

Cultivating fearlessness through *Shine Lhatong* meditation

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Shine Lhatong meditation – commonly referred to as mindfulness-awareness meditation - is a practice that is fundamental to the Kagyu-Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism and literally means *Calm Abiding Clear seeing*. When we practice Shine Lhatong meditation, we learn to tame our restless mind, recognize our inherent wakefulness, open gently towards others and ultimately live a fully realized, fearless life. Such a discipline is a lifelong practice requiring skill, perseverance and humor, and receiving regular face to face guidance from a qualified teacher is highly recommended. Generally speaking, the practice unfolds along four broad guidelines:

Motivation: *Fearlessly opening to whatever occurs*

Mindfulness: *Vigorously training attention*

Awareness: *Becoming familiar with primordial presence*

Relaxing: *Resting thoroughly*

Motivation: *Fearlessly opening to whatever occurs*

Science has been documenting many of the benefits to practicing mindfulness-awareness meditation. For example, with only short amounts of practice, we can grow the part of the brain that regulates our emotions or with sustained practice over months we can significantly revitalize our immune system. Or with a daily practice we can gradually improve our emotional intelligence and sense of well-being. And over the centuries, accomplished practitioners of mindfulness-awareness speak of many intriguing paranormal benefits like clairvoyance, mastery over the elements, and divination. And while these benefits are inspiring, no doubt, engaging the practice properly requires that we eventually drop our desire to achieve any benefit whatsoever and instead resolve ourselves to perfecting a very simple yet demanding gesture: *fearlessly opening to whatever occurs*.

Such an undertaking seems straightforward enough but opening to whatever occurs becomes increasingly subtle and demanding as we practice more and more. At first, we quite reasonably may come to meditation motivated to relieve our personal suffering or confusion. Or maybe we have read about becoming wise, joyful and healthy through meditation and would like to become such a person. Over time, however, practicing mindfulness-awareness reveals that accomplishing such ambition is questionable and we notice that practicing teaches us to *discover* rather than achieve – *recognize* rather than accomplish.

Shedding our motivation to achieve takes time and humility where we slowly soften to ourselves and to our lives. Rather than aspiring to become someone else – someone who is less confused and a healthier version of “me” - we, instead, slow down, ease up and begin to notice who we are - which demands that we *open* – making ourselves utterly available to anything and everything that occurs. Whether we are sitting on a meditation cushion or parking a truck; studying a rare wisdom text or sewing up a wound, our motivation becomes to *fearlessly open to whatever occurs*.

Traditionally such openness – such willingness to be entirely available to our world without any preconditions - is considered the core gesture of compassion which not only becomes our motivation for practicing mindfulness-awareness but also how we increasingly recognize who we are and how to behave in the world.

It is vital, therefore, that our motives for practicing mindfulness-awareness permit us to engage our experience authentically and traditionally the motivation we are encouraged to cultivate is compassion – a willingness *to fearlessly open to whatever occurs*.

Mindfulness: *Vigorously training the attention*

In some sense, the *Shine* or mindfulness aspect of meditation is an artificial exercise where we sit still for long periods of time in order to sustain our attention on an object. Essentially, mindfulness is about remembering to bring our attention back to whatever is occurring. It's kind of like going to the gym to workout rather than just naturally swimming in the ocean or walking a mountain. We very deliberately workout: noticing where our attention is, intentionally escorting it to an object and working to sustain our attention on that object. Such training can be very monotonous and exquisitely demanding requiring alertness, vigilance, and precision.

In mindfulness-awareness, sustained attention is not so much a goal of the practice, but more how we naturally recognize that we can stop rehearsing our lives and instead live them directly in the immediate moment. Such sustained attention, while a natural expression of the mindfulness-awareness discipline, is not, however, sufficient for learning how to live a fully realized, fearless life.

For many of us, when we come to the practice we would like to calm our minds – experience a little bit of *Shine* or *Calm abiding*. And, typically, we struggle trying to make our busy minds behave themselves. Using the mindfulness technique, we recognize where our attention is, notice our thoughts and bring our attention to our breath or an object. When we vigorously train our attention in this way, an ironic shift eventually occurs. Rather than seeking calmness in the busy display of our mind, we notice that our mind is already naturally calm in *how we notice* the display. We shift from trying to make our minds behave themselves to abiding calmly *as a mind* that is noticing itself.

Such a discovery shifts the practice and over time our attention stabilizes and we become one-pointed – calm, clear and attentive to whatever arises. Mindfully and *calmly abiding* in this way, we open further to our experience and become sharply curious about our circumstances.

