

The Ten Methods of Mindfulness

There are “ten great roads” to generate the “correct samadhi,” leading to “the great reward,” “all forms of good,” “the elixir of immortality” (*S. amṛta*), “Deathlessness.”

1. Mindfulness of Buddha

For this as well as the following methods one has to do some serious thinking (first step on the eightfold path) before trying to stop thinking (last step). “Buddha” means “complete and perfect enlightened one,” a unique realization that took “three immeasurable kalpas” of preparation, virtue and self-sacrifice – the amount of time and merit it takes to achieve the “unexcelled, perfect, universal enlightenment of Buddhahood” (*anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*).

The first method is also the common spiritual practice in religion, mindfulness of a Supreme Being or Highest Power, though Buddhists focus on learning from and emulating the Buddha, rather than worshipping a God. A devoted Buddhist believes in the omnipresence and omniscience of the Buddha. Living faith in the Buddha actually enables us to contact him, anywhere and anytime, and to connect with his inexhaustible energy.

A Chinese-Taiwanese Buddhist monk recently explained mindfulness of the Buddha as follows: “His wisdom knows us, our problems and our needs, better than we know ourselves, and his compassion loves us more than our mother. The reason why we don’t feel his presence is our lack of mindfulness. To be mindful of the Buddha means being aware of his infinite perfection, wisdom and goodness. That leaves him no choice but to help us, if we could only seriously ask for it. For someone with sincere faith, the Buddha’s response is as certain as seeing one’s face when looking in a mirror. He is bound and compelled by his perfect enlightenment to guide us; just as we are bound and conditioned by our imperfection to be guided by wrong views – to mistake our ego as the center of the world, as better than the rest, slighting others and blaming everyone else except ourselves for the bad karma results we may experience. His light is waiting to illuminate us, if we could only open up. It is like having a radio but being unable to tune in and hear his Dharma because we have not switched it on. That is why we have a hard time believing in the Buddha. We only believe what our senses tell us and only listen to the thought-channel in our head – mainly empty talk of desire, aversion, delusion, arrogance, and doubt – while we could follow him and become like him. His mind is like pure and clear water that flows freely everywhere, while ours is like ice ... we behave as living in cocoons.”

In general, this method of mindfulness of the Buddha reflects on what we are, compared to what he is; on the trivialities we understand compared to his omniscient knowledge; on what we care for, compared to his compassion; on what we are capable of, compared to his cosmic might; on what we deserve, compared to his infinite reserve of merit and blessing – to make us grateful for his exceptional achievement and compassionate teaching (Dharma).

In popular Buddhism, people worship statues and images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, like deities in other religions. But “for serious practitioners who have a better understanding of Buddhism, those images are just a tool for practice. When they want to express gratitude, or

practice concentration, the Buddha statue serves as a focus for their attention ... they are inclined to conduct themselves similarly, to emulate the Buddha — one who possesses infinite merit and wisdom ... If there is any benefit to be gained from the buddhas at all, whether it be paying respect to the Buddha, or by using the statue as a tool, that benefit comes from the Dharma that the Buddha taught. The act of paying respect to the Buddha helps to incorporate more Buddha-dharma into our practice. Thus, what may appear to be worshipping becomes, in fact, a kind of practice, cultivation. Prostrating to the Buddha becomes a meditative exercise.”¹

The role of Buddhist meditation, and spiritual cultivation in general, is to open up and empty out. The more clean the mind-mirror, the clearer the reflection; so the effort so the result. Faith in the Buddha means faith in Mind. “This mind is Buddha-mind” said the Chan masters. “He was a man just like we; how can we become like him? What is perfection? What is ignorance and what is enlightenment, exactly?”

This Buddha-mindfulness resembles prayer and contemplation in other religions, based on devotion and concentration, single-minded and whole-hearted focus on a deity like Jesus, Yahweh, Allah, or Krishna. The intention is to gain spiritual (dhyana-samadhi) power to unite with the honored one, but in Buddhism always *with the purpose of learning and following his example*, not worshipping or asking for forgiveness (no Gods in heaven can undo the karma we create for ourselves, just as they cannot undo theirs).

The first disciples “attained the goal of liberation” by practicing mindfulness of the living Buddha:

“They call him Buddha, Enlightened, Awake, dissolving darkness, with total vision, and knowing the world to its ends, he has gone beyond all the states of being and becoming. This man is the man I follow. This man is a universe of wisdom and a world of understanding, a teacher whose Truth is “the Way things are,” instant, immediate and visible all around.”

Asked why he does not spend all his time with this man, Pingiya, who is too old and weak to follow the Buddha, answers:

“There is no moment for me, however small, that is spent away from him. With constant and careful vigilance it is possible for me to see him with my mind as clearly as with my eyes, in night as well as day. And since I spend my nights revering him, there is not, to my mind, a single moment spent away from him. I cannot move away from his teaching; the powers of confidence and joy, of intellect and awareness hold me there. Whichever way this universe of wisdom goes, it draws me with it.”

Then the Buddha spoke: “Pingiya, other people have freed themselves by the power of confidence. You too should let that strength release you; you too will go the further shore, beyond the draw of death.”

“This man,” said Pingiya, “is a perfectly Enlightened One: everything accessible to knowledge is known to him, even the ultimate subtleties of godhood. There are no more questions for the doubtful who come to him: the teacher has answered them all.” ...

¹ Chan Master Sheng-yen, *Zen Wisdom* (Dharma Drum Publications, 2001), 95, 98

“Yes,” said the Buddha, “you may consider this as mind released.”

(Sutta-Nipāta 1133-49)

When remembering the Buddha, the first disciples visualized his live appearance that was said to be exceptional, displaying the radiant marks of a Cakravartin or “great man.” His physique was the result of his exceptional past merits. Amidst the imperfection and dissatisfaction of life stands an example of pure perfection, an inspiring standard worthy of all our attention.

