



Meditation & Inner Practice

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Summary: Meditation in this tradition is a training with a syllabus, a diagnostic vocabulary, and a map of what goes wrong. Calm abiding (śamatha) is developed through nine stages, pictured in the thangka of the elephant path: at the start the mind is a black elephant led by a monkey, and by the ninth stage it follows without being led. Tsongkhapa set out five faults that spoil concentration and eight antidotes for them, the central pair being mindfulness, which holds the object, and introspection, which checks whether it is still held. Alongside this runs analytical meditation — the same faculty trained in the debate courtyard, turned on one's own habitual sense of how things exist.

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It is also not vague. This is a training with a syllabus, a diagnostic vocabulary, a map of what

goes wrong, and a set of remedies — worked out over centuries by people who sat down every day and paid close attention to what happened.

Stabilising and Analytical Meditation

The tradition distinguishes two kinds. **Stabilising meditation**

(*jog sgom*) rests the mind on an object and keeps it there.

Analytical meditation (*dpyad sgom*) takes a topic apart —

impermanence, the self, the causes of anger — with reasoning, until conviction shifts.

They are not alternatives, and a monk does not choose between them. Analysis produces an insight;

stabilising meditation then holds that insight until it stops being a conclusion and becomes

simply how things look. The mature form, where the two run together, is called the union of

śamatha and *vipaśyanā*.

One clarification matters, because it is the usual misunderstanding: in analytical meditation a

monk is not arguing with himself during the session. He is trying to perceive something in the

way he has already established it to be. The argument comes first. The meditation is what makes

its result perceptual rather than merely agreed to.

The Elephant Path

Calm abiding develops through nine stages, and the tradition pictures them in a thangka that

hangs on the wall of almost every Tibetan monastery: a monk climbing a path after an elephant.

The elephant

The mind. Black at the start of the path, whitening from the head down as the stages pass.

The monkey

Distraction. It leads the elephant at first, and by degrees falls behind and turns back.

The rabbit

Subtle dullness — the quiet sinking that can be mistaken for calm. It disappears partway up.

The rope

Mindfulness: what keeps hold of the object.

The goad

Introspection: what notices the hold has slipped.

The fire

The effort required. It burns beside the path and grows smaller, and by the ninth stage it has gone out.

At the bottom of the path the elephant is black and the monkey is leading it. By the ninth stage the elephant follows without being led at all, and the fire has gone out: no effort is needed to hold the object.

The image comes from Asaṅga and reaches this tradition through Tsongkhapa. What is striking about it is how unflattering it is about beginners. At the start the mind is a black elephant being led by a monkey — and everyone begins there, including the monks who have been sitting for forty years.

Five Faults, Eight Antidotes

Tsongkhapa set out what goes wrong in meditation, and what to do about each of them, in the

Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path. It is the most practical thing in the tradition, and it reads less like mysticism than like a fault-finding guide.

| Fault | What it is | Antidote |

| --- | --- | --- |

| Laziness | Not sitting down at all. | Faith, aspiration, exertion, pliancy |

| Forgetting the instruction | Losing the object. | Mindfulness |

| Laxity and excitement | Dullness on one side, agitation on the other. | Introspection |

| Non-application | Noticing a fault and not applying the remedy. | Application |

| Over-application | Correcting when nothing needs correcting. | Equanimity |

The central pair is ****mindfulness**** and ****introspection****. Mindfulness holds the object; introspection watches whether it is still held. One does the work, the other checks it — and the second is the harder to develop, because it means attending to attention

itself.

That the fifth fault is **over*-correction* is worth noticing. The tradition anticipated the earnest beginner who ruins his own concentration by adjusting it continually, and named the problem several centuries before anyone thought to write a book about trying too hard to relax.

What Monks Meditate On

Two bodies of practice supply the content. The ***lamrim*** — the stages of the path — was compiled by Atiśa after his arrival in Tibet in 1042 and given its great commentary by Tsongkhapa. It sets out twenty-one topics for meditation, commonly worked through in a three-week cycle.

Alongside it runs ***lojong***, mind training: fifty-nine terse slogans organised by Chekawa into seven points, meant to be applied in ordinary life rather than only on the cushion.

Chekawa broke with an older convention of secrecy in order to teach them publicly.

Within these sit two methods for generating compassion. The **seven-point cause and effect**

works from equanimity through recognising all beings as having at some point been one's mother, remembering their kindness, wishing to repay it, and affectionate love, to compassion and the

resolve that follows from it. The other is **exchanging self and others**, practised as ***tonglen***: breathing in the suffering of others, breathing out one's own wellbeing. It is deliberately the reverse of instinct, and that is the point of it.

Tsongkhapa combined these two methods, which had been taught separately, into a single

eleven-point practice. The integration is regarded as a particular contribution of this tradition — and it is what connects sitting practice to [compassion in action](/en/seven-pillars/compassion).

The Same Faculty, Turned Inward

The [debate courtyard](/en/seven-pillars/study) trains a monk to find the weak point in a position and press until it gives. Analytical meditation turns that same faculty on his own habitual sense of how things exist.

This is why study and meditation are not separate enterprises here, and why a monastery that

argues this much is not being merely academic. Years of being attacked by challengers teach a monk that a position which cannot survive examination is not yet understood. Analytical meditation applies that standard to the one position he has never had to defend in public: his own unexamined sense of being a solid self in a world of solid things.

The emptiness argued about for four years in the [Middle Way](/en/seven-pillars/study/madhyamaka) classes is the same emptiness meditated on afterwards. The difference is only whether it is being established or being looked at.

A Reality Check

In 2024 researchers brought portable EEG equipment to Sera Jey Monastic University in Bylakuppe — the institution whose curriculum this monastery follows — and recorded twenty-three monks across thirty-five meditation sessions. Nine were beginners with under a year of practice, six had between one and ten years, and eight had more than ten years including extended retreats.

Concentrative meditation produced strong and unambiguous signatures: power changes of up to fifteen decibels in the most experienced monks, with a marked shift in the alpha peak that the researchers interpreted as active inhibition — the mind holding distraction at bay.

Analytical meditation barely registered by comparison. Around two decibels. The researchers concluded that it engages processes less visible to this kind of analysis.

There is something worth sitting with in that result. Of the two practices, the one that most resembles ordinary thinking is the one the instruments find hardest to see.

The Wisconsin practitioners had between ten and fifty thousand hours of practice behind them.

Those studies, and the reasons for holding them lightly, are set out under [research: a reality check](/en/seven-pillars/meditation/research).