Awareness: *Becoming familiar with primordial presence*

Typically, we experience meditation and our lives in general as what is traditionally called a *dualistic situation* - “me over here” encountering “that over there” - which is natural enough. There is a lot of stuff “over there” that we need to attend to - picnic tables and sharp knives; hurricanes and fast traffic that need our attention. But in *Lhatong*, or awareness meditation, we realize that such a dualistic perspective is a narrow window that, while giving the impression as complete and accurate, is, in reality, a confined and partial view of a much larger and accessible perspective – a *primordial presence*. Recognizing this larger presence is *Lhatong* or *clear seeing* and we do this in the practice in three ways:

- Synchronizing
- Analyzing
- Glimpsing

Synchronizing – Through the discipline of *calm abiding* we eventually notice that our mind, body and world are not just unfolding as three separate and seemingly uncoordinated aspects of life – *our dualistic situation* - but we recognize that we are intimately woven together – our mind, body and world - as a primary immediacy - an undifferentiated physical nowness that we experience in the meditation and in everyday life as our synchronized presence

Analyzing – The more familiar we become with being a synchronized presence in nowness, the more we become curious about what exactly is going on here. For example, it is not unusual for *Lhatong* practitioners to seek answers to questions like: “Where is this ‘mind’ that I am trying to observe in meditation?” “What is a ‘thought’ and where does it come from?” “Since I can only experience ‘now’, where is the past and why is the present ungraspable?” Traditionally, shaping and training the mind’s natural curiosity as it seeks to investigate its synchronized presence is of the utmost importance and the Kagyu Mahamudra tradition offers many excellent instructions for examining this non-dual nature of mind.

Traditionally, engaging Mahmudra instruction is done only under the guidance of a qualified teacher who is capable of giving what is called “direct pointing out instruction”. Such instruction is vital because “direct pointing out” is how the practitioner unmistakably and clearly recognizes what is, in fact, going on here: *our synchronized presence is unbiased, timeless and vast - a primordially wakeful and pure state of mind - and we have ready access to this wakefulness because, despite our seeming confusion, it is exactly how we have been experiencing our lives all along.*

Glimpsing – By mingling our *calm abiding* with our awakened synchronized presence, our meditation shifts further from the artificial checking of attention to *just being primordially awake*. Practicing in this way is subtle and demanding where we become more and more familiar with being fearlessly awake as primordial presence rather than striving to do so. We may struggle to extend our experience of wakefulness or try to recall how best to enliven the experience, but such strategies prove useless and we discover that becoming familiar with wakefulness is about *glimpsing*. Whether during brief moments or extended episodes; by surprise, or through deliberate technique, the practice of *Lhathong* teaches us how to recognize, this sudden and vivid arising of our natural state of mind and over time we *become familiar with being primordially awake*.

Relaxing: *Resting thoroughly*

The more familiar we become with calmly abiding as a wakeful presence, the more confidently we live a fearless and simplified life, free of the mistaken complexities of being a coward. Rather than picking and choosing our experiences, trying to horde life's pleasures and ward off life's difficulties, we instead discover that we can taste all life's encounters deeply and thoroughly – with a full and vigorous presence. Here, our meditation shifts even further from synchronizing, analyzing and glimpsing to *relaxing*. Such relaxing is not about sitting by the pool and reading a comic book, though this is not excluded, of course. Rather, relaxing, in this case, is how we confidently express our wakefulness and live a fearless, realized life. Traditionally, it is highly recommended that we practice in extended solitary retreats under the guidance of a realized teacher in order to fully appreciate this discipline of *relaxing* and *resting thoroughly*.

Finally, at some point in the practice of mindfulness-awareness, circumstances definitively shift, where we discover that we are effortlessly and irreversibly awake. Many inspiring stories of Buddhist masters recount this shift: Tilopa slapping Naropa with his sandal; Bankei observing his spittle while lying on death's bed; Kasyapa smiling during Shakyamuni's flower sermon. And for those who practice mindfulness-awareness with great effort and devotion, such a shift occurs as a profound irony - as if we had mistakenly been living our lives backwards – walking in reverse, observing our world as it recedes. And suddenly, we discover, almost by chance, that we were perfectly designed to live our lives moving forward – facing ahead as we walk, going towards our experience rather than away. And we simply wake up to a natural rhythm that we possessed all along but had misunderstood and overlooked. Like rediscovering how to walk, finally, we wake up unmistakably and irreversibly - fearlessly at our ease - and at this stage of meditation, there is really nothing to do but *rest thoroughly* and walk forward.