TEACHINGS ON SHAMATHA
FROM THE 2015
MODERN DAY BODHISATTVA
SEMINAR

THE NINE WAYS OF RESTING
THE FIVE OBSTACLES
THE EIGHT ANTIDOTES
In Buddhist practice, *shamatha* (“calm abiding”) and *vipashyana* (“awakening insight”) together are the main part of the path. When we work with the mind, it can often be like a wild elephant. It will not do what we ask of it. It needs to be tamed, and the way to tame it is through the practice of shamatha.

Does shamatha work? Yes. But does it work in all situations? Does it work in a place like New York City, where there’s a lot of stimulation and noise? Does it work when you’ve just heard you have cancer? That depends on how stable you are in the practice of shamatha, and how much you take the practice as your own true inner and ultimate resource. Without taking shamatha as a daily practice and resource, we won’t develop any stability, and therefore it might not work in situations involving a lot of stress and strong emotion. In such times, our stability and our depth of faith in the practice are crucial.

If we look at practice not as our ultimate inner resource but as a secondary method—as if we can pull it out of our bag of tricks when our first option fails—then I don’t think it will work. The necessary connection, trust, and single-pointed reliance are not present. Our mind will keep looking outward to find ways to soothe itself, such as by popping a pill. Shamatha doesn’t work like popping a pill.
But when it comes from a sincere effort to work with our mind, when we have total faith and reliance on the practice as our inner resource, above all other methods, then shamatha really does work. In general, it will calm our mind and help us when our mind is wild or flighty; and it will work in more difficult situations, where our mind is lost in anxiety and distress.

To practice shamatha, we begin with the seven-point posture of Vairochana. Some of these may be difficult, so just do what you can.

The Seven-Point Posture

1. Sit in full lotus.
2. Place the hands above one another in your lap, with the left hand on top of the right. The thumbs are not touching and there is a small gap between them. (In the Dzogchen practice, the two palms are placed on the knees. You can do it in either way.)
3. The spine should be as straight as possible.
4. Shoulders are pulled back, balanced, and relaxed.
5. Roll the tongue behind your upper gums or on the palate. This has an immediate effect on your mind and thought process.
6. The gaze is about four of five feet in front of you, looking down your nose to the floor.
7. Tuck your chin—not all the way to your collarbone, just down a bit.
Try to manage these seven points of posture as best you can. If you can’t do full lotus, you can sit cross-legged on a cushion. Sitting on a chair is also fine. But perhaps try a cushion to see whether you can sit there for a short time, even five or ten minutes.

There’s a story about a sage who was meditating in this posture in the forest, and some monkeys copied him. Because of the sage’s blessings and the blessings of the posture, they all attained a state of samadhi. When you work precisely with your body, realization can dawn in your mind as an auspicious coincidence.

**The Focal Point**

The second aspect of shamatha practice is the focal point, where your mind returns over and over again. This could be a small statue of Buddha, Manjushri, or Avalokiteshvara, illuminated by a lamp, or on its own. You could also use a flower, such as a peony or a rose, something that delights you. Another option is a round stone, or a dot on paper like a bullseye.

The breath is also a popular focal point because it is always with you and always available. In the beginning, you may realize you’re breathing naturally, but mainly from your upper chest. Try to breathe deeply and naturally down into your belly and through your nostrils, and then place your mind upon the sensation of the breath coming in and going out through your nostrils. In the Dzogchen practice
you breathe through the mouth, but in general shamatha it’s through the nostrils.

In Buddhism, particularly in Vajrayana, there’s a lot of emphasis on breathing because the breath is the horse of the mind. Learning to work well with your breath consistently gives you more and more control of your mind, meaning you are able to place your attention where you want it to be. When you first sit down, it is helpful to count the breath, up to twenty-one times, slowly and calmly. (Breathing in and out counts as one.) If your mind and body are still not settled after twenty-one breaths, you can start again. It may be hard to settle your body and calm your mind if you’ve just had a lot of coffee. This practice comes from a time when the body was not forcefully awakened like that. But you can experiment with what works for you.

**Working with the Mind**

The third aspect is working with the mind itself. This is broken down into “nine ways of resting.”

**The Nine Ways of Resting**

1. **Placement of the Mind  བོད་པ་ Jokpa**
   This is like placing a statue on a table, placing it where it ought to sit. Whether it’s a flower, a dot, or the breath, you are placing your mind upon that object.
2. **Continual Placement**  གྱུན་དུ་འཇོག་པ་ *Gyündu jokpa*

“Continual” here means daily, and it also means returning to the focal point again and again—in other words, maintaining continuity. In order to create any habit, there has to be continuity in order to develop proficiency. The objective is to develop a calm abiding state of mind. You have the physical posture, you have the focal point, you have learned how to place your mind on the focal point, and now you are continually placing it on the object in daily practice.

