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CHAN MAGAZINE

WINTER 2023







One can only understand ultimate emptiness, or emptiness as reality, through direct personal experience, wherein one realizes that all dharmas, whether mental or physical, are both empty and existent. In other words, existence is identical to emptiness. If one has no attachments and makes no discriminations based on a self, then one recognizes that every dharma exists and is empty. One recognizes that existence and emptiness are really the same thing. One further recognizes that there really is no such thing as existence or emptiness. This is the true emptiness of the Mahayana.



CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN

*There Is No Suffering:*

*A Commentary on the Heart Sutra, 2001*

## CHAN MAGAZINE

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# 禪 CHAN MAGAZINE

Volume 43, Number 1 — Winter 2023

From the Editor	4
The Noble Eightfold Path – Part I <i>BY Chan Master Sheng Yen</i>	6
Like a Sound Absorbing Board – Methods of Practice Using the Ears <i>BY Chan Master Sheng Yen</i>	14
Mindfulness of Breathing as Applied to Advanced Chan Methods <i>BY Venerable Guo Huei</i>	18
A Guide to Sitting Chan <i>BY Chan Master Changlu Zongze</i>	26
Checklist for Sitting Meditation <i>BY Gilbert Gutierrez</i>	30
Chan Meditation Center Affiliates	38

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## FROM THE EDITOR

DEAR READER, YOU MAY HAVE NOTICED that our *Chan Magazine* has been somewhat delayed. Due to various causes and conditions, we have been struggling to deliver the issues on time. As the editor, I take responsibility for this, and I also take comfort knowing that my Shifu, Chan Master Sheng Yen, had similar struggles, as shown in this excerpt from his autobiographical work *A Journey of Learning and Insight: My Intellectual Autobiography* (Dharma Drum Publishing, 2015):

Master Dongchu continued the will of Master Taixu to spread the Dharma through the use of words, and advocated what Master Taixu called humanistic Buddhism. Commencing May 1949, Master Dongchu gathered several Buddhist youths with similar goals and began a monthly magazine, *Humanity*. It has survived since then through the efforts of more than ten editors, and when I sought refuge under Master Dongchu, it was just as the chief editor resigned. As a result, I moved from being a writer to *Humanity's* chief editor. Before I went into solitary retreat in the mountains in southern Taiwan, I had served as editor for two years.... During that time, not many articles were being submitted to *Humanity* by the Buddhist community, and since there was no remuneration for the writers, acquiring articles was very difficult. I really respected the previous editors for being able to publish the

magazine every month on time, an amazing feat. Therefore, I asked Master Dongchu to tell me the secret. His reply was, "What secret? If nobody wrote anything, then do it yourself! If you wrote one article a day, you would have thirty articles each month. Give a different penname for each article and it would be done. The Dharma is so vast and deep, yet the problems of humanity are so many and complicated. You could find great topics everywhere, from what you heard, read, felt, touched, and thought every day, and there would be an endless supply of articles."

Master Dongchu suggested that if the editor had no articles to publish, the editor should write them himself. For the Spring 2022 issue I did just that, and convinced my husband to write an article as well. Fortunately, causes and conditions evolve; new material is manifesting and being processed. In the meantime, we have decided to speed things up by tapping the archives of past issues. For all four 2023 issues, we will be re-publishing *Chan Magazine* "classics," going back to the roots and basics of Chan practice.

To start with, we have Shifu's four-part lecture on the noble eightfold path. In my earliest days of learning Buddhism, before I met Shifu, I used to carry around a small booklet I'd gotten for free somewhere, a Theravadan publication detailing the noble eightfold path. Whenever I had free time I would ponder this book, reading it over and over,

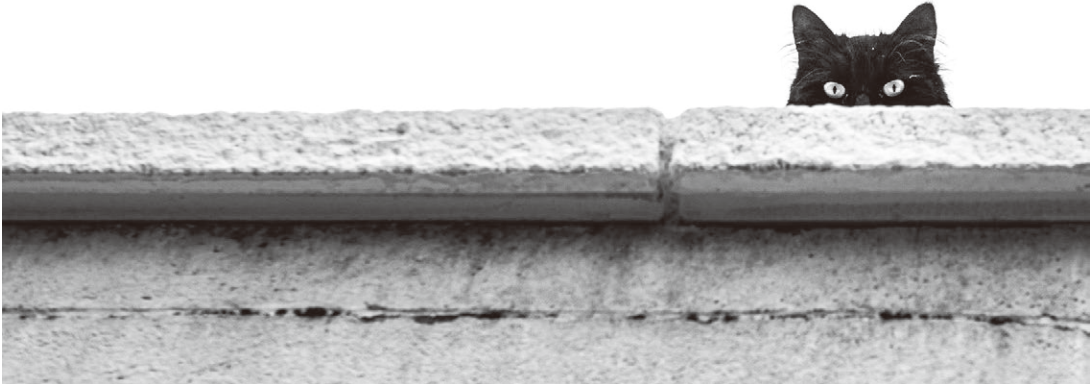


Photo by Clément Falize

but it still remained mysterious and confusing. To my chagrin I cannot, today, name all eight steps of the noble path. But here I can learn them anew with Shifu's clear explanation.

In this Winter issue we also have four instructional articles on sitting meditation. Venerable Guo Huei offers wonderfully precise directions on the method of *anāpānasati*, or mindfulness of breathing, and its relation to more advanced Chan methods. Before I read this article I arrogantly believed I knew all there was to know about following/counting the breath. But I was wrong; I've derived enormous benefit from the directions given here and I hope you may as well. No matter how many years we have been practicing meditation, we can always discover new approaches to the practice by re-visiting the basics. Shifu's instruction on meditation using the faculty of hearing is a good example.

Among our *Chan Magazine* "classics" there are items which are not available anywhere else; ancient

Chinese texts translated by a dedicated team of Shifu's disciples who called themselves "Ocean Cloud." In this issue we have a guide to sitting meditation by Chan Master Changlu Zongze. When reading this I was struck by how many of the instructions I recognized from retreat teachings given by Shifu and his heirs. These fundamentals have been handed down for nearly one thousand years!

More recent is the meditation checklist from Gilbert Gutierrez. This may not be exactly for beginners, but it is a welcome and useful tool. I keep the list tucked under my cushion at home and often refer to it before sitting. Along with the concept of the "reset button" (starting the checklist over when you find your mind has wandered) this simple list has helped to clarify and focus my personal practice. I hope you all may find some benefit in these writings. I strive to continue to deliver them to you. 🍀

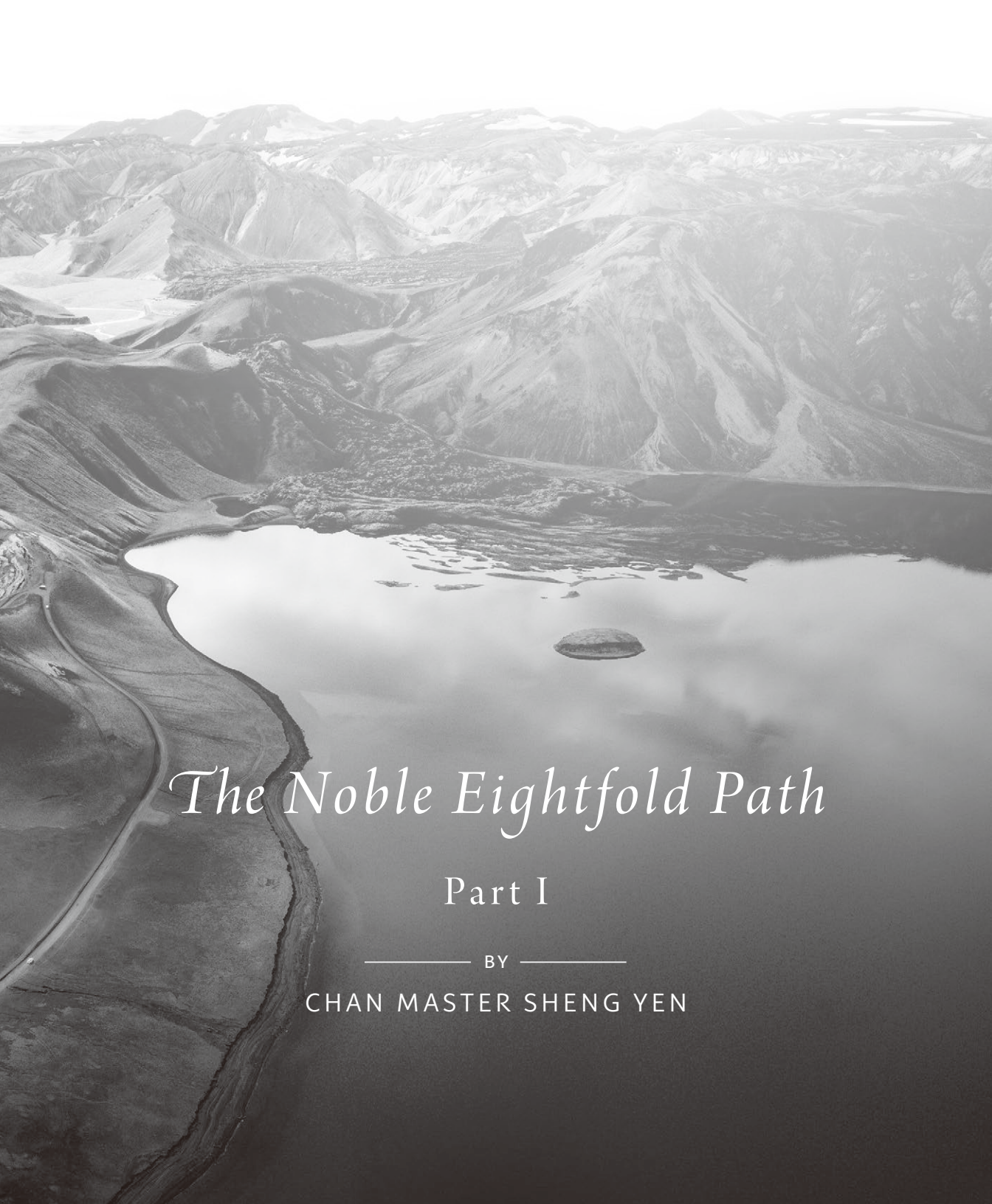
by *Buffe Maggie Laffey*  
Editor-in-Chief





Photo by Spenser Sembrat





# *The Noble Eightfold Path*

Part I

BY

CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN

In the fall of 2003 and the spring of 2004 Master Sheng Yen gave several lectures at the Chan Meditation Center in Queens, New York, on the Buddha's noble eightfold path. This article, which originally appeared in the Autumn 2008 issue of *Chan Magazine*, is the first of four in which Master Sheng Yen discusses the eightfold path as a liberation process. The lectures were orally translated by Rebecca Li, transcribed by Sheila Sussman, and edited by Ernest Heau.

