

## **The Dynamic Mandala**

### **- The five principles of practice in Triratna as an 'integrated', somatic shamatha-vipashyana**

This approach assumes a fair degree of familiarity with the five principles of the system of practice and of the basic meditation practices we introduce in Triratna, through which people to begin to embody them. In practice, generally speaking, some years' regular practice of mindfulness of breathing, metta bhavana, dharma reflection and just sitting are sufficient – it does not necessitate having practiced a sadhana.<sup>1</sup>

As regards your existing meditation practices, it very likely will involve simplifying and honing them down to essentials. I'll also be suggesting some variant methods to the same ends. The underlying principle here is that as one feels one's way into any particular practice, be it mindfulness of breathing or whatever, the practice in its original form will change through one's own engaging, experiment and play with the approach. This means discovering what is working – getting the results 'advertised' - and what is not. It's axiomatic that any practice that is persistently not getting you into actual experience of the principle it's supposed to lead to, despite best efforts, is best put aside for the present. Its time may come, or you may find a way to the principles it involves through a different form of practice.

#### **Brief overview of the integrated approach:**

1. "Integration" – becoming present in our experience by attending to posture, soma, hara, core, breath. As hindrances abate, shamatha manifests.
2. "Positive emotion" – further 'integrating' with the direct somatic experience of the heart centre and its qualities. Opening to any feelings that are present, letting them be what they are. Opening to kindness, sensitivity, confidence, unconditional love, compassion, etc. Allowing or simply noticing that the heart qualities are boundless.
3. "Spiritual death" – now, integrating vipashyana inquiry into direct experience. Using prajna 'wise discernment' as a nonconceptual 'tool' to become experientially clear regarding our essential nature and what is. Somatically, exploring shape, boundaries, somatic space, sensations, somatic energy. Inquiring into all kinds of sense experience for the substantial entity which our self-narrative posits that "I am".
4. "Spiritual rebirth" – the corollary of any seeing-through of a previously held illusion (i.e. a "spiritual death"), is the state of positive freedom from that illusion and seeing 'what is', in its absence. With any such deepening or paradigm shift, there sooner or later comes an arising of unintegrated 'stuff' that needs integrating – this is the 'work' of the spiritual rebirth aspect.

5. "Receptivity" – Effortless and spontaneous integration and embodiment of all the previous principles. Formless shamatha-vipashyana. Wholeness, undividedness.

## Details

The practices done on the retreat are mostly mentioned only briefly, as a reminder.

At any given moment you'll be working with one of the principles mainly, but aspects of the others are potentially involved. The idea is to "integrate" the successive principles – the 'previous' ones are carried on into the next principle that's being brought into focus.

## "Integration"

**Posture** as a way into embodiment and presence. Points for enhancing posture somatically include:

Grounding/earthing - bringing awareness to the strong sensations at the base of our posture (buttocks, legs, feet). Aware of the effects of gravity, a direct 'energetic' connection with the earth.

Sense of 'lift' or rising energy via breathing up from the earth, through the core, or using the 'sky hook' tugging at the top of the head.

Alignment and balance – tuck chin without bending neck forwards and subtly check whether the torso is leaning over in one direction or other. Find the 'sweet spot' of optimum poise in the upper body.

Relax – let go of whatever tensions, contractions etc. *can* be let go of. There will most likely be tensions that are resistant at present, but explore to what extent they will allow release.

**Getting into "basic presence" (access):** Whatever somatic method you are using for 'integration', it's a question of addressing whatever factors are hindering you from steady presence in whatever you're focusing on. You're in access or what I'm calling "basic presence" when the hindrances are all in abeyance.

**A somatic way of addressing hindrances:** Having a sense of the hara, core and heart are the basis of this approach. This approach doesn't interrupt your 'integration' practice insofar as you are still focusing on an aspect of your somatic experience.