Pure Land

More meditation methods concerning Shakyamuni and other Buddhas as well, were developed throughout history. The Buddha himself recommended a method that became, through the ages and to this day, the most widely practiced in Mahayana (East Asian) countries. The method of recollecting *Amitabha Buddha* in order to be reborn in his *Pure Land* has been recommended by many teachers in the past, including Chan masters, and even more so for our modern time. The reason is that we live in a spiritually difficult time, when Buddhism and other religions are declining and people are struggling with a heavy karmic burden (after centuries of wrong conduct, wars, etc.) Compared to ancient times, modern people can hardly develop a clear mind with the mental powers needed for enlightenment.²

This method (called “Nianfo” in Chinese, “Nembutsu” in Japanese) is based on mindfulness of a cosmic Buddha in his Land of Utmost Bliss, by simple repetition of his name “Amitabha Buddha” (meaning infinite light, or Amitayus, infinite life). It consists of reciting the Amitabha Sutra, imagining and visualizing his Pure Land (not a heaven but a cosmic Buddha domain) where all phenomena are beautiful and conducive to cultivation of concentration and wisdom, where nothing distracts from seeing this Buddha and hearing his Dharma. This practice is recommended for older people and for those who wish not to spend further lifetimes on earth but to be reborn in that World of Utmost Joy, where everyone is sure to achieve enlightenment without being reborn elsewhere. Reciting this Buddha-name must be done correctly, however, with sincere faith and mindfulness, not as an automaton. To be reborn in that Pure Land requires both pure concentration and pure conduct.

Thus have I heard: Once the Buddha was in Sravasti, together with many great Arhats, Bodhisattvas ... and great multitudes of heavenly beings ... and told Sariputra: To the West from here, beyond millions of Buddhalands, there is a world named Utmost Joy, where there is a Buddha, known as Amita, who is preaching now ... All beings in that land are free from suffering and only enjoy every bliss; therefore it is called Utmost Joy ... [then follows a description of the inconceivable marvels of a paradise that enjoys such wondrous adornment because of that Buddha’s inconceivable merits].

The radiance of that Buddha is immeasurable, shining on countries everywhere in all ten directions, without obstruction, and therefore he is called Amitabha. The life of that Buddha and his people lasts for countless, boundless great kalpas, and so he is named Amita. Since he became a Buddha, it has now been ten kalpas ... The living beings born in the Land of Utmost Joy are all Avaivartikas, many of whom will attain Buddhahood in

² Master Sheng-yen spent many years teaching in the US and Taiwan, but “never encountered someone who had attained samadhi.” (*Zen Wisdom*)

this life. Their number is countless. The living beings who hear this should take the vow to be born in that land, and will thus be enabled to join the company of such superior and good people in the same place. One cannot only rely on a few good roots, blessings, virtues and causal connections to be born in that land. If there is a good man or good woman who hears about Amita Buddha and holds firmly his name, whether for one day, for two, three, four, five, six, or seven days, single-mindedly without distraction, when this person approaches the end of life, Amita Buddha and all the holy ones will appear before him. When the end comes, this person, with his mind free from inversion, will go to be born in Amita Buddha's land of Utmost Joy ...

*These good men and women are all under the protection and mindfulness of all Buddhas and will invariably not retrogress from Unexcelled, Perfect and Complete Enlightenment ... As I am now praising all Buddhas' inconceivable merits, likewise all those Buddhas praise my inconceivable merits and say: Shakyamuni Buddha can do very difficult and rare things. In the Saha land during the time of the five bad defilements, of kalpa, views, afflictions, living beings, and life turbidity, he can attain Unequaled, Perfect and Complete Enlightenment, and declare this hardly believable Dharma for all the world, which is indeed very difficult.*³

This method ensures a safe future. The chances of hearing the true Dharma here on earth will become increasingly rare, because of the growing neglect of morality and virtue. It will take millions of years until this world will turn into a pure and happy land and be ready for the next Buddha Maitreya (Chapter 3). The usual dying process also poses more difficulties, anxieties, and the risk of losing what we have built up during a lifetime of spiritual cultivation. There are the hazards of going astray not only while suffering the dissolution of the four elements, or while being drawn into the adventures of the intermediate state, or while being conceived, or while leaving a womb (Chapter 4), but also of being reborn in a charming heaven of pleasure, or under less fortunate circumstances on earth.

When the mind has trained to focus on this saving Buddha and his vows, concentration power should stay unmoving throughout the transition period, to allow rebirth in this realm and be sure of no regression in the future. Once enlightened, albeit after a long time, it is for the rest of eternity. This Land of Ultimate Bliss is for advanced practitioners (bodhisattvas-to-be) whose religious faith is not selfish but for the sake of wisdom and compassion, who realize that only after self-realizing enlightenment one can help others effectively.

As for all methods of mindfulness, concentration power is needed "to hold firmly his name ... single-mindedly without distraction ... with the mind *free from inversion*" (i.e. free from false thinking, mistaking no-self as self, impermanent as permanent, etc.). Entering God's heaven "proper", to be reborn in the first dhyana-realm, supposes dhyana-attainment in this lifetime.

The Buddha also taught other methods of being reborn in better places, like mindfulness of Maitreya's Pure Land, the next Buddha for this world who now resides in a lower heaven that is close to earth.

³ The full text of this sutra can be found in Inagaki Hisao, *The Three Pure Land Sutras*, in Garma C.C.Chang, *A Treasury of Mahayana Sutras*, 315-360, and in Luis O.Gomez, *The Land of Bliss*.

*At present, Maitreya Bodhisattva is living in the inner court of the Tusita Heaven ... as Shakyamuni Buddha in the past. This special region is an adorned Pure Land where Maitreya frequently preaches the Dharma to infinite numbers of beings. After some time, Maitreya will come to Jambudvīpa to become a Buddha. By then, this world will already be transformed into a Pure Land ... Therefore, if one vows to be born in the Pure Land of Tusita, one will see Maitreya Bodhisattva and will follow him in his descent to the human world of the future. Seeing a Buddha and hearing the Dharma, one will progress upward naturally. How could one worry about regression? ... In comparison to rebirth in other pure lands of the worlds in the ten directions, the doctrine of rebirth in Maitreya's Pure Land is most precious and secure ... [because it is] very close ... As for the length of time involved in this process, after one is reborn in the inner court of Tusita in the next life, it will not be too long before one will return to the human world ... This is different from being reborn in other pure lands, in which one has to be single-minded without scatteredness in meditation, which is certainly not easy ... One need not necessarily vow to attain the bodhi mind or the mind of renunciation ... In brief, regardless of the kind of capacity one has for studying Buddhism, one needs only to take refuge in the Three Treasures, give properly, keep the precepts purely, and vow to return to Maitreya's Pure Land. One is guaranteed to progress upward in the course of practice through seeing the future Buddha and hearing the Dharma frequently, so one should not worry about the possibility of future regression.*⁴

