

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 (ཀློང་སྦྱོང་—2 FPveloped 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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Meditation & Inner Practice

In a world where thinking is increasingly done elsewhere and at speed, the monastery keeps a slower discipline. Meditation here is not relaxation and not an escape from the intellectual work of the curriculum. It is the other half of it.

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 attention to what happened.

Two Kinds of Meditation

The tradition distinguishes stabilising meditation ('jog sgom) from analytical meditation (dpyad sgom). Stabilising meditation rests the mind on an object and keeps it there. Analytical meditation takes a topic apart — impermanence, the self, the causes of anger — with reasoning, until conviction shifts.

They are not alternatives. 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 is called the union of ཀློང་སྦྱོང་ལྷན་སྦྱོང་— [yan à

One clarification matters: in analytical meditation a monk is not arguing 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.

The Elephant Path

Calm abiding is developed through nine stages, and the tradition pictures them in a thangka found on the wall of almost every Tibetan monastery: a monk climbing a path after an elephant.

The elephant is the mind. The monkey is distraction. The rabbit is subtle dullness. The rope is mindfulness and the goad is introspection. At the bottom of the path the elephant is black and the monkey leads it. Stage by stage both whiten from the head down; the monkey turns back; the rabbit disappears. Beside the path a fire burns, representing the effort required, and it grows smaller as the stages pass.

By the ninth stage the elephant follows without being led, and the fire has gone out. No effort is needed to hold the object.

The image comes from Asa Ega 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.

Five Faults, Eight Antidotes

Tsongkhapa set out what goes wrong in meditation and what to do about it, in the Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path.

The five faults are laziness, which is not sitting down at all; forgetting the instruction, which is losing the object; laxity and excitement, dullness on one side and agitation on the other; non-application, noticing a fault and failing to apply the remedy; and over-application, continuing to correct when nothing needs correcting.

Against laziness there are four antidotes: faith, aspiration, exertion, and pliancy. Against forgetting, mindfulness. Against laxity and excitement, introspection. Against non-application, application. Against over-application, equanimity.

The central pair is mindfulness and introspection. Mindfulness holds the object; introspection watches whether it is still held. One does the work and the other checks it.

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 centuries ago.

What Monks Meditate On

Two bodies of practice supply the content. The lamrim — the stages of the path — was compiled by Ati ¶ after his arrival in Tibet in 1042 and given its great commentary by Tsongkhapa. It sets out twenty-one meditation topics, commonly cycled over three weeks.

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.

Within these sit two methods for generating compassion. The seven-point cause and effect works from equanimity through recognising all beings as having been one's mother, remembering their kindness, wishing to repay it, and affectionate love, to compassion and the resolve that follows. 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.

Tsongkhapa combined these two methods, usually taught separately, into a single eleven-point practice — an integration regarded as a particular contribution of this tradition.

The Same Faculty, Turned Inward

The debate courtyard trains a monk to find the weak point in a position and press until it gives. Analytical meditation turns that on his own habitual sense of how things exist.

This is why the study and meditation pillars are not separate enterprises. 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: his own unexamined sense of being a solid self in a world of solid things.

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, clear signatures — power changes of up to fifteen decibels in the most experienced monks, with a marked shift in the alpha peak that the researchers read 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 power-spectrum analysis.

There is something worth sitting with in that result. The practice that most resembles ordinary thinking is the one the instruments find hardest to see.