

Nine Stages of Training the Mind

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(Photo: *Skyseeker*)

Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche presents a map of the meditative process. From a wild and busy mind to the perfection of equanimity, he lays out the nine stages of training the mind.

As the lineage of meditators sat on their cushions and worked with their minds, they saw the same unfolding process: nine ways that the mind can be true to its inherent stability, clarity and strength. In their descriptions of nine stages of training the mind through the practice of *shamatha* meditation, or “peaceful abiding,” they left us signposts of that process. These guidelines are helpful because the mind is so vast that if we’re left to our own devices, we’ll

usually just wander in thought. These nine stages are a map of the meditative process.

The first four stages—placement, continual placement, repeated placement and close placement—have to do with developing stability. Stages five and six—taming and pacifying—have to do with developing clarity. And the last three stages—thoroughly pacifying, one-pointed and equanimity—have to do with building strength.

Placement

Placing our mind on the breath is the first thing we do in meditation. In the moment of placing our mind, it's like we're mounting a horse: we put our foot in the stirrup and pull ourselves up to the saddle. It's a matter of taking our seat properly.

This moment of *placement* starts when we extract our mind from its engagement with events, problems, thoughts and emotions. We take that wild and busy mind and place it on the breath. Even though we're placing our consciousness, which isn't physical, placement feels very physical. It's as deliberate as placing a rock on top of a leaf.

In order for placement to be successful, we have to formally acknowledge that we're letting go of concepts, thoughts and emotions: "Now I'm placing my mind upon the breath." What happens in that moment? Our attachments are uprooted. If we can even attempt such a thing, our discursiveness is greatly reduced. At the same time, by placing it on the breath, we're gathering the mind that's spread thin all over.

For beginning meditators the first stage is where we learn how to balance the focus on breathing, recognition of thoughts and holding the posture. It's a grace period during which we develop good meditation habits. As we continue in our practice, placement is always the first step. It's that moment at the beginning of each session when we recognize and acknowledge that we've begun meditating. Because it establishes our attitude toward the rest of the session, it's the most important stage. The moment of placement gives our meditation a crisp, clean start. If we begin in a vague or ambiguous way, then our meditation will only continue to be vague and ambiguous. Like placing a domino, how carefully we place our mind in the first stage will directly affect the development of the next.

After that first moment, each time you choose to recognize and acknowledge a thought and return your consciousness to the breath, you're learning placement. It's such a small act, so innocuous, but it's one of the most courageous things you can do. When you recognize and release that thought, you can take pride in yourself. You've overcome laziness. You've remembered the instructions. You can feel happy coming back to the breath. Don't worry that you're going to have to do it again—you're going to do it thousands of times. That's why this is called practice.

Each time you remember to place your mind on the breath, you're moving forward. Just by letting a thought go, you're extracting yourself from concepts, negative emotions and bewilderment. You're letting go of the need to be endlessly entertained and consumed. You have to do it again and again and again. Change happens one breath at a time, one thought at a time. Each time you return to the breath, you're taking one step away from addiction to discursiveness and fear and one step forward on the path of enlightenment, beginning with developing compassion for yourself.

I love golf. I play it whenever I can. No matter what kind of game I'm having, I can hit only one ball at a time. Each ball is the only ball; my mind has to be fresh every time. If I think of the balls I've hit or the balls I will hit, I'm not really hitting *this* ball. I'm only ingraining bad habits. It's the same with placement. If you're not crisp and fresh in recognizing and releasing thoughts, you're not really meditating; you're ingraining sloppiness. Those thoughts will gain power, and eventually you won't be meditating at all. You'll just be thinking.

Recognizing, acknowledging and releasing a thought is like reaching the top of a mountain. It's worthy of the warrior's cry, "*Ki ki so so!*" What we celebrate is leaving behind the self-indulgent fantasies that will rob us of our life unless we work with them properly. Inspiration, view, effort, trust, mindfulness and awareness support us in this.

The more we're able to gather our attention and focus, the stronger our mind becomes, the stronger the experience becomes and the stronger the result becomes. We know we're able to place our minds properly when we can hold our focus on the breathing for roughly twenty-one cycles without our mind becoming enormously distracted.

