

Taming Your Wild Elephant-like Mind

How to focus your mind when meditating

Fixing your attention on an object of meditation and controlling it is said to be like taming an elephant. An elephant trainer ties a wild elephant to a tree or sturdy post with many thick ropes. If it does as the trainer teaches it, then fine; if not, it is subdued and controlled, struck repeatedly with a sharp iron hook. Your mind is like the untamed elephant; you bind it with the rope of mindfulness to the sturdy pillar of an object of meditation. If you cannot keep it there, you must gradually bring it under control by goading it with the iron hook of vigilance.

Mindfulness continually fastens your attention to the object of meditation. However, indirectly vigilance also focuses your attention on the object of meditation, for you depend on noticing actual or incipient laxity and excitement with vigilance, and then stabilize your attention on the primary object without falling under their influence.

It is said that you achieve concentration on the basis of mindfulness and that mindfulness is like a rope that actually fastens your attention to the object of meditation continuously. So mindfulness is the main technique to sustain in achieving concentration.

Also, mindfulness has a way of apprehending its object that carries a sense of [certainty]. If, while maintaining concentration, you stabilize your mind casually without a solid sense of certainty about the object, then your mind may take on a limpid clarity, but it will not have the vivid intensity of certain knowledge, so you will not develop powerful mindfulness. Therefore, subtle laxity will be unchecked, and only flawed concentration will ensue.

Those who cultivate just non-discursive attention without stabilizing their attention on other objects of meditation, such as divine body, bring to mind the personal instruction, "Stabilize your mind without thinking of any object at all." Then they must keep their attention from being distracted and wandering. Since this meditation is simply the technique of maintaining mindfulness, those who meditate in this way must also rely on a mindfulness that carries the force of certain



knowledge.

The foundation of cultivating concentration is mindfulness, which does not forget the object. If a lapse in mindfulness leads to forgetting the object of meditation, you will be distracted and will immediately lose the object upon which you are meditating.

How does such mindfulness focus your mind right on the object of meditation? Once you have visualized the object of meditation, generate a powerful apprehension of the object that tightly holds it with your attention. After you have set your attention at a high level, stabilize it on the object without newly analyzing anything.

Mindfulness has three features: 1) its observed object is a "familiar object," since mindfulness does not occur with regard to a previously unfamiliar

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object. In this case, the image of a previously ascertained object of meditation appears. 2) Its subjective aspect or manner of apprehension is your mind's not forgetting the object, as indicated by the phrase, "your mind is not forgetful." In this case, it is your mind's non-forgetfulness of the object of meditation.

What does non-forgetfulness mean? It is not merely being able to remember what your guru taught you about the object of meditation, thinking or saying "The object of meditation is like this," when you cast your mind to it, or when someone asks you about it. Rather, it refers to how your attention is fixed on the object of meditation and brings it to mind clearly, without even the slightest distraction. If you are distracted, you lose your mindfulness to the extent that you are distracted. Therefore, after you have set your attention

on the object of meditation... then sustain the force of that awareness in unbroken continuity. This is the most critical point in the technique of maintaining mindfulness. 3) Its function is to keep your attention from wandering from the object of meditation.

Q: [from student]: When you fix your attention on the object of meditation with mindfulness, is there a definite length for the session?

A: All earlier gurus of the various Tibetan lineages say that you have to do numerous short sessions. Why? Some say that if you meditate in brief session and stop when it is going well, you will still be eager to meditate at the end of each session. While if the session is long, you will become weary. Others explain that if the session is long, it is easy to fall under the sway of laxity and excitement, so it is hard to develop flawless concentration.

If you practice the techniques of mindfulness and vigilance,

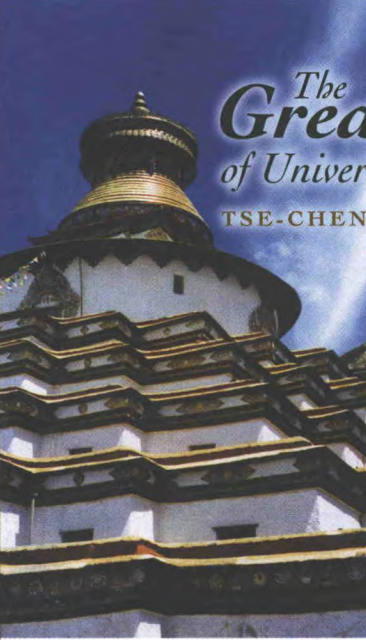
reminding yourself of the object of mediation and monitoring your mediation at moderate intervals, it does not matter if the session is a little long. However, usually one of two things will happen when you are a beginner and have a long session. On the one hand you may become distracted due to forgetfulness. On the other hand, it is easy to fall under the sway of laxity and excitement, and you will not quickly recognize them when they occur. The first situation hinders the development of strong mindfulness; the latter hinders the development of strong vigilance.

Q: [from student]: While mindfulness fixes your attention on the object of meditation, is it appropriate to monitor your meditation and think about whether you are holding the object of meditation well?

A: Yes, you have to do this. It is not that you stop your concentration and then look at your mind. Rather, while maintaining

your state of concentration, you just look to see whether your attention is staying where it was previously set on the primary object of mediation, and if is not, whether there is laxity or excitement. After you have settled into concentration, you monitor this at moderate intervals, neither too often nor too seldom. If you do this while the intensity and force of the previous awareness are not quite gone, it takes place within the perspective of this awareness. This has the purpose of both enabling long-lasting, intense stability and letting you quickly recognize laxity and excitement. This is how you sustain your mindfulness.

Lama Tsong Khapa (1347-1419), a prolific writer and Tibetan philosopher, was founder of the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism and the Ganden Monastery. This piece is excerpted from: "The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment; Lam Rim Chen Mo," by Tsong-kha-pa; The Lamrim Chenmo Translation Committee; Joshua W.C. Cutler, editor-in-chief, and Guy Newland, editor. Snow Lion Publications 2002. (Volume II precedes Volume I, which will be published Fall 2003.) Contact: www.snowlionpub.com, or 1-800-950-0313.



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