3. **Repeatedly Bringing Your Attention Back**  ལེནེ་འཇོག་པ་ *Lenté jokpa*

This is similar to the previous stage, but with more of an emphasis on the process of doing it over and over again. It’s not a one-shot deal. When you try to place your mind continually on the focal point, it keeps wandering off. At some point, you become aware that your mind has wandered. Then it is very important not to get caught up in self-aggression, self-disparagement, or other reactions. Just delightfully and simply, bring your mind back to the focal point, again and again and again. It’s like repeatedly patching a hole. The mind is not like a statue that just stays wherever you put it. It moves! So it’s very important to have lenté jokpa in order to accomplish the state of shamatha.
4. **Close Attention**  ཤེས་བུལ་ཞིབ་ Nyewar jokpa  

To your surprise and delight, your mind begins to stay in place longer than you expected. It still wanders, but not as much. This is the beginning of having a relationship with shamatha practice. The body is settled and relaxed, the mind has calmed down and stays on the focal point, and there’s also a certain amount of lightness in the body and mind.

5. **Tamed Attention**  རྡོད་བུལ་ཞིབ་ Dulwar jépa  

This is different from the previous stages. Now you have built up your shamatha, and you have a taste for it. You can contemplate the qualities of shamatha lightheartedly. You can feel the difference: you are physically light, mentally clear, and emotionally open and serene for periods of time. All the buddhas and sages of the past, of all the traditions, must have experienced this. And that’s why they were so attracted to meditation, to being alone in the forest above all else. Like them, you can contemplate how shamatha practice brings great meaning and perspective to your life. You now know the positive aspects of meditation, which increases your inspiration. And you consciously contemplate your experience and how it is similar to that of the masters. Here, it is like developing a passion for the sport of shamatha.
6. Pacification of the Mind  བི་བར་ཐོད་པ་ Shiwar jépa

This means pacifying, especially in regard to obstacles to our attention. We can tend to get bored with the practice, to seek distractions, to not even want to sit up straight. We tend to feed the mind with whatever object it’s craving. All of sudden, while you’re meditating, you think, “It’s a beautiful day! Wouldn’t it be nice if I just walked outside in the sun?” The mind can come up with many ways to entice you to get up from the cushion. “Wouldn’t it be nice if I called someone? I haven’t called my sister for a long time.” The mind is restless and comes up with different forms of craving, or sepa, to distract itself.

When your restless mind craves distractions and engagement with the outside world, remember how often you’ve already done those things in your life. Just yesterday you did that—you engaged in conversations, spent hours on your smartphone or computer, replied to emails, cleaned the house, worked in the garden. When you are intending to practice and are distracted by what may seem like work or other valid activities, you are actually going with the mind’s sepa in the guise of work, etc. Underneath it all, craving is dominating you, if you honestly look. Rather than penetrating that boredom as another state of mind, you avoid it and then become restless, and then the karmic wind
stirs and objects of craving arise in the mind, and before you know it you are off.

We are not talking about when it is time to work or be with your family or do other tasks in life, we are talking about the time set aside to sit and practice formally, to spend time on making progress on your path. We’re talking about justifying yourself, in the name of doing this or that, but in reality wasting a tremendous amount of time. You have to start with being honest with yourself about how much time you waste. This is the chronic illness of the modern lifestyle. And all of the media and the smartphones encourage us to be totally engrossed.

Meanwhile, your time on the cushion becomes less and less and less. If you don’t pull yourself back and learn to remedy this as soon as you become aware of what is pushing you to get off your cushion—or even not get to the cushion—it gets more and more difficult. So you must reflect quietly and honestly to yourself about how much time you waste during this precious human life. Feel and remember the sensation of this wastefulness. Then you will develop revulsion toward your sepa.

Revulsion is known as “the foot of meditation,” the real starting point, as it says in the Kagyu lineage supplication. It counters the restlessness and sepa brewing up inside you; it takes their feet
out from under them, so to speak. And when boredom arises, as it is bound to along with every other state of mind, you can learn to use it as an opportunity to go deeper into your practice by penetrating that state with your awareness.

So shiwar jépa is pacifying the restlessness that entices you to do things without any great meaning. Then you can resolve to sit for the forty-two minutes, or two hours, that you promised yourself. You can meet your intention with your action.

