

Pocket Guides to Buddhist Wisdom
Chan Practice Series

THE INTRODUCTION TO **CHAN** PRACTICE

Master Sheng Yen



The background of the cover is a grayscale illustration of a seascape. It features several layers of waves, with the most prominent ones in the foreground showing white foam. The horizon line is visible in the middle ground, and the sky above is a light, hazy gray. The overall style is minimalist and serene.

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Foreword

Have you heard of “Chan”, or Zen? Many people think that Chan practice is meant to enable us to achieve some “mystic” states or supernatural powers, such as the ability to fly cross-legged through the sky and dive in and out of the earth. But actually this is not the case. Master Sheng Yen said, “Chan practice is the methods of practice for humans; Chan practice is for uplifting and transforming an afflicted person into one of insight and wisdom.” A Chan practitioner, in its true sense, does not seek to develop supernatural powers or pursue mystic experiences; instead, they stress the cultivation of freedom of mind.

This booklet includes five articles on Chan practice selected from Master Sheng Yen’s books. They represent a sequential and comprehensive introduction to the concepts and methods of Chan practice, including how to relax our body and mind, the purposes and correct mindsets in applying the methods, as well as the five fundamental skills required for our daily practice. It aims to help beginners to establish correct attitudes and concepts in their practice; and, meanwhile, through the practice of these methods, to relax

their body and mind, bring their mind to a calmer and more stable state, as well as handle things with wisdom and treat people with compassion.

Dharma Drum Mountain Translation Group

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Chan Is Not Mystical



Chan is a practice that helps to transform affliction into wisdom. Master Taixu (1890-1947) said: “Fulfilling one’s humanity is fulfilling buddhahood.” Therefore, please do not deify the Buddha; we should just treat him as a perfected human being. The perfected and accomplished human character is the Buddha. Many Chan practitioners not only mystify the Buddha, they also mystify themselves as well as the practice of Chan.

To practice Chan from a humanistic perspective and standpoint is most healthy; if we practice from the standpoint of the gods, then that is not the method of Buddhism, but of theistic religion.

Some theistic religions believe in so-called mystical phenomena and experiences. This includes making the impossible possible, knowing the unknown, foreseeing the future, transforming physically, or seeing lights, flowers, scenes, gods, ghosts, bodhisattvas, and buddhas. They also add mystical explanations to these phenomena. These are not true Chan teachings and they are not Buddhadharma. Do Buddhist practitioners have these kinds of experiences?

Can they develop supermundane powers of knowing past lives and attaining the Heavenly Eye? It is possible, but a true Chan practitioner would not value or display such powers.

About twenty years ago, a lama came to Taiwan to spread the Dharma. He spoke good English but with a pronounced accent. One of my disciples, who had very good English skills, was given the task of translating the lama's talk into Chinese. But this disciple worried that he would not do a good job of translating. So, the night before the lama's talk, he prayed: "The lama is a living buddha; please let me understand what you say!" That night he dreamed that the lama appeared before him saying, "Don't worry! You will be able to translate," and then nodded to him.

When this disciple woke up, he was very joyful that the lama came to him in his dream. The next morning he went to the lama and prostrated in gratitude. The lama looked at him, not knowing what happened. The disciple said, "Last night you came to me in a dream and told me

not to worry. Living buddha, you blessed and empowered me!” The lama said, “Oh! That happened! Okay! Okay!”

Did the lama really appear in my disciple’s dream? Some may think he didn’t, but the lama did not deny it. No matter, it was probably better for the lama not to deny it; otherwise the disciple might have had trouble translating. This disciple was very smart, and he responded to the challenge and translated very well. I think his virtuous roots brought on this response based on faith, and caused the lama to appear in his dream.

The number of practitioners who can attain enlightenment is quite few. If we must wait until we are enlightened before gaining real benefits and usefulness from Chan, then very few people would practice. Should we still practice Chan then? Is it useful and beneficial? The answer is certainly yes!

When they are anxious, confused, afraid, excited, and angry, most people cannot make correct decisions and wise judgments. If one’s mind is agitated or disturbed, not

knowing what to do, it is very easy to say the wrong thing, do the wrong thing, or even commit a crime; a single slip can bring the downfall of lasting regret. One who practices Chan can remain cool, calm, and stable in body and mind. With a settled body and mind that is balanced and not in turmoil, our observations about ourselves and the environment will be more correct and truthful; in this manner, the first fruit of practicing Chan is accomplished. If Chan practitioners can maintain a peaceful mind whatever occurs, their stability and calm mind will lessen unnecessary troubles and dangers. Therefore, learning meditation is quite useful from the human perspective.