2. Mindfulness of Dharma

This practice underlies mindfulness as a whole. Dharma means the truth and teaching of the Buddha, not only typically Buddhist doctrine but the universal truth as expounded by a Tathagata, one who clearly and fully knows the nature of reality in all respects. This includes natural law, the universal principles of phenomena, people and events, both physical and spiritual dimensions; the substance of life and its full range in the Triple Universe, the Way the universe operates and the working of karma, the causality of cyclical existence in the six destinies in past, present and future, the twelvefold chain of dependent origination, the no-self and emptiness of ego and phenomena. This method means to “constantly be aware” of the true nature of existence.

Mindfulness of “dharma” as phenomena means to observe and examine the nature of things, the way they appear in our consciousness and how we react to them. This constant reflection is not mere thought and conception but direct observation. It includes the meditation methods of fixing the attention on a metaphysical riddle (*huaou* and *koan*) as in Chan and Zen in order to gain immediate insight into the nature of the mind. It also includes study methods of logic and philosophy as in the Buddhist Yogacara and Mind-only schools, as well as in Jnana Yoga and Advaita Vedanta in Hinduism, and other spiritual disciplines.

Most important is the combination of “knowing Dharma” with “applying Dharma.” To realize wisdom, to arrive at the transcendental experience of ultimate reality and witness no-self and emptiness, truth has to be understood-in-action. The theoretical principles have to be tested,

⁴ Abridged from Yin-Shun, *The Way to Buddhahood* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1998), 102-105

verified, internalized, and actualized in life. Mindfulness of Dharma not only knows the right view but puts it into practice, combining insight with deep reflection and penetration in meditation, and with action; to let the truth permeate all aspects of life, at all times and circumstances. It also requires understanding that all theories, practices, and stages of realization are but “expedient means” leading to the correct samadhi of Nirvana, which is absolutely empty.

3. Mindfulness of the Sangha

This practice originally focused on the monastic order of Buddhist “professionals,” the mendicant men and women with shaven heads, clothed in rags, who had forsaken the ordinary way of life in order not to be distracted and tied down by worldly views of convention and appearance; to give expression to what alone is real and beyond appearances; to lead a life that is dedicated to integrity and detachment, discipline, morality and virtue, intellectual honesty, serenity and precision, poverty and chastity; not to care about what the world may think of this reversal of its establishment and common sense (the Buddha was the first in history to establish a monastic community life).

Members of the Sangha, followers of the Buddha and ordained by himself or his disciples, were held in high esteem, but only the “realized ones” were entitled to counsel others and initiate newcomers into the order. They formed the “congregation of noble ones,” those who had made it to “the other shore” and joined the community of sages, those who embody eternal truth and everlasting life.

To learn the Dharma one must rely on the wise guidance of the Sangha ... Buddhism teaches that we should “rely on the Dharma, not on an individual,” and so taking refuge in and transmitting the correct Dharma is of utmost importance. Consequently, the behavior of monastics is their personal business, and as long as they have correct views and can preach the Dharma, even if they break the precepts, laity should still give them respect ... The Buddha is worshiped because of the Dharma, and the Sangha is paid reverence due to one’s faith in and acceptance of the Dharma. Worshiping the great bodhisattvas is one way of paying reverence to the Sangha. While of course we should revere and make offerings to spiritually realized monastics, we should also do the same for ordinary monks and nuns who keep precepts and teach the Dharma ... even to monastics who do not keep the precepts but have right view and can teach the true Dharma ... In fact, in these days long after the Buddha has left us, noble monastics [enlightened to the noble (S. arya) level] are hard to find.⁵

Besides respect for its members, mindfulness of the Sangha means to be in communion with the enlightened ones, the arhats and bodhisattvas, eminent masters and other “noble ones.” Accomplishment in the past as at present depends on the mentor, on the person who transmits the light. If we cannot share the actual guidance and presence of an enlightened master, we should recollect the worthy sages of past generations and learn about their lives, experiences, and teachings. How did they live, study, and practice? To examine and follow their example, to *actually do what they advised us to do* is to be “mindful of the Sangha.”

⁵ *ibid.* p. 87

A further development was the preeminent role of the teacher or guru in the esoteric sects. Mindfulness is then directed towards an “honored one” and his specific methods of instruction. Recollection of and communion with a spiritual teacher of high cultivation attainment, with enlightened transcendental beings — who by virtue of their transcendence of space/time/form are always present everywhere — means sincere faith in their being with us, and in what they represent. Spiritual union with a Teacher is a potent way to reach samadhi and its power-operations. The Teacher uniting with the disciple is a wonderful working of the spirit, as has been manifested through many different signs of dhyana-samadhi proficiency in other religions as well.

4. Mindfulness of Discipline

This method directs all attention to constant self-improvement, examination and correction of our behavior, above all our inner conduct. It is the effort to set one’s mind fully and constantly on avoiding unwholesome thought and action, to raise ever more “skillful states of mind” such as the “four boundless states of loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity” (S. *brahma-vihara*, pure abidings or divine abodes), also called “the four immeasurables” because they make the mind immeasurable.

Through observing one’s mind until all conduct becomes pure, samadhi is naturally attained. Eventually it means eradication of the outflows and the bonds and compulsions that bind us to the birth and death cycle (next chapter). Only this leads to Nirvana, which is unconditioned and spontaneous perfection, and *only then* (not earlier as is sometimes misunderstood) can good and evil, the duality of right and wrong, be left behind.

The main purpose of discipline is to subdue and dissolve karmic obstructions that have built up during ages of inadequate conduct and have resulted in the mental problems, vexations, temptations and other destructive emotions we suffer. If there is no foundation of discipline and moral integrity, meditation will not only not work but will cause more problems than just distraction. Spiritual training means perfection through discipline; it has little to do with special experiences or paranormal powers. On the other hand, pure discipline will prove mightier than any psychic or miraculous powers.

