

Benefits of Meditation / Mindfulness of Breathing Zen-Seven Meditation Retreat

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Some Misconceptions about Meditation

Today we will learn about the benefits of meditation. But first, there are some misunderstandings we should address. We should know what the proper attitude is in practicing Zen meditation. Last week someone came here to participate in the Zen retreat. No one had ever taught him how to meditate. He loves to meditate, so he often sits silently at home. I asked him what he did when he was sitting. He said someone told him that the purpose of meditation is to sit until you fall asleep. That is a misconception. We are not sitting here to fall asleep. If we wanted to sleep, we might as well go home, lie down and sleep in bed.

Last year, I also met someone who had been practicing meditation for over 10 years. I asked her how she meditated, and whether her teacher taught her the proper posture in meditation. She said that her teacher taught her to sit in any position whatsoever; that the purpose of meditation was to be at ease and that she could think about whatever she wanted. Again, that is a misconception. I also asked her if her teacher taught her where to focus her mind. She said that her teacher never taught her how to train her mind during meditation. All she had to do was sit in any position for half an hour or an hour and that was considered to be meditation, and when she came out of it she would feel well and relaxed. Of course, if you took a nap for half an hour, you would feel relaxed too. But that is not meditation. If you sit in whatever position you like, it might not be the right posture. For example, many people have back problems. Why? Because many of us haven't been standing, sitting or walking in the right position. We design comfortable sofas, beds, and chairs; they are very cozy, but the longer you sit, the more problems you develop because they don't necessarily put your body in the right position. They turn you into a "couch potato." When you sprawl out on a sofa, look at what it is doing to your spine. Here we are sitting with our backs straight. It is not easy. If it is not easy it means that we are used to sitting in the wrong position; it means that we are conditioned wrongfully. So, sitting up straight may be hard but it is the right conditioning. We should try to be persistent about it. Posture is important. But what is even more important is what you do with your mind during meditation.

Two Types of Meditation: *Samatha* and *Vipassana* (止觀)

What is the purpose of meditation? How do you practice meditation? What are the different types of meditation? There are many different types of meditation but they all fall into two categories. One is to concentrate the mind, to make your mind still, calm, and focused. The

other is to make the mind observant and able to contemplate clearly. Sometimes the terms *samatha* and *vipassana* are used. *Samatha* means to calm, to still, to focus, or to stop the mind. *Vipassana* means to perceive, to reflect, or to contemplate. Vipassana has also been translated as “insight”. These are the two general types of meditation. Both are important.

While you are practicing the breath counting method, you are focusing on the breath and nothing else. That is *samatha* or concentration. Your mind never leaves the breath. Every number that you count, you are counting it single-mindedly. When you are counting the numbers your mind should be very clear; for every number that you bring forth from your mind (1, 2, 3, etc), you should put your full attention on it. When you are counting the numbers clearly without getting mixed up, that is *vipassana*. What is the benefit of samatha practice? Practicing samatha results in *samadhi*, a state of deep concentration. What is the benefit of practicing vipassana— perception, reflection, or contemplation? It is wisdom. Wisdom is a result of practicing vipassana.

We should understand that depending on what we are contemplating, we might obtain either secular wisdom or *prajña* wisdom. So everything we do in life, the skills we’ve learned and the knowledge we’ve acquired, those come from keen observation or insight. Being able to observe the principle, to understand the principles, to see phenomena clearly, that is vipassana. To observe or perceive clearly or correctly brings us wisdom. However, if we reflect on our mind, we turn our attention inward. That kind of observation, reflection and contemplation can bring us *prajña*. *Prajña* is the kind of wisdom that can cut through all the delusions we have, that can even help us to understand and transcend life and death. So it is important to know what you do during sitting meditation. Breath counting is one of the most fundamental techniques in meditation. The lady who had been practicing for more than 10 years never heard of it. So it is important to have a good teacher while practicing meditation.

Mindfulness of the Breath

Today we will teach another method called “mindfulness of the breath.” At this point, if the mind is very scattered and unable to settle down, then we should still use the “breath counting” method to bring the mind into focus. If you can do breath counting well without interruption and without dozing off, then you may come to a point where you think that counting the numbers is burdensome and that you can focus well without the counting. In that case you may let go of the counting. However, don’t let go of your attention; you should still be mindful of the breathing. Observe the air coming in during inhalation and going out during exhalation. You don’t need to follow the passage of the air, just keep your attention on the tip of your nose. Observe and concentrate, see how the air is coming in and going out. At every moment your attention never leaves that point. This is concentration or *samatha*. This will bring you into samadhi. At every moment your mind is very clear, you can even begin to realize the difference between the incoming and the outgoing breath. How are they different? The incoming breath is slightly colder than the outgoing breath. Being able to detect the difference between observing and perceiving is an example of *vipassana*. It can bring you insight, or wisdom.