(excerpted from *Liberated in Stillness and Motion*)

Four Benefits of Chan Practice



There can be many benefits to Chan practice, but I will discuss four:

1. Physical health: If we can make a habit of relaxing our muscles and nerves, this can be useful for relieving hypertension and maintaining a healthy heart. Consistent meditation also can improve the circulation and respiratory systems, and enhance metabolism.

2. Mental balance: When the mind is out of balance, there is often anger, fear, excitement, and so on; when the mind is clear, not stressed, and in a pleasant mood, it is naturally in balance. Chan meditation helps to alleviate anger, dissolve fear, ease excitement, and one is more able to enjoy a calm and pleasant mood.

3. Spiritual transcendence: Our experience and view of the world becomes spiritual to the extent that we can transcend shallowness and coarseness in daily life. Ordinarily, especially if we are anxious, we may not pay much attention to a vase of flowers but when our mind is calm and stable, seeing flowers makes us feel like the

world itself is beautiful. When we enter the spiritual aspect from the material, the world appears very different; seeing someone crying or laughing, we can relate to their feelings and gain a better understanding of their inner world. This way the boundaries of defense and confrontation between people can be removed.

4. Development of wisdom: Among people there are many levels of wisdom, intelligence, responsiveness, and insight; these are not all true wisdom. From the viewpoint of Chan, wisdom means transcending the dualisms of “you” and “me,” of existence and emptiness, of gain and loss; it is to see from the pure perspective of transcendence. This is wisdom, and meditation helps us to achieve it. People with wisdom appreciate the world and love life. Whatever happens, whether good or bad, they will not feel proud or pain; they admire the world with an objectivity that transcends subjective views, and are free from vexations. People are in pain, and suffering, because they lack the wisdom that comes from meditation practice.

(excerpted from *Liberated in Stillness and Motion*)

The Purpose and Methods of Meditation Practice



Many chronic diseases are caused by stress in life and mental tensions. Through meditation one learns to relax the body and mind, achieve balance, and improve one's health. Simple methods of meditation are as follows:

1. Relax the body and the mind.

Assume a natural and comfortable sitting posture, relax the body, and place your hands on your lap, feet flat on the floor. Close the eyes; do not exert the muscles of the eyes, and lean back against the chair. Relax the facial muscles and then slowly turn the attention downwards to relax the shoulders, arms, thighs, and finally the abdomen. Relax the whole body. Do not hold onto any thoughts, feel your breath, and do not control your breathing; simply enjoy this very relaxed sensation.

2. Unify the body and the mind.

When your body sensations are no longer a burden for the mind, simply be aware of the existence of the body but do not pay attention to its reactions. Feel the intimacy of the surrounding environment; be in harmony with it as if becoming one with the universe. At this time, self-

centeredness still exists. One can only reach the state of no-self by going further and letting go of the body and the mind.

3.Let go of the body and the mind.

Letting go does not mean giving up. The body and thoughts still exist and function normally, but one is not attached to self-centeredness. From the experience of practice, one gradually enters the state of no-self; this is very different from the conceptual view of no-self. Modern people often seek quick results, and hope to reach sudden enlightenment through intellectual knowledge and concepts. Recognizing no-self conceptually can help one towards experiencing no-self, but it is not a substitute for realizing enlightenment through practice. Therefore, to truly experience the Dharma one must practice; otherwise, it is just empty talk and unrealistic.

The correct idea and attitude for practice is to emphasize liberating the mind. However many people, even educated intellectuals, still seek supernormal abilities. There was a monk who wished to teach the Dharma in the West, and his master advised him to acquire supernormal abilities to attract

followers, thus making it easier to spread the Dharma. As a result, he practiced day and night and finally accomplished a kind of supernormal power to help people find lost items. His original intention was to use it as an expedient means to teach the Dharma; however, many came who only had in mind personal benefits rather than hearing the Dharma. This is putting the cart before the horse.

(excerpted from *Liberated in Stillness and Motion*)

Basic Methods for Chan Sitting Meditation



How to Use the Method

I. Relax the Body

1. Relax the head:

(1) To relax the eyes, whether open or closed, do not exert them by looking nor involve them in thinking.

