

meditative state will be situated somewhere between embryonic breathing and turtle breathing. When the true condition of turtle breathing is reached, the psycho-physical body will form its own microcosmic universe, nourished directly by its own internal wellspring of vital breath, or energy. The body will no longer need to take air or vital energy from the outside environment in order to replenish its vitality. Instead, energy wells up from a wholly internal source, naturally suffusing the body and requiring no effort whatsoever.

The levels of coarse and subtle breathing described above represent a natural progression that is commonly experienced by persons who practice meditation over an extended period of time. It is helpful to know about these things so that one can evaluate the effectiveness and progress of one's practice. But such knowledge may prove harmful if you set up unrealistic expectations for yourself, or become overly anxious to attain advanced stages. These stages must develop naturally and without artifice. You must first learn to practice well with nasal breathing. If, in time, abdominal breathing develops, then it is a good start.

#### PRECONDITIONS FOR EFFECTIVE MEDITATION: HARMONIZING THE MIND

Once the harmonious concentration of body, breath, and mind has been established, the experience of samādhi and wisdom will be within reach. The Buddhist tradition offers many different techniques to develop samādhi, wisdom, and insight, each of which is designed to counter impediments and develop the mind in its own particular way. Nonetheless, their basic principle is the same: they strive to take the mind from its usual scattered and coarse condition, simplify it and unify it with concentration, and bring it to what we call the insight of "no-mind" (*wuxin*), or "no-thought" (*wunian*).

The mind of the ordinary person swings like a pendulum between two sorts of mental condition: scatteredness and drowsiness. When one is energetic and full of vigor, outwardly the mind romps through the sense fields and, inwardly, it boils with thoughts. In such an excited condition, it is not easy to even conceive the thought of calming down, much less actually collecting and settling the mind. This is true for almost everyone. If such excitation were not so important to us, we would not feel bored and dejected when there is nothing to do. Then again, when one's energy is dissipated and exhausted, one may sink into a dull torpor or melancholy. If this condition did not exist, one would not need to sleep after spending the day at hard mental or physical labor.

In the former condition, the mind is characterized by distractedness and confusion; in the latter case, by dullness and torpor. These two mentalities are the great enemies of meditators. Every beginning practitioner must guard against them and learn to bring them under control.

When you are slightly drowsy, there are methods to remedy the situation, such as opening the eyes very wide or concentrating your attention on the spot between the eyebrows. For extreme drowsiness, however, it is best to put down your given method of meditation, close your eyes, and rest for a few moments. Just do not allow yourself to fall into the habit of stopping your meditation and drifting off at the slightest suggestion of drowsiness!

By far, the biggest problem faced by meditators is the condition of a scattered and confused mind, and the majority of the techniques for taming the mind are designed to address this problem. The Buddhist scriptures describe many such practices, each with its own particular content and procedure. However, despite their apparent differences, these methods share the common aim of bringing the scattered mind to a condition of one-pointed concentration and, finally, to the realization of no-mind. For the purpose of conveying to my students some idea of this process, I use a series of seven diagrams, each of which illustrates a particular degree of mental concentration (or lack thereof). These seven diagrams are not meant to describe a set of fixed stages that every person must experience. Meditative development is highly individualized and cannot be so rigidly codified. At best, this scheme is meant to give a basic understanding of the meditative process and some measure by which to determine whether one's practice is correct.

Buddhist teachers will generally assign different techniques of meditation according to the specific emotional disposition and meditative needs of the given student. We will have occasion to discuss some of these methods and their usage later. For the sake of the present illustration, I will discuss the phases of meditative development in relation to the method of counting breaths. Counting breaths is the most elemental practice in a traditional set of techniques known as "recollection, or mindfulness, of breathing" (*S. ānāpāna-smṛti*; *C. nianxi*). *Ānāpāna-smṛti*, and especially counting breaths, is particularly effective for counteracting a scattered, distracted mind. Thus, it has long been used by Buddhists as a method for beginners, as well as a foundational practice for other meditation methods.