To develop the spiritual qualities of enlightenment, to excel and transcend the birth-death realm that is caused and dominated by good and evil, right and wrong, we need a huge amount of excellent, positive karma. Once advancing on the road of pure conduct and great goodness, spiritual power, blessings and merits (that cover not only spiritual but all aspects of life) will grow exponentially, creating more comprehensive benefits than we can imagine, because selfless goodness is the heart of creation.

Because concentration power and wisdom arise from moral excellence, if we have trouble meditating, praying, or believing, and miss wisdom, spiritual clarity, and charisma, conduct is where to look. That is why self-discipline in people of all cultures has led to amazing natural and supernatural powers. The wisdom and influence of Socrates, for example, the father of

Western thought, came not from special DNA or brain cells but from the moral discipline and concentration power of someone who was known as “the most virtuous man of his time.”

5. Mindfulness of Giving

This mindfulness practices compassion and wisdom at the same time. It means constant concern for others, forgetting oneself and renouncing the ego. Generosity and selfless love means to be intent on benefitting others instead of oneself (against worldly common sense); on letting go and giving away instead of “going and getting,” not even thinking of “doing good” and acquiring merit for one’s own sake. Giving is not only giving away of one’s belongings (that do not belong anyway) but giving up and surrendering oneself, not grasping or holding onto anything, not even beliefs and opinions, not even one’s life. Real giving is a difficult task.

This mindfulness prepares for awakening in action. When one gives and gives up everything until no thought and no body is left, then (only) can one expect to experience the samadhi of no-self and emptiness. When personal ideas and opinions, preferences and inclinations are given up and thrown out, pure concentration arises of itself – after the ego, the source of false thinking, is gone.

6. Mindfulness of Heaven

This spiritual exercise is the core of religion. The purpose of all religious activity – from individual faith and devotion to communal liturgy and celebration, from altruistic conduct to mortification and holiness – is to ascend to a higher, heavenly realm and enter into union with the Divine, the defining goal of Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. The practice of *devekut* or “cleaving/adhesion,” for example, is to achieve single-minded concentration. To be reborn in God’s heaven, beyond the lower heavens of the sense-desire world, sexual desire has to be abandoned to make place for the bliss of dhyana-concentration – the main but forgotten reason for chastity and celibacy. “To experience something of heaven” is the goal of prayer and contemplation, to “lift up one’s heart” (*sursum corda*) literally, up to the level of dhyana-heaven *experience* and achieve actual separation from senses and thoughts, body and world, to enter a new, pure world.

The condition is mindfulness with no distraction or second thought, as can be seen in the “the brief rule” for Catholic monastics: “Sit in your cell as in paradise. Put the whole world behind you and forget it. Watch your thoughts like a good fisherman ... Realize above all that you are in God’s presence, and stand there with the attitude of one who stands before the emperor. Empty yourself completely and sit waiting, content with the grace of God ...”⁶

Constant awareness of God, to pray not just now and then but to “pray always” (Jesus) and live “in the presence of God” is the theme that permeates all religious exercise. A clear definition of Christian mindfulness which illustrates the goal of one-thought concentration is given by the great mystic-philosopher-theologian Meister Eckhart: “Therefore if a man begins to travel this path in the midst of other people, let him first commit himself strongly to God and holding him

⁶ Saint Romuald’s *Brief Rule for Camaldolese Monks*.

firmly in his heart, let him unite within himself all his strivings, thoughts, wishes, and powers, *so that nothing else can arise in him.*⁷

To be mindful of those in heaven is not only to remember and adore them for their superb qualities and merits, and implore their intercession, but also to honor their excellence by *following their example*. Mindfulness of heaven, in Buddhist perspective, means to be aware that exalted states of heaven exist because of excellent karma. Saints and angels and divinities may not have realized enlightenment yet, but they have the power to protect those who practice moral excellence and concentration. That is why they are in a blessed and more fortuitous position than the rest of us. This position is the result of pure conduct and virtue, and most worthy of our admiration and emulation. To keep those in heaven constantly in mind leads to communion with their samadhi state. Another reason to be mindful and thankful of heaven is that we receive much help and blessings from above. Mindfulness of heaven partakes of its grace, power and glory. The main difference between Buddhist mindfulness of Heaven and religious worship is that “God’s Kingdom” is not “where God is King over you;” gods are not superior and humans not inferior.

Other religions are much respected by Buddhists, because their over-all inspiration is in consonance with the Dharma and they differ from Buddhism only in final (enlightenment) degree. Buddhist ultimate truth and *transcendence* of the highest heavens in the Triple World is the Buddha’s achievement and not ours. Therefore, one should not look down on religions but ask oneself if one is capable of their standards of living virtuously, of selfless love, constant prayer and dhyana-experience; in other words, whether one is able to accomplish the basics of Buddhism.

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These six recollections have in common that they are other-related, either believing or trusting what others have realized (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, Heaven) or acting toward others (discipline and giving). It is typical of religious faith to shift one’s attention from actual reality, from the uncertainty and suffering of this world to a better world. In contrast, the following four methods of mindfulness rely solely on our own resources and are based on plain human reality, on bare attention and naked awareness, stripped of any beliefs or ideals.

7. Mindfulness of Stopping and Resting

This is a most simple and effective but difficult practice, to exercise the “extinction of body and mind” as if in samadhi. In fact, all spiritual exercise goes through the stage of “stopping” (*samatha*) before reaching samadhi. Thorough mental and physical relaxation, not only dissolving superficial stress but deeper problems, compulsions, and illusions as well, allows one to drop and let go of all issues and concerns of body and mind, to put down everything and come to real rest. Doing this means that we can eventually reach the fullness of Nirvana.

Resting and taking a break from all attachment and involvement, worries and troubles, vexations and afflictions that may bother us is in itself a healthy and energizing practice. To be at rest in

⁷ Meister Eckhart, *Sermons and Discourses* (Pembroke Press, 1990), 95; italics added

all circumstances, “whether sitting, standing, walking or resting,” and to stop all thinking, willing, and doing is a most difficult thing to do. When emptying the mind, untying not only psychological but also physical knots, thoroughly freeing and opening up the nerves and energy-channels, a remarkable phenomenon takes place: body and mind fill with new energy, eventually merging with the spiritual energy that sustains the universe. Only when the (separate) ego stops can the real One-Self come out.

