

2017_09_03_1_Shamatha_LMC.mp4

abilities to gain from practicing shamatha, reasons for reciting and meanings of refuge & bodhicitta text, gaining stability with many short sessions

[00:05:13] So our topic this morning and presumably this afternoon, is the practice what we call shamatha or calm abiding. ... We use the term 'calm abiding' in order to fool ourselves. Since anyone who has sat in that meditation knows that... it's very difficult to find the calm. ... And even if we find the calm, that's not actually the calm abiding. So this morning and afternoon we will explore, hopefully, *primarily*, experientially... what the practice of shamatha or calm abiding really is. And it's of great importance because there is not a single other meditation practice... in all of the many teachings and practices of Buddhism, not a single one of them... can be accomplished or even just fruitfully engaged in... without the abilities that we get from learning to practice calm abiding. ... So in one grand sense, there's no practice that is more important. And at the same time, no practice which is more easy to understand.

[00:08:12] Before we can begin also, we need to recite the Refuge & Bodhicitta Prayer together. But before we do that... we need to first remind ourselves... why it is that we need to recite that liturgy. Because, of course, reciting the liturgy as... actually, a kind of pro forma activity, it doesn't in and of itself... necessarily, reach us. So again, first thing we need to do is remind ourselves why we're here. ... We could give a different explanation every hour for the next year... and not repeat anything. So we'll just start with one this morning.

[00:09:47] The issue in our meditation practice is that we come to it... relying upon the very thing, maybe the very things, that we have come to overcome. In other words, we come to sit down and practice in... each of the meditation systems and in the case of calm abiding, at the very least, just the idea, the aspiration... that we might be able to sit quietly. Not be worried or anxious. Put aside all our current difficulties and just abandon them 100 percent. And take a break. Just that much often feels like it *should* be possible... just to do that. But anyone who's done it for a long time knows it's just not quite so easy. So the first thing we understand in the recitation... is the idea of a refuge.

[00:11:29] Refuge is a bit of a loaded word. We have *refugees* in this world. Back in the 70s, many of the Tibetan lamas... began to use, instead of refuge, they began to refer to all of the people who... were going for a refuge as refugees. And for a while, that seemed just like one of those silly things that happens between cultures... when the language is not understood. But as time went on, it actually became... more interesting to use that understanding. It forced us to ask the question... refugee from what?

[00:12:50] So the 'from what?' will be this morning's primary topic. ... In a nutshell, we are taking refuge from our own confusion. What we call the kleshas. Kind of a technical term referring to all of our attachments, all of our aversions, all of our indifference, our opinions about ourselves and others. All of the things that we normally rely upon... as if they would bring us happiness. ... What's fascinating is that we can rely upon all of those things for a very long time and never have even the slightest shred of peace of mind or happiness from relying upon them. Because we say... they are the wrong things to rely upon. If you're going to go for refuge, you need to rely upon the things... that will undermine the causes of suffering. All of our mental and physical angst. We need to figure out a way to put aside all the things that trouble us. Especially those things that trouble us meaninglessly.

[00:15:18] So, we can peel back the layers of the onion by starting first with just the Refuge & Bodhicitta Prayer. And let's take a look at... the words and then we'll recite it together. We go to Refuge & Bodhicitta Prayer and down one line in italics, it says, 'Turning the mind towards Enlightenment for the sake of all beings.' ... Our first hint is that it's for the sake of *all* beings. Not for myself. Though I'm one of those beings, so we don't *exclude* ourselves. We have to *include* ourselves. But, primarily we're interested in *all* sentient beings. So of course, that also includes all the people we don't like. ... They're special. ... People we do like, the people we've never met, the people we never will meet in this life... the people who represent the things that we don't like. ... All the racism, sexism, the attachments and the aversions of each other... come together and give rise to those kleshas, those emotional conflicts. Which we love so much as an antidote to suffering. ... But they're not. ... So turning the mind towards enlightenment for the sake of all beings... that's a critical aspiration.

[00:17:22] And then it says, 'Until the summit of enlightenment is reached I and all beings go for refuge to the sources of true refuge.' It says the sources of true refuge because... when we look at our own experience of refuge... if we look closely, we can see that... it's common when we turn our minds to refuge... and give rise to the aspiration to benefit all beings, that we often end up actually moving in the wrong direction. A direction which brings us more harm, not less. The sources of true refuge then, traditionally in Buddhist practice, the sources of true refuge are the Buddha. When we mention the Buddha, we don't mean just the historical figure, but the actual... realization, the actual enlightenment, the state of mind. ... So we say I and all beings go for refuge to the sources of true refuge. So refuge in our new cars, our new friends, our new house, our new center, whatever it is, these refuges we call false refuges. They do not... deliver... on the promise that we think they have made to us.