## Overview

**A**FTER THE BUDDHA BECAME ENLIGHTENED the first sermon he preached to his disciples was about the four noble truths. The first noble truth, the Buddha said, is that suffering is a fact of sentient existence; the second noble truth is that the origin of suffering is people having wrong views – that is to say, are afflicted by desire, aversion, and ignorance; the third noble truth is that it is possible to bring an end to suffering; and the fourth noble truth is that to cease suffering one should practice the noble eightfold path. To follow the noble eightfold path therefore means practicing to liberate oneself from suffering. In the order given by the Buddha, the noble eightfold path consists of right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

If the way out of suffering is to practice the noble eightfold path, how should we understand suffering? Actually, the Sanskrit *duhkha* is conventionally translated as suffering but the term is nuanced and also connotes ideas of unease, disquietude, and dissatisfaction. With that in mind, we can say that Buddhism recognizes three kinds of suffering. These are not three categories of suffering separate from each other, but rather, they are three aspects of the experience of suffering as a whole.

The first kind is the suffering of suffering, the second is the suffering of change, and the third is

called pervasive suffering. The suffering of suffering consists of everything that we experience as part of being born, getting old, getting sick, and dying. In this sense, to suffer is to experience samsara, the cycle of birth and death. This does not mean that in any given life there is no joy and happiness. Sentient beings can know ordinary happiness and joy by satisfying the five senses. On another level they can also experience the meditative bliss of samadhi. One who cultivates the noble eightfold path can enjoy these kinds of happiness and still not attain liberation. Why? Because the happiness and joy derived from the senses and from samadhi are transitory. Because they cannot be maintained forever the ultimate result is still suffering. Suffering which results from the inherent impermanence of things is called the suffering of change. Underlying both the suffering of suffering and the suffering of change is pervasive suffering; it is a fundamental feature of sentient existence, so long as liberation has not been attained.

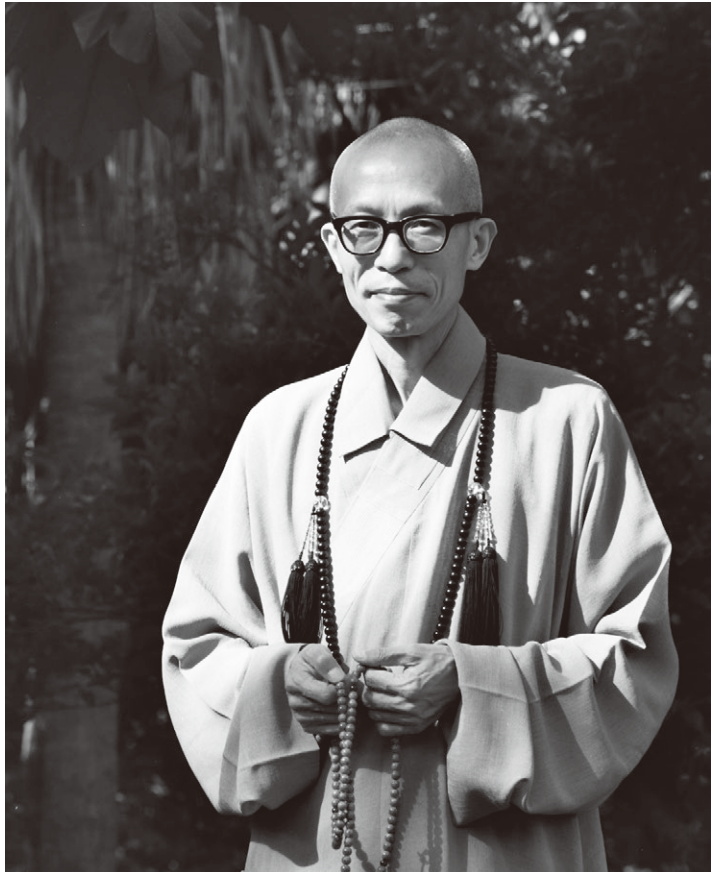
When someone praises you and you feel happy, is that true and lasting? On the other hand, if someone scolds you, is that also true and lasting? A treat of ice-cream can be delicious but if you ate one scoop after another, at some point would your joy turn to repulsion? So the same experience may lead to joy as well as dissatisfaction. Once in Taiwan a lay disciple brought me some loquats. I ate some of the fruit and told him it was delicious. The next time he brought ten pounds of the fruit saying, "Shifu, you

seem to enjoy this fruit so much. Next time I will bring you more.” If I tried to eat it all, would this be joy or suffering?

The Buddha did not deny that there is happiness in the world. However, the happiness and joy from sensual pleasure is brief and transitory. The bliss of samadhi during meditation can last for a while but however deep the samadhi, one inevitably comes out of it; the samadhi will fade and the joy with it. Often, one is left with craving for more. This is an example of pervasive suffering – the subtle vexation that underlies the most blissful of feelings.

To experience true happiness we need to cultivate the noble eightfold path and attain liberation from vexations. The best kind of happiness comes when one is free from ever-conflicting thoughts and emotions. At that time whatever happens in the environment, favorable or not, one’s body and mind will not be affected. One sees clearly that things are just the way they are. One no longer has a selfish need to benefit oneself. Both the burden of mind and the burden of body have been lifted. When the mind is without burdens, it is very clear and responds to events appropriately and without vexation. When you are free of the burden of the body then that is lasting samadhi. This is the joy of liberation.

When the Buddha’s father died, Shakyamuni returned home to take care of the funeral. He also helped carry his father’s body to the ritual ceremony.



*Chan Master Sheng Yen* DDM Archive Photo

Do you think that at that time Shakyamuni Buddha’s mind was filled with grief and suffering? If he had no grief in his heart, why did he go back to help with the funeral?

Student: Shakyamuni Buddha had sorrow but without suffering.

Sheng Yen: Shakyamuni was a completely liberated being and therefore a buddha. But when his father died Shakyamuni still needed to fulfill his responsibility as a son. Though Shakyamuni’s father had heard the Dharma from his own son he was not



yet liberated. But Shakyamuni knew that his father would eventually become liberated. For these reasons there was no need for him to feel grief.

## The Middle Way

In India at the Buddha's time, there was a belief that the purpose of life was to enjoy as much sensual pleasure as possible. Sensual pleasures are of course enjoyed through the sense faculties – the eyes, ears, nose, palate, and touch. This ability to experience pleasure through the senses gives rise to the five desires. In this hedonistic view, failing to fulfill the five desires results in unhappiness. In reality, however much we may crave and pursue pleasure, we can never completely satisfy the five desires. Therefore, the result of constantly pursuing pleasure is vexation, not happiness and joy. Furthermore, this behavior ultimately causes conflict with others, producing more

vexation. The sutras describe this kind of conduct as that of ordinary beings not sages or saints.

Also prevalent in India at the time was the opposite view that to become pure one needs to experience extreme pain and suffering – the more pain, the purer one becomes. Some ascetics had themselves buried in the earth up to their necks; others would immerse themselves under water for long periods of time, or hang upside down from a tree. Even today, in Mainland China I saw one person who wore a very heavy coat in the summer but very little in the winter in order to inflict suffering on his body. In Taiwan, I saw another person staring directly into the sun for hours. I asked him, “Why are you doing this?” He said that by staring at the sun he was burning off his bad karma. If people like these think they can gain liberation through asceticism, then a furry dog running around on hot summer days can get liberated too.



Photo by Rafaelia Waasdorp

Shakyamuni Buddha said that if following the path means suffering, the fruit will inevitably be more suffering. Inflicting suffering and pain on oneself will not result in liberation. Furthermore, the pains ascetics inflict on themselves are not necessarily connected to the vexations they are trying to eliminate, and inflicting pain on one's body does not necessarily ease mental suffering. The Buddha therefore taught that practicing the noble eightfold path is the middle way between the opposing extremes of hedonism and asceticism. One needs the basic necessities of life in order to practice, but on the other hand one should not merely pursue pleasure for its own sake either. So, if one is guided by the noble eightfold path one will naturally practice the middle way. In other words as long as the mind does not attach to this position or that, there is no discriminating self. But when one says, "I am neither on the right nor on the left, I am in the middle," there is still discrimination and therefore, a self.

The ultimate goal of the path is to realize no-self, which is the second meaning of the middle way. Whatever one experiences, thinks, says, or does, as long as a self is involved, one has not attained liberation. What then does realizing no-self mean? It means that although everything exists, self-centered attachment does not.

Some Buddhists see practicing the noble eightfold path as belonging only to the early Buddhism of the Nikaya scriptures. However, the later Mahayana scriptures do indeed advocate the noble eightfold path. For example, the *Amitābha Sutra*, the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sutra*, the *Laṅkāvatāra Sutra*, as well as the *Prajñāpāramitā Śāstra* all advocate the noble eightfold path as a foundation of the bodhisattva path. That is to say, the noble eightfold path is correct Buddhadharma from the Mahayana point of view.

In early Nikaya Buddhism the focus was on liberating oneself from the suffering and entering nirvana, after which one need not return to the realm of sentient beings. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to think that the liberation path and the bodhisattva path are separate. In fact, a proper understanding would be that they are two necessary stages of practice. A practitioner of the liberation path may become an arhat and remain in nirvana for a period of time, but realizing that there are sentient beings that need help, these liberated beings will transform to the Mahayana path and engage in work to benefit sentient beings. Indeed, the *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka (Lotus) Sutra* says that one who has just entered nirvana is like an intoxicated person who is not aware that there are sentient beings who are still suffering. However these liberated beings eventually become aware that they should help sentient beings. At that time, they will give rise to bodhi-mind and engage in the work of delivering sentient beings by treading the bodhisattva path.

