

The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment
(Lam Rim Han Mo)
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Now I shall explain how to develop concentration in a manner conducive to achieving serenity.

Here, concentration refers to your attention remaining one-pointedly on an object of meditation; in addition it must stay with the object continuously. Two things are needed for this: (1) a technique in which your attention is not distracted from whatever it had as its original object of meditation, and (2) an accurate awareness of whether you are distracted and whether you are becoming distracted. The former is mindfulness; the latter is vigilance. Vasubandhu's *Commentary on the "Ornament for the Mahāyāna Sūtras"* (*Mahāyāna-sūtrālamkāra-bhāṣya*) states:

Mindfulness and vigilance bring about close mental focus because the former prevents your attention from wandering from the object of meditation and the latter clearly recognizes that your attention is wandering.

If a lapse in mindfulness leads to forgetting the object of meditation, you will be distracted and will immediately lose the object upon which you are meditating. Therefore, the foundation of cultivating concentration is mindfulness which does not forget the object.

How does such mindfulness focus your mind right n the object of meditation? Once you have at least visualized the object of meditation in the minimal manner as explained above, generate a powerful apprehension of the object that tightly holds it with your attention. After you have set your attention at a high level, stabilize it on the object without newly analyzing anything.

With regard to mindfulness, Asanga's *Compendium of Knowledge* says,

What is mindfulness? In regard to a familiar object, your mind is not forgetful and operates without distraction.

This indicates that mindfulness has three features, (1) Its observed object is "a familiar object," since mindfulness does not occur with regard to a previously unfamiliar object. In this case, the image of a previously ascertained object of meditation appears. (2) Its subjective aspect or manner of apprehension is your mind's not forgetting the object, as indicated by the phrase "your mind is not forgetful." In this case, it is your mind's non-forgetfulness of the object of meditation.

What does non-forgetfulness mean? It refers to how your attention is fixed on the object of meditation and brings it to mind clearly without even the slightest distraction. If

you are distracted, you lose your mindfulness to the extent that you are distracted. Therefore, after you have set your attention on the object of meditation in the manner explained above, you think, “In this way, I have fixed my attention on the object of meditation.” Then, without new examination, you sustain the force of that awareness in unbroken continuity. This is the most critical point in the technique of maintaining mindfulness. (3) Its function is to keep your attention from wandering from the object of meditation.

Fixing your attention on an object of meditation in this way and controlling it is said to be like taming an elephant. An elephant training ties a wild elephant to a tree or sturdy post with many thick ropes. If it does as the trainer teaches it, then fine; if not, it is subdued and controlled, struck repeatedly with a sharp iron hook. Your mind is like the untamed elephant; you bind it with the rope of mindfulness to the sturdy pillar of an object of meditation such as I explained above. If you cannot keep it there, you must gradually bring it under control by goading it with the iron hook of vigilance. Bhāvaviveka’s *Heart of the Middle Way* states:

The erring elephant of your mind
Is securely bound by the rope of mindfulness
To the sturdy pillar of the object of meditation
And is gradually controlled with the iron hook of intelligence.

Also, Kamalaśīla’s second *Stages of Meditation* states:

With the ropes of mindfulness and vigilance, tie the elephant of your mind to the tree trunk, the object of meditation.

It is not contradictory that the former text likens vigilance to an iron hook while the latter text compares it to a rope. Mindfulness directly and continually fastens your attention to the object of meditation. However, indirectly vigilance also focuses your attention on the object of meditation, for you depend on noticing actual or incipient laxity and excitement with vigilance, and then stabilize your attention on the primary object without falling under their influence. Also, as cited above, the master Vasubandhu says that both mindfulness and vigilance focus your mind on the object of meditation.

It is said that you achieve concentration on the basis of mindfulness and that mindfulness is like a rope that actually fastens your attention to the object of meditation continuously, so mindfulness is the main technique to sustain in achieving concentration.

Also, mindfulness has a way of apprehending its object that carries a sense of certitude. If, while maintaining concentration, you stabilize your mind casually without a solid sense of certainty about the object, then your mind may take on a limpid clarity, but it will not have the vivid intensity of certain knowledge, so you will not develop powerful mindfulness. Therefore, subtle laxity will be unchecked, and only flawed concentration will ensue.

Those who cultivate just non-discursive attention without stabilizing their attention on other objects of meditation, such as a divine body, bring to mind the personal instruction, “Stabilize your mind without thinking of any object at all.” Then they must keep their attention from being distracted and wandering. This non-distraction is synonymous with mindfulness that does not forget the object of meditation. Thus, since this meditation is simply the technique of maintaining mindfulness, those who meditate in this way must also rely on a mindfulness that carries the force of certain knowledge.