7. Fully Pacifying
Nampar shiwar jépa
When you’re practicing shamatha, certain strong emotions—grudges, deep yearnings, unsettling insecurities, jealousy, or fear—can arise in your mind. Before, when the mind was distracted, it was preoccupied and there was no space for these states of mind to arise. But now, when the mind is becoming like a clear pond, strong thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations can arise. This could be during meditation, or just during the day. You feel strong attacks of klesha activities in your mind which can make you feel hesitant to go sit. You’d almost rather be distracted with these attacks than sit down and confront them face on. It’s almost like self-organized torture. because rather than penetrate the states of mind that are
arising, allowing them to be exposed to the power of the practice, you self-sabotage yourself and give into them, allowing them to rule your life. What could be more unfortunate than that?

Similarly, if you skip your practice because you feel anxious about having something important to do, you’ll be skipping your practice all the time. You may only practice when you have nothing else to do. And then what kind of self-esteem will that build in you as a practitioner? Nampar shiwar jépa means that, no matter what occurs in your mind, you have the firm resolution to pacify, to resolve the disturbance or confusion with your practice. It is within your means to overcome the confusion of your kleshas. And there are many means available to you. For aggression, you can practice loving-kindness, tolerance, or patience. For jealousy, you can practice sympathetic joy; for insecurity, self-confidence. For fear, you can contemplate how all things are impermanent. In the dharma, there are methods to work with, understand, and resolve or pacify every klesha that might arise.

It’s too much to expect to overcome all klesha activity in your life once and for all. But you can certainly work with everything that arises, for the time being, moment by moment. And isn’t that more the point? Imagine, in the first minute of sitting, you have an attack of fear about losing
something. That minute can seem very long, especially when doing shamatha. Then in the second minute you remember that you can apply an antidote. You contemplate impermanence and how everyone goes through losses. That is the nature of things. You realize that you haven’t been specially picked to experience fear. If you do this contemplation for a few minutes, then by the fifth minute, you will have come to understand, and to have pacified your fear considerably. This is how you can accomplish *nampar shiwar jépa*.

There is nothing faster than the thought process. In a few seconds you can have many thoughts. Between the first and the fifth minutes, there are many seconds in which you can apply the antidotes of the shamatha practice. If you have a surge of jealousy in the first minute, you can work with this and transform your jealousy by meditating for four minutes on sympathetic joy.

Basically, *shiwar jépa* and *nampar shiwar jépa* are the same—it’s just a question of degree. In the latter case you have stronger emotions or thoughts that can arise, so you must contemplate the downfalls of taking your thoughts and emotions at face value, believing them to be real, going down that same track, and instead become curious enough about the ability of your own mind to apply the antidotes of shamatha practice.
8. **One-Pointedness**  རེ་ཐོས་ཞུ་ཞེ་པ། Tséchik tu jépa

You’re able to stay on the focal point for a long time. Your body is light, your mind clear. Your emotions are open, present, and serene like a clear lake without wind. Your mind is like a flame in a glass jar, not flickering—just a steady illumination. Your concentration is effortless.

9. **Resting in Equanimity**  ཕོ་བས་དབང་འཇོག་པ། Nyampar jokpa jépa

At this point, there’s no craving, aggression, stupidity, or any other disturbing emotions or kleshas. They are all pacified. If they do arise, they subside, naturally, as soon as they arise. They are not a threat to your calm abiding state of mind. It’s as if the clear, undisturbed lake is expanded further. Here, your mind is very agile. It’s not frozen or ice-like. You could apply your mind to anything and everything, and it stays where you intend it to stay. For example, you can apply your mental power to work with mathematical equations, like Einstein. It takes a focused, agile, calm state to break through those equations. This state of shamatha, once achieved, may be applied wherever you wish. It can penetrate many mysteries with its precision and clarity and focus.

Those are the nine ways of resting in shamatha practice.
Then there are five faults or obstacles to accomplishing shamatha.

The Five Obstacles

1. **Laziness** བེལོ Lélo

   There are three kinds:

   a. The laziness of oversleeping, being generally sluggish and unmotivated.

   b. The laziness of avoiding what’s important by taking pleasure in doing small things. For example, you make your coffee, check email, feed the dog, make the bed, do laundry, take a shower, read the news, check messages again. Then, when you’re ready to get to the cushion, almost all your time has been used up. All those tasks contain a little bit of pleasure, but there may also be a little pressure that makes people avoid the important things. So you procrastinate. In our modern age this second kind of laziness has become a very big problem.

   c. The laziness of self-disparagement. “I can’t do this; I’m not good enough; this is beyond me. I can’t get it.” So you don’t even want to try, and with self-disparagement you remain unmotivated. But this is really just another form of laziness if you look more closely.
2. **Forgetfulness**  འཇོག་པ། *Jépa*

Being forgetful of the instructions. Or just spacing out on the cushion, not really knowing what to do. For example, you forget to recall the nine ways of resting, the five faults, and the eight antidotes. You should memorize these. How can you cure a problem if you don’t remember there is a solution?

