

Pocket Guides to Buddhist Wisdom
Chan Practice Series

CHAN PRACTICE THE PATH TO PEACE OF MIND

Master Sheng Yen





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Chan Practice — The Path to Peace of Mind

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Foreword

Living a highly civilized lifestyle, we may not lack enjoyment in material good, but as we are stressed by hectic work situations and a busier pace of life, we often find ourselves having to run around day and night to earn a decent living, wondering why we are so busy, like headless flies moving around in confusion. As a result, we may suffer bodily and mental fatigue, insomnia, depression, and mania, among other psychological disorders, which have become more and more commonplace. In recent years, the prevalence of epidemics, climate change, and regional wars that signify huge change have caused extreme anxiety for people around the globe. So, what should we do to settle our minds and also help people around us to calm their minds?

This booklet includes five chapters of articles based on Master Sheng Yen's Dharma talks on Chan practice, illustrating how engaging in sequential methods of Chan practice can help relax our body and mind, for better physical health and mental serenity. Furthermore, we can apply the Buddha's teaching to transform our concepts and let go of our attachments. It hopes to help more people know about the

benefits of Chan practice, learn to calm their minds, and also bring calm to other people. When human minds are at peace, the world will be at peace.

Dharma Drum Mountain Translation Group

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Contemporary Life



These days, people live very tense and hectic lives without knowing why they are so tense and why they are so busy. While the physical distances that separate people are getting smaller and smaller, they actually feel more and more distant from each other. They feel the same way about time: they get too much information and want too many things, so their bodies and minds are busier than ever, with less and less time to do it all. Why this is so, they simply don't know.

Everyone hopes to have an independent self, but they don't understand exactly what a self is. Many people hope that other people respect them, but they don't know how to respect other people. They hope the environment will provide them with more good things, but don't understand how much responsibility they should take for the environment, or what they should contribute to it. But the biggest problem is that people don't know why human beings exist in this world, and aren't clear about their own ultimate goals. They don't even know how to determine a direction and pursue it come what may. That's why the contemporary killers—heart disease, high blood pressure,

cancer, AIDS, and substance abuse—have become more prevalent.

These are all problems for people today, but how can we solve them? Many philosophies and approaches have emerged, including those aiming to improve our material lives and harmonize the spirit, but they don't really work. That's why some people hold that religion is even more imperative for the 21st century. Tonight, from the Buddhist perspective, I'll offer some suggestions to see if they might help solve these problems. Buddhism originated in India some 2,500 years ago, and then spread to China, Korea, Japan, Tibet, Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, and elsewhere. Shakyamuni Buddha appeared in this world to solve human problems and deliver humanity from the afflictions and suffering inherent in everyday life.

(excerpted from *The World of Chan*)

**The Method of Chan
is the Method of
Settling the Mind**



Chan provides the methods and concepts to help people settle their minds. In his youth Shakyamuni Buddha witnessed the suffering of birth, aging, sickness, and death, but did not know how to gain liberation from these things. So, leaving home to practice, he became enlightened to the way of settling the mind. Then, he taught the Dharma for 49 years, all with the intent to help human beings settle their minds. He told us that though the body requires material aid and medical care, the mind needs the salvation of Buddhadharma. Physical health is important, but if the mind is unhealthy, even if one appears physically healthy, one is still a sick person. Many people think themselves physically healthy who wouldn't even know if they were sick; if they don't feel discomfort they think they are healthy. But there are few people who think that their minds are completely healthy, free of problems, and normal.

To be physically healthy exercise is required, but for mental health it is the opposite; one requires sufficient stillness in the mind. It is better for the body to exercise every day, but for the mind it is better to be still sometimes.

