
WISDOM ACADEMY

# Restricted Dzogchen Teachings, Part 2: Buddhahood Without Meditation

B. ALAN WALLACE

## Lesson 6:
## Approaching the One Taste of Samsara and Nirvana

Reading:
*Attention Revolution*
"Tamed Attention," pages 80–94

# *The* Attention Revolution

## UNLOCKING THE POWER OF THE FOCUSED MIND

B. ALAN WALLACE, PH.D.

foreword by Daniel Goleman

Wisdom Publications • Boston

Wisdom Publications, Inc.
199 Elm Street
Somerville MA 02144 USA
www.wisdompubs.org



*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*
Wallace, B. Alan.
The attention revolution : unlocking the power of the focused mind / B. Alan Wallace.—1st Wisdom ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0–86171–276–5 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Samatha (Buddhism) 2. Attention—Religious aspects—Buddhism. I. Title.
BQ7805.W33 2006
294.3'4435—dc22 2005037195

ISBN 0–86171–276–5
eBook ISBN 978–0–86171–990–7
First Wisdom Edition
09
5 4 3

Cover design by Laura Shaw. Interior by TL from a design by Gopa & Ted2, Inc. Set in Weiss 11pt/15pt.

Wisdom Publications' books are printed on acid-free paper and meet the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Production Guidelines for Book Longevity set by the Council on Library Resources.

Printed in the United States of America.

This book was produced with environmental mindfulness. We have elected to print this title on 30% PCW recycled paper. As a result, we have saved the following resources: 12 trees, 8 million BTUs of energy, 1,072 lbs. of greenhouse gases, 4,448 gallons of water, and 571 lbs. of solid waste. For more information, please visit our website, www.wisdompubs.org. This paper is also FSC certified. For more information, please visit www.fscus.org.

I shall set forth here the option of advancing to another method after you have achieved the fourth stage by mindfulness of breathing. This is the practice of *settling the mind in its natural state,* a technique that directly prepares you for Mahamudra and Dzogchen practice, two traditions of contempla-tive practice that are focused on the realization of the nature of conscious-ness. A comparable practice within the Theravada tradition is called "unfastened mindfulness."[50]

Like mindfulness of breathing, this method is especially suited for people whose minds are prone to excitation and conceptual turbulence, and it has the further advantage of providing deep insight into the nature of the mind. Düdjom Lingpa, a Tibetan Dzogchen master of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, commented that this practice may be the most suitable for high-strung people with unstable minds who may run into great difficulties by adopting various visualization techniques for developing shamatha.[51] The First Panchen Lama, a teacher of the Fifth Dalai Lama, referred to this practice as "a wonderfully skillful method for novices to still the mind."[52]

You *can* begin your shamatha practice with this method and continue with it all the way to the achievement of shamatha. You don't need to practice mindfulness of breathing first. However, many people find this method difficult, as they are swept away time and again by their thoughts. For them, mindfulness of breathing may be the most effective way to progress along the first four stages on this path.

While many people practice meditation to achieve "altered states of consciousness," from a Buddhist perspective, our habitual mindsets, in which we are drawn under the influence of such imbalances as craving, anxiety, stress, and frustration, are *already* altered states of consciousness. The practice of settling the mind in its natural state is designed to release us from these habitual perturbations of consciousness, letting the mind gradually settle in its ground state. The "natural state" of the mind, according to Buddhist contemplatives, is characterized by the three qualities of bliss, luminosity, and nonconceptuality. I believe this is one of the most remarkable discoveries ever made concerning the nature of consciousness, and that it calls for collaborative research between cognitive scientists and contemplatives.

For a description of this practice, I shall cite the essential instructions given by the nineteenth-century Dzogchen master Lerab Lingpa.[53] His instructions are presented here, followed by my own detailed commentary.

