

“The Less Dust, the More Trust”

Participating in
The Shamatha Project
Meditation and Science

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Introduction

What does it mean, “settling the mind in its natural state”? Who am I, who are we, what might be the natural state? The least thing I can do is to bring a number of fresh notebooks and pens for jotting down, reporting. (Diary, September 2007)

In this book I present the story of my participation in the Shamatha Project, addressing Buddhism, concentration-calm practices, and meditation research. With diary fragments, dream log, and audio transcripts communicating my personal experiences I hope to give you, reader, a feel of how it is to be participating in such a project. I present the up-to-date research outcomes, that focus on the effects of the various practices on attention and emotion regulation, and on health. They include groundbreaking findings of effects up to the chromosome level.

Every chapter in this book includes a guided meditation. The book is structured in a way that it can provide you with various threads. You can read it, for instance, as an overview of the Shamatha Project, with a window into one participant’s experiences with the project and the practices. Additionally, you may read it as an exploration into Buddhist studies, with a focus on psychological and scientific understanding of meditation. Most importantly, however: you can read it as a personal journey for yourself, combining it with taking up the meditation practices, with the guidance that is given throughout the book, including responses to questions that came up for us participants. So: you may immerse yourself into the practices and embark on your own nourishing journey, with guided meditations. In that way you will be cultivating your mental balance and well-being. This I can already give away: the science findings show wide-ranging benefits of the retreat experience for the participants. For myself, personally arising in flesh and blood body-mind out of the statistics database, I can only affirm this, in my felt sense

experience!

How did I get to be a participant? Let me start with the beginning.

Once upon a time

In September 2006, in a far and desolate, yet inspiring corner of the Netherlands, a course was offered: "The sense and meaning of meditation: an interactive retreat with Alan Wallace." Located below sea-level at Naropa Institute in Cadzand, we participants shared Wallace's enthusiasm about the Shamatha Project that would combine three months of residential meditation retreat with state-of-the-art scientific research. Shamatha refers to concentration-calm meditation. Two shamatha retreats of three months' duration were going to take place in 2007. Some of my deep longings were coming together here: for quite a time, I've had the wish to participate in a meditation retreat of several months' duration, and combining this with research would add an extra fulfilling dimension to it. Inquiring about the possibility of participation, I received Alan Wallace's declining smile: oh, no, the waiting list is already too long ...

Months later, I just thought: nothing wrong with being placed on a long waiting list, without much hope that anything would come from it. And then, at a certain moment I happened to be the person for the matching of the groups on demographic, meditational and psychological variables (including age, sex, education, and meditation experience) that was needed. Just a few weeks before the start of the Fall retreat I bought my flight ticket, and in September 2007 I happily found myself back on the shamatha cushion, hooked up to a monitor, 8000 feet up in the rugged Rocky Mountains.

In what follows, you read about my questions, wonders, confusions and understandings, in these three months of meditation and science, and daily "ordinary life," during this extraordinary period of time. Next to reflections from this period, I include diary musings from more recent times, showing how the project continued to

ripple through my life. I will focus specifically on one form of the shamatha meditations that we practiced, “Settling the mind in its natural state.” This one practice has interested and fascinated me specifically: as a personal interest, and connecting with my work-background in “minding the mind” and understanding the mind, with others, in psychotherapy and psychiatry. The name of the practice sounds intriguing to me, to the Western ear. I’m aware that I can have ideas about these notions, and I wonder about my culture and time-bound understandings. How do they relate to this Tibetan practice that originated many centuries ago, far away? What might it be, the natural state? This question will resonate and accompany us, sometimes more on the foreground, sometimes more in the background.

“The less dust, the more trust”

The less dust, the more trust: these words are heading the title of this book. They combine into one of the one-liners or little mantras that just came up during retreat, while I went for a walk in the mountains. It was a clear day, I was enjoying breathing this crispy Rocky air, and viewing the radiant, contrast-rich autumn colors. From the Shambhala Mountain Center, where we lived, many paths go up the foothills. I often walked up, in this magic valley scenery, through the aspen and then pine tree woods, then higher up where just rocks remained, with an immense sky above. Wind on my cheeks, and increasingly wide, fresh, clear scenery, that invited for freshness inside. To me, it feels like I still carry these mantra words with me, as a body-mind anchor for the whole retreat experience, including sense impressions, perceptions, musings, memories of feelings, people, interactions, some of them to be described.