People have the habit of exercising every day, but very few have the habit of stilling the mind every day for a period of time. In Chan, mental therapy consists in practicing methods for settling the mind and includes two aspects: relaxing the body and mind, and letting go of all worries. It would be useless to know about the methods and not practice them, so practice is necessary. However, this kind of relaxing and letting go is not permanent because ordinary people cannot forever let go of their worries in one attempt. They may be able to do it for a few minutes, but no longer than that. But even this temporary letting go is so that one will ultimately let go for good. In other words, letting go of one's worries permanently usually starts with letting them go temporarily.

In Chan there is the gradual approach to enlightenment and there is also the sudden approach. "Gradual" means practicing the methods to make the mind healthier, and "sudden" means not using any specific method, and putting down vexations all at once to achieve sudden enlightenment. Therefore, many people like sudden enlightenment. Sudden enlightenment without practice

is possible but very rare, and afterwards people usually still need to practice in everyday life. This means finding periods of time in a day, or when there are problems in the mind, to help oneself by relaxing the body and the mind.

(excerpted from *Liberated in Stillness and Motion*)

The Basic Attitude for Settling the Mind



From the Chan perspective, settling the mind is the method and process by which we cure the afflicted mind. Actually, the reason for people's mental instability already exists at the time of birth. If you do not recognize your problems by the time you have grown up, you really have problems. Nobody in the world is completely free from mental problems. Since you came here to listen to this lecture, this signifies that you and others could use help in some areas, so from that perspective you are already a normal and healthy person. When you discover you have problems and illness, and do not conceal them from yourself, this is a healthy attitude. How does Chan teach people to calm their minds in everyday life? The Chan attitude is to recognize the problem, face it, deal with it, and then let it go. No matter what one encounters, do not see it as devastating. If one knows in advance what possible misfortune may occur, it is best to not let it happen; if it must happen what is the use in worrying? Worries and anxieties not only are of no help but will also probably make situations even worse. The best solution is to face it.

Very often, patients with cancer come to see me because the doctors have already told them that their life is about to come to an end. They come asking for help and to say goodbye as well. I tell them not to fear death but not to wait for death. If treatment is required then accept treatment, if something can be done then do it and eat whatever you can eat. Live a normal life but do not force yourself. Do not feel complete despair towards life. This is the Chan attitude. Living is very important and life is very precious. Do not be frightened by others and do not frighten yourself. Very often the situation may not be so bad, but people are scared or worried to death because they cannot accept what has happened, and feel worried and anxious. Therefore, the approach of Chan to calming the mind is to do whatever should be done.

One time, Master Zhaozhou saw a monk in the monastery and asked him, “You have been living here for a long time?”

The monk said, “No, I am new here.”

Zhaozhou told him, “Go have some tea.”

He saw another monk later and asked him, “Have you

been here a long time?”

The monk replied: “Yes, I have.”

Zhaozhou said to him, “Go have some tea.”

The abbot witnessed this and was puzzled, so he asked Zhaozhou: “Why did master invite the newcomer to tea and also the old-timer?”

Zhaozhou said to him: “You go have some tea, too.”

This is the very famous Zhaozhou tea *gong'an*. What exactly happened in this story? Many people guess about its meaning but it is actually quite simple; because it was time for tea, Chan Master Zhaozhou invited everyone to go have some tea. In other words, life is living and doing whatever should be done. It is very important to experience and enjoy life and live earnestly.

(excerpted from *Liberated in Stillness and Motion*)

How Chan Buddhism Cures Mental Illness



Applying Buddhist Concepts as an Approach

I will give some examples of how Chan Buddhist concepts can address mental illness and pain.

1. Cause and effect: The Buddhist concept of cause and effect (karma) is a religious belief, but it also reflects the reality that in life, whatever we do will cause a response, and lead to a result. As a matter of faith, we believe that we had a life before this life, another prior to that, and countless lives before that. And after this life, there will be a next life. Without gaining liberation, we will experience countless and innumerable subsequent lives. We may find much of the result of what we are experiencing unfair. The “unfairness” we encounter in this life is a result from what we did in past lives. If we can embrace this faith and concept, then whatever we encounter that cannot be overcome, solved, or rejected, we can face and accept with a sense of ease, without being adversely affected.