Once I met a man who told me, "Shifu, practicing the Mahayana path is too much work. It involves helping and taking care of other people. I'm very selfish and I really don't have that much time. So, could you teach me the liberation path so that I can free myself from suffering and vexations?"

I asked him, "Do you have a wife and children?"

He said, "Yes, I do, but that is precisely my point. My family is very annoying and irritating, and that's why I want to gain liberation."

I asked him, "If you became liberated would you still keep your family?"

"Of course I would, but after I attain liberation they won't irritate me anymore."

That is quite idealistic thinking. I told him, "It's not that simple and you're not going to get away with it easily. Even if you attain liberation and your family

members have not, they will keep annoying and attaching to you. You are still going to have vexations.”

Just striving for liberation for oneself without being able to let go of everything in one’s life is not truly attaining liberation. A better approach would be to help sentient beings give rise to fewer vexations. In that way one can be joyful and happy, and as a result one’s family will not be a source of irritation. I told this gentleman that this is actually a very effective approach.

Another person often came to Chan retreats and was always very diligent in his practice. However, because of his intense focus on practice he neglected his wife and children. He even neglected his own career. As a result his family complained to me: “Shifu, our father has been studying the Dharma with you but as a result we no longer feel secure. We feel hopeless. Is this the kind of result you’re supposed to bring about in your teaching?”

So I asked this man, “Have you been studying Mahayana Buddhism?”

He said, “Of course, Shifu, you teach Mahayana Buddhism and that is what I practice. In fact, I practice very hard because I want to become liberated so I can deliver sentient beings.”

I told him that, on the contrary, the bodhisattva path teaches that one needs to vow to first deliver others before delivering oneself. That is the correct way to arouse the bodhisattva mind and that practice the Mahayana path.

The noble eightfold path is the essence of the four noble truths in that it contains the methods through which sentient beings can be liberated from ignorance and suffering. In daily life people suffer from conflicts in their ideas, attitudes, and their emotions. These kinds of suffering may seem similar but they are different. While conceptual conflicts can be resolved and clarified through logic and theory, psychological

afflictions are not easily resolved through reasoning. In today’s world there are many ideologies: some people praise the benefits of democracy, others argue for totalitarianism. There are also many faiths, each believing itself to be the best and religious conflicts erupt into holy wars. All these types of conflicts are based on people having different worldviews.

Psychological problems, on the other hand, occur at a more personal level. People want to feel secure and gain as much benefit and happiness as possible. However, opportunities are not that many. People are seldom content: they fear losing what they have, crave for more, and regret what they have lost. As a result, they never feel truly secure. These afflictions affect our sense of self, our health, and our relationships; we feel dissatisfied, unfulfilled, and unstable. These are all vexations.

A while ago we had guests from Taiwan, a mother and daughter. They planned to stay at the center for a week, but after just two days, they disappeared without saying anything. We became so concerned that we called their family in Taiwan. The family informed us that the women were not there either. What is more, they criticized us for not taking good care of our guests. Four days later the women showed up again.

I asked them, “Where have you been?”

They said, “We wanted to have some fun so we went to Las Vegas. It was so nice there that we decided to stay for a while.”

I asked her why they did not tell us they were leaving, or call us. She responded, “Well, I’m not a member of the Chan Center, so why do I have to call you when I’m gone? We have to go now. Goodbye.” This is an example of vexation in social relationships. We cling to people and things; we can’t detach from them. I did not have vexations before they showed up; after they showed up I had vexations.





## Summary

The noble eightfold path helps us resolve afflictions in the realm of concepts as well as emotions. The first two paths – right view and right intention – help us deal with our erroneous views and are perhaps the most important because they are the foundation for all the other paths. Right view is accomplished when one accepts the four noble truths as the means for departing from suffering. When we view the world through the perspective of the four noble truths, we are able to actualize them in thought, action, and speech. Applying the teachings of the four noble truths, we can then depart from suffering and achieve happiness and joy.

Guided by right view, we can investigate and truly understand what is around us. This will allow us to develop right intention and thus be able to manifest purity in our speech and actions. Purity means not causing vexation to oneself or others through words

or actions. When our conduct is pure, this encompasses the next three paths: right speech, right action, and right livelihood. Then, through right effort we diligently practice meditation to achieve right mindfulness. With mindfulness as foundation we cultivate right concentration, or samadhi. When we cultivate samadhi deeply we can give rise to the wisdom that leads to liberation in nirvana.

Thus, following the noble eightfold path we can transform ourselves from suffering sentient beings into liberated saints with deep wisdom. The path is called noble because it facilitates our transformation towards sainthood and nirvana. Nirvana is the extinction of vexations, the cessation of the birth-and-death cycle. In nirvana vexations no longer arise, and not arising, they also do not perish. In the noble eightfold path we practice the path of liberation while also aspiring to the bodhisattva path. 🌿

(To be continued)



# LIKE A SOUND ABSORBING BOARD

*Methods of Practice Using the Ears*

— BY —

CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN



This article is taken from *Master Sheng Yen Teaches Guan Yin's Methods of Practice*. It was translated and edited by Ocean Cloud, a group of practitioners, students of Chan Master Sheng Yen, who endeavor to bring the classics of Chinese Buddhism to the English-speaking community in the spirit of dana-paramita. They are: Chang Wen (David Listen), Guo Shan (Jeff Larko) and Guo Jue (Wei Tan). It originally appeared in the Spring 2004 issue of *Chan Magazine*.

**T**HE ŚŪRAṄGAMA SUTRA INTRODUCES the practice of the “complete penetrative Dharma gate based on the faculty of hearing.” It is through this method that Guan Yin, Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, attained the realization of the Buddhas’ wisdom and the essence of wondrous awakening. How do we use this method in our own practice? “Complete penetration based on the faculty of hearing” is a very profound and lofty method of cultivation. Before we can practice at a deep level, we must prepare ourselves with more basic training using the ears. These basic trainings based on sounds and hearing will enable us to bring our minds to a state of tranquility and stability.

### Basic Training Using the Ears

First, what kind of sound should we use? Let’s take the sound of birds. When we wake up in the morning we can go to a park or a wooded area, breathing the fresh air and listening to all sorts of birds singing and chirping. It is easy to become joyful and peaceful doing this. If you live in the city and do not have the opportunity to listen to birds in a natural setting, you can use an audio recording instead.

However, the sounds of birds are choppy; they rise and fall very frequently. While such a sound can bring a feeling of peace, openness, and clarity, it is difficult to enter into samadhi with it.

Well, let’s listen to the sound of rain! Choose not the rain in a great storm, or a sudden torrential downpour from the clouds. Rather, listen to the light rain that falls steadily, together with the mild wind that blows it into fine strands of dancing strings, giving an impression that they are falling on banana leaves, on the trees in the forest, peaceful and steady. Listening to rain whose rhythm is regular, continuous, and unified makes it easier to calm ourselves compared to listening to the sounds of birds. However, if the rain is driven by strong wind and comes to us irregularly, sometimes strong, sometimes mild, sometimes fast, sometimes slow, sometimes heavy, sometimes light, a beginner can easily follow the fast changing quality and become agitated instead.

Let’s try using the flow of water then. Find a river nearby, not a large river, but a small stream. Sit at the bank or on a bridge spanning the stream. Close your eyes and let your ears take over. Listen to the flow of the stream, water splashing and dancing, stable and steady, with a seemingly eternal rhythm and melody. Listening to it for one day, you may feel that the sound stays the same for that whole day; listening to it overnight, the sound may appear to be unchanging for the whole night. The water flows on, continuous and steady. Immerse yourself in the sound and lose yourself in it, forgetting the environment, to the point that the sound itself is dropped. Then the mind will slowly merge with the sound of the water, enter into a state of unification, calm and



quiescent both inwardly and outwardly. It is possible to enter into samadhi this way.

Master Hanshan Deqing (1546–1623) of the late Ming Dynasty described such an experience in his autobiography. He was listening to the sound of water on a bridge. Immersing himself in the sound, he lost track of time, forgetting all about the environment, dropping his body, mind, the world, and all phenomena. When he came out from samadhi, many hours had gone by. He thought to himself, “That was strange, I thought I had just sat down. Why has such a long time elapsed?”

Let’s learn from Master Hanshan and listen to the flow of water as a practice. But you must take heed. When you are highly concentrated in the practice, you may end up falling into the water. If you enter samadhi outdoors and the weather changes, if rain falls suddenly, driven by wind, it could be dangerous if there is nobody around to look after you – unless you are sitting in a house by the river.



These are the simple methods of sounds that one can use to bring one’s mind into a state of peace and tranquility. Each of us can experiment with them, explore them, and come up with a variation that is most suitable for ourselves, based on our own experiences.

These methods of training using the ears are static, in the sense that one chooses a conducive environment of practice according to one’s liking. However, in our daily lives, when we find ourselves in an environment full of din and clamor, of which we have no choice, how do we use sounds as a method of practice to calm our minds?

## Make Our Ears a Sound-Absorbing Board

When you find yourself agitated, vexed, feeling the sorrow or the pain of affliction, here’s a method you can use. Regardless of your posture, whether you are lying down, standing or sitting, simply use your ears to “enjoy” the sounds. Our living environment is a soundscape with an infinitely rich spectrum. Simply listen with no intention whatsoever, without straining to listen to anything in particular. To “enjoy” the sounds, simply let them come of their own accord. Whatever sounds reach your ears you simply accept them completely. Do not actively seek for any sound, rather, listen passively, like a sound absorbing board – whatever comes into contact with it dissolves right away. It doesn’t keep anything or store anything, with no reflection or reaction, for if it reflects the sounds, it will be a reflector, not an absorber.