#### SEVEN PHASES OF MEDITATIVE DEVELOPMENT

##### 1. *The Scattered Mind Prior to Meditation*



Before taking up the method of counting breaths, there is no consistent object on which to focus the mind. Thoughts ceaselessly turn and stir. Attention is fragmented from one instant to the next, as it darts off in countless directions, in pursuit of one object after another. We hanker after sensory data and sensations from our surroundings, reminisce over the past, and anticipate the future. The scattered dots in the diagram represent the random

thoughts and sensations of a confused and unfocused mind; the broken dashes, the fragmented stream of one's attention.

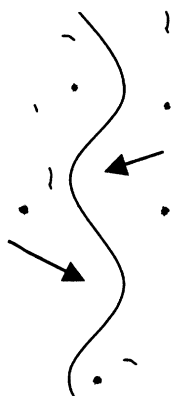
### 2. Initial Efforts to Apply the Method of Meditation



When first taking up the practice of counting breaths, your attention will often wander away from breath and number. Or, many associated thoughts will intrude, such as concerns over how to count the number or how to regard the breath. You are able to sustain the count for short stretches, but usually this is interrupted before long. By repeatedly bringing your attention mind back to the method, the confusion of wandering thoughts gradually is brought under control, and a steady stream of focus begins to develop, enduring for longer and longer stretches of time. The broken line running through the center of the diagram represents the fitful emergence of a steady stream of concentration; that is to

say, the mind concentrated on the method. The surrounding marks and dots indicate the continued presence of distractedness and scattered thoughts, but the firm line developing in the center shows that concentration is beginning to assert control.

### 3. Coarse but Unbroken Application of the Method



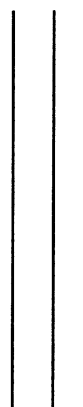
By the third level, you are able to maintain uninterrupted concentration and count each number in perfect succession for a span of at least ten minutes. Nevertheless, concentration is coarse and there still exist many subtle wandering and scattered thoughts that impinge on the margins of your attention. Although concentration may ripple and waver momentarily, these thoughts are never powerful enough to cause you completely to lose sight of the number and the method. The solid line through the center represents the uninterrupted flow of concentration over time. The surrounding dots and occasional slashes that intersect the line illustrate the subtle mental static and coarse thoughts that periodically invade your field of awareness.

### 4. Subtle and Unbroken Application of the Method

Just as before, you are able to maintain concentration on counting breaths without interruption, but at this point, scattered thoughts are now greatly reduced.

Distractions associated with the sensory environment pose almost no problem. Occasionally, wandering thoughts invented by the mind will come into consciousness and then slide away. To you, however, their presence and subsequent rippling effect remain peripheral to the main stream of mindfulness. In this respect, diagram four represents a more subtle stage of concentration than diagram three, and awareness is now quite clear and securely settled on the method. When a wandering thought does arise, you are clearly aware of it, from beginning to end, but the stream of concentration is too deep and strong for these eddies of thought to divert it.

### 5. Pure but Effortful Concentration on the Method



In the fifth diagram there exists only pure counting of breaths. There are neither scattered distractions from the sensory environment nor internal fantasies of deluded thinking. Nonetheless, there is still a lucid sense of the act or process of meditation itself. There is an awareness of a self that is counting breaths, the breaths that are being counted, and the number that is counted and seized upon as the main object of concentration. Concentration itself is pure and unified, but there is still an effortful and ongoing attention to the method. Though all other extraneous disturbances may have disappeared, the thread of this tripartite complex of thoughts remains and continues without interruption—inhalation-exhalation-count, inhalation-exhalation-count. Thus, the single thread of concentration, when investigated more closely, is really a complex weaving of three basic threads, which is represented in the diagram by the three lines together. At this juncture, your mind is highly simplified and concentrated. In fact, you will likely be on the doorstep of samādhi, or "unified mind."