## THE PRACTICE: SETTLING THE MIND IN ITS NATURAL STATE

> Simply hearing your spiritual mentor's practical instructions and knowing how to explain them to others does not liberate your own mindstream, so you must meditate. Even if you spend your whole life practicing a mere semblance of meditation—meditating in a stupor, cluttering the mind with fantasies, and taking many breaks during your sessions due to being unable to control mental scattering—no good experiences or realizations will arise. So it is important during each session to meditate according to your mentor's oral instructions.
>
> In solitude sit upright on a comfortable cushion. Gently hold the "vase" breath until the vital energies converge naturally. Let your gaze be vacant. With your body and mind inwardly relaxed, and without allowing the continuum of your consciousness to fade from a state of limpidity and vivid clarity, sustain it naturally and radiantly. Do not clutter your mind with many critical judgments; do not take a shortsighted view of meditation, and

avoid great hopes and fears that your meditation will turn out one way and not another. At the beginning have many daily sessions, each of them of brief duration, and focus well in each one. Whenever you meditate, bear in mind the phrase "without distraction and without grasping," and put this into practice.

As you gradually familiarize yourself with the meditation, increase the duration of your sessions. If dullness sets in, arouse your awareness. If there is excessive scattering and excitation, loosen up. Determine in terms of your own experience the optimal degree of mental arousal, as well as the healthiest diet and behavior.

Excessive, imprisoning constriction of the mind, loss of clarity due to lassitude, and excessive relaxation resulting in involuntary vocalization and eye-movement are to be avoided. It does only harm to talk a lot about such things as extrasensory perception and miscellaneous dreams or to claim, "I saw a deity. I saw a ghost. I know this. I've realized that," and so on. The presence or absence of any kind of pleasure or displeasure, such as a sensation of motion, is not uniform, for there are great differences in the dispositions and faculties from one individual to another.

Due to maintaining the mind in its natural state, there may arise sensations such as physical and mental well-being, a sense of lucid consciousness, the appearance of empty forms, and a non-conceptual sense that nothing can harm the mind, regardless of whether or not thoughts have ceased. Whatever kinds of mental imagery occur—be they gentle or violent, subtle or coarse, of long or short duration, strong or weak, good or bad—observe their nature, and avoid any obsessive evaluation of them as being one thing and not another. Let the heart of your practice be consciousness in its natural state, limpid and vivid. Acting as your own mentor, if you can bring the essential points to perfection, as if you were threading a needle, the afflictions of your own mindstream will subside, you will gain the autonomy of not succumbing to them, and your mind will constantly be calm and dispassionate.

> This is a sound basis for the arising of all states of meditative concentration on the stages of generation and completion.
>
> This is like tilling the soil of a field. So from the outset avoid making a lot of great, exalted, and pointless proclamations. Rather, it is crucial to do all you can to refine your mind and establish a foundation for contemplative practice.[54]

## REFLECTIONS ON THE PRACTICE

The object of mindfulness in the practice of settling the mind in its natural state is no longer the subtle sensations of the breath at the nostrils, but the *space of the mind* and whatever events arise within that space. The object of introspection, as in the earlier practice of mindfulness of breathing, is the quality of the attention with which you are observing the mind.

> At the beginning have many daily sessions, each of them of brief duration, and focus well in each one. Whenever you meditate, bear in mind the phrase "without distraction and without grasping," and put this into practice.

As you venture into this practice, I would encourage you to memorize these quintessential instructions: settle your mind without distraction and without grasping. Practicing "without distraction" means not allowing your mind to be carried away by thoughts and sense impressions. Be present here and now, and when thoughts arise pertaining to the past or future or ruminations about the present, don't be abducted by them. As you hike on this trail of shamatha, don't be a hitchhiker, catching a ride with any of the thoughts or images that whiz through your mind. Rather, be like a kestrel, hovering motionlessly as it faces the wind, slightly moving its wings and tail feathers to adjust to changes in the currents of the air.

Even when your attention is settled in the present, you may still grasp onto the appearances to the mind. Whenever you prefer one mental object over another, whenever you try to control the contents of your mind, and whenever you identify with anything at all, grasping has set it. Here is the

challenge at hand: be attentive to everything that comes up in the mind, but don't grasp onto anything. In this practice, let your mind be like the sky. Whatever moves through it, the sky never reacts. It doesn't stop anything from moving through it, it doesn't hold onto anything that's present, nor does it control anything. The sky doesn't prefer rainbows to clouds, butterflies to jet planes. Whatever comes up in the field of awareness, without distraction or grasping, just let it be.