When this experience of calm and peace becomes a routine and a skill, it generates the state of samadhi, and mindfulness becomes fixed, hour after hour, day in and day out. The result is rejuvenation, recovering the vigor of youth. It is also the only way to recover our original Nature; true rest and stopping stops everything: the drive and pull of desire and ignorance, the force of karma and its cycle of birth and death, the wheel of Samsara. When the body is empty and all phenomena have left the mind so only emptiness remains, then the experience of emptiness should also be put to rest, which is the most profound stopping, the “cessation and calm extinction of Nirvana.” “When false nature stops, stopping is enlightenment.” (*Surangama sutra*)

8. Mindfulness of Breathing

The commonly recommended method for meditation is concentration on breathing, because it involves and transforms both body and mind, thus laying a foundation for further cultivation. It is called *anapana* in Buddhism, equal to *pranayama* in Indian yoga and the main object of Daoist yoga. It was also known in ancient Greece as *pneuma*, and it is a recommended method in Orthodox prayer,⁸ Sufi and other spiritual traditions. In general, Buddhist and esoteric meditation starts with this practice of focus on breathing, such as “calming and discerning” (*samatha-vipassana*) in Theravada, “cessation and contemplation” in Tientai (Jap. Tendai), recitation and visualization in Pure Land (Jap. Jodo), and “tempering the breath” in esoteric Tibetan Buddhism (as in the practice of “*tumo* heat”). It is also the basis of energy practices in yoga, *kundalini* and *qi-gong*. These practices focus on the breathing process and awareness of its every movement, until it becomes so subtle that it almost stops – and the body starts generating its own inner energy (kundalini arousal).

When the mind and the inner breath-energy become one, both air and thoughts stop coming and going. Breathing means more than air passing through the nose into the lungs. Oxygen is a chemical and not the vital energy itself, not the breath of life. This subtle breath, called *qi* (*ch'i*) in Chinese (pronounced “chee”), is not only in the lungs but everywhere; it breathes throughout the whole body, in and out of all cells, and it joins the energy of the cosmos, interacting with the flux of life “between heaven and earth.” The air we breathe is only the medium that carries the life-breath, like “an envelope containing a jewel.” The ancient Daoists, experts in breath-energy training, called it “the mystic pearl of heaven and earth, the source of all breaths.” Usually we are not aware of this subtle, all-pervasive, most basic but “soft” energy; it is perceived only when the mind is tranquil and the body pure and attuned.

From daily life one knows the link between breathing and consciousness, between the rhythm and quality of inhalations-exhalations and different states of mind. When agitated, anxious or

⁸ See for instance the *Philokalia* and *The Way of the Pilgrim* (Spiritual Classics from Russia)

angry, or when calming down with a sigh of relief, or taking a deep breath before an important decision, mind and breathing move in tandem (science has identified a relationship between thoughts/emotions and breathing). But there is more. Breathing not only converges with our mind but depends on it; it is made of the mind's thought-movements because of the link between *prana/qi* energy and consciousness. When in control of breathing one can be in control of the mind, and vice versa. The purpose of *anapana* is to prepare for samadhi: when one-thought concentration becomes one with the breath, breathing may become so thin and unmoving that the flow of air spontaneously stops, and the body opens up its energy-channels (the qi-meridians of acupuncture) to come alive with its own inner life-breath, without breathing air (yogis in India can bury themselves for several days).

In the early Buddhist scriptures on mindfulness,⁹ the “anapana” exercise consists of being fully aware without distraction of the “wind” element in the body, establishing a link between mind and breath, connecting all thoughts with the inhalation and exhalation process. “When breathing out long, you should know how long the exhalation is, when short, you should know how short the breath is, when light ... or heavy ... or warm ... or cool ...” This breathing exercise is very efficient to improve alertness and memory, and to enhance health and brain function in general (“meditation reshapes the brain”).

However, in order to become a spiritual practice leading to samadhi and transcendental wisdom, the mind should not stay with the in-and-out breaths but focus on the empty, non-moving, not coming-and-going interval in between, until external, coarse air-breathing subsides and internal breathing takes over, igniting the inner energy flow. This phenomenon (called *xi* in Chinese) is the turning point, the start of energy transforming into spirit, (*qi* into *shen*). This is also the major object and pivot of yoga, both Indian and Daoist. To arrive at this stage, one should focus on the gaps between breathing, gradually extending the empty, quiet interval. Breath and mind calm down until they unite of themselves. The purpose is to remain in this state, which naturally leads to further concentration progress.

The sutras explain: “When there is breath, know it is there; when there is no breath, know it is not there; know your breath is coming from the mind; know your breath is entering through the mind.” To “know” at this stage means clear and calm awareness. When distracting thoughts are gone and stay away, they cannot be thought of anymore, even if one would like to think them. When the body turns to inner respiration, it produces its own vital energy, without relying on outside elements, filling with life-breath without breathing chemistry in and out. The body-mind starts a new way of life, generating light and energy of itself, able to see not only in the dark (advanced meditators used to retire in completely dark caves), but also inside the body, literally-physically. The brain and all other cells will then fill with pure energy and the body becomes light and supple, soft like an infant, recovering its health and extending its life-span.

With thoughts gone, the mental conception and discrimination process of the sixth consciousness has stopped and the third skandha obstacle/shadow is overcome; not only physical sensations and mental distractions but also all former difficulties, hindrances and afflictions disappear. They have made place for the physical rapture and spiritual joy of the first dhyana.

9 Pali Nikaya, MN 10, 118 and DN 22, and the Chinese Agama, T 125 and T 602

As a start, it is advised to observe one's breathing without interfering, like watching a sleeping baby breathing. It is recommended to count the breaths, from one to ten. When this practice generates an awareness of the pause in-between, it enters the stage of "following the breath" throughout the body. Counting should then be abandoned to focus on no-breath in between.