### 6. The Unified Mind of Samādhi

In the sixth diagram, your mind is so concentrated that the act of meditation itself—both the counting of the number and the presence of the breath—is forgotten. As the mind becomes truly calm and concentrated, the act of effortful meditation itself seems coarse and distracting. Letting go of it, number and breath vanish, and body, breath, and mind meld into a single unity. At this point, you may feel as though spatial distinctions no longer pertain among body, mind, and the

world. The opposition between self and other people seems to vanish, and the boundary between the internal and external dissolves. The previous sense of dividedness is replaced by a feeling of pure and harmonious being that is so wondrous as to be indescribable.

This is the basic experience of *samādhi*, or what we variously refer to as “meditative absorption,” “unified mind,” and “one-pointedness of mind.” However, there are many levels of *samādhi*, some shallow, some deep. They can range from the simple and relatively shallow experience of purity and oneness described above, to experiences of infinite light and sound, boundless space, limitless consciousness, limitless emptiness, and even the inconceivable experiences of enlightenment described in such Buddhist scriptures as the *Avatamsaka*, or *Huayan*, Sūtra.

Regardless of how sublime the content, such states of meditative absorption are still defiled by the presence of discriminating thought and attachment. This defilement is none other than the subtle sense of “selfhood.” At deeper levels of *samādhi*, the mind becomes so supple and powerful that even the subtlest thought is experienced on an extraordinarily vast scale. Because attachment to self is still operating in *samādhi*, *samādhi* actually entails the magnification of self to a cosmic scale. The experiences of limitless consciousness, bliss, being, and other feelings associated with *samādhi* are actually the projections of what we call the “great or expanded sense of self.” Until this particular impediment is removed, enlightenment has not dawned and one is still subject to the bonds of deluded existence. *Samādhi* experiences of this ilk will be no more than a mundane or worldly *samādhi*, and the spiritual insights generated from them, a mundane wisdom still tainted by defiling outflows.

### 7. *No-Self, No-Mind*

In the seventh diagram there is no line of concentration, no thought, no mark of any kind. Body, mind, and environment have all genuinely disappeared. Time and space are blown apart, and any sense of existence or nonexistence has vanished. You have entered a realm of emptiness and quiescence, a realm that transcends all subjective emotion and point of view. This is the experience of supramundane *samādhi* and wisdom of “no-mind” that is free of the defiling illusion of self. There is no way to effectively describe it. All words and images are useless; but you will have tasted true freedom and peace.

Just as with the experience of mundane *samādhi*, you should be aware that there are also many levels of supramundane *samādhi* and many degrees of insight into no-mind, or no-self. Sometimes the influence of the root illusions and defilements is merely lessened or temporarily suspended. Sometimes it is severed, but only to a partial degree. In all these cases, the insight of emptiness or no-mind will qualitatively be the same, but the intensity and clarity will vary.

Imagine, for example, that you are stuck inside an old well, the mouth of

which has been boarded over with planks and covered with dirt. A wind comes up and blows some of the dirt off, allowing a flicker of light to shine through the boards before another wind covers them over again. Suppose, then, that someone brushes away the dirt and removes a plank, so that light begins to stream steadily into the well; or that one is finally able to hop out of the well and see the full sun. Then, suppose that one actually becomes the sun itself. All of these experiences of sunlight are qualitatively similar and may be called “illumination,” but the difference in degree is vast. The same holds for the experience of emptiness and no-mind. In principle, the first glimpse of no-mind is the same as the enlightenment of a Buddha. One has seen the Buddha Mind, knows its character, and has developed a firm faith that this enlightenment is intrinsic to all beings. But there is still a big difference between this experience and the full and perfect enlightenment of Buddhahood itself, in which this enlightened potential is fully actualized. Indeed, the Buddhist tradition has many different systems for describing enlightenment and its stages, from the four fruits and the concept of arhat in Hīnayāna Buddhism, to the schemes of ten, thirteen, forty-two, or fifty-two stages of the Mahāyāna bodhisattva.

# Hoofprint of the Ox

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



Master Sheng-yen  
WITH Dan Stevenson

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2001