

## Why Practice Shamatha? by B. Alan Wallace

I have been drawn to the practice of shamatha from the time I was first introduced to it, in Dharamsala, India, in the early nineteen-seventies. I was immediately intrigued by the possibility of using the methods of shamatha (literally meaning “quiescence”) to explore the nature of the mind firsthand. Such practices lead to advanced stages of samadhi, or meditative concentration, where one is able to focus unwavering attention on a single object. This object may be as small as a single point or as vast as space, so it does not necessarily entail a narrowing of focus, only a coherence of focused attention. This is what Tibetan Buddhists refer to when speaking of “achieving shamatha” and “settling the mind in its natural state.”

After studying and practicing Buddhism for ten years, I devoted myself for another four years to practicing solitary retreats in Asia and the United States, training first under the guidance of His Holiness, the Dalai Lama and later under the Sri Lankan monk and scholar Balangoda Ananda Maitreya. Both these great teachers indicated to me that the actual achievement of shamatha in today’s world is very rare. After another decade, I made my first journey to Tibet to find out whether there were still contemplatives there who had achieved shamatha, and discovered that such people did exist, but they were few and far between.

The purpose of shamatha is to achieve states of samadhi known as *dhyana*, or meditative stabilization. There are four dhyanas corresponding to increasingly subtle states of samadhi, and the Buddha strongly emphasized the importance of achieving at least the first dhyana in order to achieve personal liberation. This point is well illustrated by a crucial turning point in the Buddha’s pursuit of enlightenment. After six years of practicing austerities, and having recognized the ineffectiveness of his efforts, Prince Gautama remembered a time in his youth when he had spontaneously entered the first dhyana. Recalling this experience, the thought came to him—“Might that be the way to enlightenment?” Gautama struggled to regain this heightened state of awareness, and after doing so he swiftly achieved enlightenment.

In the process of achieving the first dhyana, one’s ordinary mind and sense of personal identity dissolve into an underlying, subtle continuum of mental consciousness that is usually experienced only during dreamless sleep and at death. When this continuum is accessed by way of shamatha, it is found to have three distinctive qualities: bliss, luminosity, and nonconceptuality. This stable, vivid

awareness—like a telescope launched into orbit beyond the distortions of the earth’s atmosphere—provides a platform for exploring the “deep space of the mind.”

According to Buddhaghosa, the most authoritative commentator of Theravada Buddhism, with the achievement of the first dhyana, flawless samadhi, free of even the subtlest laxity and excitation, can be sustained for a whole night and a whole day. While resting in this state, the five physical senses are completely withdrawn into mental awareness, so that one becomes oblivious of the physical world, and the mind enters into a state of calm, luminous silence. A great advantage of achieving the first dhyana is that the five hindrances temporarily become dormant. These are (1) sensual craving, (2) malice, (3) drowsiness and lethargy, (4) excitation and remorse, and (5) doubt, all of which obscure the essential nature of the mind, namely, the subtle, luminous continuum of mental consciousness from which all ordinary states of waking and dream consciousness emerge. The Buddha emphasized the importance of overcoming these five hindrances, declaring, “So long as these five hindrances are not abandoned, one considers himself as indebted, sick, in bonds, enslaved and lost in a desert track.”

Later Buddhist contemplatives have drawn a distinction between the actual state of the first dhyana and a slightly lesser degree of samadhi that is just on the threshold of the first dhyana. The latter is called “access concentration” (Pali: *upacarasamadhi*), in which the five hindrances are as dormant as they are in the actual state of the first dhyana, but one’s samadhi is a little less robust. Instead of being able to rest effortlessly in unwavering samadhi for twenty-four hours, one may do so for only four hours—far beyond anything considered possible according to modern psychology.

I have been teaching shamatha for over thirty years, and I can’t count the number of people with training in Theravada, Zen, and Tibetan Buddhism, who have told me that, despite years of meditation, their minds are still subject to agitation and dullness. While they have been trained in more advanced practices within each of the above traditions, they never established a solid foundation in the more elementary practices of shamatha. I have also heard of many people who say they have achieved shamatha and dhyana, many claiming to have done so within a matter of days, weeks, or just a few months. But despite such reports, few appear to be able to effortlessly maintain flawless samadhi for at least four hours, with their senses fully withdrawn, while abiding in a luminous state of blissful samadhi.

Perhaps the most crucial discovery of the Buddha, as he launched his contemplative revolution in India, was the liberating power of first achieving dhyana

through the practice of shamatha, and then cultivating *vipashyana*, or contemplative insight into essential features of reality (such as impermanence, the nature of suffering, and the nonexistence of an independent self, or ego). The transformative power of Buddhist meditation occurs when the stability and vividness of shamatha is unified with the penetrating insights of vipashyana. Shamatha by itself results in a temporary alleviation of the fundamental causes of suffering, and vipashyana by itself provides only fleeting glimpses of reality. Only with the stabilizing power of shamatha can the insights gleaned from vipashyana thoroughly saturate the mind, ultimately liberating it from deeply ingrained ways of misapprehending reality.