In the mantra “The less dust, the more trust,” the dust refers to the expression: “beings with little dust in their eyes,” meaning beings who will be able to understand the Buddhist *Dhamma* teachings. The words refer to those who will be able to understand the truth of phenomena, including themselves. *Dhamma* is the Pali

term, in the canonical language of Buddhism, *Dharma* the term in Sanskrit, the universal language of ancient Indian culture. The expression of “beings with little dust” figures in the *Ayacana Sutta*, “The Request.” This *Sutta*, discourse of the Buddha, tells about the Buddha Shakyamuni, who after his awakening at first was hesitant to teach *Dhamma*, as very few beings might understand his teachings. Then the compassionate god Brahma Sahampati, aware of the deep suffering in the world and the need for this wisdom, convinced the Buddha to teach the *Dhamma* to beings in the world, with this plea: “Let the Blessed One teach the *Dhamma*! ... There are beings with little dust in their eyes who are falling away because they do not hear the *Dhamma*. There will be those who will understand the *Dhamma*.” Luckily, as it is said, then the Buddha, out of compassion for beings, surveyed the world. “He saw beings with little dust in their eyes and those with much, those with keen faculties and those with dull, those with good attributes and those with bad, those easy to teach and those hard.”¹ Here, we may all feel included. Any lesser particle of dust, every particle removed or dissolved will contribute to our seeing in more real and realistic ways, and acting more wisely.

Regarding trust: this certainly included my personal sense of trust, or lack of that. Interestingly, most traditions in Buddhism see trustful confidence or faith as an important quality. Trust must be balanced by wisdom, and can be seen as an accompaniment of meditation. It begins, in my experience, with becoming aware of this unease, the agitation, the reactivities in our ways of addressing ourselves and others. And then, somehow trust in the Buddha, his teachings and the community of those who have followed and realized the teachings can become a starting point for embarking on a path, a quest. This may regard the Buddha, or other wise and compassionate teachers. If we didn’t have some initial trust in the fact that there is a way out of suffering, and some seed of understanding the nature of suffering, would we ever begin to search a path out of suffering, with any hope of finding it?

On my way

A few words about my on-going journey on the path, about what went before, are appropriate here. During my whole life I've been intrigued and fascinated by the mysteries of the mind. Living life has been the laboratory for exploration, reflection and deepening awareness. Trust and dust: there have certainly been times that I had little trust in myself and my experiences. Getting to trust ourselves and our experiences includes that we get to see the many ways that something in us may lead to deceiving ourselves, in distorting perceptions, sensations and emotions. For periods in my life this has been the case for me, generating and maintaining a dusty atmosphere. Both the sense of intrigue, and the suffering brought about by these distortions led me into psychotherapy as a patient. Enriched with inspiring therapists and teachers and with some tools for living a more truthful life, still intrigued and fascinated, I trained for being able to help others. In psychotherapy and psychoanalysis practice, I met others like myself, with their sufferings, unease, stress and reactivities, seeing how we all share in living our lives with various degrees of ignorance and distortions. I've been engaged in the psychotherapy field, with persons who, next to having mental and emotional problems, also showed immense potential. I had the privilege to work with adults and children, and for a time specifically with people with a history of migration, loss and homelessness. Together with these involvements, there were many years of meditation and spiritual practice, in various traditions. These, I feel, have been crucially important in my development and unfolding and being more naturally present in life, including work relations. With the mindful psychotherapy and meditation flows through my life and veins, my focus of interest and research have increasingly included persons' surprising developmental capacities and resilience in the face of hardship. There may be serious mental problems. However, there's always this unique, impermanent balance that also includes an impulse for development, maturation and evolution, with naturally manifesting greater compassion, including for

oneself. These wholesome capacities and abilities can be cultivated, trained and strengthened. This we can experience ourselves, we can see this before our eyes; but we do not read about it enough in most textbooks. These capacities and abilities are much needed in this world that has witnessed and is witnessing so much pain, self-limitation and suffering. Buddhism has graphically sketched the various domains. On the one hand, there are these domains of suffering that are inevitably part of life (including ageing, sickness, death). On the other hand, there are the domains that are much man-made, woman-made, “reactive mind-made.” Unwholesome traits that have been “made,” conditioned, can to a large extent be de-conditioned. Wholesome traits can be trained: this is one of the positions that, I hope, can be strengthened with this book. As it is said: train your mind, change your brain. Neuroplasticity and the potential for transformation are “on” and in action all the time. Neuroplasticity can be invited for training resilience in pain, and for cultivating loving kindness, genuine happiness and trust. Training and cultivating attentional trust turns out to go in synergy with allowing dust to dissolve.

