Module One

Developing Attention and Stability of Mind

Although our presentation of compassion meditation begins with training in concentrative meditation (shamatha), it is important to recognize that the Tibetan Buddhist lam rim (graded stages of the path to enlightenment) literature traditionally locates shamatha in the techniques for practitioners of advanced capacity—highlighting the fact that stabilizing the attention is no easy or quick process. The literature also emphasizes that every practice, from the very beginning, must be accompanied by focused meditation to stabilize and incorporate the understanding that results from analysis, in order to deeply infuse that understanding with one's personal experience. Thus, basic attentional stability is the key to any meditation. Without any basic training in concentrative/mindfulness techniques, it would be difficult for the participant to gain personal, undistorted awareness of inner thoughts, feelings, aspirations and emotions. Without these insights, the participant risks remaining a victim of unconscious impulses and patterns, without the ability to transform these problematic emotional/mental states. Thus these techniques for developing and refining attentional stability form the foundation for all subsequent meditation components in this protocol.

One of the most effective and appropriate ways to develop attentional stability and clarity is mindfulness of breathing. In this context, we use the word “mindfulness” to denote the concept of sustaining awareness of an object or concept, in this case the breath, without forgetfulness or distraction. Training in mindfulness techniques enhances and refines attention.

This first step of meditation training is like focusing a microscope, a tool that can then be directed to examine an object under investigation, to make it clearer and to bring it into focus. The ordinary mind lacks focus; when the mind is too distracted it lacks clarity as well.

The classic analogy used to illustrate this process is training a wild elephant. Three essential tools are required to discipline a wild elephant: a firm pillar, a strong rope, and an attentive trainer. The trainer ties the elephant to a pillar and watches it carefully, correcting the elephant if it tries to make any movement away from the post.

To train the mind to be more attentive and reduce the tendency for distractions, a meditator also requires three tools: a firm object of focus to anchor the unruly elephant mind; a strong rope of mindfulness to tie the elephant mind to the object of focus; and introspective vigilance, or alertness, to monitor and correct when necessary any attempt of the elephant mind to wander.
away from the object of focus. Like a wild elephant trying to get away from the pillar, the mind continually tries at first to move away from the object of focus. But with alertness one gently brings the mind back, again and again, to the pillar of focus – in this case, the breath – and with mindfulness keeps it present with the breath.

At the beginning of each meditation the participant adjusts his or her posture in order to facilitate stillness and focus and then takes three deep, deliberate breaths in order to initiate a relaxed state. With this relaxed body and mind, the participant begins the art of refining attention by focusing on the breath, simply sustaining awareness of the incoming and outgoing breath. With introspective vigilance, the participant observes any worries, anticipations, reactions or hopes that distract attention from the breath. Each time this happens the participant is instructed to notice the distraction, to let go of it without trying to repress or reject the thought or emotion, and then to gently bring the attention back again to the breath, for as long as possible, without further distraction.

One phenomenon often noticed by new meditators is that the mind appears to become more distracted and agitated, rather than less so. This observation is deceptive. It is not that thoughts are more numerous or distractions more frequent, but rather that, through the process of observing mental activity, one becomes aware, for the first time, of the constant, continuous chatter just below the threshold of awareness. Enhanced attention makes it possible to become aware of mental activities that previously went unnoticed.

The key attitude to maintain during this meditation is non-judgmental awareness, like that of an innocent child observing a painting for the first time, simply aware in the present moment, without imposing pre-conceptions or value judgments. The idea is to suspend judgment, not become involved in the thought, and return to the breath. Through this process, sustaining concentration from one moment to the next, the meditator develops attentional stability and clarity.