Let’s train ourselves so that our ears become like a sound absorbing board. Simply listen, listen, and listen. If the sound is loud, do not give rise to any resistance; if the sound is weak, do not strain yourself to listen to it. All you’re doing is just listening, accepting everything without any discrimination. Most

Photo by Derek Story

importantly, do not give the sounds a name. You may hear a girl screaming, a boy cursing, a dog barking around the corner, or a cat meowing on the roof. It could also be that the sounds of birds, chicken, cows, or even sounds of cars, horns honking, televisions, radios, motorcycles, air-conditioners, all present themselves to you at once. Even then, you listen without naming them, without making any discrimination or distinction of the spectrum. Merely play your role as a sound absorbing board, without seeking or following anything, without echoing anything that rings in your ears.

A sound absorbing board is quiet and soundless itself. When sounds touch it, they will naturally be dissolved and cease to exist. How? Well, they dissolve because the listener does not give rise to a second thought, or a reaction, thinking, “What sound is that? How should I respond to it?” If people curse you, you do not react, because you are merely a sound absorbing board; if people praise you with sweet words, you also do not react to it because again you are merely a sound absorbing board!

Just stay very clear of what you hear; merely “know” that they are sweet words of praise, or profane curse words, or lies of deception. Merely be aware of what the sound is without giving rise to any reaction. That way, you will be a practitioner who practices well by truly putting the method into good use.

In addition, practice so that the din and clamor of the surrounding environment, the sounds that are full of “toxins” and unhealthy elements, can no longer taint you, stimulate you, arouse you, or tempt you. That way, at all times, you will be a person who is very free and at ease. That is why I call it an enjoyment.

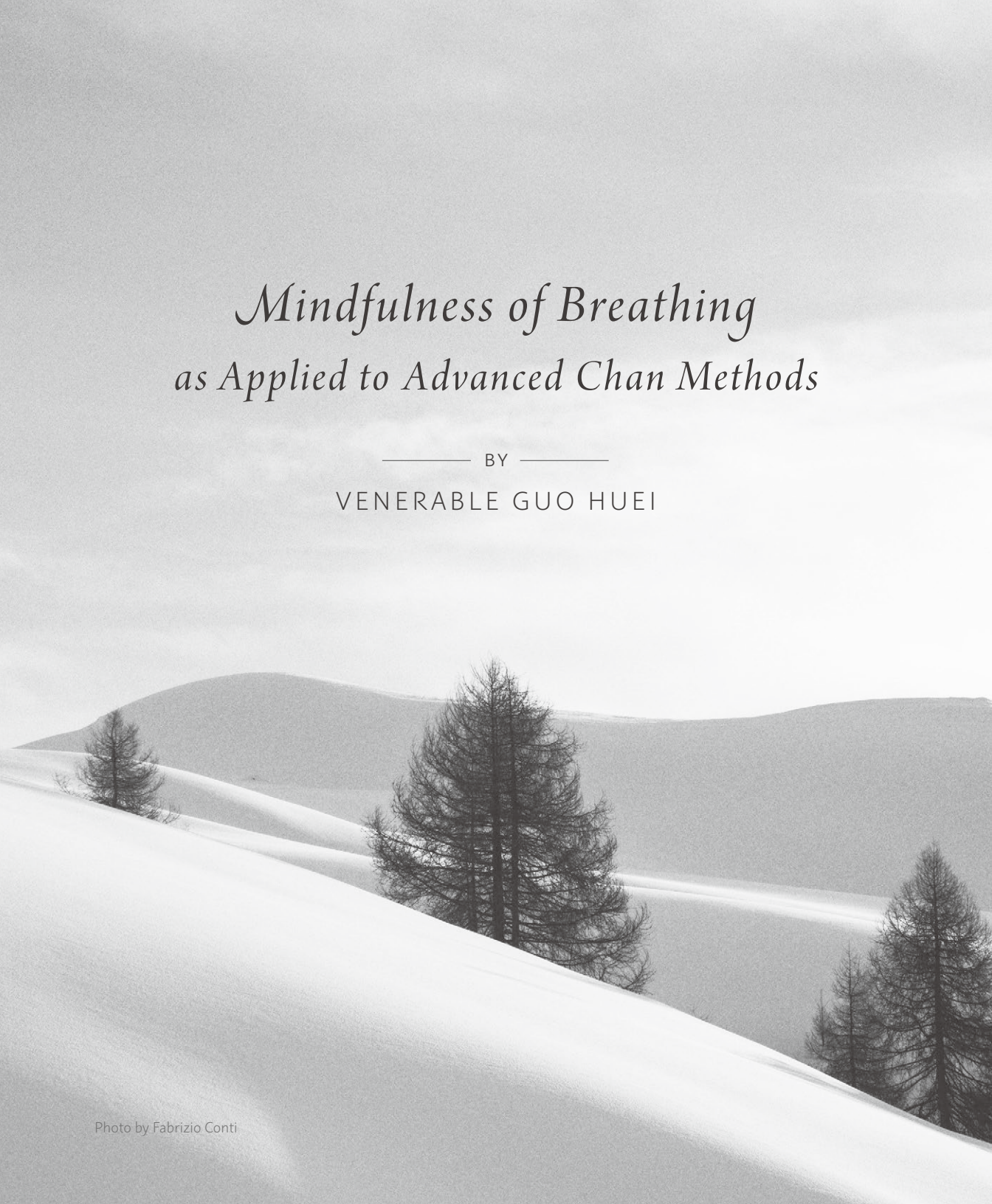
People all desire to immerse themselves in pleasing and beautiful sounds – sounds that are enjoyable to them. By listening, they derive a sense



of pleasure and joy. But with this method of training, the essence is to simply use your ears to listen attentively, without giving rise to any emotional reaction – pain and afflictions, sorrow and sadness, elation and excitement, not even a sense of joy. But to be sure, the state of no reaction is actually a very tranquil and quiescent kind of contentment and happiness.

So please remember this! If you can be a sound absorbing board, even amidst the din and clamor of the world, you will live very well, with no stress or pressure, free and at ease.

These are basic methods of training through the use of sounds. They will enable you to enter into shallow states of samadhi and to alleviate vexations in your lives. However, they will not open your mind to wisdom, or bring you the attainment of complete penetration. 🌿



*Mindfulness of Breathing*  
*as Applied to Advanced Chan Methods*

————— BY —————  
VENERABLE GUO HUEI



Venerable Guo Huei, a Dharma heir of the late Chan Master Sheng Yen, is currently the sixth Abbot President of Dharma Drum Mountain in Taiwan. He holds a PhD in Literature from Rissho University in Japan, and lectures at DDM Sangha University. This article (which originally appeared in our Spring 2017 issue) is taken from the concluding dharma talk of a workshop given by Ven. Guo Huei at the DDMBA-NJ chapter on July 26, 2015. It discusses the Buddhist meditation method of mindfulness of breathing, and its relationship with the advanced Chan methods of silent illumination and huatou. Edited by Cindy Toy, Andy Liaw, Mei-Ping Yang and Buffe Maggie Laffey.

## Counting the Breath

**M**INDFULNESS OF BREATHING (Sanskrit *ānāpānasmṛti*, Pali *ānāpānasati*) is a form of Buddhist meditation that uses breathing as an object in the practice of mindfulness. The method is to start with exhalation, followed by inhalation. Number one is the first breath of exhalation and inhalation, number two is the second breath, etc. In the breathing patterns that practitioners usually experience when relaxed, some exhalations or inhalations are longer than others, and some are shorter. This is perfectly normal and represents the natural rhythm of breathing when the practitioner does not control their breath.

It is best not to count when just starting the exhalation. Instead, make the count shortly after the exhalation begins, and hold the count until the end of the exhale. During inhalation, remain aware of the breath but do not count it. Continue counting the

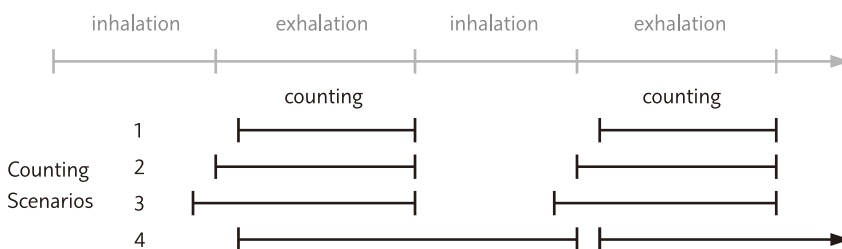
second breath, the third breath, and so on until the tenth breath, and then start back at one again. For a beginner it may be difficult to complete the perfect cycle of counting from one to ten, due to wandering thoughts and an unsettled mind.

## Counting Scenarios

The figure below illustrates the timing and duration of the counting. The gray line represents the breathing pattern, exhalation and inhalation, and the black lines show various counting scenarios.

Scenario 1: Counting starts shortly after the exhalation begins, and the count is held until the exhalation is complete. This is the best timing for counting.

Scenario 2: Counting begins at the same time as the exhalation. This is not the worst timing, but can frequently lead to controlling the breath, which is not ideal.



Scenario 3: Counting begins before the exhalation. This will trigger the most severe controlling of the breath. The body can tense up, and the breathing will become heavy and panting.

Scenario 4: Counting starts shortly after the exhalation begins, but the count is held all the way through the inhalation. People do this because they worry that wandering thoughts may arise. But if one counts all the way through, it's not as relaxing as simply maintaining awareness during inhalation. It causes stress and the mind cannot be at ease.

## Losing the Count

Between breaths, wandering thoughts may come up which can cause you to be distracted, and to lose track of the count. For example, as you are counting "One, two, three..." a non-related thought comes up such as "What's for dinner tonight?" "Oh, what number should be next, four or five? Alright, I'll just use five, and go on." Then you count "Six, seven, eight..." and another thought comes up: "What should I do for fun tomorrow?" "Oh, I'm not sure which number is next, eight or nine? Never mind, I'll just use eight." The mind will keep wandering off to other thoughts instead of concentrating on the breath.

There are two types of distracting thoughts: the grosser form is the wandering thought, the finer form is the scattered thought. There is a subtle difference between the two. At the grosser thought level, the mind follows the distraction and forms a complete idea of the wandering thought, such as "What's for dinner tonight?" At the finer thought level, the mind is more alert and is aware of the distraction when only one word pops out, such as "eat." When you notice that you have wandering thoughts, resume the counting from one. At the finer level of scattered thought, a slight thought emerges and is still in the

primitive form; complete awareness is not lost, so you can return to the method immediately and continue on with the counting.

