

**Transcript of the teachings by Khen Rinpoche Geshe Chonyi on
*Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds, 2014***

Root text: *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds* by Shantideva, translated by Toh Sze Gee. Copyright: Toh Sze Gee, 2006; Revised edition, 2014.

Lesson 2**18 February 2016**

Taking initiations. Chapter 8: Teachings on Concentration. Verses 8.1 to 8.4. Instructions on cultivating concentration: The reasons why it is necessary to accomplish calm abiding. Abandoning the class of things incongruous with calm abiding: Identifying the causes of attachment to the world. The antidotes to attachment.

TAKING INITIATIONS

I have been getting many questions about the upcoming initiations that will be conferred by Lama Zopa Rinpoche. As many people are wondering whether they should take the initiations or not, I will give my reply now.

In general, if one wants to study the module on the tantric paths and grounds, then on the basis of having faith and interest in tantra and the wish to study tantra in more detail, one needs an initiation before one can study that module.

There are different opinions among the lineage lamas as to whether one needs to have received tantric empowerments or a great initiation in order to study the tantric paths and grounds. I did ask Lama Zopa Rinpoche about this and Rinpoche's position is that it is better to study the tantric paths and grounds after having received an initiation.

In order to receive a great initiation in highest yoga tantra, one needs very stable and irreversible faith in and real devotion towards the person or vajra master who is giving the initiation. This is not negotiable and is very important. On top of that, one needs to have very stable and irreversible faith in tantra.

If one does not have stable faith and devotion towards the person who is giving the initiation, one may end up generating negative thoughts towards the guru. Some people may even end up giving up the guru or criticising him after taking the initiation. This will accumulate unbelievably heavy negative karma so this is something that one needs to consider.

If one doesn't have that strong irreversible faith in the vajra master who is giving the initiation, then it is better not to take the initiation. One needs to think about this because one needs strong irreversible faith in the vajra master who is giving the initiation. If one doesn't have that, then it is better not to take the initiation. If one doesn't have such stable devotion and proceed to take the initiation, one may end up receiving more loss than profit. So having very strong stable devotion towards the person who is giving the initiation is one of the criteria for taking the initiation.

I also get questions from people about whether one should take just one initiation or all the initiations. The answer to that depends on whether one can keep the commitments or not. The various initiations have their own commitments and if one can manage them, then one can go ahead and take the initiations. Otherwise, it is better to think twice.

For example, when it comes to the daily recitation commitments, the actual way to practise them is to reflect and meditate on them. It is not so much about verbal recitation. The minimum is to be able to recite verbally the words every day, without fail. For example, the Six Session Guru Yoga is meant to be meditated upon. However, if one can at least verbally recite the words three times in the morning and three times at night daily, then one would have fulfilled the commitment in the minimal way. Therefore, one has to check whether one can commit to this or not.

If I were to talk in a general way, we have all received the human life of freedoms and endowments. We have met with the Buddha's teachings; in particular, Buddhist tantra. Now we also have access to the opportunity to receive initiations from a truly qualified virtuous friend, Lama Zopa Rinpoche. Because of the coming together of all of these conditions in general, it will be good if we can take the initiations. As the saying goes, "If not now, when?"

There is a difference between participating in and receiving the initiation. One can participate in and take an initiation for as many times as one likes but whether one actually receives the initiation or not is a completely different matter.

Khen Rinpoche: My mother has taken numberless initiations. Whenever there are initiations, she goes. She has taken more initiations than me!

She doesn't have any proper lama. Whoever is giving initiations, she will go month after month. Then she comes back and she would say, "I have received 255 initiations." I would say, "Very good!" She takes them as blessings. To her, they leave imprints. She can't think much as she is a very simple woman. She goes everywhere to make offerings. She is very devoted.

Normally she doesn't know what the commitment is. She doesn't know anything. She only does OM MANI PADME HUM as her commitment. She does that happily.

Perhaps there are people who take initiations because their friends are taking them. They feel that they have to take them. Otherwise they feel left out or they feel they are losing out on something. But that is not the way to do it. That should not be a consideration at all when one is deciding whether to take an initiation or not.