With 'sinking' hindrances (sloth, torpor), bring the awareness up to the crown of the head and open the eyes, maybe looking straight ahead or slightly upwards. With 'upwards' or heady hindrances (restlessness/anxiety and doubt), try "enfolding" the thoughts in awareness and on the in-breath, bringing them down into the hara where, on the out-breath, they dissolve. With both desire (projecting

forward, towards) and aversion or ill-will (projecting backwards, away), bring awareness strongly into the core, i.e. the part of the 'central channel' behind the heart and just in front of the spinal column.

If these somatic approaches don't work for you – use other appropriate antidotes.

### **“Positive emotion”**

On the basis of somatic integration, bring awareness to the heart centre – another aspect of the soma - as you're experiencing it now. What are its qualities now? Be open to whatever turns up, turn towards it. This being-with, intimacy with what is here, is already an activity of metta and compassion.

Metta – benevolence, goodwill, kindly intention – and other divine abode qualities need to be 'simple' to be integrated. It's fine to do the full metta bhavana practice if this is helpful or needful at this stage, but what is 'integrated' is the simple sense of all-pervading metta that the final stage involves. This involves first just pervading 'what is here' in direct experience, i.e. everything that "I am". Keep with awareness of the heart and whether the benevolence seems to be located in, or radiate from, the heart. There can come a moment when the heart centre 'ignites' with the divine abode quality, but don't be concerned if it doesn't happen in this way for you.

Then recognise that the boundary of 'what I am' is just a mental assumption and can be let go. The benevolence or compassion etc. can now become boundless, limitless. It can be 'without an object', which means simply for everyone and everything, or particular people and beings can come to mind – there aren't any rules, let it take its course.

### **“Spiritual death”**

To integrate the spiritual death or vipashyana aspect is straightforward when the vipashyana is somatic. You've already become integrated somatically with the positive emotion being integral to this. Now you integrate the spiritual death aspect by non-conceptually inquiring into direct experience of the body.

Spiritual death has two aspects – the wisdom practices we do in order to make the dharma teachings experiential and any actual arising of insight, the latter being a 'seeing through' or 'seeing things clearly'. We'll look at the second of these more under the heading of spiritual rebirth.

We protect "our-selves" by fiercely maintaining our mind-made bounds, *living* in our minds (a "left brain"-oriented way of being). Somatic approaches to spiritual death involve inquiring into our direct experience of the body and inquiring directly into our beliefs around boundaries in various ways. We maintain boundaries for ego-protection and these involve and reinforce our clinging to the notion of a substantial, separate 'self' entity.

Inquire directly (non-conceptually) into:

- Your notion of 'form' and the fundamental boundaries you create and sustain – primarily self vs. world
- Inquire directly into boundaries, size, shape etc. of body. Are they as you *think* they are?
- Inquire into a sense of 'solidity' regarding body experience vs. finding as sense of 'somatic space'. This can lead to direct experience of openness / emptiness of soma.
- Inquire into whether you actually experience an 'inside' and 'outside', especially regarding sphere of the somatic body and sphere of sounds.

### **“Spiritual rebirth”**

Spiritual rebirth as a principle is the natural corollary of a spiritual death. As mentioned above, an actual experience of 'spiritual death' or vipashyana is an arising of insight – a shift from “what I thought” was the case about some aspect of “me” or “the world” to a clear, experiential, non-conceptual knowing “this is how it actually is”. This means an aspect of delusion has been seen through. Here, spiritual rebirth arises as a direct knowing of this together with a genuine shift in our way of being. What we've seen through will be one of our self-sustaining 'ego stratagems'. These stratagems always involve self-referential, afflictive 'negative' emotions (*klesha*).

As these stratagems cause and indeed are dukkha, when one of them has been seen through, there is a sense of liberation and freedom. This is the 'positive' corollary of a spiritual death and can be quite blissful for a while. Sometimes it's not so much blissful as just a kind of wholesome feeling – it just feels 'right'.

