

Crucial Points in the Practice of Śamatha:
A Brief Guide to Mental Health and Well-being
November 22, 2023
B. Alan Wallace

Five object-ascertaining mental processes (Tib. རྒྱལ་ངེས་ལྔ་, *yul nges lnga*)

1. Aspiration (Skt. *chanda*; Tib. འདུན་པ་, Wyl. 'dun pa)
2. Admiration (Skt. *adhimokṣa*; Tib. མས་པ་, Wyl. mos pa)
3. Mindfulness (Skt. *smṛti*; Tib. དྲན་པ་, Wyl. dran pa)
4. Concentration (Skt. *samādhi*; Tib. ཉིང་ངེ་འཛིན་, Wyl. ting nge 'dzin)
5. Intelligence (Skt. *prajñā*; Tib. ཤེས་རབ་, Wyl. shes rab)

The story of Cūḍapanthaka, a Buddhist monk cited in the 2nd century C.E. in Nāgārjuna's [Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra chapter 39](#)

Mahāpanthaka and Cūḍapanthaka were born from the union of a wealthy young girl in Rājagṛha and a slave. They were born at the side of a great highway which is why they were named Great Path and Lesser Path respectively. Raised by their grandparents, they embraced the Buddhist faith. Mahāpanthaka was the first to become a monastic and, shortly thereafter, welcomed his brother into the Order. Entrusted with his religious instruction, he gave him a very simple stanza to learn by heart: “*Pāpaṃ na kuryān manasā na vācā*, etc.” (“One should not commit evil with the mind or with speech”), but Cūḍapanthaka was so dim-witted (*duṣprajñā*) that at the end of three months, he had not yet succeeded in memorizing it. The *Avadāna* mentions that the day that Cūḍapanthaka became a monk, the famous physician Jīvaka invited the Buddha and the Saṅgha except for Cūḍapanthaka whom he deemed to be too stupid. The Buddha accepted the invitation, but noticing that the Saṅgha was not complete, he refused to partake of the meal.

One day after lunch, all the monks in the sangha walked to a bamboo grove for a nap. It was the height of summer with the sun beaming down like fire. The bhikkhus found its shade pleasant and restful, but Cūḍapanthaka alone was weeping. Buddha happened to be walking by, and kindly consoled him. Cūḍapanthaka said, “World’s Great One! My elder brother and I took the vow at the same time to be monastics. My brother is smart and attained the fruit of stream-entry soon. But I am stupid, I can’t even recite one phrase. My brother is very disappointed. He told me to leave the saṅgha and look after our elderly parents at home and not to waste time. I fear I will not have another opportunity to practice Buddhism in this life. That’s why I am sad. I beg Buddha to show mercy and bless me with your guidance!”

Caressing Cūḍapanthaka’s scalp, Buddha said, “You need not be sad, and neither need you leave the saṅgha. Let me give you one simple phrase to recite, ‘Sweep away the dirt.’ You should keep chanting these four words every day.”

However, being slow and forgetful, Cūḍapanthaka could not remember them even though he tried hard. Feeling depressed he started to cry again. Buddha said to him, “Every morning, after you give your saṅgha’s clothes a good shake, you sweep away the dust and say ‘sweep away.’ In the afternoon, when you clean up the bamboo house and remove rubbish, say ‘the dirt.’ This way, you chant as you work, and you will not forget the phrase, ‘Sweep away the dirt.’”

Cūḍapanthaka followed Buddha’s advice and kept chanting “Sweep away the dirt” whenever he was dusting, cleaning and sweeping the floor. Sympathetic, the other bhikkhus often chanted with him to help him memorize.

Thus, more than a decade had passed. One morning, while the bhikkhus were meditating in the bamboo grove, Cūḍapanthaka was cleaning in their living quarters and kept muttering, “Sweep away the dirt.” Just then, the sun shone through the windows on the dust floating all around. He stared at it and his mind immediately went into samadhi. Exiting the state a while later, he suddenly understood it all and said, “There are two types of dust. The dust on the outside can be seen by the naked eye and is easy to sweep away. The dust on the inside, that is, greed, anger and delusion, however, can only be seen by looking through your own mind. If you can’t remove the inner dust, you will be perpetually caught up in the cycle of rebirth. Compassionate Buddha! I now get it! I have swept away my own inner dust.”

All of a sudden, over the top of Cūḍapanthaka’s head, a radiant glow of light shone straight into the depth of his heart. That is how he attained the fruition of arhatship.

After enlightenment, naturally possessing all the world’s knowledge with an unimpeded eloquence, Cūḍapanthaka became one of Buddha’s sixteen disciples. Although he had *iddhi-vidhā*, knowledge of a supernormal power to instantly move anywhere unrestrained by time and space, he kept using his own mere strength to clean the dust for his fellow bhikkhus. Every day, he kept chanting the phrase Buddha gave him, “Sweep away the dirt.”