2. Causes and conditions: All phenomena arise because of the coming together of many different causes and conditions, and they perish, also due to many different causes and conditions. Therefore, whenever we experience success, there is no need to be too excited and proud. Our achievements do not only depend on the effort of a single person, but also upon the coming together of many different causes and conditions, including time, space, and people. By the same token, when we encounter adversity and unfavorable situations, there is no need to be too upset. As a philosopher once said, “The darkest hour is just before the dawn.” The arising and perishing of any phenomenon reflects the arising and perishing of its causes and conditions, so why feel upset or excited about it? If one can keep a peaceful and tranquil mind, one will enjoy good health and longevity.

3. Compassion: Ordinary people hope to be treated with compassion, but sometimes forget to treat others with compassion. After doing something wrong, most people would hope to be forgiven: “Please do not judge me against the standards of a sage!” But when others make a

mistake, they tend to be relentlessly unforgiving: “You are supposed to do this right. Why are you doing it wrong?” This is lacking compassion. Compassion encompasses four principles: harmonizing one’s own inner conflicts; having sympathy for people’s ignorance; forgiving other people’s mistakes; and caring about other people’s pain and suffering. Especially important is to harmonize one’s own inner conflicts. To have a peaceful and stable mind, one must act in accord with the law of cause and effect, as well as with causes and conditions. Only by having peace of mind is one really able to care for others with genuine compassion. If you sympathize with, forgive, and care for others, you can be assured to have a rather healthy mind.

Methods of Practice as an Approach

Here are two examples of methods that can be used for mental balance.

1. Buddha-name recitation: Buddha-name recitation serves two purposes: first, when one recites the Buddha’s name in order to gain rebirth in Amitabha Buddha’s Pure

Land, one may have hope in a permanent future and let go of one's troubles. Second, one will be able to transform one's mental problems: when the mind is out of balance, redirecting it to reciting and concentrating on a buddha's name helps to put aside the issue that is causing imbalance. Therefore I often encourage people: "When you are on the verge of losing your temper and scolding someone, instead, recite the name of Amitabha Buddha." The idea is to leave the problem to Amitabha Buddha.

2. Sitting meditation: The different methods of Chan meditation concentrate the scattered, unbalanced mind and stabilize it; as a result, scattered thoughts will disappear and mindfulness will persist. This is called entering concentration. In such a state of mind, you will not be afflicted by any other person or matter. Depending on the level of your concentration, you can further realize the wisdom of no-self, and that is enlightenment. With enlightenment, you can be sure to have a rather healthy mind. However, there is small enlightenment and big enlightenment. With small enlightenment, one may be free of problems in one's mind during the enlightenment,

but once the state has passed, one will likely have problems again. Nonetheless, having experienced enlightenment, one will have a better idea how to deal with those problems. Therefore, small enlightenment is better than no enlightenment at all.

(excerpted from *Chan and Enlightenment*)

Levels of Settling the Mind in Chan



From the view of gradual enlightenment there are levels in the process of settling the mind. First, we rein in a mind that is filled with complicated thoughts directed to various objects on the outside. It is like two people having a dispute and need a third party to separate them. There is a lay follower living in our monastery who often vents his temper. One of my monastic disciples, whenever he sees this other fellow venting, immediately turns his attention to his breathing, and focuses his mind to contemplate why this annoys him. This is an example of retrieving the mind from outside objects.

When you do not want to quarrel with someone, yet the other party insists on quarrelling and it seems unavoidable, with no place to hide, you can try this method: be aware of your breathing and be aware of the thoughts in your mind. Of course, if you like quarreling or find it enjoyable, that is another story. Today I read a news story about a couple in their eighties who quarrel every day. They got married in their twenties and have quarreled for sixty years now. They view quarreling as a healthy way of communication. If we cannot be like them and view

quarreling from another perspective, then we'd better use the method of retrieving the mind from the objects outside.

