

Entering the Path
An Online Course on the Hinayana Teachings of Chögyam Trungpa
Taught by Judith L. Lief

Meditation Instruction

JUDY: Well, welcome once again. Can you hear me in the back? Yeah. So I wanted to review the meditation practice as we're going to be practicing today and tomorrow. I know that some people here have been practicing for years and years and know a lot more about it than I do, and some people may be more new to the practice, but from my perspective, we're kind of all in it together. Since this is a program that's focused on studying the teachings in *The Profound Treasury, Volume One*, I thought it would be interesting to say a little bit about history.

The teachings in the three volumes are based on what Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the Vidyadhara, taught in the Vajradhatu Seminary programs that went on for thirteen years, starting in 1973 and going through 1986. The very first talk of the very first seminary in 1973 was his presentation on meditation technique, and it was an interesting point, I think, for a number of reasons. One is, giving group meditation instruction, I think, was not a common thing at the time, and also, prior to that time, his students had been meditating and had been focusing on the central role of mindfulness and awareness practice, but as far as I know, it was not taught in a group way.

So, for instance, when I first started studying, I went to a program at Karmê Chöling, which was then called "Tail of the Tiger," and in the course of a three-day program, there was an all-day sitting, but there was no instruction. It was just like, "Okay, tomorrow we have an all-day sitting. Okay." That was my very first program. There was a little tent with cushions made from things people took off couches, like sections of couch cushions; some cushions were stuffed with straw, and it was on this ground—it was kind of all wavy and lumpy. As in group meditation practice even today, there were alternating sitting and walking meditation, but there were no instructors. I remember thinking, "Well, those other people look like they know what they're doing, and I'll just try to copy them." All you had to do was, when the bell rang, you could figure out people were walking; another bell rang and you were supposed to sit down again. That was pretty much it, and then that went all day long.

It's really interesting that—being in that space where something was going on but I didn't know exactly what—for some reason I decided to do it anyway. It was an interesting turning point in my life in that somehow, in my muddledness, I felt that I had re-met old ancestors. I felt that I had been reconnected with something that I should have been told about before. I couldn't understand why

everybody didn't know about this or didn't tell me about it. It was a primordial feeling of reconnecting with who I was at a very deep level, not that I could name it or had any label for it. And I thought, "That's very odd." It didn't make any sense, just sitting and doing nothing, having this feeling of such a raw heart opening in an unusual way. In any case, that was how I first got started, and I don't know about you all, but often I think when we first sit down to meditate, it has a kind of a shock, in a way: sometimes a shock of discomfort or exposure or confusion or thinking something is supposed to be happening and it isn't, or something is happening that we don't want happening. In any case, it's an interesting and counterintuitive kind of discipline in our culture, where we want to do things and make things happen and see results that we can hold on to, as a credential or some such thing.

So, in the 1973 seminary when Rinpoche, the Vidyadhara, started presenting on meditation, and saying, "Well, if we're going to progress along the path and if we're going to really train ourselves to be true dharmic people, in the group practice it's good to have a little bit more form," some of the old-timers (they thought they were old-timers, being arrogant—they had been studying for two years or something) said, "Well, we don't want to have to follow a discipline like that. We just want to sit formlessly and, you know, do nothing." He said, "Well, that may be okay in private or individual practice, but in group practice, let's go over the basics and let's do *shamatha* and *vipashyana* properly." So that's when he introduced forms that pretty much carried throughout his teaching period, which was seventeen years in North America.

Another thing about sitting practice is . . . for instance, in the first volume of these books, I'd say discussion of sitting and the subtleties and depth and varieties of ways of approaching sitting probably take up at least a third of the book, if not more . . . maybe half. It's a lot of the book, straight on the sitting, which indicates that it was really important and it was really what takes a more surface level or merely clever intellectual understanding into more embodied understanding that actually has a transformative effect and can project and help transform our world and the people that we encounter around us.