"In tempering and refining the breath, this breath [*qi*] is not the breath that moves in and out the nostrils. This method only makes use of this breath and sets it in motion. It is like using a match: after the fire is lit, you do not need the match anymore. The body itself also has energy. We must take this *qi* and directly experience it; only then are we doing *anapana*. If you really experience the vital energy directly, then within seven days you are sure to realize the fruit of enlightenment." "If you do not travel this road, then it will be extremely difficult if you want to attain the results of cultivating practice."¹⁰

The first goal for all meditation is thus to "stop" (*samatha*). The reason for making the breath the sole object of consciousness is to connect and unite consciousness with vital energy; as long as it flows in and out, thoughts keep coming and going. The goal of focusing on breathing therefore is to stop breathing. "Stopping the breath is something our minds create: this deliberate action is for the sake of transforming this body. Only after the physical body of the four elements has been entirely transformed will you be able to see the real one: The ocean of awakening, by nature clear and perfect — perfectly clear, the original wonder of awakening."¹¹

9. Mindfulness of the Body

There are many ways to meditate on the body. The Buddhist practice includes focus on the body's impurity, to become aware of its uncleanness and repulsiveness in order to counteract lust, craving, arrogance, and ego-illusion and practice detachment, to detach from the body and its senses (the "separation" that marks the entry of *dhyana*). When meditation on the impurity of the body has been carried out thoroughly, the result is the transformation into a pure, mind-made body. The creation of this spiritual body is the vehicle for obtaining spiritual powers and the know-how of liberation. Other meditations on the body also developed from the contemplation of a Buddha's glorified body of bliss to an actual transformation of one's perishable body of flesh into an "incorruptible diamond body." Later developments are various Bodhisattva evocations, where one unites oneself with those bodies in esoteric practice.

Contemplation of the White Skeleton

The method called "contemplation of the white skeleton" was a favorite cultivation practice throughout history, because it leads to spectacular results of a quick realization of no-self and emptiness. It is this method together with *anapana* that convinced the Chinese intelligentsia to accept Buddhism early on, because many practitioners attained miraculous superpowers, psychic abilities, healing power and longevity, thanks to its thorough mind-body transformation.

10 NanHuai-chin, *To Realize Enlightenment* (Samuel Weiser, 1994), 184, *Working Toward Enlightenment* (Samuel Weiser, 1993), 120

11 *Working Toward Enlightenment*, 254

After the body dies, it decomposes until nothing but the skeleton remains. This ultimate physical fact of human life is the starting point for this exercise. Most religions, when realizing the limits and hindrances imposed by the body, have resorted to austerity, mortification and other techniques of fasting and asceticism in an attempt to free the spirit from the flesh. The Buddhist way to counter the dominance of the body and free the mind of the first skandha-cloud is to see it as it is: to observe it carefully, examining and analyzing how it looks precisely, under the skin and further inside.

When the mind is concentrated and capable of “contemplation” (*vipassana* comes only after “cessation” or *samatha*), one is able to visualize the inside of the body, its organs, nerves and bones, blood circulation, energy channels, etc. Next, one should imagine the final state and fate of the body, disintegrating, shedding its skin and flesh, and scrutinize in detail its composition as well as decomposition and what remains after the perishables of flesh and organs are gone. Then one should turn the vision inwards and inspect or “scan” the body from the inside, literally; it is not enough to imagine and visualize. The basic visionary capacity, called the eye-root consciousness is turned inward. This skill, called inner vision, was like most of the Buddha’s methods not his invention but well known in other ancient cultures as well. This inner vision is, like inner breathing, a natural power that is activated through concentration, a spontaneous functioning of natural intelligence (useful and effective in diagnosing and healing disease).

“Introspection” of the body starts with imagining in detail all organs, tissues, fluids, bones – all that is contained within this “bag of skin,” as Buddhists call it. Then one should reflect on mortality and imagine oneself as dead (an exercise that gave the modern yogi Ramana Maharshi his first samadhi experience when he was seventeen). The body is viewed as a lifeless corpse, in all its parts, undergoing the successive stages of decay and rotting away, first rigid, then soft and swollen, blue-grey, festering, exuding blood and pus, fissured, eaten by worms, and baring the bones.

After meditating on the “impurity of the body” and seeing oneself turn into a heap of filth, one should think of the lower destinies, especially the hungry ghosts, who consider this kind of rottenness as precious food. Mindful of generosity and compassion, the body is then offered to all those roaming, invisible beggars, mad with hunger and thirst. To sacrifice oneself for the more unfortunate, ugly, and detestable non-humans among all sentient beings, to relinquish one’s body to feed another’s life is part of this “impurity contemplation” and a powerful way to practice *universal* compassion. When this method succeeds, after giving up the body out of love for living creatures we usually shun, unusual peace and joy arise because we have satisfied many lives, returning some sacrifice of the many slaughtered to satisfy our body.

After the body rots and is eaten away by worms and maggots and bacteria, all that remains is the bones. One should sit motionless and thoughtless, just observing the white skeleton. This contemplation unfolds in successive stages: after the bones are clearly seen, they are perceived as shining bright, dazzling white, and emitting light. Then follows the contemplation of the basic elements, earth (solid stuff), water, wind, and fire, and successively witness their destruction, until nothing is left of “me” but the ashes of a skeleton, in wide empty space. When that dust also blows away, only emptiness remains.

This contemplation of the emptiness of all physical form/mass (first skandha), including the absence of a body-self, is a true but only initial realization. There is no perception of the body and “me” anymore, nothing but vast, bright space. Coarse and impure physical life has turned into brilliant energy, and concentration has reached the opening stage of dhyana-concentration. To remain in this light without perception and sensation of body and ego is still the product of effort and contrived activity, however. This experience, although definitely without suffering and worries and of incomparable delight and serenity, is not yet liberation/independence from birth and death.

This method was recommended by the Buddha and later masters as a powerful exercise of purification and sublimation, a strong foundation for spirituality and transcendence, a way to dispel the first “poison” of greed and lust, selfishness and materialism, and cultivate universal compassion, to fully realize the impermanence, suffering, no-self and emptiness of the body first. When people overlooked these and similar instructions for “physical” spiritual training, attainment declined because the groundwork was missing. Esoteric Buddhism promoted a revival of body-contemplation, based on the meditation of impurity and the white skeleton (as can be seen from the human skulls figuring in Tibetan images). As long as the body is not emptied and transcended, other methods inevitably lead to mistakes, especially the “pair/dual practices” of sexual embrace in esoteric Buddhism and yoga. In a so-called spiritual but in fact non-empty and non-selfless setting, this indulging in carnal desire (by gurus abusing students) is a much more serious mistake or “sin” than any other worldly offense, “leading to the deepest and longest of hells.” Misunderstanding esoteric practices with regard to sex has caused Buddhism irreparable harm.

