

Dathun Letter
Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche

I would like you to know that I appreciate your participating in this particular discipline, and that we can share this world in the way the great teachers of the lineage have. We cannot even say that we are applying old methods to a new world, but only that we are leading our lives fully. The shamatha style of meditation is particularly recommended by the Buddha. It has been known as the only way for beginning meditators for 2,500 years.

To begin with we could discuss the attitude that brings about possibilities of mindfulness. This attitude is not particularly opinionated. When we talk about attitude in this context we are talking about awareness of mind, which is precisely what mindfulness is. Awareness of mind means that you are aware, that your mind is aware of yourself. In other words, the basic point is that you're aware that you're aware. The suggestion here is that you are not a machine; you are an individual person relating with what's happening around you. And mindfulness in this particular case is the sense of being.

We could use the phrase touch and go. You are in contact, you're touching the experience of being there, actually being there, and then you let go. That applies to awareness of your breath and also to your day-to-day living awareness. The point of touch and go is that there is a sense of feel. The point of touch is that there is a sense of existence, that you are who you are.

When you sit on the cushion, you feel you are sitting on the cushion and that you actually exist. You don't need too much encouragement to develop that kind of attitude. You are there, you are sitting, you are there, you are sitting. That's the touch part. And the go part is that you are there, and then you don't hang on to it. You don't sustain your sense of being, but you let go of even that. Touch and go. There's a sense of individuality, a sense of person. Actually, we are here, we exist.

We might question what will happen to us at that point. What about the non-existence and egolessness buddhism emphasizes so much? What about the current issue of spiritual materialism? What's going to happen to us if we do that? Aren't we going to stray into some kind of pitfall? Maybe you are. Maybe you are not. There's no guarantee, since there's no guarantor. However, it is possible that you could just do this. And I would recommend that you shouldn't worry about future security, but just do this, directly, simply, and the rest of the problem will be taken care of by the sangha and the guru. Somebody is there to mind your business, somebody unshakable. You can't shake them off. That's happening anyway. Since you are committed, since you are into it, that means you've asked somebody to mind your business already anyway. And that is happening, or could happen. So let us not feel too much concern about future security of that nature at all. Let us do the touch and go.

There is a further touch that is necessary. The touch applies not only to awareness of a sense of being, or mindfulness of a sense of being, it also happens at the level of mindfulness of situations. That is, one's mental state of aggression or lust has to be acknowledged. Those states should not just be acknowledged and pushed off, but actually looked at. That is a very important point here. There's no suppression or shying-off involved. You have that experience of being utterly aggressive and angry, or being utterly lustful, whatever. You don't just say, "Oh, it's okay. This is what's happening." Or, very politely, "Hi. Nice seeing you again. You are okay. Good-bye, I want to get back to my breath." That's like meeting an old friend who reminds you of the past and saying, "Well, excuse me, I have to catch the train to make my next appointment." That's somewhat deceptive.

So in this particular shamatha approach to practice you don't just sign off. You acknowledge what's happening, and then you look at it as well. The point is that you don't give yourself an easy time so you can escape the embarrassing and unpleasant moments, the self-conscious moments of your life. Such thoughts might arise as memories of the past, or the painful experience of the present. Or painful future prospects maybe what you're going to do after this. All those things happen and you experience them and look at them and then come back to your breath. This is very important. Extremely important.

There is the possibility that we could twist the logic all around. If you feel that sitting and meditating, coming back to the breath, is a way of avoiding problems then that is the problem. You might feel your practice is sanctioned by the Buddha, since you have the technique of mindfulness of breath which he recommended. Therefore it's something extremely kosher and extremely good and sensible and real, and you don't have to pay attention to all those little embarrassments that happen around your life. You can regard them as unimportant and just come back to the breath then you are creating a patchwork; you are bottling-up problems and keeping them as your family heirloom. Therefore it is very important to look at those embarrassments and then come back to breath. However, there's no implication at all that if you look at them it's going to be an expression of freedom, an escape from one point to another, or that that's the end of the story.

In fact, most of the problems in life do not come so much because you are an aggressive or lustful person. The greatest problem is that you want to bottle those things up and put them aside, and you have become an expert in deception. That is one of the biggest problems. Meditation practice is supposed to uncover any attempts to develop a subtle, sophisticated, deceptive approach. It is to uncover those patches. That's a basic point, which is extremely important to realize and work with.

I think as far as sitting practice is concerned, there is a need for some kind of rigidity, some strict discipline. Your posture should be correct. It is constantly recommended that you sit cross-legged, as opposed to hanging out in any convenient posture. You might say, "Suppose I lie down and meditate, wouldn't that still be valid?" Somehow it doesn't seem to be. Not because there is a rigid rule, but it's a practicality. Once you sit, you sit properly. You have a straight spine, your breath doesn't have any strain, and your neck doesn't have any strain. So sit, upright, cross-legged. You can change your posture and

rearrange yourself. There's no point in punishing yourself and trying to strain constantly. But you sit, properly, so there's no strain on the breath. If you sit up properly, you are there. Your breathing follows naturally.