Enjoy it when it's like this because generally, sooner or later, it just becomes the 'new normal' and no longer feels like anything special. Though actually, if you look back, you'll almost certainly notice that there is less secondary dukkha in your experience now. Another very likely development following any such shift in our being is the emergence of previously unacknowledged layers of reactivity. This is good news! Working with this insightfully is the active aspect of spiritual rebirth.

The fundamental 'basic' insight – the actual spiritual death – with which the 'transcendental path' starts is seeing directly the illusoriness of the view we have of 'me' (*atta*) as potentially permanent, satisfactory and substantial. Put another way, it's a direct seeing that the supposed 'self' is merely a product of our internal narratives (stories) – it doesn't exist outside of our narratives. Thus the self-view can also be described as the 'narrative self'<sup>2</sup>. Either way, this view is what is seen through.

As long as the self-view is intact, there is always an underlying sense of lack – sometimes described by theists as a ‘God-shaped hole’. Whether we’re theists or not, all humans feel this lack as it’s a fundamental aspect of ‘secondary’ dukkha, and we attempt to remedy it via acquisition and rejection, i.e. getting what we want (craving) and avoiding whatever feels threatening (aversion). This ‘hole’ can never be filled because it is ultimately nothing other than the very view, or rather deeply held belief, that we are separate and lacking.

The self-view together with the craving and aversion which support it arise directly from delusion or ignorance (*avidya*) – literally our ‘not-knowing’ that permanence, satisfactoriness and substantiality are simply unavailable. The ‘narrative self’ – our mind – is always seeking something which we hope will permanently and dependably fill the ‘empty hole’ in our being thus confirming our substantiality and giving us the real lasting satisfaction we long for. This is never going to happen – because it’s based on the delusion that permanence, satisfactoriness and substantiality are actually available.

All these stratagems to ‘fill the hole’, are called *kleshas*, or ‘afflictions’. Kleshas are ‘self-support stratagems’ which have become deeply entrenched, compulsive habits (*samskaras*) in which we impulsively and compulsively engage. As the dharma primarily addresses the cause and cessation of dukkha, our practice is first and foremost oriented to countering and seeing-through the kleshas.

We counter them initially – and indispensably – through undertaking ethical precepts and cultivating states of *shamatha* or ‘calm abiding’, in which the hindrances are in abeyance. We ultimately see through them via the practice of vipashyana or spiritual death. In terms of the ‘integrated practice’ there are two ways that you might approach the vipashyana aspect. One is called ‘bringing the kleshas to the path’ – this is from Mahamudra, but it’s actually found in various forms in all the major Buddhist paths and involves experientially deconstructing negative emotions and seeing their emptiness directly.

The other has been characterised as “sitting with your own shit”. This is also known – less colloquially ☺ – as shamatha-vipashyana.

For shamatha-vipashyana practice, set up your meditation posture and get to a point where all the principles so far are integrated and accessible. Then sit, without deliberately moving, with whatever experiences, feelings, emotions and so on arise, but *resist impulses*. Impulses to move, scratch etc. are a quick fix for any uncomfortable feelings. By resisting the impulses, the uncomfortable feelings and embodied (unconscious) traumas we’ve been resisting then emerge into consciousness.

If an impulse takes you “out of the practice”, come back to the posture: grounding, poise/balance, breathing ‘up’ the core, tucked chin, relax. This ‘downregulates’ you from “flight, fight, freeze” reactions in a very direct way. Then breathe into the hara – lying down or sitting up. Relax and connect with the

open, impartial space-awareness of the soma and deeply feel the sensations. This can be very effective in releasing and healing traumas<sup>3</sup>.

### “Receptivity”

In terms of the dynamic mandala, this is the central principle, which embodies or integrates all the others. Taking one's place in the centre, there is no doing or cultivation (*bhavana*) – it's a “non-practice” of just sitting, a formless meditation. It's just a simply being – whatever happens just happens. This means there is no interference from the ‘narrative self’. While thoughts about just about anything can still arise, they are just passing through – there is no ‘stickiness’.