Continual Placement

Placing our mind on the breath is now fairly easy. We've learned to mount the horse, and now we feel comfortable being in the saddle. The horse is walking along the trail. We're experiencing how it feels to be on the breath, to be continually in placement. When discursiveness and distraction take us off the trail, by and large we're able to implement placement and get back on. What allows us to do this—*continual placement*—is further development of mindfulness and awareness, lack of laziness and remembering the instructions.

Another reason we're able to successfully place our mind on the breath is that we have confidence in the reasons why we're meditating. We do it with enthusiasm because we know it will bring us peace. We see the futility of outside concerns, fantasies, thoughts and emotions. We're willing to give them up at least for the period of our meditation because we see the benefits of doing so. Placement has become a reasonable thing to do.

When resting our mind on the breathing and relating to our thoughts with ease becomes the norm, we're coming to the end of this stage. A benchmark is that we're about to rest our minds for roughly 108 cycles of the breath without being caught in distraction. Through 108 breaths, in and out, we can be mindful of the breathing. Although we may experience some discursiveness, the thoughts aren't bothersome or large enough that we lose mindfulness and forget the breathing altogether.

At this stage our mindfulness and stability last only so long; then our mind drifts off. But when the mainstay of our practice is that we can stay on the breathing for 108 breaths, giving ourselves a little wiggle room in that we will be neither completely still nor completely distracted. Then we've graduated from the second to the third stage, which is known as *repeated placement*.

Repeated Placement

We might feel like we have been doing repeated placement since the beginning. But the landscape of meditation is vast, and the stages progressively subtle, because they describe our experience, which becomes more and more refined. The Tibetan word for this stage is *len*, which means to retrieve, to gather, to bring back. We've learned how to place our mind and how to continue to place our mind, but occasionally a thought still breaks out

like a wild horse galloping across the plains. In the first two stages this happened incessantly. By the third stage it happens only occasionally.

During the second stage, we learned to enjoy the ride. We're delighted that we can stay in the saddle and enjoy the scenery. In the third stage we become more confident. But the horse will have spontaneous moments of excitement and wildness. Now and then it rears or bucks or leaves the trail. We have to bring it back. We practice occasionally retrieving it throughout the third stage, and by the end we do it less and less. Our mindfulness is maturing into stability.

Now we're able to focus on our breathing, on being present. When the mind departs, it's usually to chase fantasies of little pleasures, from food to better weather to romantic adventures. This is elation: we're holding our mind too tightly. We're focused on the breath so hard that the mind suddenly departs. As this stage progresses, the speed and efficiency with which we retrieve our mind increases. By comparison, the way we extracted ourselves from thoughts in earlier stages looks messy. Sometimes it was like quicksand—the harder we tried to get out, the more we were embroiled. But now, because mindfulness is so strong, we're able to remove ourselves with precision. By the end of this stage we've achieved one of the milestones of *shamatha*: stability. Mindfulness is so potent that we're able to remain on the breath without ever being fully distracted. Awareness is also becoming more astute. We're beginning to catch thoughts before they occur.

Our meditation isn't as clear and vibrant as it could be, but it feels good and peaceful because we've stabilized our minds. Throughout the course of a session, our mind always remains in the theater of meditation. This is an admirable accomplishment. In Tibet it is likened to a vulture soaring high in the sky over a dead animal. This bird now always keeps its eye on the food. It may drift a little to the left or right, but it never loses sight of the food. Similarly our minds may drift here and there, but never away from the breath. Before the end of the third stage, sometimes we were present for our practice and sometimes we weren't. Now we're there for all of it. This is stability. It didn't happen because we hit ourselves over the head with an overly simplified meditation technique. We achieved it gently and precisely through repetition, consistency, view, attitude, intention, proper posture and good surroundings.

Close Placement

The entry to the fourth stage, which is known as *close placement*, is marked by nondistractedness. We always remain close to the breath. That's when we know

we've crossed the border. This is stability. We know that even though the horse will wander here and there, it won't be leaving the trail.

Our meditation now takes on a different twist. Previously our main concern was not to be distracted from the breath. We were worried that our mind was going to be sucked back into everyday problems. We were always wondering if we'd be strong enough to return to the breath. Now we're more relaxed. We're no longer wondering if we can stay on the breath because we know we can. We're no longer concerned about outside influences pulling us away from meditation because we know they won't. Our confidence is heightened. Now we're concerned about the quality of our meditation—the texture, the experience. Before we were worried that we couldn't get a cup of coffee; now we want a mocha cappuccino. How can we make our minds stronger, more vibrant? This is our new priority.