Next follows an unabridged translation of the opening passage from an early and influential meditation manual (*Sutra of the Secret Essential Method of Dhyana* ¹²), describing in detail the “contemplation of the white skeleton”:

One day the Buddha with his following was visited by an intelligent and very learned monk. He paid his respects but, as the Buddha sat absorbed in dhyana, was greeted with silence. He then turned to Sariputra and asked him about the meaning of the teaching ... and he then asked the other disciples, but he could not understand. Finally he went back to the Buddha, who rose from his meditation and saw the monk bowing at his feet, in a flood of tears, requesting earnestly to reveal the truth. The Buddha then fully explained the four noble truths, but he still failed to understand, just as before. Deities who were listening to the Buddha's words, however, realized the pure dharma eye, and honoring him with heavenly flowers they declared to have quickly realized the truth and become Stream-winners. When the monk heard the heavenly language he felt shame and wept, and without words, like a crumbling mountain, he prostrated himself and repented before the Buddha.

Ananda then asked the Buddha about the causes for the fate of this monk, who – being very learned and well-versed in all scriptures and sciences, and after so many years of religious life – could not taste the flavor of the Dharma; was he to blame for something? The Buddha then explained that, innumerable aeons ago, this monk had met the Buddha

12 *Chan mi yao fa jing*, T 613

of that time. Being intelligent and learned he was conceited and heedless because of his knowledge and he did not practice the four foundations of mindfulness. After having wasted his life he fell in the darkness of hell. Thereafter he was reborn many times as a king among dragons and elephants, and when leaving the animal realm he went to heaven as a result of discipline during his former religious life. Reborn among men he is now able to meet the Buddha, because he was versed in the former Buddha's teaching, but because of his previous heedlessness and lack of cultivation of mindfulness, he could not become enlightened.

The monk then asked the Buddha to teach him how to practice mindfulness. Thereupon the Buddha explained, not only for him but for all those who suffer from heedlessness, the method of fixing mindfulness, to destroy the robbers that are the distracting thoughts, the true way of immortality, the medicine of the Buddhas of all times to cure the defilements, to close all doors of heedlessness, to open for Men and Gods the eightfold correct path. This is the method: You should sit in a quiet place, upright in the correct lotus-posture, left hand on the right, with closed eyes and the tongue touching the palate. Let the mind stay concentrated, without being distracted. First fix your attention on the big toe of the left foot. Visualize attentively half the toe and imagine a blister rising. Watch carefully until it becomes very clear. Then imagine the blister festering. Look at the half toe until it turns so white and clean as if emitting white light. After seeing this, visualize the whole toe being stripped of flesh. Just watch the toe until it becomes completely clear, shining white. This is "the method of fixing attention."

Now observe two and three toes. After three toes, the mind expands gradually and you should view five toes. Fix the mind on observing the five toes of the foot, shining bright as white light, clearly discerning the white bones. Watch carefully the five toes, without straying. If thoughts scatter they should be focused again on the half toe as from the beginning. When this perception is made, the whole body glows and warmth develops under the heart. This is "fixing the mind to stay."

When thoughts have stopped, the imagination has to be aroused again, to let the flesh of the sole split open to both sides. Watch the bones in the foot until they are as clearly distinguished as possible. The bones in the foot should look as white as dazzling snow. View subsequently your anklebone, shinbone, kneecap, thighbone, pelvic bone, ribs, backbone and shoulder bone, visualizing each being stripped off the flesh from both sides, until they are clearly perceived, in dazzling white light. From the shoulder to the elbow, from the elbow to the wrist, from the wrist to the hand, from the hand to the fingertips, let the flesh split open for each ...

Once this visualization is made, one's own body looks as white as a snowman, the joints still holding together. If it looks yellow or dark, one should repent. After repenting one sees a skin growing over the skeleton, then stripped off and fall in front where it gradually grows, from the size of a bowl to a cask and as big as a tower – it increases or decreases according to one's will – and it steadily grows into a big mountain. There are maggots gnawing the mountain, dropping pus and blood, and innumerable worms wriggling in the pus. The skin mountain gradually rots away until little is left and the maggots start fighting for food ... This is "the initial meditation on impurity."

When the monk heard the Buddha's explanation, he carefully observed one contemplation after the other, spending ninety days without distraction. On the last

evening of the summer retreat, he realized the four stages of the arhat fruits and was in full command of the three superknowledges and the six superpowers. Great was his joy and he went to pay his respects to the Buddha: "Through meditation, through the correct experience, based on samadhi, my destiny has been terminated. I will not experience any further existence. I know for sure that the path corresponds with the truth, and that pure conduct will be completed. This method contains the sweet dew of immortality, and who consumes it enjoys ambrosial delight."

The Buddha said: "Now that you have truly realized this method, you can freely exercise the eighteen transformations." Indeed, the monk stood in the air and performed freely and autonomously the supernatural powers.

Remarkable is, first, the way karma operates throughout the different destinies, from a very intelligent but stubborn and arrogant man to rebirth in hell, as an animal, up to heaven, and back. Then comes the concentration practice "without distraction," illustrating how plain focus on physical reality and natural imagination leads to super-natural powers like "walking on water as on earth, going through walls and mountains as through water." Liberation means concrete empowerment, solving life and death not just intellectually but actually-physically breaking through, dissolving, and mastering the matter/body skandha first.