(2) Let your facial muscles relax; when your mind relaxes and generates a feeling of peace and happiness, this will show in your facial expression. If your expression is stiff or scowling, or you pretend to be smiling, you will be tense, not relaxed. Why are we tense? Some reasons are fear, anxiety, thinking too much, excitement, or self-pride. If you can remain peaceful and calm, you won't be tense.

(3) Don't hold tension in your head, especially your forehead. Relax your forehead; don't use your brain to think or to focus your attention; simply count or observe your breaths with a relaxed and easy attitude.

2. Relax all the muscles, joints, nerves, and your skeletal structure. Feel the weight of your body settle towards your bottom, but nowhere else. Every part of your body is very relaxed.

3. After straightening your back, relax your lower abdomen. There should also be no tension or sense of weight in your back.

II. Purpose of Using the Method

Sitting in meditation and using the method with a single-minded focus allows wandering and scattered thoughts to settle down. The purpose of the method is to relax and calm the body and mind, thus gradually reducing wandering thoughts. What are wandering thoughts? They are thoughts that occur when the mind lacks focus, and scattered thoughts occur as a result. For instance, we may be thinking about things we don't want to think about, thoughts that we don't want emerge against our will, or our thoughts are confused and random. These are all wandering thoughts. It is indeed not easy to be free from wandering or scattered thoughts. So we must use the method to focus our mind. First, pay attention to your breath coming in and going out of the nostrils. Second, count the exhalations from one to ten. Using the method this way, the mind will have a reliable focal point, and our scattered thoughts will therefore diminish.

III. Technique for Counting Breaths

1. Focus on the breath: simply be aware of the sensation of your breath coming in and out at the tip of the nose, without counting. This method of just being aware of your inhalations and exhalations will not banish wandering thoughts, so you should count the outgoing breaths.

2. Count the outgoing breaths:

(1) First feel the breath coming in and going out of the nostrils.

(2) When the breath exits the nostrils, count “one.” Do not count the inhalation.

(3) When a number comes up, keep your thought on the number itself until the following breath is being exhaled, then count the next number. Continue to count each breath, one by one, until you get to ten, then start with one again.

(4) While counting, don’t pay close attention to your breathing. While you’re breathing, simply be aware that air is coming in and out of your nostrils. Next, you can stop being aware of your nostrils, and shift your attention to the number, and focus your awareness on it.

(5) While counting, you can say the number silently, but don't picture the numeral in your head. Don't count with your mind in a state of tension; be mindful, but unattached, as you count.

IV. Common Issues in Counting Breaths

1. Difficulties related to counting.

2. Some people get the count mixed up after just a few numbers, or they forget the numbers themselves.

3. Some people count past ten, but aren't aware of it. Whenever anything similar to the issues above occurs, simply start counting again from one.

4. The main reasons for tightness of the chest and headaches while counting breaths are:

(1) Thinking too much.

(2) Erratic breathing, now long, now short.

(3) Controlling the breathing pace (fast or slow) to avoid generating scattered thoughts.

(4) Holding the breath.

(5) Tense abdominal muscles.

V. Benefits of Counting Breaths

1. Pacifies the mind.
2. Helps banish wandering thoughts.
3. Gradually calms, settles, and stabilizes scattered thoughts, wandering thoughts, and a distracted mind.
4. Fosters purity and clarity of mind.

VI. Advice for Beginners

1. Don't be overly ambitious and greedy, and don't expect to banish wandering and scattered thoughts all at once.
2. You need to be patient and practice for an extended period of time to settle down the confused and chaotic mind.

VII. Counting Recitations of the Buddha's Name

1. [As an alternative to counting your breath, you can] recite Amitabha Buddha's name while counting the recitations. Don't pay attention to your breathing, or anything else; just focus your attention on reciting Amitabha's name.
2. Recite Amitabha's name and count a number in

the following manner: “Namo Amitabha, one; namo Amitabha, two; namo Amitabha, three...etc.”, up to ten, then start again with “Namo Amitabha, one.”

3. Counting recitations of Amitabha Buddha’s name may still be accompanied by wandering thoughts, but it doesn’t matter. Being aware of wandering thoughts is normal, just don’t follow those thoughts.

4. Don’t recite with an anxious mind. As soon as you notice a wandering thought, immediately bring your attention back to the number of the Buddha’s name recitation count.