When you are settling the mind in its natural state, occasionally falling into distraction or grasping, you experience a semblance of what it is like to fall from the state of pristine awareness (Tibetan: *rigpa*) into the mind of dualistic grasping. This is not something that occurred long ago in a Buddhist Garden of Eden. It happens each moment that the dualistic mind is activated and we lose sight of our own true nature. Pristine awareness is always present. But it is obscured when we become carried away by the objects that captivate our attention, and to which we respond with craving and aversion.

> As you gradually familiarize yourself with the meditation, increase the duration of your sessions. If dullness sets in, arouse your awareness. If there is excessive scattering and excitation, loosen up.

This is the essential guidance on how to remedy laxity and excitation as soon as you've noted these imbalances with your faculty of introspection. If you feel a natural urge to constrict the mind when it becomes agitated, overcome this urge and loosen up. Let the stability of your attention emerge naturally from the mind at ease, rather than a mind that is strenuously constricted. But see that your mind is not so slack that dullness sets in. Here is the challenge, mentioned earlier, that is especially characteristic of the transition from the fourth to the fifth attentional stage. With fine-honed introspection, you quickly detect attentional imbalances, and you then take the necessary measures to restore balance.

> Simply hearing your spiritual mentor's practical instructions and knowing how to explain them to others does not liberate your

> own mindstream, so you must meditate. Even if you spend your whole life practicing a mere semblance of meditation—meditating in a stupor, cluttering the mind with fantasies, and taking many breaks during your sessions due to being unable to control mental scattering—no good experiences or realizations will arise. So it is important during each session to meditate according to your mentor's oral instructions.

While much can be learned from books about meditation—and this can be enough to get you started—for dedicated, sustained practice there is no substitute for a knowledgeable, experienced teacher. This is true for professional training in the cognitive sciences—there are no expert psychologists or neuroscientists who are entirely self-taught—and in a myriad of other fields. It is possible to waste an enormous amount of time in faulty meditative practice, and there is also the possibility of damaging your mind, so it is important to find qualified instructors and to listen closely to their counsel. As the Dalai Lama responded when asked whether it is necessary to have a teacher in order to achieve enlightenment, "No, but it can save you a lot of time!"

> In solitude sit upright on a comfortable cushion.

Sitting upright with legs crossed is generally the most suitable posture for meditation, and many meditation manuals give detailed instructions on the specific points of such a posture.[55] But Lerab Lingpa also advised that you be comfortable when meditating. So if sitting cross-legged for extended periods is painful for you, try sitting in a chair or lying in the supine position. Düdjom Lingpa gave this advice:[56]

> Motionlessly relax your body in whatever way is comfortable, like an unthinking corpse in a charnel ground. Let your voice be silent like a lute with its strings cut. Rest your mind in an unmodified state, like the primordial presence of space.... Remain for a long time in [this way] of resting. This pacifies all illnesses due

> to disturbances of the elements and unfavorable circumstances, and your body, speech, and mind naturally calm down.

Lerab Lingpa continues:

> Gently hold the vase breath until the vital energies converge naturally.

"Vase breathing" is an energizing and stabilizing breath practice. To practice "gentle vase breathing," as you inhale, let the sensations of the breath flow down to the bottom of your abdomen, like pouring water into a vase. Then, as you exhale, instead of letting the abdomen retract completely, keep it slightly rounded, with your belly soft. In this way, you maintain a bit of a potbelly, which expands during the in-breath and contracts somewhat during the out-breath, but still retains a fullness. The goal of the vase breath is to converge the vital energies, or *pranas*, in the central channel in your abdomen and allow them to settle in this region. This is something you can detect from your own direct experience of your body and the movement of energies within it. When you settle your mind in its natural state, opening up the abdomen with such breathing, the *pranas* start to converge naturally into the central channel that runs vertically through the torso to the crown of the head. Most explanations of shamatha practice make no reference to vase breathing, so it is not indispensable. But many people do find it helpful for stabilizing the mind and tuning the subtle energies in the body.

> Let your gaze be vacant.