Beginning Properly

So I'd like to just go over this technique. You may practice many techniques in your life, and that's great there's a variety, but in the course of the retreat, it would be great if we could try to figure out and work with this technique and see what comes of it. Right? So why don't you stand up and kind of shake, and we'll begin fresh. [*Students stand*]

As you stay standing for a little bit . . . When does a meditation practice start when you come into the room? It starts as soon as you bow and enter the shrine room. That bowing—the ritual of bowing when you enter into a shrine room or meditation hall—is a signal to click in to a more meditative state or meditative mentality. There’s a sense of beginning properly. The Vidyadhara always talked about the importance of beginning properly, doing what you’ve begun properly, and ending properly, and not mindlessly just running in and sitting down on your cushion; but coming in, you’re already sitting in your mind. In fact, he talked about the attitude being that it’s as though you sewed a cushion on your pants or your dress that’s carried around with you at all times, which is a great image: having a *gomden* stitched on your butt. [*Laughter; student makes remark*] Good plan. So that means that when you come in, you don’t just plop down; you sit down mindfully. Why don’t you do that right now. [*Students sit down*]

Posture

I’d like to review sitting practice in terms of the three elements of posture and breath and mind/heart, and the starting point really is posture. It’s interesting to me that *shamatha* tends to be translated as “mindfulness.” Sometimes it’s translated as “peaceful abiding,” but I think the notion of mindfulness—the word *mindfulness*—implies that it’s simply a mental exercise, like going to a gym, only with your mind. But I think it’s important to realize that it’s whole bodied. It’s embodied practice—it’s not just a mental exercise. It involves the heart and the physicality, as well as the mentality and those qualities. It involves all the sense perceptions. So the starting point is just to notice the quality of being embodied: notice how grounded or not grounded you feel, notice how fidgety or stable you feel, just notice the boundaries of your body, just perception: How do you even know you’re in a body? What is that all about? And notice if you’re just a floating head with a body hanging underneath it, or are you a stable support that’s kind of connected together?

The image of being in a good posture is being like a mountain, very stable and still and weighty—has weight—and you can tell the difference. Sometimes there’s a feeling when you’re sitting that the Vidyadhara used to refer to as “perching”: it’s as though you’re about to take off, like you’re a bird on a twig about to take flight, which indicates a sense of discomfort with really settling and being still. Just notice that quality, and as much as possible, imagine that you’re solid, like a mountain: you’re stable, you’re still. There’s a sense of uprightness—uprightness of posture—and always within meditation technique, there’s what’s called a “middle way” of not too tight and not too loose. With a good posture, there’s a sense of dignity and a sense of strength, which is from your backbone and your

skeletal structure, but there's also a quality of softness and vulnerability in your squishy front parts (at least, if you're me, squishy front parts). So there's a physical embodiment of the joining of vulnerability and strength: they're not in battle, but they are joined. There's also . . . The Vidyadhara used to talk a lot about what he called "head and shoulders" and the sense of a certain positive pride in having a human form and having a life on this earth for a while: not in a sense of arrogance, like humans are better than other beings, but in the sense of appreciation of this life that you have, this body you have, however it is: whether it's healthy or sick or strong or weak or beautiful or ugly, it's fine.

So the very first thing when you sit down is to come back into your body and to settle. I was talking with Barry earlier about when you come into a retreat like this from very busy lives and then the business of getting here: I think it's sort of like those cartoons of the Road Runner, when he comes racing and he tries to stop and he goes [*shaking sound and motion*]. It's a little bit like that, this transition period: we're like the road runners who try to stop for a little bit, hopefully right before we go over the cliff. So settling, weight, uprightness yet relaxed—that's the physical quality.

Then there are different options for posture. One option, in terms of the hands: they can rest on your thighs gently, and that's called the "royal posture," or sometimes it's called the "double earth-witnessing mudra." That's a very traditional way of placing the hands. The other option is called the "meditation mudra," or the "cosmic mudra," in which you rest one hand on the other and have your thumbs make an oval. Usually it's said the thumbs should be slightly apart and then just resting your hands. You have to hold them up, but there should be a sense of being able to rest your shoulders, relax your shoulders. Sometimes I find it helpful when I'm sitting down, if I feel very tight in one part of the body or other, sometimes I extra tighten them, like with shoulders, and then let them fall, and that sometimes helps. If you get stiff during practice, you can do that as well.