What you will find in this book

Let me elaborate a bit more on what weaves together in this writing.

First, I draw on my own first person subjective impressions as a participant in the Shamatha Project and on later understandings, often in diary form. The scientific aspects of the Project and Buddhist meditation that are addressed include the objective recent research outcomes. They include findings in follow-up measurements, and also plans for new follow-up data collection yet to come.

Second, as to Buddhist background, I turn to traditional texts by Tibetan masters including Lerab Lingpa and Dūdjom Lingpa, to commentarial literature, and to verbal exchanges with teachers. Next to honoring my Western upbringing and education in some psychiatry and psychotherapy musings, I include insights from the Integral approach, to provide a map for organizing the various

perspectives taken in this exploration.

Third and most importantly is my wish that you feel invited to join on this expedition in a felt-sense way. The meditation instructions by Alan Wallace guided us participants while we were in retreat. You may read them, put the book aside and practice "with us," in a timeless dimension. While sitting in your chair or on your cushion, you may join me in "going on an intensive and enriching meditation retreat," and in continuing the journey that this retreat inspired me to; and, with that, continue on your own path. So, in case you like to join: imagine yourself preparing for participating in a long-term meditation plus science retreat. How would you proceed in the practical sense, what to bring, what not to bring? And in the mental and emotional sense: what would you like to know, to ask, to read, what would it be that you might worry about? You might want to take in some background information. At this point you don't really need to do, as this book is going to give you some, in the process. Come in fresh, with "beginner's mind"! You may be aware of the turbulence in your mind from time to time. Would you like to know how it can be "tamed," as it is named?

In this personal report, I will most of the time follow the sequential way in which my understandings developed and unfolded. So, there I came in, carrying my Western background, into a center and group that was going to practice meditation in some sort of Tibetan Buddhist context. Sitting in a shrine room, with an altar, we were surrounded by colorful *thankas*, silk paintings, depicting Buddhist deities. Right in front of where I sat, on a distance of a few meters, I looked at an impressive large one, with abundant gold embroidery. On the one hand, interestingly, we were immersed in the meditation perspective with instructions and context from the Tibetan tradition. Here the subjective experience aspect stood out. On the other hand, within the first days we were thrown into the language, agency, and "culture" of Western science. We were wearing EEG, Electro Encephalogram-caps on our head for brain research that was aiming at objective measurements.

For the diary sections, sprinkled throughout the book, most of the time I roughly and simply refer to the months: September, October and November 2007. These, globally, were the months of the fall retreat. For giving some indication of time frame for later diary sections (after retreat) I mention the year. Here's the larger diary fragment from which a few lines were presented at the start of this Introduction.

Shambhala Mountain Center, Rocky Mountains, Diary September 2007

At this time my main research question can be named, very broadly: What will it be like for this participant to be in the project, when coming in with as open mind as possible. What does it mean, "settling the mind in its natural state"? Who am I, who are we, what might be the natural state? The least thing I can do is to bring a number of fresh notebooks and pens for jotting down, reporting. Anyhow, first step will be presence, awareness, and the aspiration to have an open look and describe phenomena as much as possible with "beginners mind."

Clearly, what I present in this book about the Shamatha Project are experiences of only one participant in the Project. As such they are not in any way representative, neither typical nor special: tens of first person stories and broader experiential reports can be written about the Project. As it stands, this is just one example, one story, by a grateful woman on the path.

Chapters overview

Following this Introduction, the initial chapters are directly connected with the Shamatha Project. The story continues into further explorations that I felt invited to by the project experience. Then there is a convergence in what I see as possible applications of the practices described, with a rounding up in some personal Conclusions.