The fundamental structure of the Buddha's path to liberation consists of three elements of spiritual training: ethical discipline, samadhi, and wisdom. In this threefold context, the term "samadhi" refers not only to the achievement of meditative concentration but also to the cultivation of exceptional mental health and balance through the cultivation of loving-kindness, compassion, and so on. Practicing ethical discipline is similar to building a clean astronomical observatory, developing samadhi is like creating a high-resolution telescope mounted on a stable platform, and cultivating wisdom is like using that telescope to explore the heavens. The Buddha repeatedly indicated that the first dhyana is a necessary basis for fully realizing the benefits of vipashyana. Ethical discipline is the basis for developing samadhi. In this way, ethics can be viewed pragmatically: it's all about cultivating modes of conduct of the body, speech, and mind that are conducive to refining the mind to the point of achieving dhyana, and avoiding those kinds of behavior that undermine mental wellbeing. The more advanced our meditation practice is, the more pristinely pure our conduct must be. This is why Padmasambhava, who first introduced Buddhism from India to Tibet in the eighth century, declared, "although my view is higher than the sky, my conduct regarding cause and effect is finer than barley flour."

The Buddha commented that the practice of vipashyana without the support of shamatha is like sending a minister out to negotiate with bandits without having a bodyguard to protect him. But the achievement of shamatha may require many months of single-pointed practice, meditating ten hours each day. While at first glance this may seem impractical (who has time?), consider that this is far less time than it takes to earn a graduate degree in astronomy. If the study of the heavens had been left to naked-eye observers, we would still think that there are

only about three thousand stars revolving around the earth, instead of discovering that our earth revolves around the Sun, one of about a hundred billion stars in the Milky Way, which is one of fifty to a hundred billion galaxies throughout the universe. What discoveries lie in wait for us when we apply the telescope of shamatha to explore the deep space of the mind!

In his teachings as recorded in the Pali canon, the Buddha asserts that without samadhi it is impossible to gain realization, and he more specifically declares that freedom from the five hindrances (the primary purpose and benefit of achieving dhyana) is a necessary condition for gaining stream-entry, the point at which one first achieves the nonconceptual union of shamatha and vipashyana in the realization of nirvana. The eighth-century Mahayana Buddhist adept Shantideva likewise wrote, "Recognizing that one who is well endowed with vipashyana together with shamatha eradicates mental afflictions, one should first seek shamatha." Some great Indian Buddhist contemplatives did claim that it is possible to achieve insight without achieving shamatha and to then strive for shamatha on the basis of vipashyana. But they were referring to achieving vipashyana on the basis of just access concentration to the first dhyana, and then to achieving the actual state of the first dhyana and unifying that samadhi with vipashyana. It makes as little sense to think of achieving vipashyana without a high degree of attentional stability and vividness as it does to think of practicing astronomy without a telescope.

In Zen practice, it is clear that even without having fully achieved shamatha, one may experience *kensho*, a transitory realization of one's buddhanature. But to achieve *satori*, the irreversible enlightenment of the Buddha, one's initial realization must be supported by a high degree of mental stability. This is why mindfulness of breathing is commonly practiced in the Zen tradition to stabilize the mind so that the experience of "sudden awakening" doesn't vanish as suddenly as it arose. How many of us have experienced extraordinary breakthroughs in our meditative practice, only to find them rapidly fade away, leaving behind only a nostalgic memory? Since the Japanese word "Zen" derives from the Chinese Chan, which in turns derives from the Sanskrit word dhyana, it would be odd for the achievement of dhyana to be overlooked in these Eastern schools of Buddhism.

In the practice of Dzogchen, the Great Perfection school of Tibetan Buddhism, shamatha is no less important. According to the *Natural Liberation*, attributed to Padmasambhava, "Without genuine shamatha arising in one's mind-stream, even if *rigpa* (pristine awareness) is pointed out, it becomes nothing more than an object of intellectual understanding; one is left simply giving lip-service to

the view, and there is the danger that one may succumb to dogmatism. Thus, the root of all meditative states depends upon this, so do not be introduced to *rigpa* too soon, but practice until there occurs a fine experience of stability.” Lerab Lingpa, a nineteenth-century Dzogchen master, likewise emphasized the importance shamatha for the practice of Vajrayana in general, declaring it to be “a sound basis for the arising of all samadhis of the stages of generation and completion.” It is very meaningful to engage in a three-year Vajrayana retreat, but without the basis of shamatha, no Vajrayana meditation will come to full fruition.

As widespread as such advice is in the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana traditions, it has been widely neglected in recent times. As Dūdjom Lingpa, a nineteenth-century Dzogchen master commented, “among unrefined people in this degenerate era, very few appear to achieve more than fleeting stability.” If this was true in nomadic Tibet more than a century ago, how much truer it must be today.

Given the vital importance of shamatha for all schools of Buddhism, we must face the question directly: why is its accomplishment so rare? The achievement of shamatha is a result, and if the result is rare, this must be due to the rarity of its necessary causes and conditions. To return to the analogy of earning a graduate degree in astronomy, this result would be impossible without having qualified instructors, well-equipped observatories, and financial support for graduate students. Likewise, for aspiring contemplatives in the modern world to achieve shamatha, they must be guided by qualified instructors, they must have an environment conducive to sustained training, and they must be provided with financial support so that they can commit themselves to such training. While the prerequisites for earning a graduate degree in astronomy are relatively common in the modern world, the prerequisites for achieving shamatha are rare. So naturally its achievement must also be rare.