Within that general guideline of posture of being steady and still as much as possible, again there's a middle way: you really don't want to hurt yourself; you want to be kind to yourself. The ground of the practice is really kindness, and sometimes basic sitting practice is referred to as "making friends with yourself": developing kindness—greater kindness—to yourself. As Westerners who aren't used to sitting cross-legged all that much, for most of us, one way of being kind is paying attention to if you have a pain in your body, which you may have. I find that sometimes you have a pain and immediately you want to do something about it, but if you don't, then the pain goes somewhere else in your body, or it disappears, if you stick with it for a little while. But if you get into a kind of Marine mentality of dealing with any kind of pain that comes up no matter what, that can just be a total distraction and you're just dealing with that, rather than doing your practice. So, at some point, it makes sense to move, or it may

make sense for you (especially these long days of practice) to alternate between on a chair and on a cushion or to adjust your posture from time to time. Don't be too rigid, but don't be too indulgent. Every little discomfort doesn't necessarily mean any big drama: it's just a little thought usually.

The other component of the posture is the gaze—the eyes—and the general guideline is for the eyes to be what's called a “diffuse gaze,” or a “relaxed gaze”: slightly down, tilted downward. In the old texts, it says something about an “ox-yoke distance,” or something like that, but most of us don't have ox yokes, so it could be more like the distance of three or four laptops lined up, [*laughter*] or something like that. An interesting thing about the gaze is . . . You say, “Well why? Some people prefer eyes closed and some people prefer eyes open.” But from my perspective, the eyes open and relaxed makes a little bit more sense: the hearing and the smelling and the physical sensations . . . it's not that you're going into a sensory deprivation tank and trying to shut them all off; it's more like letting the senses just flow through, as you're just hollow and those senses come and go and they don't capture you and you don't battle them; you just let them be. Sometimes it's helpful in terms of the gaze to have your eyes a little bit half-mast: not all the way open, not closed. That can help. If you find yourself staring, that's going to cause a lot of strain on your eyes and give you a headache. If you start staring at one of these bizarre patterns, then you can remind yourself: you might close your eyes and reopen them and just try to relax. There's a real interesting teaching already there in terms of how we deal with the sense perceptions in a way that's dispassionate as opposed to grasping—the subtle areas and levels of grasping. So that's posture. If you can settle into that, that's very good.

Another thing about posture is . . . Sometimes, for some of us, while we're sitting, after a while we get distracted—it does happen! When that happens, and when distraction becomes really kind of a challenging level of distraction—we find ourselves pulled away—one thing that's very, very helpful in terms of regrouping is to come right back to posture, right back to embodiment. It's a really great thing to practice over and over again because you can apply it in the midst of life in many situations too, which is so, so helpful because when we spin out, when we're anxious, when we freak out, we lose the body and we go into high-speed conceptual thinking. And that doesn't really work very well. It gets kind of not very useful. So when we see ourselves doing that, in sitting or in life, it's very helpful to be able to just come back: “Wait a minute: come back, be in the body.” The grounding and the support of the Mother Earth is so healing and so empowering—it is great.

Breathing

The central aspect of the meditation technique is working with the breathing—the breathing. It's great because it's something we all have as long as we're alive, so we don't need special equipment, and it's a very powerful thing to work with because we really care about our breath. It means we're alive, and if our breath is threatened, we'll do anything to get it back. The breath is really a conveyor of life force in so many ways, and that's why it's so revered in many traditions as something not to take for granted—something to appreciate. Also the cycle of the breath is so interesting because in the stillness of the body being like the mountain, total stillness, there's rhythm and there's movement all the time. Another thing about the breath is that it's a message of complete interdependence with all that is: continually, what's inside of us is going out and what's outside is coming in. There's a continual exchange happening all the time with our environment. We don't exist without our environment, without air, and we don't exist without one another; we don't exist without all beings, and we don't exist without what's happened in the past, happening now, and might happen in the future. So the breath is simple, intimate, and fraught with meaning.