So, in our methods, we use both concentration and observation. They are not two separate practices. They are two aspects of one single practice, the practice of meditation. In every Zen

practice both samatha and vipassana are integrated. However, in this practice, we are not using our discursive mind, we are not thinking about anything. In breath counting you still use a bit of thinking, counting 1, 2, 3, etc. In breath observing (mindfulness of the breath), there is less activity for the conscious mind. You don't count anymore, you just observe. We are going back to the root of our mind, to the source of our wisdom, observation. *Who is the one that is making the observation?* To understand this, we first need to learn to observe well, to perceive well and clearly with concentration, without disturbance and interruption, without drifting away and dozing off. That is what we need to achieve and that is why we are practicing. This second method is called "mindfulness of the breath".

Four Benefits of Meditation

There are many benefits to practicing Buddhist meditation. One sutra lists four such benefits. First you will be rewarded immediately in this lifetime (為得現法樂). Many people are interested in meditation because it can help them relax, get rid of anxiety or sleep better during the night. These are all true, but they are not the only benefits of meditation. There are much greater rewards you can obtain in this life, in a few months, and even in this seven-day retreat. When you are able to concentrate and perceive correctly with single mindedness and with mindfulness, when you reach samadhi or are close to samadhi, you can feel an inner joy, a joy that is indescribable in words. It is something that you've never felt before, an experience with which you are not familiar. It is not an exciting kind of happiness; it is not pleasure resulting from the stimulation of your senses. It is a calm, quiet, soothing, pervasive and burden-free kind of joy. It is a very peaceful kind of joy, and from there you can go deeper and deeper into samadhi. But it takes practice. Even in these seven days and even if you haven't practiced meditation before, have faith in the teaching and in yourself. The first three days may be difficult, just endure, concentrate and observe.

The second benefit of Zen meditation is to achieve a superior and true understanding of the self and the way things are (為得勝知見). What is the world really like when you get rid of all the delusions and illusions? Do you know who you really are? Why are there conflicts in the world? How do we resolve them? How do we resolve the vexations in life, all the problems, all the sorrow, and all the pain? What is true happiness? We don't know and we are confused. We are not enlightened. Meditation can bring us this superior understanding. We need a mind of concentration, a stable mind that can perceive correctly.

The third benefit of Zen meditation is the ability to discriminate with wisdom (為得分別慧). We discriminate everyday. We say that this person is pretty or ugly, that I like this or I hate that. These are what we call false discriminations, undesirable kinds of discrimination. These are all based on our ego, based on a false perception. They are not based on the true understanding of the ways of the world. We don't see that everyone is inherently equal, that everyone can become a Buddha, that everyone should be respected. We don't see how the principle of causality works, so we do foolish things. We discriminate based on our own ideas and false conceptualizations. This is not intelligent discrimination. Meditation will bring us discriminative wisdom; the wisdom that enables us to distinguish between different situations without making false judgments, without clinging to particular views, and without clinging to discrimination itself.

And this wisdom will also enable us to distinguish, classify, understand, and perceive without attachment. When we are attached to food (craving, overeating), it brings us suffering. When we cling to beauty, then ugliness brings us suffering. When we cling to life, then death brings us suffering. What we like or dislike is all very subjective. It is based on delusion. So, a clear mind, a mind of concentration and perception, will bring us the wisdom to distinguish between things without bias, without falling into one extreme or another, without clinging.

The fourth benefit of Zen meditation is being able to eradicate all the delusions and all the ignorance that we have, to see the true nature of life and death, to transcend life and death, and to become a Buddha (為得諸漏盡). Without a clear mind, without a mind of deep concentration, we won't be able to see the roots of our delusions. We won't be able to cut through, sever, or eradicate them. This is why we practice meditation. When we are able to extricate the roots of suffering, the roots of bad karma, and the roots of our delusions, then we will achieve true wisdom. We will be liberated. So, it is important to understand the right way to practice. There may be many different ways to practice but they all should contain these two elements, namely, concentration and truthful observation/contemplation.

Finally, we should realize that samatha and vipassana are one and not two. While being mindful of the breathing, the fact that your mind or attention doesn't stray, that is called samatha. The fact that you can observe clearly and carefully very minute details of the breathing, that is vipassana. As a result, you will achieve samadhi, wisdom, and the four benefits of meditation. You need to have faith in the teaching, in the Dharma, and in yourself. Even in these seven days, you can do it.

The “Three-Cart Master”

There is a story that gives a valuable lesson on the practice of meditation. During the Tang Dynasty there was a famous monk whose name was Xuan Zang (玄奘). He was one of the greatest translators in Chinese Buddhist history and brought us many important sutras. During the Tang dynasty he traveled from China to India in order to obtain the original sutras. It was a difficult and perilous journey; he had to cross the Gobi Desert, which was very hot, and scale the Himalaya Mountains, which were very cold. He undertook this journey alone. He risked his life for the teaching. As he was crossing a mountain somewhere outside of China, he saw a very old monk sitting in meditation inside a cave. The old monk was in deep samadhi; his hair and beard were so long that they touched the ground; his clothes would fall apart as soon as someone touched them. Master Xuan Zang couldn't tell how old the old monk was. He used the hand bell to wake him. After the hand bell sounded a few times, the old monk came out of samadhi. Master Xuan Zang asked him, “Old master! What are you doing and how long have you been here?” The old monk said, “I've been in deep samadhi. I don't know how long I have been here.” Master Xuan Zang asked him who his teacher was and the old monk said, “My master was Kasyapa Buddha. Kasyapa Buddha has entered nirvana, but I wasn't enlightened so I entered samadhi to wait for the next Buddha, Sakyamuni Buddha, to come into this world.” The time of Kasyapa Buddha was many billions of years ago. So, a very long time had passed since this old monk entered samadhi. That is what you can do when you enter deep samadhi, you can be in that state for days, years or even eons. Master Xuan Zang thought that the old monk hadn't been