One has to think for oneself whether one can fulfil the samaya and commitment.

Anyway, I think that as long as one has received a highest yoga tantra great initiation—it can be any highest yoga tantra great initiation—that would be sufficient for one to qualify to receive an explanation of tantra, especially the tantric paths and grounds.

I think it is mentioned in one of Jamyang Shyepa's commentary on a particular generation stage practice, it is better to receive initiations. It is good to receive many initiations because one places many virtuous imprints on the mind, even if one goes to

hell because of not keeping the commitments. This great lama said that it is alright if one goes to hell because of an initiation.

Then there are also some great lineage lamas who have said that one needs to think carefully before one takes an initiation with regard to whether one will be able to keep all the vows and recitation commitments. Otherwise, one will experience more loss than profit.

In summary, it is okay to take the initiations if in one's heart,

- one knows one has stable irreversible faith in and devotion towards the vajra master, the person who is giving you the initiation
- one has irreversible stable faith in tantra
- one thinks one is able to keep the vows and commitments and daily recitation commitments.

After having analysed well and one thinks that one possesses these prerequisites, then one should decide and take the initiations. As the saying goes, "If not now, when?" So there is no need to wait especially since the time of death is uncertain.

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## **CHAPTER EIGHT: TEACHINGS ON CONCENTRATION**

The chapter that comes after Chapter Seven on joyous effort in Shantideva's *Engaging in Bodhisattva Deeds* is Chapter Eight, *Teachings on Concentration* or meditative stabilisation.

Here, there is a discussion and presentation on:

- the instructions on cultivating concentration
- abandoning the class of things incongruous with calm abiding
- how to cultivate calm abiding

These are the three major outlines of Chapter Eight.

### **INSTRUCTIONS ON CULTIVATING CONCENTRATION**

*The reasons why it is necessary to accomplish calm abiding*

Verse 8.1

Having develop joyous perseverance in that way,  
I should place my mind in meditative stabilization.  
The man whose mind is distracted,  
Dwells between the fangs of afflictions.

Verse 8.2 a, b

Through the isolation of body and mind,  
No distractions will occur.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, joyous effort (or joyous perseverance) is enthusiasm and taking delight in virtue. It refers to the happy and enthusiastic mind when one is engaging in virtue.

But joyous effort alone is not enough. One also needs to engage in virtue with a single-pointed mind. For example, let's take our learning the Buddhadharma here. In this case, we are trying to find out more about the practice of calm abiding and developing concentration.

In order to develop an understanding of this topic, first we must receive and hear the instructions and listen to the explanations on the topic. When we listen to these explanations, we should do so with a happy, enthusiastic mind, a mind that is very interested and that takes delight in hearing the instructions and finding out more about the techniques for developing calm abiding and so forth.

In the process, with a mind that takes delight in learning this particular topic, we will remove many misconceptions and any lack of understanding we may have with regard to the topic. After we have removed all the misconceptions, doubts and wrong understanding of how calm abiding should be developed, we will acquire the correct understanding of how to go about developing calm abiding. Then we take these instructions to heart by actualising them in isolation. The kind of concentration that should be developed is a single-pointed mind that is not influenced by excitement and laxity.

If one has enthusiasm for virtue, one takes delight in virtue. What is wrong with engaging in virtue without a single-pointed mind that is not able to focus on the task at hand?

We will become easily distracted by various objects such as form, sound, smell, taste and touch, and even objects of the mental consciousness. Distracted, the mind moves from one object to another. Because of these distractions, many faults arise in our mind. That makes it difficult for us to achieve freedom and liberation.

If we don't have a single-pointed mind, we are like a person who is standing in the midst of all kinds of dangerous wild creatures that are just waiting to consume us. When our mind is constantly distracted, then literally we will be dwelling "between the fangs of afflictions." Our mind will be under the influence of the different kinds of afflictions that will harm us and take away our chances of achieving liberation. This explains the need to have single-pointedness of mind.

