

Hoofprint of the Ox

Principles of the Chan Buddhist Path
as Taught by a Modern Chinese Master



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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Although the situation will vary from person to person, there is a logic—or a process—to the way in which these different experiences of emptiness take shape and build on one another. From the time of Śākyamuni Buddha himself, Buddhist meditation masters have charted this process in terms of sequential stages of spiritual progress, carefully specifying the transformations of body and mind (e.g., the defilements that are eliminated and meritorious attributes that are appropriated) that take place with each phase of development. They have also indexed to these schemes various methods of spiritual discipline designed to bring about their realization. Thus, the Buddhist tradition preserves a rich and varied technology for spiritual cultivation that is one of the most complex of its kind.

Different Buddhist systemizations of the path will each have its particular representations and methods, but the basic principles of organization are similar. Stated in the simplest terms possible, those principles describe a process of taking body and mind from a state of confusion and disparity; through a condition of one-pointedness, or unity; to the experience of no-mind, or no-thought. Methods of practice may themselves be functionally classified as: (A) procedures for purifying the mind of basic hindrances and obscurations; (B) methods for concentrating or unifying the mind, with the aim of inducing various states of conventional or mundane meditative absorption; (C) techniques for developing the uniquely Buddhist insight (*prajñā*) into selflessness that opens the door to true liberation, followed by; (D) Buddhist techniques for extending the insight of no-self to that of genuine emptiness, and finally; (E) emptiness in its absolute or most profound sense.

Simplifying the Mind and Purifying the Mind of Basic Obscurations

Virtually any object or repetitive activity can serve as a support for focusing the body and mind. It can be a concrete external object, an internal thought or process, an activity such as verbal recitation, even a physical movement such as walking or standing, although activities that are not too physically exhausting are best. If the individual puts his or her entire physical and mental attention into such an object or activity, wandering and confused thoughts will gradually disappear; one's awareness will become very calm, focused, and pure; and the signs associated with the condition of a simplified and concentrated mind will emerge.

While this sort of discipline need not be overtly religious (certain types of athletic training can produce the same experience of concentration), virtually all religious traditions prize mental concentration and purity as a foundation for the spiritual life, and they offer techniques to assist their development. Purity of mind and heart, utmost sincerity, and wholeheartedness are qualities held by

most religions to be instrumental to the higher life of grace and beatitude. The contemplative techniques that assist them may range from devotionally oriented disciplines such as prayer, prostrations, and various forms of penance, recitation of scripture, singing of hymns, continual intoning of names or incantations of deities (*mantra*), to the more autonomous practices of Indian yoga and Chinese martial arts.

In classical Buddhist tradition there is an extensive collection of methods designed to promote initial purification and calming of the mind, both autonomous and devotional. Typically, these begin with a regularized physical routine, such as sitting in the "lotus" position (the formal posture of meditation), standing or kneeling with palms joined in reverence, or slow-walking. One might then take up a specific forms of mental contemplation, such as observation of the inhalation and exhalation of the breath (*S. ānāpāna-smṛti*), contemplation of bodily impurity or decay, visual recollection of a given Buddha or bodhisattva (*S. buddhānusmṛti*), meditation on kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity (the four *brāhmvihāra* or *apramāna*), and so forth.

Known in certain Buddhist circles as the "Five Methods for Stilling, or Pacifying, the Mind," the latter meditations have the twofold power to counteract specific emotional imbalances while simultaneously providing a ground for developing mental concentration. For example, concentration on kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity will alleviate deeply rooted malice and anger; concentration on the breath will eliminate distractedness, or scattered mind; contemplation of a Buddha or bodhisattva will counteract fear and uncertainty. Depending on whether a student's disposition tends toward one or another of these habits, a technique may be assigned accordingly.

As the heart begins to be unburdened of its grosser emotional afflictions and obscurations, body and mind become increasingly easeful and are melded into a pure, unalloyed stream of awareness. The mind will begin to slow down and simplify, becoming clear and open. It will wander less and less, until it reaches a point where it becomes so calm and supple that it stays effortlessly engrossed in the object at hand, as though entertaining its full presence for the first time. Initially, this condition may be quite fleeting, but in time it will occur with more frequency and endure for longer periods, eventually arriving at what we call "access concentration," the condition from which the higher states of mundane *dhyāna*, or "enstatic absorption," are generated. Thus, in addition to providing a preparatory therapeutic, the Five Methods for Stilling the Mind can seamlessly take the practitioner from the grossest to the most sublime of the mundane states of meditative concentration.