In this practice, it is important that your eyes are open, vacantly resting your gaze in the space in front of you. If you have not meditated with your eyes open, you may find this uncomfortable, but I encourage you to get used to it. Blink as often as you like and don't strain your eyes in any way. Let them be as relaxed as if you were daydreaming with your eyes open. By leaving the eyes open, while focusing your attention on the domain of mental events, the artificial barrier between "inner" and "outer"

begins to dissolve. Especially in our materialist society, we have gotten used to the idea that our thoughts and all other mental events are inside our heads. But this has never been demonstrated scientifically. All that is known in this regard is that mental events are correlated with neural events, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they are located in the same place.

Even without this materialist assumption that the mind is nothing more than a function of the brain, we naturally have a sense that we are looking out on the world from behind our eyes. But this sense of an independent subject, or ego, inside the head is an illusion. There is no scientific support for such a belief, and when it is inspected through rigorous contemplative inquiry, this autonomous thinker and observer inside the head is nowhere to be found. In this practice, by leaving your eyes open but directing your attention to the mind, this conceptually superimposed demarcation between inner and outer begins to erode. You begin to recognize that your thoughts are not occurring in here, in your head, nor are they occurring out there in space. This practice challenges the existence of an absolutely objective space of the physical senses that is absolutely separate from a subjective space of the mind. You are now on a path to realizing the meaning of nonduality.

> With your body and mind inwardly relaxed, and without allowing the continuum of your consciousness to fade from a state of limpidity and vivid clarity, sustain your awareness naturally and radiantly.

On the path of shamatha, while it is crucial to enhance both the stability and vividness of attention, this must not be done at the expense of relaxation. On the foundation of bodily and mental ease, let the stability of your attention deepen, and from that increasing stillness, witness the natural vividness of awareness. The *limpidity* of consciousness refers to its qualities of transparency and luminosity. The space of the mind is limpid, like a pool of transparent, brightly lit water. Clarity, limpidity, and radiance are qualities of awareness itself, not qualities added to it by meditation. So this practice is one of discovering, not developing, the innate stillness and vividness of awareness.

> Do not clutter your mind with many critical judgments; do not take a shortsighted view of meditation, and avoid great hopes and fears that your meditation will turn out one way and not another.

One of the most helpful pieces of advice my spiritual mentor, Gyatrul Rinpoche, gave me had to do with hope and desire. He told me that when I was meditating, I was doing so with too much yearning. "But," I countered, "I've been told many times about the importance of developing a strong motivation for practice, and this entails desiring to succeed. So how is it possible to cultivate a powerful yearning to practice, then do with little or no desire?"

He responded, "Between sessions, it is fine to meditate on the value of such practice and to arouse your motivation to engage in it with great diligence. But during your meditation sessions themselves, let go of all such desires. Release your hopes and your fears, and simply devote yourself to the practice, moment by moment." Especially in the modern West, where so many people are in a hurry, intent on finding quick fixes and short-term gains, it is easy to take a shortsighted view of meditation. It is a big mistake to judge the value of meditation solely on the basis of how good you feel while meditating. This isn't a miracle drug designed to provide temporary relief within minutes. It's a path to greater and greater sanity, and for that we have to be patient and persevering.

> Determine in terms of your own experience the optimal degree of mental arousal, as well as the healthiest diet and behavior.

As the practice becomes subtler, you have to discover for yourself the optimal degree of mental arousal, or tension. Video-game players commonly experience a high state of mental arousal, while in deep sleep we all experience the opposite state of low arousal. Recall the analogy of stringing a lute: like finding the optimal degree of tension on the strings, determine the optimal degree of arousal of your attention.

In addition, since your meditating mind is embodied, it is crucial to determine from your own experience the healthiest diet and daily behavior. Eat

small, nutritious meals, suitable for your own physical constitution, and exercise in a way that keeps your body fit. Walking is good exercise between sessions, but very strong aerobic exercise may agitate your nervous system and mind in ways that detract from the practice. Experiment for yourself to see what kind of diet and exercise best support your practice.

> Excessive, imprisoning constriction of the mind, loss of clarity due to lassitude, and excessive relaxation resulting in involuntary vocalization and eye-movement are to be avoided.