It's the difference between animals and human beings. Animals find relaxation by going horizontal. Horses can sleep that way. They could even meditate that way, if anybody taught horses to meditate. Snakes and lizards and horses and cows could meditate horizontally. But as far as human beings are concerned, we don't walk on four feet at this point of our evolution. We have no chance of going back, so we have to walk on our two feet. For us that vertical posture always happens, including when we sit. So since we are formed this way, we should do it this way. The Buddha set an example. The Buddha for human beings sits upright in the meditation posture. This isn't particularly anthropocentric, in the sense that human beings are regarded as the highest beings. It's a question of what our make-up is, and we should go along with our make-up. So posture is very important. It's upright as opposed to animal style, and not too tense in your neck. Just sit up, very simply.

I've noticed that when people see something very interesting happening in a movie everybody sits up in perfect posture. And when the movie gets slightly dull and uninteresting, people begin to do all kinds of things. But at first, they have perfect posture. So that's an example for us. It is happening, it is your life, and you are up, and you are breathing. It is very personal and very direct. You are sitting, you are sitting upright, and your head is forward, neither up nor down, direct. Posture is very important, extremely important, in this case.

The attitude towards breathing in meditation is that once you are set properly in your posture, there is breath coming out of you. The shamatha approach to relating with that is: breath is coming out, become the breathing. Try to identify completely rather than watching it. It's just, you are the breath; the breath is you. Breath is coming out of your nostrils, going out, and dissolving into the atmosphere, into the space. You put a certain energy and effort towards that. And then, as for in-breathing, should you try to breathe in and deliberately try to draw things in? That's not recommended. Just boycott your breath, boycott your concentration on the breath. As your breath goes out, let it dissolve, just abandon it, boycott it. So in-breathing is just space. Physically, biologically, one does breath in, obviously, but that's not a big deal.

Then another breath goes out be with it. So out, dissolve, gap; out, dissolve, gap. Constant opening, gap, abandoning, boycotting that of you which would follow through. Boycotting, in this case, is a very significant word. If you hold onto your breath, you are holding onto yourself constantly. Once you begin to boycott the end of the outbreath, then there's no world left. Except that the next outbreath reminds you to tune in with it. So you tune in, dissolve, tune in, dissolve, tune in, dissolve.

Thoughts arise in the midst of that practice. "Well, back at home . . ." "How should I do my calligraphy?" "How can I compose another article?" "What's happening in the financial scene of Karma Dzong?" "I hate so and so who was so terrible to me." "I would

love to make love if she were only here," and "What's the story with my parents?" All kinds of thoughts begin to arise naturally. If you have lots of time to sit, endless thoughts happen constantly.

The approach to that is actually no approach. When I feel an ache in my neck, okay, I'm thinking "ache in my neck." Reduce everything to thought level rather than to concepts. Usually what happens is that if you have mental chatter, you call it your thoughts. But if you have very deeply involved emotional chatter, or fights and struggles in your mind, you call it emotion, and you give it special prestige. You think it deserves the special privilege of being called emotion. "I'm actually angry, it's more than my thought." "I feel so horny, it's more than my thought." Somehow, in the realm of actual mind, things don't work that way. All of them are thoughts, all of them are thoughts, all of them. It's just thinking; you're thinking you're horny; you're thinking you're angry. It's thinking process taking place all the time.

So the idea, as far as this shamatha practice is concerned, is to depersonalize the thoughts. Your thoughts are no longer regarded as VIPs in your life, while you meditate. You think, you sit; you think, you sit; you think, you sit. You have thoughts, you have thoughts, thoughts about thoughts, thoughts about thoughts. So let it happen that way; call them thoughts. You are thinking, you are constantly thinking, nothing but thinking. You are not really getting angry. Maybe you have physical repercussion from it, but still it's the thought process generating that. You might have erections in the middle of your sitting, but it's your thought. Your mind gets erected first, then your body becomes erected afterwards. Usually that's the pattern. So it's thinking process, constant thinking process, thought, nothing but thought, thought patterns.

But there is a limit. By thinking and thinking, thinking of thinking, you can impose intensity on your body which undermines it. In other words, if you regard the body as your little brother and tell it to shut up, because big brother is more important, that is not really a good thing to do. You could go too far and strain your body, your leg, your back or something. Rearrange your posture if it is necessary; at some point it's good to do that. But at the same time, it's a thinking process, and relate to it as a thinking process.

Another thing I would like to mention is the focus of the eyes when you look at things. Sometimes, if you are paying too much attention to visual details and colors, you find you're getting a tight neck and a headache. That's because your visual expenditure is much more than necessary. Usually in our ordinary life we walk and we move our bodies and we look, so the whole thing is balanced. In this case you sit so much and the only thing you have left to do is to listen and to look. And there's not much noise either, so everything is concentrated visually. So there is tension and that's a problem. The idea is not to focus too much on the visual situation, but just open your eyes and see it, and look at it maybe. But don't manipulate your visual hallucination.