After retrieving the mind from external objects, let it settle on the practice method; this is concentrating the mind. There are many methods to concentrate the mind; for example, counting breaths, investigating *huatou*, or just sitting in meditation. Everyone breathes, at all times and in all places. Therefore, counting the breaths is a most useful method. As for investigating *huatou* and just sitting, they are the specific methods of the Chan School. After learning to calm the mind through practice, one must not be attached to this settled mind. If that happens one may become very passive, wishing to meditate at all times, not wanting to be in contact with anyone. When one is unattached to the settled mind and can let it go, then one can have true mental health.

The process from gathering the mind, to focusing, and then letting go of the mind, is also the process of moving from a scattered mind to the levels of concentrated mind,

unified mind, and no-mind. This can be illustrated with the analogy of riding a horse:

1. Scattered mind: In the first stage of riding a horse, we are aware of the horse, and we know it is not easy to ride the horse because it is untrained and wild. The horse we refer to here is our mind, full of wandering and scattered thoughts. These scattered thoughts do not stop for a second; they are uncontrollable like a wild horse.

2. Concentrated mind: In the second stage of riding a horse, we are aware of the horse, and the horse follows our commands. This means our mind is more settled, and we are able to take care of our mind. If someone comes to quarrel with us or criticize us, or make us uncomfortable, we are mostly unaffected.

3. Unified mind: In the third stage of riding a horse, we no longer feel the existence of the horse. This is like the best rider riding on a horse. With the horse running very fast, the rider forgets about the horse and the horse forgets about the rider, thus unifying rider and horse. At this level,

everything and every event in the surroundings is unified with us and inseparable. At this time we feel very close to everything and people because we are them, and they are us.

4. No-mind: But achieving a unified mind isn't the ultimate. The fourth level is to practice no-mind. When no-mind is achieved, we are unaware of both horse and rider. This is what we mean by attaching neither to settled mind nor to unsettled mind. However, this does not mean we do not do anything or not care about anything. Life is the place of practice. Having achieved no-mind, we will live more normally, peacefully, and with more compassion.

Chan Master Huangbo Xiyun said: "Eating all day without biting into a grain of rice; walking all day without stepping on the ground. At that time, there is no separation of forms such as you and I, and no separation at any time from all things. Not deluded by various states, this is one who is free and at ease." This means neither liking nor disliking anything in life, just living naturally. This is freedom and liberation. If we can live with this attitude and

adapt to our environment and the people in it, we will have far fewer problems. However, we should still have our own position, and not give it up as a result. I am a monk and should not have a wife. For lay Buddhists, it is right to have wives. Therefore, everyone has his own position, which should be respected. Many problems between people occur because we often see things from our own perspective, and deny the opinions and views of others. This causes many problems and results in an unhealthy mentality in the end.

(excerpted from *Liberated in Stillness and Motion*)

Appendix

Dharma Drum Mountain Pocket Guides to Buddhist Wisdom
The books series already published:

- E-1 Meeting of Minds*
- E-2 In the Spirit of Chan*
- E-3 A General Introduction to the Bodhisattva Precepts*
- E-4 The Effects of Chan Meditation*
- E-5 The Meaning of Life*
- E-6 Why Take Refuge in the Three Jewels?*
- E-7 The Buddhadharma in Daily Life*
- E-8 A Happy Family and a Successful Career*
- E-9 Chan Practice and Faith*
- E-10 Establishing Global Ethics*
- E-11 Wu Ming Exposes Ignorance*
- E-12 The Buddha Mind, Universe, and Awakening*
- E-13 The Dharma Drum Lineage of Chan Buddhism*
- E-14 Master Sheng Yen*
- E-15 The Six Ethics of the Mind*
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