## Following the Breath

Gradually, the grosser form of the wandering thoughts will reduce, and subtly, the finer form of scattered thoughts will also subside. Then you can maintain mindfulness for longer periods of time. If you can focus on the breath without losing awareness of it, eventually you will notice that each breath feels the same. The breaths when you count "one, two, three" are no different from those if you just repeatedly count "one." When reaching this stage, you don't need to count anymore; simply exhale and inhale while maintaining awareness all the time. This is the stage of following-the-breath instead of counting-the-breath. The body is at ease and relaxed. At this point, if you do not get attached to this enjoyable state, and continue to practice, you can reach the unified mind state. In the state of unified mind, one does not need to pay attention to breathing anymore; just maintain awareness that the existence of energy and air fills the body. Since the body, the earth element, is heavier, and the air element is lighter, when one does not feel the body element but only the air element, one will feel the sensation of lightness almost to the state that the body does not exist.

## Six Subtle Dharma Gates

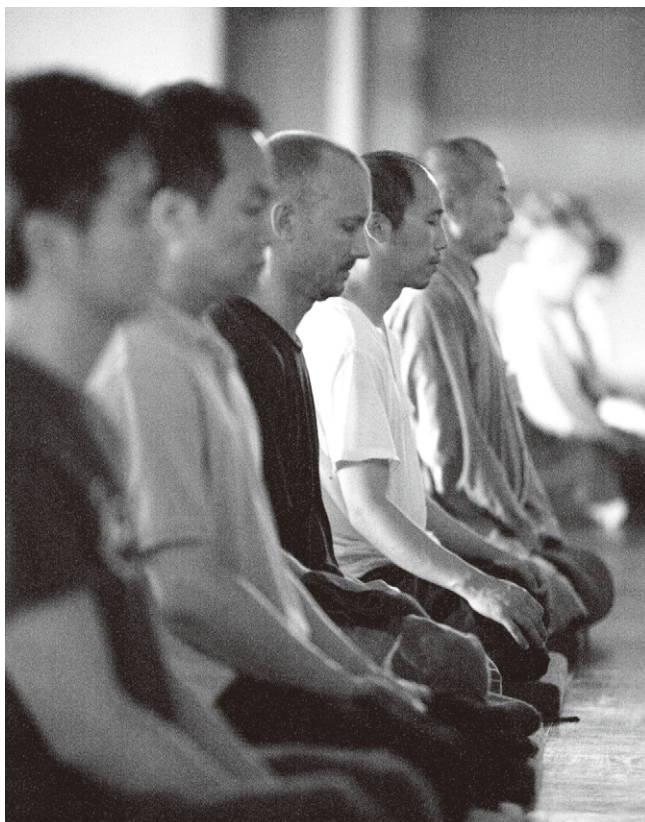
Next we will discuss the relationship between mindfulness of breathing and the Chinese Chan meditation methods of silent illumination and huatou. Mindfulness of breathing can be summarized by the six meditation steps mentioned in the *Six Subtle Dharma Gates* of the Tiantai School:

Six Subtle Gates	Silent Illumination	Huatou
<p><b>1. Counting</b> initial level of concentrated mind</p>	<p>calming &amp; contemplation of the whole body</p>	<p>repeating the huatou</p>
<p><b>2. Following</b> advanced level of concentrated mind</p>	<p>calming &amp; contemplation of the whole environment</p>	<p>asking the huatou</p>
<p><b>3. Stabilizing</b> unified mind</p>	<p>calming &amp; contemplation of totality and infinity</p>	<p>contemplating the huatou</p>
<p><b>4. Contemplating</b> Four Foundations of Mindfulness</p>	<p>calming &amp; contemplation with relaxation of body and mind</p> <p>calming &amp; contemplation of Buddhist wisdom</p>	<p>calming &amp; contemplating</p> <p>shattering / initial enlightenment</p>
<p><b>5. Returning</b> righteous roots</p>	<p>initial enlightenment</p>	<p>watching the huatou</p>
<p><b>6. Purification</b> first to fourth blooming</p>	<p>advanced practice after initial enlightenment</p>	<p>advanced practice after shattering / initial enlightenment</p>



- (1) counting the breath,
- (2) following the breath,
- (3) stabilizing the mind,
- (4) contemplating on the nature of phenomena,
- (5) returning to the root of reality,
- (6) purification of insights.

In comparison, silent illumination and huatou are two advanced methods of Chinese Chan meditation. In these methods, from the beginning, calming and contemplating are practiced simultaneously. Both of these Chan methods begin directly at the fourth step of contemplating whereas, in the six steps of the Tiantai school, meditation progresses sequentially starting from step one of counting the breath.



## Steps of the Six Subtle Gates

In the six subtle gates, the first three steps are to cultivate calming of the mind:

1. Counting the breath to reach an initial state of concentrated mind.
2. Following the breath to reach an advanced level of concentrated mind.
3. Stabilizing the mind to reach unified mind.

Let us discuss silent illumination first. When we begin, we relax both body and mind. Then we contemplate our body, then the environment. Then the boundary between internal and external disappears. When we practice silent illumination, we

practice calming and contemplating simultaneously. Relaxing the body and mind, is accomplished through mindfulness of breathing. In fact, when we relax both body and mind, we are using the method of silent illumination. Therefore even though silent illumination involves practicing calming and contemplating, we still have to go through the process of calming.

In the traditional Indian Buddhist system, the practice progresses from concentration to contemplation. By comparison, with the six subtle gates, the practice of concentration progresses from counting breath, following breath, to calming the mind. This is so-called five methods of stilling the mind. When practicing the five methods of stilling the mind, there is also a contemplation component that is part of concentration. However, the object of practice has form (Sanskrit *nimitta*). It is the same with counting breath or reciting Buddha's

name. The object of practice for all five methods has its form (*nimitta*). What happens when we succeed in the practice of the five methods and achieve unified mind? We need to change the method of practice. We have to switch from the contemplation of concentration to contemplation of wisdom. This is, in fact, practicing the four foundations of mindfulness (Sanskrit *smṛtyupasthāna*, Pali *satipaṭṭhāna*).

Continuing below are the steps following the previous three from the six subtle gates:

4. Contemplating the four foundations of mindfulness, which includes the body, feeling/sensation, mind/consciousness, and phenomena/existence. There are two levels of contemplation:

A. Mindfulness of a singular foundation: In the beginner stage, one can practice mindfulness on one of the four foundations individually and connect it to the insight of the three universal truths – impermanence, no self, and emptiness.

B. Mindfulness of totality: Since one can relate the three universal truths to each of the four foundations, in the end, from contemplating on the four foundations in totality, we can observe impermanence, no self, and emptiness. At this level, one has to utilize the four noble truths in contemplating. The four noble truths are: suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the path that leads to the end of suffering.

5. Returning to the full wholesome state and retrieving the four righteous roots.

6. Going beyond the concept of subject and object and achieving the first blooming, or stream entry (Sanskrit *srotāpanna*, Pali *sotāpanna*) to the fourth blooming (Sanskrit *arhat*, Pali *arahant*) which is equivalent to the first to eighth grounds (Sanskrit *bhūmi*) in Mahayana.

## Silent Illumination

Next, we will discuss the meditation steps of the silent illumination method. It emphasizes the practice of both calming and contemplating, simultaneously and at all steps. It starts from the fourth step directly, but then it goes back to the first, second, and third steps. As it moves along from the beginning stage to the advanced stage, the level of contemplation deepens.

1. Begin with the relaxation of the whole body from step four.

2. Go back to steps one and two, because relaxation has equivalent calming effects of counting the breath and following the breath.

3. Expand the contemplation of:

A. Totality of body and environment, so one can reach the initial state of unified mind.

B. Totality of the internal and external, so one can reach the advanced state of unified mind.

C. Totality of every thought, so one can reach the still nature of mind (Sanskrit *dhyāna*, Pali *jhāna*).

Silent illumination goes through the progression of calming, but won't stay at samadhi (a unified state of body and mind). One can use the same method through all the steps, there is no need to change the method at the fourth step. Silent illumination is to contemplate the entire body from the beginning, instead of a particular object (*nimitta*). Listed below are the continuing steps of silent illumination.

4. Contemplation is shifted from the body/mind phenomena to reaching Buddhist wisdom. Using silent illumination, one can reach samadhi. However, one does not go to deep samadhi because the element of contemplation is also functioning strongly. From the unified mind, one can reach enlightenment, but needs to deeply comprehend the three characteristic marks: impermanence, no-self, and

emptiness. The key point of silent illumination is to let go of all phenomena, and do not give rise to one thought.

5. Enlightenment – steps one to three are techniques for us to polish the meditation methods and to cultivate samadhi. In order to progress to steps four, five and six, one needs right view and a deep understanding of emptiness. Let go of all hindrances, but also let go of all good experiences. Practice letting go of all phenomena, and eventually let go of the self. Only by doing this, can one have a chance of entering enlightenment. The first enlightenment is called the initial gate.

6. Advanced practice – after the initial enlightenment, there are many other gates such as shallow gate, deep gate, multiple gate, etc. The final gate is called the prison gate, which is to break through the prison of three realms. In Mahayana, the sixth step is called enlightenment of the first ground, which is analogous to stream entry (Sanskrit *srotāpanna*, Pali *sotāpanna*).

## Huatou

Now we will review the meditation steps of the huatou method in comparison to the six subtle gates. Huatou is the doubt sensation, questioning the great matter of life and death. Typical huatou questions are “Where do I come from originally?” “Where do I go when I die?” “What was my true nature before I was born?” “Who is chanting Buddha’s name?” “What is wu?” “Who’s dragging this corpse around?”

Listed below are the steps of the huatou method. It begins by using the calming and contemplating elements at the same time from step four of the six subtle gates; contemplation is on wisdom, not on samadhi.