[00:19:24] So then the paragraph that follows, 'I will now practice the absorption of calm abiding in order to release all beings from their particular suffering and establish them in lasting peace and happiness.' ... 'I will now practice the *absorption* of calm abiding.' Which is to say I will become proficient at the practice of letting go of my hopes and fears. ... And resting in a mind which is settled and stable. ... But anyone who's cared to look will realize that... this is almost hopeless. ...

[00:20:47] 'Establish them and lasting peace and happiness.' Mostly when we sit down to meditate, it's *not* quiet. It's not stable, peaceful, filled with loving kindness and compassion. It's filled with all of the attachments to our emotional states... our disappointments... a *few* of those things that we're happy about, just to keep us off track. One of the best descriptions of calm abiding that I've heard is developing the skill to sit down and still the body. Which is actually not so difficult, to still the body. And then in the hurricane... the tornado of... emotional states, ideas, friends and enemies, plans for the future, broken plans in the past and on and on... to just sit quietly and see what happens. With no effort to change it... in any way at all. And if you can do that, then you have a *real* practice of shamatha. Not complaining about all the experiences that arise while we're practicing calm abiding. Those experiences, we have to take as 'the gift.'

[00:22:48] So for a moment, I think enough on the introduction. Then we can recite the refuge and bodhicitta prayer, and we'll cover the bodhicitta prayer in a bit. For now Refuge & Bodhicitta Prayer, we'll recite together three times.

sangha [00:23:16] *reciting Refuge & Bodhicitta Prayers.*

[00:25:17] When we say, 'Until the summit of enlightenment is reached' it's important to remind ourselves when we say that... to remind ourselves that we *already*... contain the essence of enlightenment... in the mind of each being. Everyone sitting here and everyone beyond sitting here. ... In order to make that as apparent as possible... you imagine.... each person in front of themselves... you imagine... a vast cloud of beings. Human beings, animals... all living things. Though it's perfectly okay if you find it most helpful to visualize *human* beings. As long as we occasionally remind ourselves that we are not limiting in this practice... *who* we are practicing for. It is *all* sentient beings.

[00:27:27] So we imagine a vast cloud. Kind of like the... beautiful pictures that we sometimes see of galaxies and... clouds of galaxies. And within those things... immeasurable *other* things. So in this case, we can say... while I live in this world... of sentient beings... there is not a single one who does not contain the full essence of the awakened mind. Not *just* the confused mind, but also the awakened mind. ... I also contain the essence of that awakened mind. Because I contain the essence of the awakened mind, we must say to ourselves, therefore... it is possible for me to recognize that awakened mind. If it was *only* in the Buddha, that would be a different issue. Maybe it would be hard to *find* the Buddha on any given day. But the awakened mind, in essence, is complete in every sentient being. Therefore, the possibility of complete awakening is always present. ...

[00:29:48] We imagine, when we go for a refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha... 'until the summit of enlightenment is reached' and so on... we imagine that *all* of these beings... because of our connection with each and every one of them, developed and nurtured over time without beginning, because of those connections, those enduring connections, pleasant and unpleasant... because of those connections... I imagine that my aspiration becomes their aspiration. I imagine that my wish for their benefit becomes their wish for their benefit and their wish for the benefit of all beings. And therefore, as we recite that prayer, we come to have the sense... of mutual connection. Allowing ourselves to feel delighted in that way that we often do feel delighted when we are with a group of close friends, associates and so on. Imagine that... your having that experience with all sentient beings.

[00:32:03] We'll recite the Refuge & Bodhicitta Prayer three times again.

sangha [00:32:21] *reciting Refuge & Bodhicitta Prayers*

[00:34:15] In order to become... really skilled... in the practice of calm abiding... many great teachers have said, we gain the skill of stable mind and stable calm abiding by engaging in many, many, many sessions. *Short* sessions. Short sections of a few seconds to a few minutes and most. ... The practice is essentially... about allowing the mind to settle naturally. ... The truth is that... our minds do not necessarily settle naturally. The conditions that we live in... in this culture, and most others, are actually a support for distraction, angst. ... Causing us to take refuge in our opinions, our likes and dislikes and even sometimes refuge in hatred itself.

[00:36:46] So the *best* way to gain proficiency... is first to settle the mind by placing our awareness upon some aspect of our overall experience, such as our breathing. ... Now, if we place our awareness on the movement of our breath... that can be helpful because it gives us... something to hang on to and something to let go of. ... It's helpful to have those two things. ...