*Instructions on abandoning the class of things incongruous with calm abiding*

How do we achieve this single-pointedness of mind? We need to abandon distractions by isolating ourselves physically and mentally. A person who is intent on cultivating calm abiding and developing single-pointedness of mind has to isolate herself physically, i.e., she should not live in places where there are many people around and she should avoid getting involved in the hustle and bustle of life.

One has to isolate oneself physically from these situations. At a mental level, one has to be careful about paying attention to all kinds of discursive thoughts such as desire and attachment. One has to distance oneself from such distractions.

In general, for a beginner who wants to cultivate and actualise calm abiding, then choosing a correct and suitable external environment becomes very important. Of

course, this explanation is from the perspective of somebody who is intent on developing calm abiding.

The teachings tell us that we need to isolate ourselves physically. We need to live in a place that is very, very quiet. As beginners, our mind gets distracted very easily. Just by hearing something or seeing something, as soon as we come into contact with an object, all kinds of discursive negative thoughts, afflictions and distracted thoughts will arise. Therefore, living in a very quiet environment that is not busy becomes very important for a beginner who seeks to actualise calm abiding.

In order to develop calm abiding, one must abandon the unfavourable and discordant conditions. This is indicated by the last two lines of Verse 2.

Verse 8.2 c, d  
Therefore, I should abandon the world,  
And completely discard conceptualizations.

The external discordant factor to developing calm abiding is a busy life. We need to abandon the hustle and bustle of this busy modern life. Mentally, we also have to distance ourselves from all kinds of mental distractions.

Why are people unable to isolate themselves physically? Why are people unable to stop living a busy life? This is because people like a busy life. They like the hustle and bustle and are attached to it. In order to be able to physically isolate ourselves from a busy life, first we must identify what are the causes that make us want to be stuck in a busy life.

### **ABANDONING THE CLASS OF THINGS INCONGRUOUS WITH CALM ABIDING**

*Identifying the causes of attachment to the world*

The answer is in the next verse.

Verse 8.3a, b  
Because of attachment and due to craving for material gain and the like,  
The world is not abandoned

It is very obvious that we are not able to give up this busy life because of our attachment to it. In dependence upon grasping at a self, due to the view of the transitory collection, the holding onto a real “I”, from that arises grasping at “mine” and holding on to things as “mine.” Then we develop attachment for all kinds of things.

We should analyse this for ourselves and look at our own experiences. Whenever we get upset or whenever attachment or an affliction arises, those afflictions always arise in relation to the “self” that we identify ourselves to be. First, there is this very strong feeling of an “I” and we hold on to that. Based on this, we get attached to the “I”, the “me”. From that, either attachment or anger arises.

For us, I think it is clear that we can tell that the bigger our ego, the more attached we are to this sense of “I”. Likewise the anger, attachment and other afflictions that arise in dependence on this sense of “I” are much stronger.

Just think of our own experience. In general, when an attractive object presents itself to us, we usually develop attachment for it. When an unpleasant object comes into view or even when we think of an unpleasant object, we usually react with aversion and anger. Isn't that the case?

We need to think about this. Why are we attached to certain things and why are we averse to others? The reason we are attached to certain things or certain people is because they appear as pleasant and attractive to "me" and the reason why we get upset with a certain situation or certain people is because they appear to "me" as unpleasant. So it is always related to the "I".

This is clear. We do not get attached to a person or an object because that person or object appears as pleasant to our friend. In the same way, we do not get upset because an unattractive object is appearing to our friend. This is not how it works.

It is only when an attractive object or person appears as attractive in the view of the "I", to "me". Then we get attached to the object or person. Furthermore, the stronger our attachment to the "I", the stronger our cherishing for this "I", the stronger will be our attachment and anger that arise in dependence on these attitudes. This is very obvious.

It is important to strive in the method that will reduce our grasping at the "I". If we are able to reduce this ego-grasping, then our anger, attachment and the afflictions that arise in dependence upon this ego-grasping would be weaker as well. Therefore, as a method to eliminate or at least to reduce this ego-grasping, we have the presentation of the view, the nature of reality.