Chapter 1: In this chapter, an outline of the Shamatha Project, initiated by B. Alan Wallace PhD, meditation teacher and Contemplative Director, and Clifford Saron PhD, Scientific Director, is presented. During the three-month retreat, we practiced shamatha attentional meditations from both Theravada and Mahayana traditions. Regarding the research, I provide a description of biomarkers, assessments, and tests. I report on the outcomes of the project focusing on the effects of the various practices in attention and emotion regulation, and on health. They include unique findings, among them linking meditation and positive psychological change with changes on the DNA level.

Chapters 2 and 3 offer a fuller presentation of the specific meditations involved in the project: attention practices with various aspects of tactile sensations of the breath as the object of mindfulness, “Settling the mind in its natural state,” Awareness of awareness, the practices of the Four Qualities of the Heart (Loving Kindness, Compassion, Empathetic Joy and Equanimity), and *Tonglen*. While I present diary fragments and guided meditations in all chapters, these two chapters especially, together with Chapter 5, represent my direct experiential reports of being on this expedition. Included are verbatim transcriptions of guided meditations with Alan Wallace, with his instructions on selectivity and balance, mindfulness and introspection-monitoring. At the end of Chapter 2, I present some basic information on Buddhism, representing in this way – Buddhism, science – the main culture fields we were exposed to, at that time. For concluding Chapter 3, I present four working hypotheses, that guided my explorations regarding shamatha and Settling the mind.

Chapter 4: Here I describe shamatha practice in the Tibetan Buddhist context. In particular I explore how shamatha is the indispensable complement to the cultivation of contemplative insight, vipashyana. I address the nine stages of meditative concentration, the Elephant Path, and the notion of substrate consciousness, the relative ground of the psyche. Attention is given to various ways of

understanding mindfulness and (meta) awareness.

Chapter 5: In this chapter descriptions of my personal experiences are presented, with first person phenomenological impressions of mind-operations and dynamics in the psyche. While regarding all practices that we did, the diaries especially address “Settling the mind in its natural state.” The object of mindfulness in this practice is the space of the mind and what arises in it, with non-distraction and non-grasping: in the sense of no control, no preference, no identification. Grasping to a thought is released, while the thought is observed. In my descriptions I include diaries, audio, video and dream-log content as empirical material. The felt sense data include descriptions of inner turbulence while progressing with the practices, with surprises, ups and downs in the physical and psychological sense.

Chapter 6 offers meditation instructions and experiences regarding Settling the mind practice as presented by nineteenth century Dzogchen masters Lerab Lingpa and Dūdjom Lingpa. Specifically, the turbulences that are bound to appear in some practice phases are addressed. A section from *The Vajra Essence* text by Dūdjom Lingpa offers descriptions of turbulences and challenges such as intense pains and paranoia, anger and bliss. I’ve been intrigued by these descriptions of experiences, designated by Dūdjom Lingpa as “signs of progress” on the path. I connect them with my personal experiences, and with descriptions of these dynamics by other teachers about their students. The turbulences as described in the text by Dūdjom Lingpa, and as reported by myself and others seem to attest to universal dynamics in the psyche.

In the chapters that follow, I explore shamatha, including Settling the mind practice, in various kinds of larger contexts.

Chapter 7: In this chapter I explore the practice “Settling the mind in its natural state,” a practice of “abiding, moving and awareness,” in greater detail, in the context of being the shamatha part in Mahamudra and Dzogchen traditions. The less dust and the more trust, that shamatha brings in: together they make a

foundation for these Essential insight approaches.

Chapter 8 addresses some psychological themes and explores the phenomenological descriptions, connected with supposedly universal dynamics (as presented in Chapter 6) in the contextual framework of both Buddhist and Western psychology. Here I explore the Buddhist notions of The Six Realms and The Four Maras, and some Western views as presented in the reference book the "Diagnostic Statistical Manual," and developmental stages in defensive maneuvers. The diary experiences connect in surprising ways with the broad range of defensive maneuvers and reactivities as described.