By and large, we've overcome the obstacles of laziness and forgetting the instructions. These obstacles were bad because they kept us from meditating. By the end of the third stage and into the fourth stage we're dealing with the obstacles of elation and laxity. Either extreme has distracting results. However, since by now we're always remaining at the scene of our practice, these are considered good problems to have.

In Tibet we're warned that at the fourth stage we might be fool enough to think we've achieved enlightenment or high realization—the mind feels so strong and stable and good. Because the struggle with our mind has been reduced greatly, there's a quality of joy and ease. But if we enjoy the stability of the mind too much, it will become too relaxed. We might not reach the other stages. Hence the obstacle of laxity. Our mind is stable but not clear. The bird can't land on the meat; it can only fly around it. We need awareness to hone in, sharpen sensibility, pull our mind in tighter.

Taming

Even though the accomplishments at the third and fourth stages are heroic, there's further to go. In the fifth stage we're able to tighten up our meditation by bringing in more clarity. This stage is known as *taming* because we begin to experience the true fruits of a tamed mind, something that we began to cultivate long ago in the first stage. Taming here is the experience of *lesu rungwa*, being able to make our mind workable. In the fourth stage, we might still feel awed by the fact that we've tamed the horse. But now a strong, stable and clear mind feels natural. Our mind is not perfectly still. We still have discursive thoughts. But we're feeling true synergy with the horse. We're

feeling harmony. We're no longer struggling.

The harmony and synergy create joy. A traditional metaphor for what we experience at this stage is the delight of a bee drawing nectar from a flower. Meditation tastes good, joyous. If you've ever had a hard time and then suddenly felt the pressure lift, you might have briefly known such bliss and liberation.

Pacifying

The sixth stage is known as *pacifying*. A great battle has taken place and there is victory. We're seated on the horse surveying the field. We know we've won. We feel tranquil and vibrant like mountain greenery after a thunderstorm. Everything has been watered and energized. There is tremendous clarity.

We're still working with a mind that is sometimes tight and sometimes loose. In our practice we still have to make many little adjustments. But in making these adjustments we're no longer frantic, as we might have been in the first few stages. Then it was questionable that we would ever make our mind an ally, and now the peace we feel tells us that we have. Our meditation is joyous and clear. We begin to experience not only mind's natural harmony, but also its inherent strength.

At this stage we also feel excitement. We begin to see the possibilities of what we can accomplish with our tamed mind. Before, this relationship was a burden, but now it's full of possibilities. The wild horse has been tamed.

Thoroughly Pacifying

The battle may be over, but there are still a few little enemy soldiers running around in the form of subtle thoughts, mostly about pleasure. We may be slightly attached to how good meditation feels. There are little dualistic rumblings. Although we know that they're not going to disrupt our meditation, we can't just sit back and ignore them. In *thoroughly pacifying*, we don't dispel the thoughts as we did in stage four. Now we seduce them, like snow falling into fire. Our meditation is becoming so strong that when thoughts and emotions encounter its heat they naturally dissolve.

Remember the waterfall of thoughts we felt when we first sat down on the cushion to tame our minds? It's become a lake with only a few little ripples.

One-Pointed

By the eighth stage, known as *one-pointed*, the remnants of discursiveness have evaporated. We're sitting there completely awake, clear and knowing. This is possible because we're no longer distracted. Our meditation has developed all the attributes of perfection, which is what we will accomplish at the ninth stage. The only difference is that at the beginning of meditation we still have to make a slight effort to point our mind in the direction of the breath.

Equanimity

Our meditation has come to perfection. When we sit down we engage with the breath in a completely fluid and spontaneous manner. Our mind is strong, stable, clear and joyous. We feel a complete sense of victory. We could meditate forever. Even in the back of our mind, there are no traces of thoughts. We're in union with the present moment. Our mind is at once peaceful and powerful, like a mountain. There's a sense of *equanimity*.

This is perfection. Like a finely trained racehorse, our mind remains motionless but alive with energy. The mind has actually grown—in strength as well as size. We feel magnanimous, expansive. This is the fruition of peaceful abiding. Now we have a mind that is able to focus in any endeavor. We feel centered and confident.



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