~ *The four tenet systems*

In our study of tenets, there are four Buddhist philosophical views. Each view has its own presentation as to what the "I" or what the self is.

Starting with the explanation of how there is no such thing as a permanent, unitary and independent "I" or self, we have an explanation of how the self or the person does not exist in a self-sufficient, substantially existent way either. Although in reality, an understanding of the "I" or person in such a way will not eliminate ego-grasping from its root, it will at least help to reduce our ego-grasping.

When we talk about the emptiness of the permanent, unitary and independent self, basically it is saying that there isn't an unchanging "I" that is a separate entity from the body. This is roughly what the lack of the permanent, unitary and independent self means.

The next explanation is more refined and pertains to how a person does not exist as self-sufficient substantially existent. What this means is that if the "I" is not outside, then is there an "I" inside, somewhere within the body and mind? When we say that there isn't a self-sufficient substantially existent person, what this means is that within the body and mind, there is nothing there that is the controller or owner of the body and mind. We do have these wrong conceptions. There are times when we think there is a real "me", an unchanging entity who is distinct from and exists separately from our body and mind.

But when we analyse and think about this logically, when we see that such an “I” has never existed and will never exist, then it helps to reduce our grasping at this “I” which has led to other problems for us. Similarly, if we understand that there isn’t such an “I”, that this “me” is not self-sufficient and does not exist substantially, it is also very helpful in reducing our very strong and coarse grasping at and clinging on to an “I”. When we are able to weaken these wrong conceptions, the afflictions that arise due to them will also be weaker.

In short, the first two lines of Verse 8.3 is saying that in dependence on our ego-grasping, holding on to a real “I”, then grasping at “mine” arises. From that, one develops attachment for sentient beings and also attachment for external objects like wealth, prosperity, reputation and so forth.

This explanation is the approach of the Great Exposition School (GES) and the Sutra School (SS). They assert that all afflictions and problems arise from holding on to an “I” that is self-sufficient substantially existent. Because of that, one develops attachment, anger and so forth. Then come all the problems. So if we are able to counteract and overcome this grasping at the self-sufficient substantially existent person, we will be able to remove all the afflictions. As such, the GES and the SS only talk about the selflessness of persons. They do not have an explanation of the selflessness of phenomena.

For the Mind Only School (MOS) and the Middle Way School (MWS), on top of their respective presentations on the selflessness of persons, they also present an explanation of the selflessness of phenomena. As such, they offer methods that are more powerful in dealing with ego-grasping.

They say that phenomena do not exist in the way they appear:

- The MOS asserts that external objects do not exist although there is the appearance of external objects and phenomena existing as separate entities from the consciousness. In reality, that is wrong. These are mistaken appearances. The MOS’s presentation of the selflessness of phenomena is that things do not exist, there are no external objects and everything is like a reflection of the mind.
- In the MWS, in general, they present the selflessness of phenomena in this way—that all phenomena that exist do not exist truly although they *appear* to exist truly. Because the MWS presents selflessness in terms of the perceiver and the perceived, their method of counteracting ego-grasping is much more powerful.

In short, the Mahayana tenets present the selflessness of phenomena. In essence, what they are saying is that although phenomena appear to exist in a certain way, in reality they do not exist in the way they appear, i.e., what you see is *not* what you get. Therefore, understanding their presentation of how things exist is a very powerful way to counteract our afflictions.

Attachment is the cause for taking delight in a busy life, constantly seeking material gain, wealth, power and reputation. Therefore, if we want to achieve the single-pointedness of mind, we have to counteract this attachment to a busy life which gives rise to so many discursive thoughts and distractions.

Verse 8.3 (c, d)  
Therefore, I shall entirely abandon these;  
The skilled analyze in this way.

“The skilled” or the wise ones will analyse in this way—what they need to cultivate and what they need to abandon.

*The antidote to attachment*

What then is the antidote that would enable us to abandon our attachment?

Verse 8.4  
Having understood that afflictions are completely destroyed  
By special insight endowed with calm abiding,  
First of all I should search for calm abiding.  
Further, this is achieved with joy by those unattached to the world.