3. **Wild Mind and Dull Mind**  ཆིང་འོད་(Ching Gö) *Göpa & Chingwa*

*Göpa* is when your mind is agitated, like a wild horse. This happens when you have an attack of jealousy, aggression, deep insecurity, fear, or nervousness, or when you’re very excited. For example, brides and grooms have this before they get married, but meditators can also have this arise when they try to sit.

Then, there are two kinds of *chingwa*, or dull mind. The first happens when you’re falling asleep and withdrawing your sense perceptions. The second is just your mind being dull, as if you have a fog around your head. If you eat a lot of carbs, you’ll have *chingwa*. If you drink a lot of coffee, you’ll have *göpa*.

4. **Non-Application**  ཉོམ་མི་ཐེག་པ། *Du mi jépa*

You’re ill, but you’re not taking the medicine. You are acknowledging and not addressing the faults or obstacles that are arising by applying the antidotes.
5. **Over-Application** བོད་ཇེ་པ་ *Du jépa*

Your mind is in a good place: serene, open, present. You have accomplished the nine ways of resting and your mind is like a clear spring lake. Yet, underneath, you feel you should be *doing* something: you should be contemplating, focusing, trying to remember what needs to be remembered. This is over-striving, over-application—not letting your mind be, just as it is, when it’s in a good place.

Those are the five obstacles or faults of shamatha—or any practice.

These faults have eight antidotes.

**The Eight Antidotes**

The first four work against **Laziness**.

1. **Faith** དད་པ་ *Dépa*

   You must have faith in what you’re doing, otherwise you won’t succeed. You must feel your practice is significant, meaningful, and valuable.

2. **Aspiration** རབ་ཕུན་པ་ *Dünpa*

   For any activity, not just shamatha, you can’t do it well if you have no passion for it. So you must have passion, inspiration, a vision to move forward.

3. **Resourcefulness or Effort** ཀྲུལ་བ་ *Tsölwa*

   Apply effort to overcome any challenges. If you’re oversleeping, go to bed earlier and sleep a bit less.
If you have the self-disparaging type of laziness, rouse self-confidence by studying the Buddha Nature teachings. If you have a tendency to do small things, one after another, and avoid important things, as soon as you realize this, stop at once and get to your cushion. They say you must practice like a crazy man becoming enraged. He doesn’t prepare to become enraged; it happens instantly, like the snap of a finger. So when you have the thought of practicing, just sit down and do it. Trungpa Rinpoche was once asked how to do this. He said, “There’s no how; you just do it!”

4. **Pliancy or Suppleness**  རི་ལྔ་ རོ་་། ‘Shinjang

This basically means getting good at it. With this practice you feel physically lighter as the energy flows in your body, as if you’ve had a good work out or a long hike. And you don’t need so much food—samadhi itself becomes a food for you. Mentally, you feel clear, calm, and agile. Those are the effects of shinjang.

The antidote for **Forgetfulness** is:

5. **Mindfulness** ལུང་པ་ ‘Drenpa

Memorize all the problems, antidotes, and nine ways of resting and keep a close watch on your mind and what it is doing.
The antidote for the **Wild Mind and Dull Mind** is:

6. **Awareness**  རེ་བཞིན་ Shézhiṅ

   You know what göpa and chingwa are, and how they’ve disturbed you; and you know what antidotes to apply.

   When your mind is wild, it is very helpful to contemplate impermanence and death. This settles the mind naturally, calming the wind and bringing you down to earth. If you have a lot of windows, it can help to put down the shades. You could wear a hat, or gaze down.

   With dull mind, it’s the opposite. You could open up the shades, take off your hat, raise your gaze a little bit. It’s also very helpful to cultivate mögü, or inspiration. You could contemplate the life stories of past masters, or the kindness of your own teacher and your connection.

The antidote for **Non-Application** is:

7. **Application**  ས་ཐེ་པ་ Du jépa

   Applying the antidotes, precisely and specifically.

The antidote for **Over-Application** is:

8. **Non-Application**  ས་མི་ཐེ་པ་ Du mi jépa

   This means not disturbing one’s mind by overexertion, but very simply leaving it as it is. Overexertion often comes from insecurity: when you’re meditating, you feel like you should be doing
something. By leaving your mind as it is, you can often recognize the nature. Most of the Mahamudra and Dzogchen teachings are like this. You actually penetrate the nature by not doing.

This is the practice of shamatha. It may seem like a lot of information, but if you study these lists they will soon become familiar.