The next challenge is the walking practice of meditation. We have found in the past that a lot of people treated it as an opportunity for dramatic display. Everybody tried to

compensate for the fact that when they sat they couldn't do very much. However when they stood and walked they could at least exercise their self-existence. That became a very troubled and problematic situation. The walking meditation was regarded as comic relief, a time to do something extraordinary, or self-exploratory, self-expressive. The poets walked their way, the theater people walked their way, the freaked-out people walked their way. I think that's not particularly advisable. Since we have a chance to review what happened before, we can bring this issue to the surface.

Walking practice is the same as sitting practice, except that you're walking. Instead of paying attention to your breath you work with the movement of your legs. And your body still is in good posture. You raise your right leg, swing out, touch your sole on the floor and press; then the left leg releases its tension, you swing across, touch and press; then the left leg releases its tension, you swing across, touch and press. The right leg swings across, touches and presses. It's a very natural, very ordinary walk. Often people attempt to run around and race with everybody or they do it very slowly. Both of those are unnecessary affectations. And you should be careful that your awareness has shifted to your legs.

In fact, walking practice is very important. It relates to your everyday life situation much more closely than sitting practice. In walking practice you rise from your meditation cushion and begin to get into walking in the street, speaking, and working. So walking practice is a very important transitional period, although in this case it's still part of formal practice. So regarding it that way, you have to pay heed to it. Hopefully you can do it somewhat deliberately but at the same time freely.

The duration of each sitting period is not predictable; that's part of the approach, the same as with nyinths. You have day number one, day number two, day number three, and each day has a particular unpredictable schedule. The schedule is not released to the public, so to speak, except to the timer, so you do not prepare yourself to go fight through that long sitting, or to expect that long tea break. Things are just worked out as ongoing life situations. The basic idea is to dissolve the sharp edges between sitting and non-sitting periods, so that an ongoing awareness practice is developing, constantly happening. That seems to be the basic approach.

The next question is how should we handle ourselves during the periods when we are not sitting here? Should you just tip-toe back like walking on eggs still trying to hold onto your meditation experience? Or should you make a big splash and come right on? Or should you be somewhat dumb and hesitant and try to play along with other people's energy? Those three choices are the passion, aggression and ignorance syndromes that usually happen. In this case I think the point is not so much that you should tip-toe, or make a big splash, or be hesitant. But you should try to continue the sense of meditational awareness that has developed in your state of being; just continue that way. This doesn't mean especially working with the breath or working with your walking, but there is a flash of awareness, the memory that you sat and that you are committed to this particular course. It's the recognition that you have set your purpose and that being here is part of that. It's nothing particularly moralistic or a question of behaving like good boys and

good girls. It's just a basic recollection of why you are here. And you are here; you have sat and meditated; it's very simple and factual.

Another general recommendation which I recommend very heavily as a matter of fact is to minimize unnecessary chatter. This means you should refrain from conversing or commenting among yourselves and limit your verbal statements to what is purely functional and necessary. For example one might say, "Pass the salt," or "Close the door."

That brings us to the point of mealtimes. Mealtime, as I have observed, becomes like a company cafeteria. It's a moment of release, a moment of freedom which is unnecessary in this case. I think we can approach it differently; we can approach the whole thing very directly and precisely. One problem is unnecessary chatter and another is a sense of a gap, a vacation. You are eating and drinking no doubt having a relatively pleasant time and you regard it as completely outside of what we're doing here. There's a big dichotomy, a big gap, a shockingly big gap. Which is unnecessary. If we develop such a gap during the mealtimes or during free time thinking that this is free time, release time, time to release energy then obviously your sitting practice is going to be like imprisonment. Then you are creating your own jail. The meditation hall is where serious things take place, and when we get out of the door, then everything's okay, back to normality or something. Although our physical environment is somewhat isolated and restricted, still, we can improvise with our free time and enjoy ourselves. By doing that you're developing hatred towards one place, considering it a jail, while the other place comes to represent freedom, having a good time.

So the suggestion here is that we could even out the whole thing and have a good time all over the place. This is not so much a jail, and that is not so much a vacation, freedom, a holiday. But everything should be evened out. That seems to be a basic approach: if you sit, if you stand, it's the same thing; if you eat, if you squat, it's the same process. It's the good old world. You are carrying your world with you in any case; you can't cut your world into different slices and put it into different pigeon holes at all.

The point is that we don't have to be so poverty-stricken about our life. We don't have to try and get a little chocolate chip from our life. All the rest will be sour, but here I can take just a dip in pleasure. If your body is hot, and you dip your finger in ice water it feels good. It's so painful at the same time, not particularly pleasurable. So if you really know the meaning of pleasure in the total sense, this dip in pleasure is just further punishment and an unnecessary trick that we play on ourselves. Actually the practice of meditation is not so much about a hypothetical attainment of enlightenment, but in this case about leading a good life. In order to learn how to lead a good life, a spotless life, we need continual awareness that relates with life constantly, directly, very simply.