When is calm abiding achieved? A mind that is able to focus single-pointedly on a chosen object without any laxity and excitement and that also possesses the bliss of physical and mental pliancy is called calm abiding.

After one has achieved this kind of concentration—calm abiding—the meditator proceeds to engage in the analytical meditation on emptiness. Comes the day when one actualises the special insight that focusses on emptiness, then for the first time, one would come to possess the actual antidote to the afflictions, the tool that would enable one to destroy ignorance.

Special insight focussing on emptiness is not achieved until the time when that analytical meditation on emptiness is able to induce the bliss of physical and mental pliancy. When that analytical meditation on emptiness is able to induce the bliss of physical and mental pliancy, that becomes the special insight focussing on emptiness.

- Calm abiding is a mind that possesses the bliss of physical and mental pliancy. This bliss of physical and mental pliancy comes about through placing the mind single-pointedly on an object.
- There is also the bliss of physical and mental pliancy that arises due to analysis. The mind that possesses this bliss of physical and mental pliancy that is induced through analysis is called special insight.

In the context of Verse 8.4, the special insight mentioned here is the special insight that is focussed on emptiness. This special insight that focusses on emptiness is the only tool that can overcome our ignorance. So in order to overcome our afflictions, we have to actualise this special insight focussing on emptiness. But in order to develop this special insight focussing on emptiness, first one must actualise calm abiding.

Actualise calm abiding → Develop special insight focussing on emptiness → Overcome ignorance

This explanation of how one must develop calm abiding prior to developing special insight is, in general, the procedure according to sutra.



In order for the mind to act as an antidote to the afflictions, particularly ignorance, that mind must see emptiness clearly. Emptiness must appear very clearly to that mind.

In order for emptiness to appear clearly to the mind, the mind must be able to abide single-pointedly on the object, emptiness. With the ability to abide single-pointedly on the object, in this case, emptiness, that would allow the meditator to experience a clear appearance of emptiness. He would then come to see emptiness clearly and directly.

However, one would not be able to overcome the afflictions simply by having a single-pointed mind. If one does not realise the object, emptiness, then no matter how stable and clear one's concentration may be, one will not be able to overcome the afflictions.

This is clear when we look at the gods of the form and formless realms. In order to be born into the form and formless realms, one must have achieved calm abiding already.

- If we look at the form realms, we start from the level of the first concentration, second concentration, third concentration up to the fourth concentration.
- If we look at the formless realms, there are four levels too all the way up to the highest level called the peak of cyclic existence.

The gods in these realms have unbelievable concentration. They can stay focussed for eons! But they still have to take rebirth after their karma finishes for that rebirth in the form or formless realms. This is very clear. This shows that they still have afflictions in their mental continua because they have not abandoned ignorance. Therefore, they have no choice but to take rebirth.

- Therefore, the main purpose of actualising calm abiding is to have the means to actualise special insight.
- The purpose of actualising the special insight focussing on emptiness is to destroy our ego, our ignorance and our afflictions.

In order to destroy our afflictions, we *must* have the special insight focussing on emptiness. But prior to actualising the special insight focussing on emptiness, we must achieve calm abiding. This is the reason for this discussion on the need to develop calm abiding.

#### ~ *The paths and grounds*

In our discussion of the five paths and ten grounds, when is the path of preparation achieved? The path of preparation is achieved when one actualises the special insight focussing on emptiness. When one achieves the special insight focussing on emptiness, simultaneously one achieves the path of preparation

Therefore, when one achieves the special insight focussing on emptiness, one achieves the heat stage of the path of preparation. Once one enters the path of preparation, as one progresses through the different levels of the path of preparation, one gains the ability to harm or overcome the manifest apprehension of true existence. One is able to counteract to some extent dualistic appearance. As dualistic appearance gradually diminishes, one's ability to harm the manifest apprehension of true existence increases. Comes the time when all dualistic appearances have subsided, the yogi or meditator will see emptiness directly.

When the yogi or meditator sees emptiness directly, not only is he able to harm the manifest apprehension of true existence, he is able to abandon also the artificial (or intellectually acquired) conception of true existence together with its seeds.