- Four kinds of faith: (1) of admiration, (2) of aspiration, (3) of conviction, and (4) irreversible faith.
- How to evaluate our progress in our śamatha practice, whether integrated into an active daily life or while in full-time śamatha retreat

Düdjom Rinpoché, Jigdral Yeshé Dorjé (*Extracting the Vital Essence of Accomplishment: Concise and Clear Advice for Practice in a Mountain Retreat*): “Because of the profundity and intense power of the Great Perfection, there will also be obstacles, just as great profit often comes with great risk. This is because all the negative karma you have accumulated in the past is catalyzed due to the power of these practical instructions, and this manifests externally as the upheavals of demonic interferences and apparitions.... Psychologically, you may inexplicably experience intense misery and sadness that will make you want to weep. You may experience strong mental afflictions, and your sense of admiration and reverence, bodhicitta, and compassion may decline.... You may misinterpret words intended to help you, and, losing the desire to remain in retreat, you may consider abandoning your samayas. You may experience false views regarding your guru, doubts about the Dharma, and so on.... Oh, these are indications of upheavals, so recognize them! Here is the demarcation between profit and loss: If you embrace those obstacles by means of the crucial points of practice, they will turn into siddhis. If you fall under their influence, they will become hindrances. With pure samayas, admiration, reverence, and unfaltering courage, entrust your heart and mind to your guru, and earnestly pray to him with confidence in whatever he may do. By regarding unfavorable circumstances as something desirable, and by striving diligently in your practice, eventually the substantiality of those circumstances will naturally dissolve, and they will instead empower your practice.”

- Yangthang Rinpoche (from his oral commentary to his root text *View, Meditation, and Conduct*, Nov. 4-10, 2015):
 - “There are many methods for developing śamatha, but in this union of Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen the classic approach is to loosely invert your awareness and then loosely rest your awareness on whatever comes up. It’s very important here that whatever comes up, you just let it be and don’t try to improve your mind.”

- “To practice meditation, first of all a suitable environment is what is required. You have to seek a peaceful place where there is no distraction in an environment that is completely suitable for you to do your practice. It is best if you can go into solitary retreat in the mountains. But for the foreigners, their life is so busy that you need both: Dharma and the worldly life. They have to go hand-in-hand, which is quite impossible to do, but still you have to do it.”
- When asked how we can regain confidence in our śamatha practice and not just think we’re doing the practice for the sake of a blessing, but practicing for real transformation, real bodhicitta, for ultimate bodhicitta, he first emphasized the importance of immersing oneself in the Four Revolutions in Outlook, and then replied, “When you rest the mind in its natural state and get signs of success in that, recognize this is not the main practice, but it is the preparation for the main practice. In this way you can gradually, step by step, build confidence, because there is a path from the beginning to end within the context of Dzogchen... Don’t lose heart, but have a lofty aspiration. What is most important is to have faith, and then again and again offer prayers of supplication to your yidam, to your root lama, to the three jewels, with the sense of utterly entrusting yourself to the objects of refuge. And have a long-term view. That is, think, ‘However long it takes, I will do it,’ with no notion of giving up. Have that courage. Maintain a kind of balance of alternating between accumulating merit and then resting in meditative equipoise. Then you will progress. Don’t lose heart.”
- Drubpön Lama Karma (“The Mahāmudrā Tradition of Śamatha,” Nov. 10, 2023): “Once you have achieved śamatha, if you apply yourself to the practice of Vajrayāna, you can achieve enlightenment in twelve years.”
- H.H. Dudjom Tenzin Yeshey Dorji (personal correspondence to me, Oct. 23, 2023), referred to the path as a “Journey to nothingness.” There is (1) the nothingness of dissolving your human identity into the substrate, (2) the nothingness of dissolving your identity as a sentient being into emptiness, which is completely deactivated in the Dzogchen practice of resting in the open presence of pristine awareness, and (3) the nothingness of the extinction of all impure appearances into the primordial union of the dharmakāya and dharmadhātu, from which emerge its originally pure, creative displays.
- Śāntideva:
 - “As a result of surrendering everything, there is *nirvāṇa*, and my mind seeks *nirvāṇa*. Surrendering everything at once—this is the greatest gift to sentient beings.” [I:11]
 - “The unfriendly will become nonexistent; the friendly, too, will become nonexistent; and I shall become nonexistent, as well. Likewise, everything will become nonexistent. Like the experience of a dream, whatever we enjoy will be reduced to a memory, and everything that has passed will not be seen again.” [II: 35-36]
 - “Upon developing zeal in that way, one should stabilize the mind in meditative concentration, since a person whose mind is distracted lives between the fangs of mental afflictions.” [VIII: 1]
 - “Recognizing that the mental afflictions are eradicated by vipaśyanā imbued with śamatha, one should first seek śamatha. That is achieved with detachment toward the world and with joy.” [VIII: 4]