned and waited it out. This was, I must say (in hindsight), a big mistake. And here is where I explain why this was never meant as an intellectual exercise.



It was some years later, when Rinpoche was teaching the same material that I finally woke up to what was happening. Is the mind the color red? We've been through that, as mentioned. However, this year I was struck by Rinpoche's statement that in Tibet, the brightest monks would spend some three months on this kind of questioning. I knew that these monks were bright, not dull. So what was going on here?

I figured I better stop editing Rinpoche's teachings in my mind and just start following his instructions, which were: look in your mind and tell me if the mind is the color red? In Tibet, they would send the monks off with that question for three days and three nights of looking at their mind to see if it was red, and then have them report what they found to their Rinpoche. After that they would be sent off for another three days and three nights to determine if the mind was blue, and so on, color after color.

Well thought I, although I believed I knew the answer, I could at least do Rinpoche the honor of looking, and so I gave it a try. I looked, and I mean I actually looked into my mind for the answer, rather than just intellectualizing it. And I soon found out that the act of looking was not the same as making an intellectual judgment without looking. And it was the looking that Rinpoche had been asking me to do all this time, but I never actually looked in my mind. Instead, I just skipped over that part with an intellectual answer that of course the mind was not red. Now I looked in my mind physically, by looking. I looked at the mind with the mind.

And what I realized through the looking is that I felt something move, and for the first time, like moving a muscle that had never been moved before. I finally saw that Rinpoche was asking us to begin to exercise

the mind itself just as we would exercise any other muscle. Only this was not just any other muscle, but something within the mind itself.

I am going to spare you the entire story, and I am not teaching this anyway. My point is that learning to work the mind is not simply an intellectual exercise, but something most physical as well. And we are not used to exercising our mind as we would a muscle, but it can be exercised.

We can not only look in our mind to see its color and location, but if you really want to see the mind move, try looking at who is reading this line. Right now, look at the looker! If you do you can feel the mind move. That kind of exercise is what Insight meditation is all about.

## A TASTE OF INSIGHT MEDITATION

Here I am just giving you a taste, some sense for how Insight meditation is different from the basic Tranquility meditation we start off with. As you can see, it is very different. For one, it can be quite physical, getting right into the mind and moving it around like we would move a muscle. Most of us have never thought of doing this, much less done it.

I have permission to teach Insight meditation, but it really has to be done with a teacher and a student, very carefully, and I don't want to just take a stab at it and possibly mess it up. But I do feel you should have some idea that this kind of training exists.

Tranquility was never intended as the be-all and end-all of meditation, but more of the base upon which Insight meditation can be taught. Actually, the two meditation techniques, Tranquility and Insight are a matched team that works flawlessly together in such advanced techniques as Mahamudra meditation.

But Insight meditation, at least in the vajrayana tradition, depends on our finding someone who has received an authentic transmission and has themselves mastered the technique of Insight meditation. I like to think of such a teacher like we might think of a surgeon, someone capable of very delicate and fine work. Not just anyone will do, any more than you would want just any surgeon to operate on you. This is even more delicatated.

Such a teacher has the task of tweaking our mind and receptivity until we actually lock into and see the true nature of the mind, no small task. And so much also depends on us, on how prepared we are, and on our intent. It is not unlike trying to land an orbiter on the

moon, very detailed work with a great chance for error.

Of course, once we get it, once we see the actual nature of the mind, we are ready to roll, to be on our own, dharmically speaking. But getting there is much more iffy than learning basic Tranquility meditation, which is straight ahead practice until perfect. With Insight meditation, much more is involved and there really has to be a refined rapport between teacher and student. That may prove difficult to find.

It is up to us to get out there, find a teacher that we resonate with, and work with them. And this is where, aside from all the talk of secular meditation, where spiritual and intuitional factors come into play. We don't get that close with just anyone, and the kindness and experience of rinpoches are not found easily or just anywhere, especially since it is not about money. Transmission of this kind is not about money.

In my own case, working with the same teacher, it took some 22 years just to be able to get and reflect the teachings that I am pointing at here. And then, after that, many more years to refine the experience into stability.

In closing I might ask you what indeed is important to accomplish in this life? And what accomplishments pay real dividends? What do you consider real dividends? It is with these kinds of questions that we can differ and find our differences. All of the above should make learning about recognition and Insight meditation something that should interest us, placing it high on our priority list of inquiry.

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