Then on the first to the eighth grounds of the path of meditation, progressively, the meditator is able to harm the innate apprehension of true existence together with its seeds. When he reaches the eighth ground, the meditator is able to destroy the innate apprehension of true existence together with its seeds.

From the first to the eighth ground, the meditator gains the ability to overcome the innate apprehension of true existence together with its seeds through a path that unifies method and wisdom. Through this union of method and wisdom, the bodhisattva is able to destroy the innate apprehension of true existence together with its seeds on the eighth ground.

When we look at the entire five paths and ten grounds, we can look at them from the angle of how one comes to develop the wisdom realising emptiness and how that wisdom progresses.

Due to the factor of method, the wisdom realising emptiness becomes more and more powerful as the bodhisattva moves from path to path and from ground to ground. With the support of method, the bodhisattva is able to overcome even the predispositions of ignorance. When even the subtlest stains, the subtlest predispositions of ignorance, are removed, then the bodhisattva becomes a buddha and achieves the Mahayana path of no-more-learning.

## **SUMMARY**

The point that we must focus on is this: In order to destroy our afflictions, we have to actualise the special insight focussing on emptiness. That is the point. Why is this so? This is what we need to ask ourselves. This is what we really need to think about and analyse in detail.

We need to be able to answer these questions for ourselves:

- Why do I need to have the wisdom realising emptiness?
- In particular, why do I need this special insight focussing on emptiness?
- Why would I not be able to overcome my attachment if I don't realise emptiness?

If we don't realise emptiness, there is no way for us to overcome our attachment. The earlier verses say that as long as we hold on to and grasp at the real "I", there will always be room for developing anger and attachment. If that is the case, then as long as we don't get rid of this grasping of an "I", then there is no way we can get rid of attachment. In order to overcome and to destroy this ego-grasping, the clinging to a real "I", the only antidote is to realise selflessness.

Having said this, another question that we must really think about, analyse and ask ourselves is this: "*Why* must I realise emptiness in order to overcome this ego-grasping?"

In order to be able to answer this question well, first we must have at least some rough idea of what ego-grasping or self-grasping is. Experientially, what is this apprehension of the self, this holding on to the self? We must get some experience of what this self-grasping or this ignorance is. What kind of mind is it? How does it work? Is it a factually concordant mind or factually discordant mind? In particular, what is its mode of apprehension, i.e., how does it view the world?

It is only when we have some understanding and feeling for this ignorance that we will come to understand that the only way to destroy our ego is to generate a mind whose mode of apprehension—way of seeing the world—is completely different to that of self-grasping. If we analyse in this way, we will understand that the only way to uproot or overcome ignorance is to generate a mind whose mode of apprehension is completely opposite to that of ignorance.

This is the sequence:

- In order to overcome our afflictions or delusions, we have to attain the special insight focussing on emptiness.
- In order to attain that, first we must achieve calm abiding.
- In order to achieve calm abiding, first we must distance ourselves from the unfavourable conditions or discordant factors of calm abiding. Basically, we have to distance ourselves from the objects of attachment and distraction that are sentient beings and the objects of attachment and distraction that are not sentient beings.
- In order to do that, we must take joy and delight in and be enthusiastic about wanting to isolate ourselves physically and mentally to be able to settle down to actualising calm abiding.

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Question: What is the difference between the manifest apprehension of true existence and the intellectually acquired apprehension of true existence?

Answer: When we talk about manifest afflictions, there could be instances where they are the artificial (or intellectually acquired) conception of true existence. But there could be cases also where they are innate conception of true existence.

Question: You spoke of the calm abiding that is endowed with the bliss of physical and mental pliancy. When you switch to the analytical meditation focussing on emptiness, does that bliss of physical and mental pliancy temporarily cease? Because after that, your meditation induces another bliss of physical and mental pliancy.