[00:37:55] I hang on to my breath. Place my awareness on the movement of the breathing, the inhalations and exhalations. But at the same time, I must let go of... an attachment, which is

almost always present, that I will succeed in the practice. I will be successful in the practice... in a way in which / have predetermined. ... But what / have predetermined may very well not be what is the most helpful for becoming proficient at the practice. So again... many short sessions of... a few seconds, 10 seconds. ... And after a while, a few longer sessions of... 20 seconds, half a minute. Until we can place our awareness on our breath or on something like this copper [bowl]. Place your awareness... and the mind just settles there as if we had placed a glass of water on a table. ...

[00:39:55] So I'd like to try that for a little bit, see how you respond to that. ... For starters then, let's use the breath. The breath is in some ways, easier than other things because the breath is moving, right? It's moving. We're breathing in and we're exhaling, back and forth. So the idea first is... rest your awareness on that movement. ... Kind of naturally, with the least amount of intention that you can bring about. Just enough to notice your own breathing.

[00:40:55] *very short meditation*

[00:41:32] If you place your mind on the movement of your breath, you will almost surely be distracted. ... And it is common to relate to that distraction as a hindrance to the meditation. ... Give that up. ... You will not get anywhere sitting and pondering the hindrances. So instead of a hindrance, take the distraction... as an advantage, as an enhancement. Because the single most important thing that most of us have to learn to do is to place the awareness on the breath. So when we're distracted, we have another opportunity. We know *exactly* what we need to do. We bring awareness to the breath. We place it there again and we relax. ...

[00:43:02] And if we're carried away by thoughts about lunch, or yesterday's adventure or meeting or whatever... in the moment that we recognize that we've been moved from resting on the breath... it's the opportunity once again to establish... the mind *resting* on the breath. We're resting the mind on movement. You notice? If it's on the breath, the breath is always moving. ... If we're distracted, we're distracted by movement. So we just then place our awareness on that movement. ... Not to control it. ... Just to see it.

[00:44:10] *very short meditation*

[00:44:28] As you watch the breath, come and go... don't worry about all the other things that come in. The object is to... just see the experiences as they unfold... while your body is still and your mind is stable. Stable, because you're not trying to control the experiences as they arise, but rather stable because *you* are still while the breath is moving. ...

[00:45:15] Let's take a few attempts here at very short sessions. ... If we have a session, which is... 10 seconds long... you are more likely to be successful... than a session which is 10 minutes long. So if our objective is to see the unfolding of our experience... we don't care how big of a slice of that experience we take. Our objective is to just see it. So let's take a few of these short sessions. I'll ring the bell. ... You become still. I'll ring the bell again, like this. [dull knock] and that's the end of that session. Then just don't meditate. [laughs] Don't take that as a new session. It's like, just stop. Just relax. And if thoughts come, it's okay. And if you indulge in them, it's okay.

[00:46:56] And then we'll do another session. Then it's *not* okay to do that. [laughter] Then you have to rest the awareness on that movement of the breath. You just like develop this skill of like sitting down, getting up, sitting down, getting up. If you can do that consistently for 10 seconds

with a 10 or 20 second break and another 10 seconds, then you have linked into what you need and expanding that is not difficult. ... First one. [sound of bell].

[00:47:37] *very short meditation*

[00:48:05] Sometimes when you are in the 'let go of the meditation phase', you can move your body a little bit and it becomes a support for letting go. Letting go is as important as staying with the meditation. If you can't let go, you will not be able to stay with the meditation either. ... Another one.

[00:48:35] *very short meditation with a number of 'let go's'*

[00:51:21] Now, see if you can do this on your own. A short meditation and then letting go of it. ... And after a bit... another meditation... and then letting go of it. ... This is like you're in a large building... that has many windows. And you're walking down the hall, and every time you come to a window, you look out. ... And you acknowledge... the view and what is there. And then you walk on. So in the same way... the mind presents itself continuously in new ways. Never the same experience twice. Ever! ...

[00:52:33] So you place your awareness... on the movement of your breath again. And of course, not only your breath is moving, but experiences are arising. Like, for example, this is a really dumb practice. ... Or, this is a great practice! Whatever occurs, whatever speech in your mind occurs, whatever experience arises, you just bring your awareness to it. Place it there for a short time. And then let go, relax. And then place your awareness again. ... Back and forth. ... On your own.

[00:53:25] *period of meditation*

[00:55:37] So now we're going to take a break. And on the break... it will be good if you can continue this... as you move around. ... Let's remain silent for this break period, which will be about 10 minutes. And as you move around, see if you can engage in this. Short sessions. Letting go. Short session. Letting go. They don't need to be the same size. Work with it. See if you can discover something there. ... Something that doesn't need an explanation. But is nonetheless inherently *interesting* from its own side. ... We'll ring the bell when the break is over.

...

sangha [00:57:10] *dedicating the merit*