5. Don’t picture the number in your head, just silently repeat it in your mind along with Amitabha’s name.

VIII. Why Count Recitations of the Buddha’s Name?

1. Amitabha Buddha’s name is simple and easy to recite, not as complicated as counting breaths.

2. When counting breaths, if you try to control your breathing, tightness in the chest and headaches will result. But counting recitations of the Buddha’s name doesn’t require focusing on the breathing, so this kind of problem doesn’t arise.

3. Most people's minds are rather confused and chaotic. They can be reciting the Buddha's name while their imaginations wander, easily developing the habit of reciting the Buddha's name with a scattered and confused mind. By counting recitations, however, wandering thoughts are more easily discovered. But it's easier to notice fluctuations in wandering and scattered thoughts when counting breaths than it is when counting recitations of the Buddha's name. So for those who cannot count breaths and find it uncomfortable, it's fine to switch to counting recitations of the Buddha's name. Otherwise, counting the breaths method is still better.

Handling Physical and Mental Reactions to Sitting Meditation

It is normal to experience physical discomfort during sitting meditation, and usually the best solution is to pay no attention to it. Backaches might be caused by a cold; leg pain, numbness, or aches are caused by inadequate practice. Backache and neck pain are normal, and it's best just to ignore them. But if you can't ignore the pain, gently

move your body a little bit without gross movements. Don't move too frequently; the more you move, the more pain you will have, making you feel uneasy. Therefore, constantly practice focusing your attention on the method, and ignoring bodily sensations. The method consists of what we mentioned above: relax the body, relax the head, and count breaths or count each recitation of the Buddha's name. When you can use these techniques effectively, you won't feel the discomfort that disrupts your meditation.

(excerpted from *The World of Chan*)

Harmonizing the Five Fundamentals



At the same time, Chan practitioners should also moderate the five fundamentals of daily life:

1.Harmonizing diet: Our diet should be appropriate and nutritionally balanced, not eating too little or too much. Do not take stimulating food such as strong tea and coffee, which affect one's mood during sitting meditation; and of course, no alcohol.

2.Harmonizing sleep: We are born with the ability to sleep, so sleeping should be easy. However, it is not always easy to sleep well, and it is a blessing when we have a good night's sleep. When we sleep well, our mood and health will be good; when we sleep poorly, we will lack vitality; we feel irritable, get into conflicts easily, and have a lot of stress, which in the long run is not healthy for the body. Naturally, if we lack sleep we will not get the positive effects of meditation. We need sufficient sleep, but sleeping long hours is not necessarily better. For better sleep, it is important to lie down on the right side, relax the body and mind and sleep soundly. Going to sleep in a nervous mood, we will have dreams; so before sleeping, we relax, and let

go of things in the mind. Do not worry about unfinished things, which is useless; just set the mind at ease and sleep; you'll do better after a good night's sleep.

3. Harmonizing the body: We can moderate the body through motion and stillness. In terms of motion we can do aerobic exercise but not too strenuously; in terms of stillness we can do sitting meditation using correct posture and without pressure on any body parts. Meditation does not necessarily have to be sitting; we can also meditate while walking, standing, or lying down. The point is to relax, stay natural, peaceful and calm. As long as one is able to maintain a stable mind without confusion, that is the basis of Chan.

4. Harmonizing breathing: Breathing is very simple, but good breathing should be natural and smooth. Do not control your breathing; rather, admire and enjoy it. This is harmonizing breathing. Breathing is related to physical posture; if the body is bent or distorted, then breathing will not be smooth. When the nerves are tense and the muscles are tight, breathing becomes unnatural. Therefore,

maintain the correct sitting posture at all times. Whether sitting, standing, or lying down, breathe naturally and smoothly. Relaxing the body does not mean being lax or lazy. The mind must be very clear.

5. Harmonizing the mind: The above four harmonizations are related to the state of mind. Mental stability is closely related to eating, sleeping, and breathing. If one harmonizes the mind well, one's mood will be pleasant and stable. One can then use the methods of Chan to transform false and defiled mind into true and pure mind. We start with harmonizing the daily habits of eating, sleeping, and breathing; we then use methods of Chan such as counting the breath, investigating *huatou*, Silent Illumination, and direct contemplation, to reach the state of undefiled purity.

(excerpted from *Liberated in Stillness and Motion*)

Appendix

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