While this is what might *optimally* be happening in just sitting, what actually arises will tend to be a reflection of where we are with the other four principles. Sangharakshita recommended just sitting at the end of any other practice and in terms of the integrated practice, what transpires in the just sitting will reflect which principle we've mainly been working with. For example, if we're working mainly with integration and hindrances are still present, the just sitting is likely to full of prapanca. It's nevertheless still worth just sitting at the end of the meditation period because sometimes the very effort that we are making is keeping us in prapanca rather than helping release it. This is often the case when it's a forced and goal-oriented kind of effort.

Similarly, whether we have reached the point of basic somatic presence (access), opened up heart qualities (benevolence, etc.), got a sense of the boundlessness of the body or are assimilating an insight that has arisen, the just sitting will tend to reflect and embody this effortlessly. So the centre of the mandala has a kind of chameleon-like quality – it reflects whatever and wherever we ‘are’, which in principle could be anything from complete delusion to complete awakening.

However, if the other four principles have been well integrated, just sitting can be a genuine state of shamatha-vipashyana, a relaxed, effortless basic presence imbued with openness or receptivity and absence of ego-grasping. This is where the formless or ‘non-forming’ / ‘unformed’ (*asankhata*) nature of things can potentially come ‘into view’ spontaneously.

Non-forming is in contrast to forming (*sankhata*). Forming is another way of talking about the deluded mental activity which characterises ‘samsara’. Having integrated the other four principles and just sitting in a very positive, open and receptive state, some kind of dharma ‘pointing’ to or ‘pointing-out’ of ultimate truth can now be very effective. If the words or images strike home, mental ‘forming and fashioning’ can suddenly cease of itself and there is a glimpse – or more than a glimpse – of non-forming, or what is “unborn, unbecome, unmade, unfabricated”<sup>4</sup>

At this point it can be helpful to have some very pithy 'pointing-out' text or phrase at your disposal, such as the Buddha's teaching to Bahiya<sup>5</sup>, or "Form is emptiness, emptiness itself if form" from the Heart Sutra, or part of Padmasambhava's direct introduction to the nature of mind from 'Self-liberation Through Seeing with Naked Awareness'<sup>6</sup>. There are plenty of other examples - though this seems to be most effective if you hear someone else saying it out loud. If no-one else is available, try bringing the phrase or the part of it that resonates most to mind and then just let go and relax - there is nothing you can do to 'make it happen'.

### **Tejananda, Dharmadhara Retreat Center, CA May/June 2019)**

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<sup>1</sup> This can certainly be done in relation to sadhana, however. One possibility would be to do the entire 'integrated mandala' of practices while self-visualised as the deity.

<sup>2</sup> See Jeffery A. Martin "The Finders"

<sup>3</sup> Note that this refers to 'normal' levels of life-trauma. The resolution of extreme traumas such as PTSD need specialist attention. See Reginald Ray "The Practice of Pure Awareness" for more on this as well as much else about somatic meditation.

<sup>4</sup> ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṅkhatam

<sup>5</sup> "Bahiya, you should train yourself thus: In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed. In reference to the cognised, only the cognised. That is how you should train yourself. When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognised in reference to the cognised, then, Bahiya, there is no you in terms of that. When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of dukkha."

<sup>6</sup> "Now, the method of entering into intrinsic awareness involves three considerations: Thoughts in the past are clear and empty and leave no traces behind. Thoughts in the future are unconditioned by anything. And in the present moment, when you remain in your own condition without constructing anything, Awareness at that moment in itself is quite ordinary. And when you look into yourself in this way nakedly (without any discursive thoughts), Since there is only this pure observing, there will be found a lucid clarity without anyone being there who is the observer; Only a naked manifest awareness is present." (Abridged)