Settling the mind in its natural state, like all shamatha practices, is a balancing act. If you constrict the mind too much, you will become exhausted and stressed out. If you let your mind go too slack, the clarity of attention will fade, resulting in involuntary vocal and bodily activity.

> It does only harm to talk a lot about such things as extrasensory perception and miscellaneous dreams or to claim, "I saw a deity. I saw a ghost. I know this. I've realized that," and so on. The presence or absence of any kind of pleasure or displeasure, such as a sensation of motion, is not uniform, for there are great differences in the dispositions and faculties from one individual to another.

A wide range of physical and mental experiences may arise in the course of this practice. Some of them may be inspiring, for example, when you feel you've broken through to a profound mystical insight, while others may be troubling or simply weird. While many Westerners love to report their meditative experiences to others, this runs against the grain of traditional Buddhist practice. Tibetans have an old saying: If you fill a gourd with just a little water and shake it, it makes a lot of noise. But if you fill it to the brim and shake it, it makes no sound. Generations of seasoned contemplatives have found that making any claims about one's spiritual achievements—even if they are true—creates obstacles to one's practice. These are private matters, and if you discuss them with anyone, it should be in private with your own spiritual mentor.

> Due to maintaining the mind in its natural state, there may arise sensations such as physical and mental well-being, a sense of lucid consciousness, the appearance of empty forms, and a nonconceptual sense that nothing can harm the mind, regardless of whether or not thoughts have ceased.

When the body and mind are in a state of imbalance, we feel uncomfortable. This is a good thing, otherwise we wouldn't do anything to remedy the problem. All too often, though, instead of seeking a cure, we look for quick fixes to suppress the symptoms. The path of shamatha leads to increasing mental balance, and we may experience that as physical and mental well-being. As the dust of the mind settles, you may discover an unprecedented degree of lucidity of awareness. Moreover, as the deeply ingrained habit of conceptual grasping subsides, you may begin to experience physical objects in a different way. Normally, the mind involuntarily superimposes a sense of solidity on our perceptions of visual objects, even though the eyes are not designed to detect this tactile characteristic. As the conceptual mind calms down, you will see more clearly what the Buddha meant when he said, "In the seen there is only the seen." Visual objects are seen simply as visual objects, without the overlay of past experiences of substantiality. Sensory objects take on a quality of transparency, as mere appearances to the mind, rather than solid objects "out there." Even your own body appears "empty" of substance. All that appears to the mind is an interrelated matrix of sensory phenomena, but these qualities no longer appear to belong to something absolutely objective, for that sense of reified duality is diminishing.

Another remarkable experience that may arise from this practice is a nonconceptual sense that nothing can harm the mind regardless of whether or not thoughts have ceased. This implies that even when concepts are present, your awareness may remain nonconceptual. How is this possible? Normally, when thoughts appear, you may normally grasp onto them, often only semiconsciously, and your attention is directed to the referents of the thoughts. For example, if a mental image of your mother comes up, you start thinking about your mother. Or if memories arise of

someone ridiculing you, out of habit your mind goes back to that occasion, rekindling the emotions you felt at the time and thereby reinforcing them. But in this practice, whatever thoughts or mental images arise, you simply observe them, without distraction and without grasping. You nonconceptually note them as mental events in the present, without attending to their referents and without being either attracted to them or repulsed by them. You just let them be. In this way you can maintain a nonconceptual awareness of concepts.

As the old saying goes, "Sticks and stones can break your bones," but appearances to the mind cannot harm you if you don't grasp onto them, identify with them, and thereby empower them. As you settle the mind in its natural state—which is profoundly different from its habitual, dualistic state of distraction and grasping—you will find that it heals itself and unveils its own inner resources of well-being. Gyatrul Rinpoche told me, "When your mind is settled in its natural state, even if a thousand demons were to rise up to attack you, they could not harm you. And even if a thousand buddhas appeared to you in a vision, you would not need their blessing." When your mind is free of grasping, it provides no target; it can be harmed no more than the sky can be harmed by a missile attack. And when your mind is settled in its natural state, you discover for yourself the innate qualities of bliss, luminosity, and stillness that have always been there.

