

DIAGRAM OF SHAMATHA MEDITATION
PRACTICE OR 'TRANQUIL ABIDING'

(Tib. *zhi gnas*)

Primary consciousness itself is pure, yet habitual tendencies gathered over countless lifetimes have ensnared the mind in the fifty-one secondary mental consciousnesses. These habitual thought processes, which can be positive, neutral or negative, cause the mind to dwell continually in a state of unfocused distraction. The practice of *shamatha* meditation develops the ability to focus the mind in single-pointed equi-poise or perfect concentration, and is a prerequisite for the development of *vipashyana* or analytical insight meditation.

The Tibetan word for *shamatha* meditation (Tib. *zhi gnas*) means 'calm' (Tib. *zhi*) 'abiding' (Tib. *gnas*), or 'dwelling in peace'. *Shamatha* should ideally be practised in a secluded retreat situation, adopting the 'seven point meditation posture of Vairochana', with the legs crossed in '*vajrasana*' or reversed full lotus posture, the spine straight, right hand resting lightly on the left palm in the *dhyana mudra* of meditative absorption, neck slightly bent, eyes focused along the line of the nose, mouth relaxed, and the tongue held lightly against the upper palate. The object of concentration is usually the image of the Buddha or a deity. Formless concentration usually takes the breath as the object of contemplation.

The illustration of the development of mental tranquility is often painted as a fresco on monastery walls.

This mnemonic diagram depicts the nine progressive stages of mental development (Tib. *sems gnas dgu*), which are obtained through the 'six powers' of study, contemplation, memory, comprehension, diligence, and perfection.



Beginning at the start of the path in the lower right, the diagram shows a monk chasing, binding, leading, and subduing an elephant whose colour progresses from black to white. The elephant represents the mind, and its black colour the gross aspect of 'sinking' or mental dullness. The monkey represents distraction or mental agitation; and its black colour, 'scattering'. The hare represents the more subtle aspect of sinking or mental torpor. The hooked goad and lasso which the monk wields represent clear understanding and mindful recollection. The progressively diminishing flame, which occurs at intervals along the path, represents the decreasing degree of effort needed to cultivate understanding and recollection. The five sense objects of cloth, fruit, perfume, cymbals, and a mirror represent the five sensual sources of distraction.

At the end of the path single-pointed concentration is attained, and the 'purified elephant' of the mind is now completely submissive. The flying monk represents bodily bliss; and his riding of the elephant, mental bliss. Riding the elephant back triumphantly across the rainbow, wielding the flaming sword of perfect insight having attained the flame of clear understanding and mindfulness, represents the uprooting of samsara by the unity of *shamatha* and *vipashyana* which directly realises emptiness (*shunyata*).

Key to the nine stages of tranquil abiding (*shamatha*):

1. The first stage is attained through the power of study or hearing.
2. The monk fixes his mind on the object of concentration.
3. The lasso represents mindfulness or recollection.
4. The hooked elephant goad represents clear understanding.
5. The flame, which progressively diminishes along the path, represents the degree of effort needed to develop both recollection and understanding.
6. The elephant represents mind; its complete black colour represents the gross form of mental dullness or sinking.
7. The monkey represents mental agitation; its black colour represents distraction or scattering. The monkey at first runs wildly, leading the elephant.
8. The second stage is attained through the power of concentration.
9. This is achieved by lengthening the periods of concentration on the object.
10. The five senses of touch (cloth), taste (fruit), smell (perfumed conch), sound (cymbals), and sight (mirror), are the objects of distraction.
11. Beginning at their heads, the elephant and monkey begin to turn white. This shows the continuous progress in fixing and holding the object of concentration.
12. The third and fourth stages are attained through the power of memory or recollection.
13. The monk lassoes the elephant, fixing the wandering mind on the object.
14. The hare, which now appears on the elephant's back, represents the subtle aspect of sinking, or mental torpor. Here one is able to differentiate between the gross and subtle aspects of sinking.
15. The elephant, monkey, and hare look back; showing that having recognised these mental distractions, the mind turns back to the object of contemplation.
16. The meditator holds a clear and detailed conception of the object.
17. Attainment of the fifth and sixth stages of meditative absorption through the power of clear comprehension.
18. The monkey now follows the elephant; the arising of distraction diminishes.
19. Even the arising of virtuous thoughts must be perceived as a distraction from the object of concentration.
20. The monk hooks the elephant with his goad; the mind is stopped from wandering by clear understanding.
21. The mind is controlled.
22. The hare disappears and the mind is pacified.
23. The seventh and eighth stages are attained through the power of energetic perseverance.
24. The monkey leaves the elephant and now squats behind the monk in complete submission. However there are still slight traces of black; this shows that even the subtlest sinking and scattering may continue to arise. Should they begin to arise they can be eliminated with the slightest effort.
25. The monkey disappears and the elephant becomes completely white. The mind can now remain continually in absorption on the object of concentration.
26. Single-pointedness of mind.
27. The ninth stage of mental absorption is attained through the power of perfection.
28. Perfect equanimity. The path has ended and the elephant is at rest. From the heart of the meditating monk emanates a rainbow.
29. The monk flies alone; bodily bliss.
30. The monk rides the elephant; attainment of *shamatha*.
31. Riding the elephant across the rainbow; mental bliss.
32. The monk wields the flaming sword of perfect insight, and rides triumphantly back along the rainbow; samsara's root is destroyed by the union of *shamatha* and *vipashyana* (sword), with emptiness (*shunyata*) as the object of contemplation.
33. Control of the flame of supreme mindfulness and understanding represents the ability to examine the sublime meaning of *shunyata*: the knowledge of the ultimate reality of all phenomena.

The upper part of the illustration, where the rainbow emanates from the monk's heart, represents the tenth and eleventh stages of transcendental mental absorption. The tenth stage of bodily and mental bliss is symbolised by the flying monk and the monk riding the elephant. The eleventh stage is represented by the monk riding the elephant back across the rainbow. From the monk's heart emanate two dark rainbows, which the monk is just about to cut assunder with his flaming sword of wisdom. These two rainbows represent karmic hindrances and mental illusion (*klesha-varana*), and the obscurations of the instincts of mental distortion (*jneyavarana*).

A somewhat simpler but similar symbolic sequence for the attainment of meditative tranquility is found in the 'ten oxherding pictographs' of Zen Buddhism. Here the ox replaces the elephant, and in some Zen traditions the colour of the ox changes from black to white as the ox is glimpsed, found, herded, ridden, and finally forgotten. The ten oxherding images illustrate the search for the ox; seeing its footprints; catching the ox; herding it; riding the ox back home; forgetting it; forgetting the man who subdued it; returning to the place from which he started from; and appearing in the marketplace to teach and transform.