This sutra contains more than thirty "meditations of the white skeleton," each effectuating certain aspects of the liberation process. One of them describes how to gradually view one's place, surroundings, and then the whole world filling with white skeletons walking and staring towards oneself. Another meditation envisions the skull descending upside down into the hollow abdomen where the intestines were, and dissolving into bright light. This is an effective remedy for a distracted, chaotic mind, and for high blood pressure as well. All thoughts and feelings take place in our head and over-load the brain. This exercise "takes everything off one's head" literally, by taking off our head altogether and leaving us supremely relieved. Once the impurity of the body has been viewed and all flesh has been removed, one can also use the white skeleton to locate and cure specific syndromes and diseases (even before the symptoms appear). Concentration power is able to empty and dissolve the bones with all the discomfort and sickness they support. The Buddha was not only a spiritual teacher but a remarkable physician as well, not by miraculously healing others but teaching how to become thoroughly healthy and revitalized through the self-power of the mind.

10. Mindfulness of Death

This exercise deserves special attention among the ten methods of mindfulness, because death has been a principal topic of meditation for all spiritual disciplines. It provides the essentials of true training that lead to actual attainment. It is the easiest but least practiced way, because we are afraid of death. To meditate on death means to be realistic, not pessimistic. Wisdom starts with acknowledging reality as it is. Life does not exist without death. As long as we do not confront the main problem of life, no other problem can be really solved. To understand death is to know what life is all about; to elude death is to ignore how things are, not giving truth and wisdom a chance to dawn upon us. To confront death is to knock on "the Door of

Deathlessness.”

The key to this mediation is not to imagine oneself as dead but to be mindful of complete rest and relaxation. The body and the brain are gone, of no concern anymore (a similar supreme relief is reported by people who had a “near-death experience”). Detachment, to be without any intentions, expectations, beliefs or whatever *creations* from our side, is the most pure and direct way to spiritual realization; the right practice to realize the Uncreated.

We know from modern science and from our own experience, probably, how fragile human life is. Any disturbance of our inner make-up or outer environment means disaster, if not the termination of our “beautiful world.” This life is short and unpredictable to the extent that we are never sure of tomorrow, never *really* sure of coming home from a trip or waking up the next day. Although modern civilization has worked hard to make death seem far away and absent from our lives, it is as close as our shadow, as our breath. Life is floating on such a thin thread of breath, so flimsy that we depend on “air” to conduct our many important affairs. The life of this body is but a transient, unreliable accommodation, capable of letting us down at any moment. And there is nothing we can do about it, no prevention, no insurance, and no immortal resort on this planet or in any of the other abodes in the Triple Universe.

“Mindfulness of death is very fruitful ... and has Deathlessness as consummation. Meditate more intensely on death!” the Buddha once said. One of the monks replied that he knew how to meditate on death. “How do you meditate on it?” “I hope to live for not more than seven years” answered the monk. “Your meditation is not mindful but thoughtless of death,” declared the Buddha. Another monk said he hoped to live not more than seven months, another one talked about seven days, and others about one day, one morning and not more than the time for a meal. The Buddha told them: “You all meditate heedlessly on the meaning of death.” One monk said “I only need the time for breathing out without waiting for the next breath.” The Buddha said “This is really meditating on the meaning of death, without heedlessness. All phenomena are conditioned, empty and quiet, born and perishing moment after moment, like magic, without true reality.”¹³

To be mindful of death at any moment is a powerful way of spiritual cultivation. When mindful that death is imminent, not only in meditation but also in the midst of daily life, one can set aside all that is nonessential to concentrate on “the one thing that is indispensable.” To be mindful of death means to do *only* what is right, and do it now, moment after moment.

Life is just this, one moment after another. When one has detached from and transcended transient phenomena, simply concentrating on this moment, one can naturally and spontaneously enter the peace and bliss of dhyana-concentration, and experience the true nature of eternal life; one can find out what all coming and going is about and where it all turns around. What is the point of birth with death, and the essence of all life-death phenomena? How can we be in charge of where we go, or stop going, after death? Many masters have spent their time concentrating on this one topic, not on Buddhas or Divinities or Scriptures or good works, not on auras and

13 T 1509.228, T 125.742, AN iii 303-306

chakras, heaven and hell, but on death, the only thing we are really sure about. We had better hurry and take this fleeting opportunity to find out, they said.

* * *

These are the main topics to focus on. The first three, recollecting, rejoicing and taking refuge in the Three Jewels, the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, are the basics for the Buddhist community. The fourth and fifth, mindfulness of moral discipline and giving are part of daily life for anyone who is serious about self-development and spirituality in general. For the rest, we can choose whether to start our meditation with “breathing” and continue with “heaven” or “rest” or “body” or “death” – it all depends on our needs, disposition, and the level of cultivation practice we have achieved. When tired and sleepy we can visualize light or do some recitation and chanting of a Buddha’s name or mantra; when restless we can do some breathing and qi-energy exercise to calm down body and mind; when feeling relaxed, resting brings us to an even deeper level of concentration; and after entering concentration we should practice all available cultivation methods to purify the mind and realize no-self and emptiness, step by step.

These methods are to be applied in a skillful way. There is a story about the Buddha noticing two monks sitting in a kind of meditation that was not right. He called the two community leaders who were their mentors and criticized both “noble disciples” for not observing the physiognomy of their students and failing to instruct them according to their karmic disposition. One of the two monks was a silversmith before, practicing concentration on fine work (holding his breath), and the other had been a cloth-bleacher (seeing white). The latter was practicing anapana and the first was concentrating on the white skeleton. Once they practiced the other way round “they soon realized the fruit of the path.”

It is advised to practice more than one method, one we like and one we don’t, because the last one is usually more effective – spiritual training is about self-reform and detachment, getting out of habits and bonds. Every technique involves imagining and “pretending” first, to pre-figure (rest, death), visualize (Buddha, Sangha, Heaven), and penetrate (Dharma, discipline, self-giving, breathing, body) the intended result, staying constantly mindful of it. After visualizing a Buddha in his Pure Land and reciting his name or chanting a mantra, for instance, breathing will become light and easy, clearing the way for entering the “lightness and ease” that precedes dhyana and emptiness meditation.

Stopping/cessation, *samatha* always comes before practicing *vipassana* (often neglected nowadays). It is only when the mind stops wandering and abandons its normal clutter, inner talk and outer distraction, that it acquires the power to penetrate into the deeper layers of consciousness and reality, after confusion, problems and emotions disappear. Once in samadhi, one does not become restless or tired anymore, but the mind is open and clear, radiantly aware and ready to investigate “things as they are.”