1. Repeating the question. This is the early stage of concentrated mind, equivalent to counting the breath. Most people can’t start from unified mind. So one needs to go back to the first, second, and third steps. One has to develop from concentrated mind to unified mind.

2. Asking the question to generate the doubt sensation. This is the advanced stage of concentrated mind, equivalent to following the breath.

3. Step three has two stages:

A. Contemplating the question until it turns into a doubt mass. This is the stage of unified mind, equivalent to the stabilization step of the six subtle gates. The elements of calming and contemplating are unified, and both body and mind are unified. The existence of body and mind are almost not felt. One just responds to the daily routines out of natural reflexes.

B. The doubt mass has accumulated to the maximum point, waiting for the right condition for breakthrough. It’s like a hen pecking a hole on the eggshell when the chick is ready to hatch. Or it’s like blowing up a balloon; when expanded to the limit, it can burst at any touch.

4. Shattering/initial enlightenment – as one continues to work on the doubt mass, it will burst suddenly. It is described as if the universe has shattered. What actually shatters is the sense of ego/self. The sense of ego/self is deeply rooted, it is the cause of suffering, and it is the hardest one to break through. Once the sense of self (Sanskrit *ātman*) is shattered, and one sees the true nature of emptiness (Sanskrit *śūnyatā*, Pali *suññatā*), the initial gate is reached.

5. Advanced practice with watching the huatou after the initial enlightenment. Just as discussed in the meditation steps for the silent illumination method.



6. After the initial enlightenment, there are multiple gates, and finally the break-through of the prison gate.

## Summary

In our daily life, we encounter life and death all the time. When we step on an ant, we may not feel the significance of it. During our normal life, we focus on career or family, and neglect the big question. However when something happens to our loved ones, we start to ask the question “Why me?” The doubt sensation arises. In our lives, we may have the doubt sensation only a couple of times. Actually, it is a very useful method for us to focus on.

Silent illumination and huatou are advanced methods. Beginners can't easily reach this level. It's

beneficial to use the mindfulness of breath method (steps one to three) to cultivate calming to the advanced level of concentrated mind. When we count the breath, we are aware that we have many wandering thoughts. By using the method of counting breath, we can effectively reduce the wandering thoughts and gradually calm the mind. It would be easier to pick up the methods of silent illumination and huatou at the step of unified mind. The method of chanting Buddha's name can also be used in the same way, for beginners to reach concentrated mind. As an analogy: there is a lot of gravel mixed with grains of rice. One needs to pick out the gravel before cooking the rice. If one did not do that, the cooked rice still smells good, but it would be difficult to chew. We can apply the same analogy to the silent illumination and huatou methods. 🌿



Photo by Honey Kodphon Onshawe



*A Guide to*  
*Sitting Chan*

BY

CHAN MASTER CHANGLU ZONGZE

Chan Master Changlu Zongze (1037–1106) was a teacher in both the Chan and Pure Land traditions in the Song dynasty. In 1089 he led a recitation retreat during which he encouraged both monastic and lay practitioners to chant Amitābha Buddha. The work translated here, originally titled *Zuo Chan Yi* (坐禪儀 *Principles of Sitting Chan*, 1103), strongly influenced the writing of Zen Master Dōgen Kigen and the development of the Sōtō school of Zen in Japan. Translated by Guo Jue (Wei Tan). It originally appeared in the Summer 2002 issue of *Chan Magazine*.

ONE WHO ASPIRES TO ATTAIN WISDOM AS a bodhisattva should first give rise to the mind of great compassion, generate great vows and cultivate samadhi diligently in order to deliver all sentient beings, without seeking liberation for oneself. With this mindset, one lets go of the attachments to all phenomena and brings the myriad engagements of the mind to rest. Whether one is moving or resting, the body and mind should be unified without a break. One should eat and drink with good measure, not consuming too much or too little. One should sleep just adequately, without deprivation or idleness.

When one intends to engage in sitting Chan practice, one should find a quiet place, prepare the seat with adequate cushions, and then loosen any clothing that is tight.

Having done so, one assumes a serene and orderly demeanor and sits in the full-lotus posture, that is, placing the right foot on the left thigh, and the left foot on the right thigh. Alternatively, one can sit in the half-lotus posture, by placing the left foot on the right thigh. Then proceed to place the right hand on top of the left foot, the left hand on top of the right hand, with the thumbs touching each other.

Straighten one's upper body slowly and lean forward swaying the body to the left and to the right. After that, settle down and sit upright. Do not sit

tilting to the left or right, or to the front or back. Allow the spinal vertebrae to align naturally like a stupa. However, do not stretch the body too much. That may result in the quickening of the breath and thus disturb the peace of mind.

The ears should be aligned to the shoulder and the nose to the navel. Let the tongue touch the upper palate. Close the mouth and the jaws together lightly.

Leave the eyes slightly open so that one will not fall into a stupor. The samadhi one attains will be the most powerful with the eyes open. In ancient times, many eminent monks practiced with their eyes open. Chan Master Fayun Yuantong (1027–1090) also disapproved of engaging in sitting Chan practice with eyes closed. He referred to this as practicing in the “ghost caves of the dark mountains.” The meaning of his admonition is profound and only one who is accomplished realizes it.

After the posture is set, and the breathing calmed, one relaxes the lower abdomen.

Do not entertain any wholesome or unwholesome thoughts. When a thought arises, one should be aware of it immediately. With this awareness, the thought will disperse instantly. Eventually, one would cease to be involved with all phenomena, and one's practice would naturally become seamless. This is the essential technique of sitting Chan practice.



Sitting Chan practice is a Dharma gate through which peace and happiness can be cultivated. However, many people become sick engaging in this practice. This is because they do not know how to use their minds properly. If one applies the practice properly, one's body (the four elements) will naturally be light and at ease, one's mind will be comfortable and sharp, and one's awareness will be clear and bright. The taste of Dharma enriches one's spirit, bringing the pure joy of quiescence. For those who are enlightened, practicing in this manner is like dragons receiving water, and like tigers roaming freely in the mountains. For those who are not yet enlightened, practicing in this manner is like blowing air into a fire, there is no need to exert much effort. If they understand the practice clearly and correctly, it is definite that they will succeed.

However, when one's practice advances, one may encounter more demonic phenomena, as there are numerous favorable and unfavorable conditions along the way. As long as one can maintain proper mindfulness in the present moment, nothing will become an obstruction. These demonic states are clearly delineated in various texts. For example, the *Śūraṅgama Sutra*, the *Tiantai Serenity and Insight* [by Master Zhiyi, 539–598], and the *Guide to Cultivation and Realization Based on the Sutra of Complete Enlightenment* by Master Zongmi (780–841). In order to take proper precautions, one should not ignore these texts.

When one intends to get out of samadhi, move the body slowly and stand up in a gentle and peaceful manner. There should be no abrupt motions. Afterwards, one should protect one's samadhi power all the time, practicing expediently in all situations, as if one is protecting a little baby. That way, the power of samadhi will be attained easily.

One must know that the cultivation of Chan samadhi is most urgent. If one's mind cannot settle down in Chan samadhi, even though one may advance in the practice of contemplation, one will still feel lost. The extraction of pearls from the bottom of the ocean is best done when there are no waves. When the water is disturbed, the task will become difficult. Likewise, when the water of samadhi is clear and pure, the pearl of the mind will manifest by itself. Therefore the *Sutra of Complete Enlightenment* states that: "The unhindered, pure wisdom, arises from samadhi." The *Lotus Sutra* states that: "One should go to a quiet place free of disturbance to cultivate and regulate one's mind. Let the mind settle and be immovable, like Mount Sumeru."

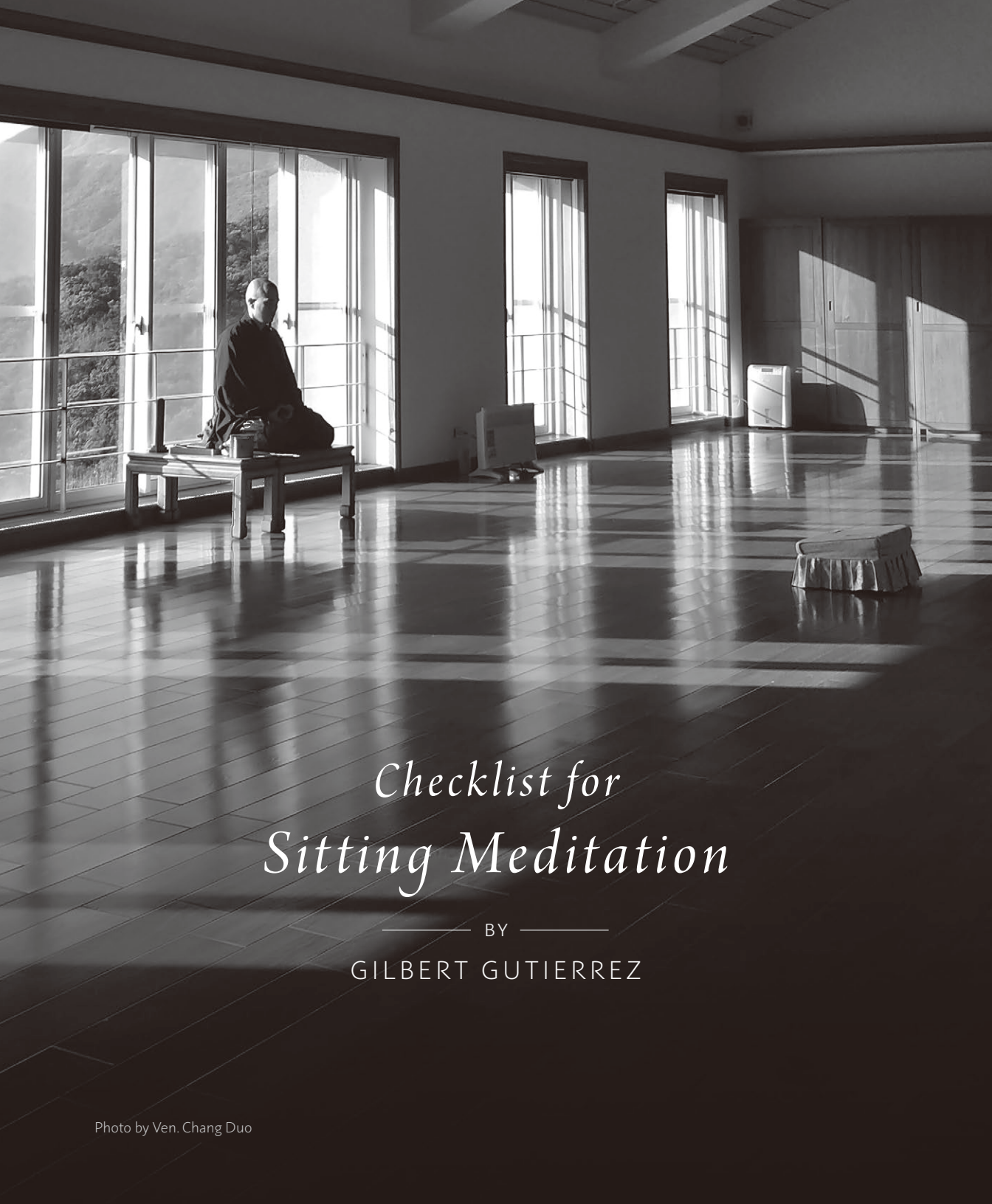
Therefore, it is through practicing in conditions that are quiet and free of disturbance that one can transcend the worldly and enter into the saintly. When one's life comes to the end, to be able to expire while sitting or standing, one must rely on the power of samadhi. For those who are determined to accomplish the goal of liberation in one life, it is possible that they may still be wasting time even with their strong determination. For those who keep on procrastinating without giving rise to a firm determination, what can they do but to follow the force of karma helplessly? That is why the ancient masters have the following admonition: "Without the power of samadhi, it is as if one is capitulating in front of the door of death; it is as if one merely closes one's eyes and returns empty handed, having roamed around like a vagabond."