Answer: I guess it is possible to have the bliss of physical and mental pliancy *before* achieving special insight. After achieving calm abiding, one already has the bliss of physical and mental pliancy. Up to the time before one achieves special insight, it is possible to have the bliss of physical and mental pliancy because one doesn't lose the calm abiding that one has achieved. It is not as if after one has achieved calm abiding, while one is working to achieve special insight, one's calm abiding is lost suddenly. Special insight is attained within calm abiding. Within the state of calm abiding, one does one's analytical meditation, so one doesn't lose one's calm abiding.

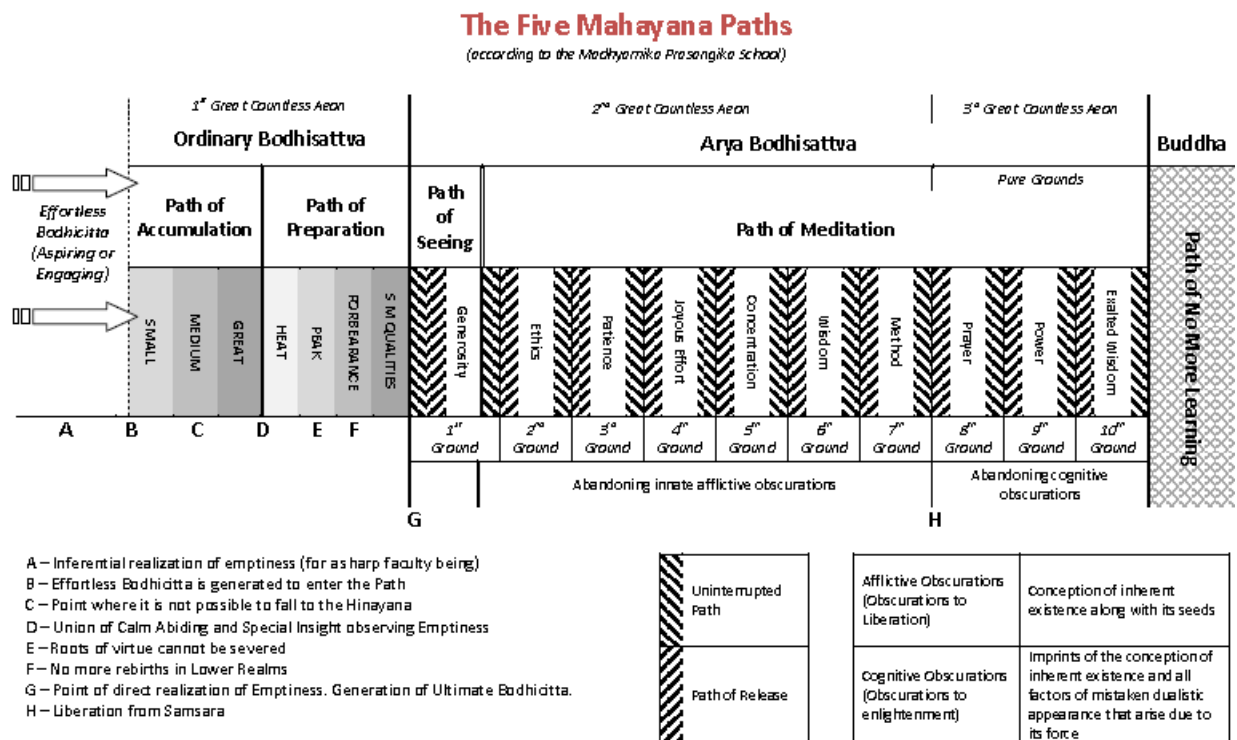
Student: (inaudible).

Answer: The bliss of physical and mental pliancy that is conjoined with calm abiding is induced through placing the mind single-pointedly on the object. It is not induced by analysis.

Student: (inaudible).

Answer: In order for it to be calm abiding, there must be the bliss of physical and mental pliancy. That bliss on physical and mental pliancy comes from focussing the mind single-pointedly on an object. That bliss doesn't come from analysis.

In order for it to be special insight, it must be conjoined with the bliss of physical and mental pliancy that is induced through the force of analysis.



Interpreted by Ven. Tenzin Gyurme; transcribed by Phuah Soon Ek, Vivien Ng and Aki Yeo; edited by Cecilia Tsong.