The other thing about the breath that is so powerful is that in order to continue—in order to maintain ourselves—we have to continually let go. For any fresh breath to arise, an old breath has to die. So there's a cycle of life and death that's symbolized by every single breath. There's a birth, a holding, and a letting go, and that attitude of fresh arising—interest in what arises and letting it go—is a very powerful teaching. In the technique that the Vidyadhara emphasized, he said, “Well, settle down, notice your breathing, breathe very naturally, don't try to breathe some special way.” It's not like doing *pranayama*—that's a different practice. And your breath will change: sometimes it will be very shallow and quick; sometimes it will be slower and deeper. I'm sure we have opinions about what our breath is supposed to be—forget about those opinions. It doesn't matter. There's no good way to breathe or bad way to breathe, according to this.

As you breathe, there's an emphasis on the out-breath. There's breath going out and dissolving into space. The breath goes out, diffuses, and dissolves into space, and that happens, of course, over and over again, hopefully. The interesting thing about the emphasis on the out-breath is—the way it's been taught often—that it gives you a little break. You bring your attention to the out-breath, it dissolves, and then nothing happens. You bring your mind to the out-breath, and it dissolves. You don't worry about the other part. There's almost like a gentle staccato of attention. You just let yourself go, let yourself go on the breath. That has many different levels of practice, but the simplest is just noticing the breath going out, and there's a little gap at the turning point, and then your body naturally breathes in—

just does it without any effort needing to be applied. You just touch your breath, touch your breath, and let it go. Touch your breath and let it go.

One image for that that I found helpful is flying a kite. You're flying a kite, and you have a string, and the kite's up in the sky, you hope, and you just keep it up there by a gentle tug of the string. Likewise, you keep your attention on the breath with a gentle tug. There's no value in really getting totally tight and struggling; it's a very gentle touch—a very gentle touch, having an interest and a gentle touch. That is the core activity, if you could call it that, of the basic sitting practice.

Mind and Emotions

The third component is the mind and emotions, and that's kind of an interesting area of the practice, and that has a couple aspects. One is that it's pretty common to be distracted quite a lot. The practice there—when you have thoughts, when you have fantasies, when you have memories, when you have plans, when you have grand schemes . . . All sorts of things arise in your mind as thoughts or images, and all sorts of feelings arise: it may feel sad, or it may feel lusty, or it may feel anxious. Usually when we're trying to deal with mental contents and thoughts, we try to figure them out and we try to deal with them and utilize them in that way. But in the practice of meditation, we're paying attention to the *process* of thoughts arising and dissolving and not so much focusing on the *content* and what we're going to do about it or analyzing what's going on and why, et cetera. We simply notice the thinking or the activity of the mind and return to the breath. We simply notice and return to the breath. The interesting thing there is, we're instructed to not be that judgmental about what arises. What arises may be something like "Wow, how brilliant I am," or we may think, "Oh my God, I'm such a superficial person. This same stupid thought comes up over and over and over again. What's wrong with me? I'll never get anywhere." But that's just another thought. So there's a sense of: Can you be kind to your thinking process? Can you just notice it and not try to blow it off? Not trying to fix it and not trying to fix yourself, but just coming back to the breath, coming back to the breath? "Oh, that's interesting." Sometimes that return—that returning—could happen a hundred times in a single sitting session, just the gentle "Tap, tap: come back to breath, come back to the breath."

Sometimes, if the thinking is more difficult to deal with, you can use the technique of labeling, which is labeling thoughts "thinking." Again, it helps shift one's relationship with thoughts and be less under the control of whatever comes into our mind. It's kind of freeing ourselves from the dominance of impulse and random thinking. It's a little glimpse of freedom or a level, you might say, below thoughts or

a level of perception that doesn't rely on that kind of conceptuality but is a more direct kind of perception.

That's pretty much the basic, simple technique, and I think the best way to practice, myself, is surrendering to the technique and trusting the technique and not thinking too much about it: just doing it and seeing what happens. Of course that takes a certain . . . you could call it "faith"—the *f* word, *faith*—or you could call it "trust," or you could call it "inquisitiveness" or "curiosity" or whatnot. For some reason, this kind of technique has been practiced for thousands of years, and even though whenever I try to actually think about it and try to figure it out, it makes no sense, but when I actually do it, it makes a lot of sense. So that's interesting altogether.

I'm trying to think if I forgot anything. I think that's good for starting. Again, be kind to yourself, work with your body, and just come back. Just come back, just come back, just come back. We'll talk a lot more about it as we go along. Any questions? I think you've all done some sitting already. Yeah.