I hope that my fellow Chan practitioners will read this article frequently and use what they learn to benefit themselves and others, so that all will attain complete enlightenment together. 🌿

# 坐禪儀

長蘆宗頤

- ▶ 夫學般若菩薩，先當起大悲心，發弘誓願，精修三昧，誓度眾生，不為一身，獨求解脫。爾乃放捨諸相，休息萬事，身心一如，動靜無間。量其飲食，不多不少。調其睡眠，不節不恣。
- ▶ 欲坐禪時，於閑靜處，厚敷坐物，寬繫衣帶。
- ▶ 令威儀齊整，然後結跏趺坐。先以右足安左髀上，左足安右髀上。或半跏趺坐亦可，但以左足壓右足而已。次以右手安左足上，左掌安右掌上，以兩手大拇指面相拄。
- ▶ 徐徐舉身前欠，復左右搖振，乃正身端坐，不得左傾右側，前躬後仰。令腰脊頭項骨節相拄，狀如浮屠。又不得聳身太過，令人氣急不安。
- ▶ 要令耳與肩對，鼻與臍對，舌拄上腭，唇齒相著。
- ▶ 目須微開，免致昏睡。若得禪定，其力最勝。古有習定高僧，坐常開目；向法雲圓通禪師，亦訶人閉目坐禪，以謂「黑山鬼窟」，蓋有深旨，達者知焉。
- ▶ 身相既定，氣息既調，然後寬放臍腹。
- ▶ 一切善惡都莫思量，念起即覺，覺之即失，久久忘緣，自成一。此坐禪之要術也。
- ▶ 竊謂坐禪乃安樂法門，而人多致疾者，蓋不善用心故也。若善得此意，則自然四大輕安，精神爽利，正念分明，法味資神，寂然清樂。若已有發明者，可謂如龍得水，似虎犇山。若未有發明者，亦乃因風吹火，用力不多，但辨肯心，必不相賺。
- ▶ 然而道高魔盛，逆順萬端。但能正念現前，一切不能留礙。如《楞嚴經》、《天台止觀》、圭峰《修證儀》，具明魔事，預備不虞者，不可不知也。
- ▶ 若欲出定，徐徐動身，安詳而起，不得卒暴。出定之後，一切時中，常作方便，護持定力，如護嬰兒，即定力易成矣。
- ▶ 夫禪定一門，最為急務。若不安禪靜慮，到這裡總須茫然。所以探珠宜靜浪，動水取應難。定水澄清，心珠自現。故《圓覺經》云：「無礙清淨慧，皆依禪定生。」《法華經》云：「在於閑處，修攝其心。安住不動，如須彌山。」
- ▶ 是知超凡越聖，必假靜緣，坐脫立亡，須憑定力。一生取辦，尚恐蹉跎，況乃遷延，將何敵業？故古人云：「若無定力，甘伏死門。掩目空歸，宛然流浪。」
- ▶ 幸諸禪友，三復斯文，自利利他，同成正覺。❁



*Checklist for  
Sitting Meditation*

— BY —

GILBERT GUTIERREZ



Gilbert Gutierrez is a Dharma Heir of Chan Master Sheng Yen with over thirty-nine years of experience in meditation, various martial arts, and *qigong*. He gives introductory and advanced Dharma talks and leads retreats at DDMBA centers throughout the United States. He also lectures weekly classes at his own group in Riverside, California. His Riverside Chan website ([www.riversidechan.org](http://www.riversidechan.org)) includes a lively “meet up” site and a weekly Dharma Talk podcast. Access to written transcripts of the weekly lectures is also available. This article, which first appeared in the Summer 2019 issue of *Chan Magazine*, is taken from Dharma talks given during the Footsteps of Ancient Masters retreat, October 2018. Transcription and editing by Buffe Maggie Laffey.

**I**N THIS RETREAT I HAVE REVIEWED WHAT the ancient masters thought was the essence of Chan, and of how to practice. I have been bringing up to you various practice points, some of which you are used to hearing about, others you are not. For some of them we were able to come up with deeper descriptions or explanations. I want to go over all that with you so you are clear about it. The reason I want to recap now, is because you can use it for the rest of the retreat.

We can essentially list out the elements that are needed in a proper practice:

- Present moment
- Relax
- Awareness / illumination
- Method
- Contemplate
- Concentrate
- No thinking
- Sublime

You will notice that faith<sup>1</sup> and right view<sup>2</sup> are not on this list. The reason is, these list items all pertain to the method, and to sitting meditation. I have isolated the component parts you need to use when you are meditating. Obviously right view has to be there, faith has to be there, but those are pre-supposed within this list, overlaid over all of this.

This list is also about knowing what you are doing when you are on a retreat. All of these are prerequisites to the practice of Chan. The ancient masters held the bar very high. If you want to practice Chan, this is what you have to do.

## Present Moment

The present moment is a very big key, because right from the very beginning, you have to put your attention there. What is the present moment? You are here in this room; you know exactly where you are and you know exactly what is in this room. So if thoughts come up, which inevitably they will do, then you compare it to the present moment. If it doesn't fit, you have to let it go and keep your mind in the present moment.

You rest in the present moment. You are just relaxed, and it brings up a sublimeness in you. You are just content. You don't need this moment to go away. You don't need for another moment to come. Just letting go and resting in the present moment enables you to appreciate this moment.

There was a movie called *Click*, where the person had a remote control that could fast forward through life, so he could speed past the undesirable moments. You can kind of guess what would happen: he's at

work and, zip! he's going home from work, zip! After a short while, his life was over, because he had just sped through all the parts he didn't like. But that took him right past the good parts as well. You don't want to be that way.

## Relax

Relax the body and mind. Don't think that you have reached the highest level of relaxation. There's relaxation beyond what you think is there. As you begin to let go of the illusory consciousness, the body will become extremely relaxed and the mind will lose its tension, will become literally brighter. So just keep relaxing and relaxing. There's going to be a time when your upper body will feel buoyant, like a balloon, tethered to the cushion. Then the mind will feel the same way. This is the freedom and ease of body and mind.

## Awareness

When I say, "awareness," I mean mind awareness. Your awareness extends beyond what your consciousness is capable of receiving information on. When you are sitting in meditation, your consciousness can't extend too far beyond the windows in this room. But just let awareness go out, unlimited; give your mind a very broad pasture to roam in. Now, we're not talking about consciousness; it's important to understand the difference. In the present moment we know what is here; our awareness goes out and illuminates in mind ground.

Awareness is different from consciousness; there's no thinking here. It's tied with contemplation, more to mind than thinking. Because you've been practicing for a while now, the right view has been imprinting into mind. So now you are realizing it experientially. You can't really call it thought. Right view is just

something that is there, but it's tacked into the awareness. Your present awareness is what enables you to see things clearly, to realize how contemplation works.

## Method

In order to meditate properly, whichever method you are working with, you have to know very well what the method is. If you are not familiar, or comfortable, then ask a well-knowing advisor about the method. Read books. For instance, if you are doing silent illumination, pick up Master Sheng Yen's book *The Method of No Method*, or *Illuminating Silence*. If you are doing huatou, read *Shattering the Great Doubt*. Be very well acquainted with how your method works.

To me, I am not a person who likes to list out stages of practice, because then you think you have to go through each stage. Sometimes the stages can go from a basic all the way up to a "top stage." It is different with different people; sometimes you might have an experience on a lower stage and you need to get to the next one, and the next, like a ladder or a staircase going up. Other times if you get it just right, you go right there. Then you read about the method and you say, "well, I didn't go through these stages." Actually, you went right past them. The thing is, you should know about your method. Be very knowledgeable about it, so that when you come to the retreat, you know what you are doing. That is very important.

## Contemplate

What is the difference between contemplating the method and using the method? Contemplation is not thinking. Contemplation is looking directly at the method. You are looking at it very clearly, and so your awareness is broad. Your contemplation is right on the method.

A lot of time when people are using a method, they are thinking about the method. They think, “all right, the method is to ask, ‘What is wu?’” and they start wanting an answer from the question. But when we are contemplating, we are looking directly with no thought; there’s nothing there. If you’re using it in the right way, you’re just asking the question. When you are using silent illumination, you are just contemplating the mind ground. You are not adding anything to it, like “Oh, it looks so wonderful.” You are just there contemplating it.