Producing a One-Pointed, or Unified, Mind

Having harmonized body and mind and achieved the preparatory condition of access concentration, if the meditator continues to use any one of these techniques

for an extended period of time, he or she will reach “unified mind,” or “mental one-pointedness.” As the mind enters deeper and deeper into calm and becomes utterly absorbed in and unified with its object, any sense of effortful practice or attention to method may seem to disappear. Eventually, the object of concentration itself, or the awareness of body, mind, and environment, will disappear as well. Absorptions of this sort are genuine experiences of unified mind, equivalent to the mundane concentrations of the four dhyāna and formless *samāpattis* described earlier.

There are numerous differences in degree to these dhyāna absorptions. Some are shallow, others profound; some coarse, others subtle. The instant that any such experience occurs, it will be so markedly different from our ordinary “dissipated” experience of body, mind, and environment that the practitioner will have no choice but to look upon it as a radically new insight into the nature of self and existence. This sense of transformation is precisely what is meant by the “conventional or mundane emptiness” described in the preceding section. The deeper one progresses in meditative absorption, the more informed one becomes about not only the subtlety and coarseness of different grades of experience, but also the subtlety and coarseness of the meditative technique itself. In this respect, one given method of meditation—such as mindfulness of the breath—can have many different levels of application, which evolve or unfold according to the depth of experience.

*Techniques for Developing Insight into No-Self (No-Mind),
Genuine Emptiness, and Emptiness in Its Highest Sense*

Just as Buddhist tradition draws a firm line between “defiled” (S. *sāsrava*) and “undefiled” (S. *anāsrava*) experiences of emptiness, or “mundane” (S. *laukika*) states of “unified mind” and “supramundane” (S. *lokottara*) experiences of “no-mind,” so it also distinguishes between the different techniques that produce them. Generally speaking, those techniques that are designed especially to concentrate the mind and produce the mundane absorptions of “unified mind” are referred to as techniques of “calming,” or “concentration” (S. *śamatha*; C. *zhi*). They are qualitatively distinguished from a second class of meditative techniques known as “contemplation” or “discernment” practice (S. *vipaśyanā*; C. *guan*), which is held to bring about the uniquely liberating Buddhist insights of “no-self” or the emptiness of person (S. *puḍgala-nairātmya*) and phenomena (S. *dharmā-nairātmya*).

Like the mundane experiences of dhyāna absorption themselves, the Buddhist techniques of “calming” are not necessarily peculiar to the Buddhist tradition, but have equivalents in numerous other religions. In fact, the Buddhist tradition itself holds that Śākyamuni Buddha learned many of these practices from the various non-Buddhist teachers under whom he studied prior to his

enlightenment. The techniques of “contemplation,” or *vipaśyanā*, on the other hand, are regarded to be the Buddha’s exclusive contribution and the sole property of the Buddhist tradition. Having grown directly out of the Buddha’s personal experience of enlightenment, they alone can reproduce the unique insights of no-self and emptiness that are at the heart of the Buddhist path to spiritual liberation. In offering these techniques, the Buddhist tradition sets itself apart from all other contemplative traditions.

Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna Buddhist treatises expound a variety of different approaches to *vipaśyanā*, or “contemplation” practice, but for the most part they are extensions of the classic formulation known as the Four Stations or Abodes of Mindful Observation (S. *smṛtyupasthāna*; C. *nianchu*): (1) mindfulness of the body; (2) mindfulness of sensation; (3) mindfulness of the mind, or psyche; (4) mindfulness of dharmas, or the constituent factors of psycho-physical experience. When applied by a mind that has been duly purified and unified by prior practice of meditative concentration (S. *śamatha*), mindful observation of body, sensation, mind, and dharmas will rapidly bring insight (*prajñā*) into the basic Buddhist truths of suffering (S. *dukkha*), transitoriness (S. *anitya*), and absence of enduring selfhood (S. *anātman*). With the realization of no-self, the liberating insight into Buddhist emptiness (*śūnyatā*) begins to emerge.

But when the mind itself is still in a state of turbidity or confusion, it becomes exceedingly difficult to develop a penetrating awareness of these four spheres, much less produce a deeply transformative experience of insight into impermanence or no-self. Thus, it could be said that the unified mind engendered by “calming” practice is a necessary precondition for effective contemplation practice and the realization of emptiness and no-mind. Without the liberating insight of contemplation practice, one’s meditation will never pass beyond the experience of mundane dhyāna, and true enlightenment will never appear. Without the power of mental concentration and clarity generated by calming practice, efforts at mindful contemplation will produce only the most meager or fleeting insight.

At the heart of Buddhist contemplation practice, the Four Stations of Mindfulness—especially the fourth station of “mindful observation of the dharmas, or constituent mental factors”—provide the door to the Buddhist insights of no-self, genuine emptiness, and emptiness in its highest sense. The technique is common to both the Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna teaching. But whereas Hīnayāna stops at the “extinction” of samsāric suffering that arises with the insight of no-self, Mahāyāna carries this contemplative practice to the deeper levels of the emptiness of phenomena, genuine emptiness and emptiness in its absolute or highest sense. Principally, this is accomplished by extending the fourth station of mindful observation of the dharmas through ever-deepening dialectic refutations of emptiness and existence, until all biased views and attachments are refuted and the perfect, inexpressible middle way stands revealed.