Chapter 9: This chapter addresses mental turbulences on the meditation path, including the themes of spiritual emergence and emergency. This is about "falling out of habitual conditionings," about the grasping self, and the potential for opening up. Attention is given to energy dynamics, with contraction and relaxation. I explore the ways in which "Settling the mind in its natural state" can be conceived of as a form of psychological therapy of self-healing. I elaborate on what has been a growing realization about a continuum, from psychological dysfunctioning to exceptional health, knowingness and insight; challenging the sense of "normalcy" of our collective habitual level of consciousness.

Chapter 10: Here some themes in contemplative neuroscience are taken up, including shifting baselines and the notion of "acquired secure attachment." The practice of "Settling the mind in its natural state" is placed in a research context of two basic types of meditation: Focused Attention and Open Monitoring. A model protocol for phenomenological meditation description in a neuroscience context is applied to the Settling the mind practice. Two pilot projects regarding shamatha and Settling the mind practice are described.

Chapter 11 includes my revisiting the four working hypotheses regarding shamatha and specifically Settling the mind practice that I presented in Chapter 3. I describe what I came to find and understand. In this chapter I offer some ideas on shamatha in the world,

possible practices and applications for special groups of people, including persons with attention deficit problems, persons with psychiatric difficulties, and mental health professionals; and applications for those who guide meditators on the path (including going through turbulence), and as a preparation for dying. In this chapter I also present information about recent developments in the Shamatha Project research, including plans for a new round of follow-up measurements to come.

Chapter 12: in “On human flourishing: continuing the project,” with presenting rounding up remarks and afterthoughts, the theme of dust and trust is revisited. Various meanings of Settling the mind in its natural state are addressed, as related to the vantage point from which one views. Here I come to four aspects that have touched me in a personal sense in this quest. One relates to the many ways in which I have experienced Settling the mind practice as a gift in my life. The second aspect regards the way that Settling the mind has facilitated for me experiencing a wide range of mental states, from coarse emotional, to subtle, to very subtle. Three: I’m aware that, with observing and experiencing various states of mind, I’ve trained traits of resilience. I have experienced the healing and therapeutic aspects of shamatha practice in general, and Settling the mind in particular, translating into character traits with greater openness, maturity and freedom. And Fourth: I’ve come to value more deeply how the findings in the many domains of investigation regarding meditation, including phenomenal experiential and their neural aspects come together; being correlates, that can neither be separated, nor reduced to each other.

Mindfulness and the mysteries of the mind

With our minds we get insights into the workings of our psyche. With our minds we can change our relationship with the mind, with the arisings in the mind, and our perception of reality. Thus we can change our relationship with the world, and open up to a deep sense of joy and well-being. With our mind we can rewire and transform

our brain. Our increasing understanding of brain processes, perception and attention, behavioral and psychological dynamics, has greatly inspired our ability to fathom, prevent and remedy problematic health conditions.

Mindfulness, moment-to-moment attention, in this shamatha context mainly refers to non-forgetting what we are focusing on. Mindfulness goes in synergy with a meta-awareness in monitoring the practice. In various traditions different accents are placed with meanings of mindfulness. Celebrating the precious gift of mindfulness: in this book mindfulness will also be addressed in the context of vipashyana and of contemporary mindfulness based approaches.

In line with the multi-perspectival approach, this work is meant to offer a balance between three perspectives. There is the perspective of my personal experience: this is a subjective, first person perspective. There are the science and theory aspects: objective, third person perspectives. Next to that, I invite you to practice and explore the meditations for yourself as you read this book: this can be referred to as an intersubjective, second person perspective.

It has been a great joy for me, with a background in psychiatry-psychotherapy, in Buddhist meditation and Buddhist studies, with an interest in consciousness studies, and with a feeling of urgency for more inclusive and integral understanding, to have the opportunity to explore these themes. The start of it has been in the context of writing a thesis for Buddhist Studies about the Shamatha Project, with special attention for the practice of Settling the mind in its natural state. While I did this with great pleasure, there was a deadline, and a maximum word-count, both inducing some effort. Curiously, after finishing there was just the feeling that a book wanted to be written through me, which took some sort of an effortless start. There was some understanding, generating questions, inviting for new, more inclusive understandings, raising new questions, experiences, curiosity, feeding the next step and the

INTRODUCTION

next, all along. Then, letting it all percolate, integrate, and then release. May the writing and reading of these chapters make a little contribution to less dust and a clearer view.