You don’t think of the method; rather you bring up the method for the mind to contemplate. If you can do that, then you’re using the method properly.

## Concentrate

Concentration is connected with the “right effort.” You are using your mind to put these things all together. You are contemplating the method; there is

awareness there. You are in the present moment. So you are concentrating all of your practice in the right way, and giving it the right attention. We call this *Mādhyamaka*, the middle way. Not overdoing it, and not being too lax. It is not that we crank up the effort, like a powerful stereo that you turn up all the way to ten. You are doing it just enough to hold it; don’t squeeze your practice. On the other hand you don’t just let it just drift away, because then you’ll be taken by thought bubbles and you’ll be gone.

By now, at this stage of this retreat, you should be able to do this. You should be able to regulate your concentration in a proper way; know what needs concentration and what doesn’t.

## No Thinking

There’s no thought in what you are doing. You use the method, which is one thought. Shifu (Master Sheng Yen) used to say, it’s like a fat bullfrog sitting on a lily



Photo by Gidon Pico



pad, where the lily pad is the thought. You can't even see the thought anymore because it's just a recurring thought that becomes meaningless. The bull frog is contented, he doesn't need to move, just sitting. But as to any other thinking – "oh, I'm getting there now, it won't be long. I'm tired. I'm hungry. I'm this, I'm that." – the thing is that you don't think. You have to get used to that.

Thinking in this practice is not going to get you there; it's going to pull you down. And the thinking is always coming in. Eventually you will wear it down and it will get so weak that it won't come in as frequently or as strong. After that thinking just doesn't come up at all. That's when the mind can lock in and work in the right way. When that happens, it's a sublime state. But you don't get to the sublimeness right away; this will come in due time.

## Sublime Attitude

Sublimity is an interesting state of mind. It's simply a feeling of contentment in the present moment, wanting nothing. You are just there, comfortable with your method. It's hard to be sublime when your legs are killing you. But now that you are settled into the retreat you will be surprised, when you check into sublimeness – all the last little bit of leg pain will be gone. You are just sitting there. All this stuff is starting to work now.

When you are in this sublime state, you can let go of all the emotional attachments to the moment. If you are eating a strawberry, you can taste the sourness of it, the sweetness, the coolness, you can appreciate its texture and when it's gone, you just put it down. You don't say, "I want another strawberry," you are just off doing something else. But you are content in that moment; you don't need another strawberry. Whatever you are doing: if you are walking, you are just walking.

What we do is we choose; we can choose whether or not to suffer from our leg pain, or to suffer from the passage of time, or whatever it is. To be sublime, we choose to rest in this moment. After a while what happens is that everything just locks in, and sublimity comes that way. We don't put down the effort; it's the right effort. Everything is right: the right awareness, right being in the present moment, right all of these things. Everything is still there. To say that you are sublime doesn't mean that you are not working. You are just perfectly content in whatever you are doing.

The sublimeness will permeate all through the body as well. But we're not worried about the body. We're tuning to the state of mind, awareness. It's all there, your body, my body, it's the same thing – it all belongs to mind. Don't try to equate that to a physical sensation. Equate it to just a form of contentment; it is very, very subtle. Some of you have probably already experienced it a little bit in this retreat when the method is working right. You are just there and you feel you are coasting, like going downhill on a sled, it's just easier to do.

When you get there you don't have to have a grin like the Joker from *Batman*. I remember I did that



Photo by Monika Grabkowska

once; now I'm very embarrassed. I was in a very sublime state (mimes body grinning and relaxing in bliss) and Shifu came by and was kicking my back trying to straighten me up. Finally he just said "Bah!" and walked away. I deserved that because I was just indulging in this semi-pseudo-sublimeness of my body. So don't make that mistake; I've already done that one for you.

## It All Clicks In

Sublime is a very subtle feeling. It's not some kind of psychological, body/mind orgasmic type of sensation. It's just contentment. What happens is, when you dial in the present moment, when you relax, and awareness is there, there comes a place where all these tumblers click in and it's like opening a safe. You are hitting the right numbers on each of them, click, click, click, and you don't have to move, don't have to adjust anything. Everything is perfectly in its place, and that's a sublimeness. You don't have to put more effort in, or less effort in, more awareness or less; it's just there, perfect.

It is a very subtle feeling and I almost hesitate to put it on this list, but all of the other things have to lock in, and then that can come in. So you don't start with sublime, and mimic it. It will come and you will feel it, and in that moment you know you have this all dialed in the right way. And all you have to do is just stay there. Don't go "I am in a state of sublimeness," and the ego says, "Oh no, you're not, let's go home." Don't do that. Just feel... not necessarily the body because the body at that point begins to fall away, if it hasn't fallen away already. But the state of mind is there and it's illuminated, it's not a dead state. In a dead samadhi one would not have the state of sublimeness. It would just be like you flipped the switch and all of the lights go out and nothing's there.



## How to Use the List

When we practice it is like we are going to prepare a dinner. When we prepare a dinner for somebody we lay out a nice tablecloth, we put the plates and goblets out, the utensils, the flowers, and then we can bring out the food. The Dharma food is the method. You've already laid out everything and it's already in place. You're going to be aware of all of that, of right view: if I keep doing this, eventually these thoughts will stop.

Without first setting up the practice in this way, when you start doing it you could easily just be taken away, watching a mind movie. You wouldn't even realize that there was right view any more. But now you've got right view in place, everything is perfectly set up, so that when you meditate it's all ready to go for you. And that's how these principles help the practice.

There is no confusion here. You are in the present moment. You should be relaxed. You spread your awareness out. You have your method; you contemplate your method. You concentrate. You concentrate with the right effort. With this awareness, you are aware when thoughts are arising, right? So there's no thinking.

All of these elements tie in very well. They're all one and the same, really, they all fit together. If one of these things is missing, it's going to mess the whole thing up. If you're doing all this but you're still thinking, it doesn't work; you're not going to contemplate, you're not on your method, because there's no awareness there. So all of these things are just elements that are there. It's not necessarily a punch list, where you can go wrong. If you do them right, it's where you go right with it. All this stuff is starting to work now.

## Playing the Game

Some of you are getting frustrated because you're trying to do this and the thoughts are taking over, which is okay. You don't have to worry about that. Try to see it a little bit like a game. You have to understand how this game works. The first thing you do is, you set the game out. You have the game clock, which is the present moment. The present moment is always moving but in any present moment, what is it that's present? This is the point we are setting now: we know what is present in this room. Then you have your awareness; you spread your awareness as far as you can. Your awareness is there, now we put the method in the game. You have contemplation; you're contemplating the method. All you do have to do is hold the method; that's what you do. The method is very clear and you see it there.

So we have an awareness that this is all appearing in, this is our playing surface, and this includes our

mind. All we have to do is keep this, and we are aware that all of this is happening in the present moment. We are ready to play the game.

So we play the game – something is going to come up. All of a sudden, a car comes up, because we are interested in buying a car. We see it coming up in the awareness. Awareness looks at it. Mind is just contemplating the method, just staying there. But this car keeps coming up and it sends ripples through the mind like “look at me.” If the awareness sees it, awareness just naturally shines its illumination on the car. So when this car comes up in the playing field it's illuminated, and as soon as it's illuminated, it's out of the game. You don't have to put pressure on it and blow it out of the playing field. All you have to do is just know that it came in. Illuminate it, and, whoop, it's gone. It's like that game we played when we were young, statues or red-light-green-light: the person who is “it” turns his back to the other players and they try and get closer to him. Then “it” turns around and everyone freezes; if you're still moving, you're out of the game.

Something else comes up, maybe money coming to you or money going out, and it sends ripples. You spot it and you know that it doesn't match the playing surface; it's not the present moment. So you don't look, because all you are aware of is the present moment.

It can become more subtle, or it can be something very strong. Let's say it's somebody that you care for, and right before you came here you had a big fight with them. They could come very quickly because their force is strong. They could come here and take over the playing field. So the method is gone now, and that person is here; they took center stage. You lost the game. So what do you have to do? You reset the game. Once you reset it, this person's gone, boom.





## Reset Button

How do you reset the game? First thing: present moment. What's in the present moment? Well, you are not in the present moment if you are thinking of something not in the Chan hall. You ask, where is my method? The method is back again, contemplation – you set the playing surface again. And then you wait. Things will come in and you can knock them out by illuminating the arising thoughts. If something comes and takes center stage and you've been thinking about this arising thought for five minutes, then you are going to have to re-boot. Start the game over again, and it will work. Just keep resetting the game until the method is stable.

You can try to push the arising thought out but it will keep coming back in and you'll get frustrated. You just reset it: "Okay, fine, no problem, I see how this works." So you gently go back to the method. Later on when that arising thought pops up again you go, "No, I know what you are." The arising thought's energy is going to be about the same as the car, easy to spot, and it's gone.

It's easy to play the game. You can play it with your eyes closed. You are there in the present moment. You know that you are just seeing the back of your eyelids. So if any image comes up you illuminate it out and win the game right away. But the habitual tendencies are always there, and will continue to come up with very sophisticated ways to take you off the method and bombard you with a relationship or an emotion; it will bring up a whole bunch of different thoughts hoping one of them is going to get through.

So this list of elements can be a reset button for your practice. Your method is your method, and these elements should be there in a proper meditation. These elements were topics that the ancient masters were bringing up, every single one of them. If you keep this, then it will keep your practice in a proper way. If you practice these sincerely, you are going to get there. Where is there? There's no "there;" so you don't have to worry, you are already there. The only difference is, you will realize that. Right now you are just hearing it, but later, mind will be realized. And you already have it so that is the biggest part of the battle. There's nothing you have to pick up, nothing you have to put down. So if you can practice in this way then your practice will be very fulfilling. 🍀

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1. *Faith* in the teacher (including Buddha), in the teaching, and in one's own ability to carry out the teaching successfully.
  2. *Right View*: a sufficient grasp of Dharma through which to frame the experiences of meditation and no thinking, particularly, the three (or four) marks of existence or Dharma seals (*anitya*, *anātman*, *duḥkha*, [*nirvāṇa*]), the four noble truths, and dependent coorigination (*pratīyasamutpāda*).

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