Thus, there is the practice of the Three Gates of Liberation (S. *vimokṣa-mukha*), or Three Samādhis of Emptiness, whereby the practitioner sequentially (a) refutes existence in order to realize the emptiness of self; (b) refutes the dharmas to realize the marklessness, or emptiness, of all dharmic attributes; and (c) refutes all notions of existence and emptiness to arrive at utter desirelessness, or unconstructedness. Then again, we also hear of a series of meditations that lead through eighteen different insights of emptiness and their refutation, beginning with insight into the emptiness of subjective selfhood and ending with the emptiness that transcends all notion of arising and perishing, existence and nonexistence.⁹

The Sudden Approach to Enlightenment: Techniques That Offer Direct, or Immediate, Access to Absolute Emptiness

The path of meditative calming and contemplation that we have described above unfolds in a graduated or sequential fashion. Different disciplines or meditations are equated with different levels of practice, and together they build on and supplement one another, leading one step-by-step from delusion to full enlightenment. First one begins with ordinary existence and the conventional sense of self. Through the practice of meditative calming and concentration, one purifies the mind and begins to experience the expanded self and unified mind of mundane dhyāna. Turning to contemplation practice, one uproots the notion of self and begins to work one's way dialectically through successive levels of emptiness, to arrive finally at the perfect enlightenment of emptiness in its highest sense.

Yet, classic Mahāyāna statements about Buddhahood and absolute emptiness assert unequivocally that the afflictions are, from the outset, identical with enlightenment; saṃsāra, as it is, is nirvāṇa. Thus, it is feasible to say that enlightenment might occur immediately, without the need to burden oneself with the illusory task of removing afflictions that do not need to be removed, and appropriating an emptiness that is never appropriated. If, by a simple expansion of horizon, one can open oneself to the inconceivable totality of existence and emptiness just as they are, then the perfect enlightenment of a Buddha is fully at hand.

This is precisely the point on which both Chan and certain forms of Esoteric, or Tantric, Buddhism take their stance. Asserting the intrinsic unity of enlightenment and afflictions, wisdom and skill-in-means, and emptiness and existence, they offer a "speedy" path to Buddhahood for those whose endowments are keen enough to grasp their lightning-like message. Thus, Chan tradition foregoes "dependence on words and texts" or "reliance on provisional expedients," striving instead "to point directly and immediately to the enlightened nature." In lieu of elaborate refutations of existence and emptiness or endless theorizing about the identity of enlightenment and everyday activity, Chan mas-

ters, in principle, strive to allow the enlightened function of absolute emptiness itself to serve as both the medium and the method of Chan.

For example, a student once asked the Chan master Caoshan Benji (840–901), "What is it in phenomena that is ultimately real?"

"Phenomena themselves are the real," the master replied.

The student asked, "How would one show this?"

Caoshan responded by simply lifting his tea tray.¹⁰

A student once asked Chan master Yunmen, "What is the most urgent phrase?"

The master simply said, "Eat!"¹¹

On another occasion, someone asked Yunmen, "What does it mean to say that 'form is nothing other than emptiness'?"

Yunmen replied, "The staff is hitting your nose!"¹²

This approach is what Chan tradition calls "direct pointing to the nature of mind," namely, using the moment to yank away the student's blinders and attachments and directly reveal the enlightenment at hand.

Of course, this by no means implies that Chan, as a religious path, is wholly without form or procedure. Quite the contrary, Chan also has its basic institutions, its requisite conditions, and its procedures for practice, which are fully as intensive as the "gradual" approach. This includes distinctive forms of meditation that are designed to facilitate Chan awakening, such as the practice of "silent illumination" (*mozhao*) or use of *gong'an* and *huaou*. In point of fact, it is only within such a highly disciplined setting—or with such a highly focused mind—that the rhetoric of Chan can have its desired impact. Thus, while Chan tradition may be uncompromising in its presentation of enlightenment, its institutional routines embody many of the same techniques and principles of spiritual development found in the "gradual" formulations of the Buddhist path.

The chapters that follow comprise two basic parts. The first section discusses general principles of meditative development, then illustrates how these principles are embodied in the Three Learning, or Disciplines, that traditionally describe the graduated approach to enlightenment: moral purification through observance of the precepts, development of samādhi power through meditative concentration, and development of insight or wisdom through meditative contemplation. The second section turns specifically to the "sudden and direct approach" of the Chan school. It describes basic practices, such as silent illumination and the use of *huaou*, outlines prerequisites of Chan training, and takes up the question of enlightenment and spiritual progress in Chan.