Despite the superficial similarities between earning a graduate degree in a field such as astronomy and achieving shamatha, the prerequisites for shamatha are actually far more demanding. The eighth-century Indian Buddhist contemplative Kamalashila, who played a key role in the early dissemination of Buddhism in Tibet, gave a precise account of the outer and inner conditions needed to achieve shamatha. Thus, in addition to having the guidance of a qualified teacher, one must be able to practice continuously—until shamatha is achieved—in a quiet, healthy, pleasant environment where one’s material needs are easily met. He adds that it is crucial to have good companions whose ethical discipline and views are compatible with one’s own. Those are the outer requirements.

The inner requirements are even more exacting. One must have few desires for things one does not have, and one must have a strong sense of contentment with what one does have, not continually seeking better accommodations, food, accessories, and so on. Until one achieves shamatha, one must devote oneself to a simple lifestyle, with as few extraneous activities—such as socializing, doing business, or seeking entertainment—as possible. One must maintain an exceptionally high standard of ethical discipline, avoiding all modes of conduct of body, speech, and mind that undermine one’s own and others’ wellbeing. Finally, both during and between formal meditation sessions, one must overcome the deeply ingrained habit of letting one’s mind get caught up in involuntary thoughts and ruminations. The meditator’s baseline must be silent, calm, alert awareness.

The eleventh-century Indian sage Atisha cautions in this way, “If you lack the prerequisites of shamatha, you will not achieve samadhi even in thousands of years, regardless of how diligently you practice.” Similarly, the fourteenth-century Tibetan master Tsongkhapa commented that among the above prerequisites, the most important ones are dwelling in a suitable environment, having few desires, and maintaining fine ethical discipline. Moreover, within the context of Mahayana practice, he adds that the first four perfections—generosity, ethics, patience, and enthusiasm—serve as the preconditions for the fifth, which is dhyana.

To achieve a greater degree of mental balance and wellbeing, it can be very helpful to practice shamatha for an hour or two each day in the midst of an active, socially engaged way of life, without the expectation that one will proceed very far in reaching the first dhyana. On the other hand, the optimal way to actually achieve shamatha is to go into retreat and practice continuously and single-pointedly for ten to twelve hours every day, not just for a month or two, but until one achieves this sublime state of meditative equilibrium. From that time forwards, one is said to be able to enter such samadhi at will, even in the midst of a socially active way of life, and use this as a basis for all more advanced meditative practices. But such complete withdrawal into solitude may not be necessary for everyone. If one is truly dedicated to achieving shamatha, one may formally meditate for as little as six hours each day, even while engaging with others between sessions, and still progress in the practice. Here the quality of one’s lifestyle is crucial. If the progress one makes *during* meditation sessions is greater than the decline of one’s practice *between* sessions, there is no reason why one shouldn’t be able to come to reach shamatha, even though it may take longer than if one were meditating ten hours each day. Especially

in such circumstances the quality of one's environment and companions is essential: if they are truly supportive, as Kamalashila described, one may well succeed. If they are not, they are bound to impede one's practice, even if one were to continue for a lifetime. Simply knowing how to practice shamatha and having the confidence of accomplishing it is not enough. One must make sure that one is fulfilling all the necessary prerequisites; otherwise one is bound for disappointment.

The current marginalization of shamatha may also be due in part to the recognition that the necessary prerequisites are almost nowhere to be found in today's world. Why encourage people to sow a crop in unfertile soil? This highlights the urgent need to create opportunities where authentic training in shamatha is offered, retreat centers that provide low-cost, suitable accommodations for those seeking to practice for months or years in order to achieve shamatha, and financial support for those dedicating themselves to such single-pointed practice.

If such opportunities become available to serious meditators, we will soon find ourselves in a world where numerous practitioners accomplish shamatha, and with this foundation, go on to authentic, lasting realizations that profoundly and irreversibly transform and liberate the mind of its afflictions and obscurations. In turn, these practitioners, working in partnership with first-rate scientists, could, for the first time, shed light on the gaping blind spot at the center of modernity: our understanding of consciousness.

Why does this matter? Because a world that truly understands the nature of consciousness shifts away from the hedonic treadmill of consumerism and towards the infinitely renewable resource of genuine happiness, cultivated by training the mind. A world that truly understands the nature of consciousness may find itself sharing ethics that are universal and empirically verifiable. In a world that truly understands the nature of consciousness, the great religions may rediscover their contemplative roots and explore their deep common ground. Seven hundred years ago, classical Greek teachings from the East made their way into Western thought, and a dark age gave way to the Renaissance and modernity. Might teachings from the East once again inspire profound, societal renewal? Might shamatha provide the missing peace that helps unite our deeply fragmented and troubled world? A great challenge lies before us, and great opportunity is at hand.