

BASIC MIND TRAINING: A DIAGRAM
Toward a general understanding of dharma practice.
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Here is a very general diagram of what can be involved in practicing dharma. I include it because many of you may have little to no knowledge about how simple or complicated dharma practice is. I apologize in advance for any oversimplification and am happy to try and answer questions. This diagram follows (in general) practices working toward making Mahamudra meditation an eventual goal. Here are some comments on the numbered points. Actual traditional mind practice are listed in points #2 through #10.

(1) Meditation as Relaxation: There are literally hundreds of practices that go under the name “mediation” here in the West. While there are dozens of words for meditation in Tibetan, in English just about everything to do with this topic gets tagged as “Meditation.” There is nothing wrong with stress reducing forms of relaxation; we all need them. However, there is a difference between these and the centuries-old established methods of training the mind, like sitting meditation (points #2 through #10)

(2) Traditional Formal Meditation: Formal sitting meditation has been around for at least 2500 years and has been used not only by Buddhists, but by many other religions and spiritual practitioners over the centuries. It has been tested and found to work, but does require that we actually practice to build a habit of concentration, etc.

(3) Sitting Practice: Perhaps the most traditional approach to mind training is sitting practice, where we simply sit on a cushion or a chair and attempt to focus on an object, often the breath, but also a stone, a twig, or nothing at all. The purpose of this is to discover how our mind works, to gradually become stable in concentration, and to develop calmness by relaxing into it.

(4) Insight Meditation: Once we have stabilized our mind a little we can begin insight meditation, which usually has two parts. The first involves learning to use our mind to look at itself, which generally involves an attempt to determine the color, shape, location, etc. of the mind through inferential valid cognition. Although this appears to be an exercise of mental-conceptual understanding, in reality it is an attempt to generally exercise the mind to look around within rather than outside, eventually at itself.

(5) Pointing Out Instructions: Insight meditation culminates with an attempt on the part of the teacher to point out to the practitioner the actual nature of his or her mind, not intellectually, but directly in what is called direct valid cognition. In other words, the student has to actually see or discover for the first time the true nature of their own mind. Only when this recognition takes place does step #7 take place. It may take many tries (and years) before the student actually recognizes the nature of the mind.

(6) Recognition: “Recognition” (‘Kensho’ in Zen) is a landmark event in dharma practice. It is not in any way a form of enlightenment but rather is just very practical, the recognition of the actual or true nature of the ordinary mind and how it works, as in: we finally get it. Once this takes place, we stop looking outward for solutions and begins to work inwardly under our own direction. In many ways the role of the teacher is completed when the true nature of the mind is successfully pointed out to the student.

After recognition the student takes over and is consciously responsible for his or her own dharma practice from then onward. At that point dharma 'practice' is no longer a practice or a "sounds like," but is real and authentic. We are no longer building a habit; we have the habit. Recognition is often accompanied by real enthusiasm for practice and the process of stabilizing the recognition begins.

(7) Advanced Meditation: From the point of recognition onward the realization gained as to the ultimate nature of the mind never reverses itself. It is permanent. That is what defines the word "realization." From the moment of recognition, as mentioned earlier, dharma practice is no longer a 'practice' such as one might 'practice' a musical instrument. Instead, one is playing music. In other words, we are now meditating for real and no longer just learning how. This is not to suggest that we do not continue to practice dharma, to sit, and so forth. What it does suggest is that we have learned the tools to systematically work with our own mind and no longer depend only on outside direction from a teacher.

Remedial Practices

All does not always go easy when learning sitting meditation and the like. Many or most of us have heavy obscurations and bad mental habits that make simple dharma practice very difficult and slow going. To assist with this, the Tibetan Buddhists have a wealth of remedial practices to help remove our obscurations enough so that we can actually get results from the main practices. Here are a few of them that are very useful. After invoking the remedial practices we can return to the main practices with greater clarity and success.

(8) The Common Preliminaries: Also called "The Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind," these four common-sense considerations not only mark the beginning of dharma study, they reoccur in the most advanced meditation as absolutely essential to keep in mind at all times. In a word, the four thoughts are that (1) This life is precious and should be put to good use, (2) that death and impermanence awaits us all, (3) That every act has a result or karma, and (4) that we will never get our ducks all in a row because the confused world is inherently undependable.

(9) The Seven Points of Mind Training: This classic texts includes the tonglen practice of sending and receiving as well as some 57 key slogans to guide our mind practice. It is a wonderful practice.

(10) The Extraordinary Preliminaries: More often called "The Ngnodro," this set of four very difficult and powerful practices not only helps to remove obscurations and karmic residue, but also assists in developing a pure heart and motivation, accumulating merit, and learning to mix your mind with the mind of the Buddha. This is the official dharma boot camp and a remedy for those of us who find we have just too many karmic stains and obscurations to practice dharma straight away. I should know; I had to do ngondro twice!

There you have a rough idea of what is involved in basic mind training as the Tibetans see it. While this diagram is not exhaustive, it may help to give you a general picture or overview of the basic dharma path, including some of the practices and remedies involved. Questions are welcome.

Basic Mind Training

1 Meditation as Relaxation, Stress-Reduction, etc.

Literally Hundreds of Practices Call Themselves "Meditation"

1 Guided Meditations, Alpha-waves, Chanting, Music, Body Awareness, Kundalini, Bio-feedback, Audio, Cosmic, Tai Chi, Walking, Japa, Kabbalah, Stress Relief, Relaxation Therapy, Yoga, Healing, Chakras, Prayer, Visualization, Healing, Transmission, New Age, and so on.

2 Traditional Formal Meditation: Zen, Tibetan, Japanese, etc.

Detailed below, this practice stretches back a couple thousand years and has been tested.

3 Basic Sitting Practice

Shamata - Calm-Abiding

3 This is the basic meditation used in India, Tibet, and Japan, by Zen and Tibetan Buddhists, plus a host of other groups. It consists of allowing the mind to rest naturally on an object.

Vipassana - Insight Meditation

4 Once the mind rests, a process of inferential logic exercises the mind and trains it to look at and for itself. When the mind can look, the teacher points out to the student how to look at the nature of the mind.

5 Major Transition Point

Recognition of the Mind's Nature

The recognition of the true

8 Obscuration Remedies

The Common Preliminaries

8 Also called "The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma," holding these thoughts in mind prevents the mind from being carried away.

The Seven Points of Mind Training

9 Tonglen, "Sending and Receiving" and other exercises help to reduce selfishness, attachment, and labeling. Plus 57 slogans.

The Extraordinary Preliminaries

10 This dharma boot camp is designed to thin out obscurations, develop a pure heart, accumulate merit, and mix your mind with Buddha mind.