practicing meditation in the right way. He told the old monk, “You wasted all these years in deep samadhi but did not acquire any wisdom. You have this power of concentration but you don’t have a clear mind, you don’t have the right insight. Old master, you have missed Sakyamuni Buddha, he was born, was enlightened, preached and entered nirvana thousands of years ago.”

The old monk thought, “Oh no, I missed Sakyamuni Buddha!” So, he crossed his legs in the lotus position and closed his eyes again. Master Xuan Zang was surprised and asked him what he was doing. The old monk said, “I am going back into samadhi.” “Why?” “I’ll wait for the next Buddha, Maitreya Buddha, to come into this world.” Master Xuan Zang told him, “Waiting for Maitreya Buddha, the next Buddha, that will be another billions of years. This is not the way to practice. Deep meditation without insight will not bring you liberation. You may be immersed in the joy of samadhi but that doesn’t bring you true wisdom. Even though Sakyamuni Buddha is gone, his true teaching still exists. I’m going to India to bring back his teaching. You should follow me and I can teach you. But this body of yours is too old. You don’t have the health to practice. Why don’t you become reborn as the son of the emperor of China? By the time I come back from India with the sutras, you can be my disciple. Then because you will be the prince, the emperor will help us propagate the Buddha Dharma, and we will be able to benefit many sentient beings.” The old monk thought, “This makes sense, he seems to be a wise teacher. I will do what he says.” Just before he was ready to go, he asked, “Where is China? How do I tell which is the emperor’s palace?” Master Xuan Zang told him, “Go East and find the most splendid and populous city. When you see the most magnificent building with a golden roof, then that is the emperor’s palace. Take your rebirth there.” The old monk went into samadhi again and was gone. That is what you can do with deep samadhi. You can give up this life; it is not suicide. You are able to be freed from the bond of life and death, but that is still not enlightenment yet, that is just samadhi power.

So, Master Xuan Zang went to India. He learned the Sanskrit language and studied with the best masters. He earned respect and honor from all the kings of India. After 17 years, he returned to China with many sutras. The emperor of China greatly honored him and sent the prime minister to welcome him. Every few days, the emperor would ask him to come to the palace to talk to him about Buddhism and even seek advice on how to govern the country. Master Xuan Zang thought this would be an appropriate time to talk to the emperor about his son. He said, “Congratulations for having a fine prince, he must be very smart. He should be twenty years old now.” The emperor was very surprised and said, “I don’t have a twenty-year-old prince.” Master Xuan Zang was also very surprised and wondered what happened to the old monk. So he entered into samadhi, and using his power of observation, he saw that the old monk had been reborn at the wrong place. One of the great generals of the emperor had accomplished so much in helping to unify China that the emperor built him a palace exactly like the royal palace. It was magnificent and had a golden roof. Master Xuan Zang went to talk to the general and told him that he wanted his son to become his disciple. The general agreed, since becoming a monk under Xuan Zang was a great honor. The emperor also gave his blessings.

But the general’s twenty-year-old son, who was very bright, had forgotten his vow from his previous life. He did not want to become a monk because he thought it would not be fun. He loved women, money, and wine. You can’t have any of those as a monk. But in those days, you were supposed to obey your elders, especially if you had the blessing of the emperor. The young

man told Master Xuan Zang, “All right, I will become a monk, but only under three conditions. I want to take a cartload of pretty women, a cartload of gold and silver, and a cartload of the finest wine with me. Let me take them to the monastery and I will consent.” To everyone’s surprise, Master Xuan Zang immediately agreed. It was a phenomenal event, because the son of the great general was becoming a monk, and in addition, he brought three carts of women, money, and wine with him. So everybody watched with great fanfare as the procession moved toward the monastery that the emperor had built for Master Xuan Zang. When they arrived, the giant monastic bell was struck. When the young man heard the solemn sound of the bell, he was awakened to his past vow. He remembered he was here to cultivate, to learn the right way to meditate, and to help propagate Buddhism! Immediately, he gave up the three carts. He went on to become Master Xuan Zang’s greatest disciple, a very well known master on his own. His name was Master Kuei Zhi and he has written many important treatises. However, he was affectionately known as “The Three-Cart Master.” This story tells us that we should have the proper attitude and proper understanding in practicing Buddhist meditation. Now, let us continue with our meditation practice.