> Whatever kinds of mental imagery occur—be they gentle or violent, subtle or coarse, of long or short duration, strong or weak, good or bad—observe their nature, and avoid any obsessive evaluation of them as being one thing and not another.

In the practice of mindfulness of breathing, you are faced with the challenge of carefully observing, *without controlling,* sensations within the body associated with the breathing. Now you face a similar challenge of carefully observing events within the mind without regulating or evaluating them in any way. A Tibetan aphorism states, "Let your mind be a gracious host in the midst of unruly guests." In the shamatha practice of mindfulness of breathing, you let go of thoughts as soon as you detect them and return

your attention to the breath. But now, instead of letting thoughts *go*, you let them *be*. Don't prefer one kind of thought to another. Avoid all kinds of attraction to and repulsion from any mental imagery. Don't even prefer the absence of thoughts to the presence of thoughts. They are not the problem. Being distracted by and grasping onto thoughts is the problem. Recognize this crucial difference from the preceding practice.

With mindfulness of breathing, you measured the stability of your attention with respect to a continuous object—sensations of the breath. But when settling the mind in its natural state, thoughts are anything but continuous. They come and go sporadically, so the stability of attention is not in relation to a specific object. It's a quality of your subjective awareness. Even when thoughts are on the move, because you are not distracted by them and don't grasp onto them, your awareness remains still. This is called the *fusion of stillness and movement*.

During the course of this training, you will experience periods when your mind seems to be empty. Thoughts and mental images seem to have disappeared. This is a time to arouse the vividness of your attention to see if you can detect subtle mental events that have been lurking just beneath the threshold of your awareness. This is one reason for switching to this technique after you have achieved the fourth attentional stage: you are continually challenged to arouse the clarity of attention, but without losing its stability. Watch closely, but continue to breathe normally. Don't let the intensity of your awareness impede the natural flow of your respiration. If, even under the closest scrutiny, you don't detect any appearances in the space of your mental awareness, simply be aware of that empty space. The object of meditation in this practice is both the space of the mind and anything that arises within it. So you can always continue to practice, with or without distinct appearances arising in the mind.

> Let the heart of your practice be consciousness in its natural state, limpid and vivid. Acting as your own mentor, if you can bring the essential points to perfection, as if you were threading a needle, the afflictions of your own mindstream will subside, you will gain the autonomy of not succumbing to them, and your mind will

> constantly be calm and dispassionate. This is a sound basis for the arising of all states of meditative concentration on the stages of generation and completion.

While it is very helpful to practice under the guidance of a qualified teacher, when you are on your cushion, you need to be your own mentor, implementing the teachings given you by your mentor. This is a delicate practice, like threading a needle, not a Herculean effort like weight lifting. Recognize that in the practice of shamatha, "doing your best" doesn't mean "trying your hardest." If you're trying your hardest, you're trying too hard and you'll burn out if you persist in that way. By cultivating shamatha with intelligence, perceptiveness, patience, and enthusiasm, none of your mental afflictions will be healed irreversibly. They will still arise from time to time, but the more you advance, the more those afflictions will subside and the greater autonomy you will have from them. The result is increasing emotional balance and equanimity. Your psychological immune system is strengthened, so when events occur that were previously upsetting, you can now deal with them with greater composure. Your mind remains calm and it is not dominated by the passions of craving and hostility. This is a clear indication of heightened sanity. The "stages of generation and completion" mentioned above are the two phases of Buddhist tantric practice, and Lerab Lingpa points out here that success in this shamatha technique provides a sound basis for all such advanced meditative practices.

> This is like tilling the soil of a field. So from the outset avoid making a lot of great, exalted, and pointless proclamations. Rather, it is crucial to do all you can to refine your mind and establish a foundation for contemplative practice.

With these words, Lerab Lingpa concludes his quintessential instructions on settling the mind in its natural state. The achievement of shamatha by way of such practice is not the final fruition of Buddhist practice, any more than cultivating a field is the same as reaping its harvest. But such refinement of

the mind is an essential foundation for later practices that are designed to unveil the deepest potentials of consciousness.