



# The Effects of Chan Meditation

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## **1. Treasure in Chan Meditation**

In modern times, the great strides of science have solved many problems deriving from the natural and social environments, as well as from human physiology and psychology. And yet, with the advancement of material civilization, the problems waiting to be solved have actually increased. In fact, until the day the Earth perishes, it will remain impossible to completely overcome the problems posed by nature. Similarly, until the day our physical bodies die, it will still be impossible to entirely control our bodily functions. If nothing else, human beings are incapable of preventing the gradual diminishing of the sun's thermal energy, so the weakening and eventual destruction of the Earth is inevitable. Again, as human beings cannot stop the aging of the physical organs, the death of the physical body is inevitable, too.

However, as long as the Earth remains inhabitable, we should do what we can to improve our natural environment, so that it can become more favorable to human life and existence. Likewise, while we are still alive, we should do our best to improve our physical and mental health, so that we can live more comfortable and happy lives. Modern science may help us with these tasks, but we should not leave the responsibility entirely to science. This is because the promotion of science depends on the mental and physical power of mankind, and the only method to bring out man's greatest intellectual and physical ability, hidden deeply within our bodies and minds, is through the practice of Chan (Japanese: Zen) meditation.

Although the methods of Chan meditation trace their origins to the wisdom of the East, in reality, East or West, all great religious figures, philosophers, outstanding statesmen, scientists, and artists benefit to some extent from the power of Chan meditative concentration. Even if they do not assume the specific Chan meditative postures or use the name Chan, nevertheless their ability to exercise extraordinary wisdom and perseverance corresponds

essentially with the effects of Chan meditation—they are just unaware that such ability is the outcome of meditative concentration. Because of their exceptional endowments, they are able to obtain the power of meditative absorption without intentional effort, which then leads to their prominence in their respective fields.

Since Chan meditation, as we already know, is the best means of uncovering one's hidden intellectual and physical power, it is not difficult for training in Chan to transform an ordinary person into a great one, and make the ungifted brilliant, the frail robust, the brilliant and robust even more so, thus making it possible for all to become perfect. Therefore, Chan meditation is the best means to perfect human life, advance society, and improve the entire environment. For an ordinary person, Chan meditation can strengthen one's resolve and change one's temperament. Physically, it helps one regain vitality; psychologically, it gives one new hope as well as a new understanding of the surrounding environment. Therefore, Chan meditation can give you a completely new life, and make you realize how fortunate, free, and vivacious you really are.

The effects of meditation come primarily from concentrating the mind on one point, whether abstract or concrete. Therefore, meditative concentration can be reached in any position: walking, standing, sitting, or lying down. Whether one is engaged in deep thought, silent prayer, prostration, recitation, or even close observation or attentive listening, whenever one's mind is focused single-pointedly, there is the possibility of attaining meditative concentration. However, instances of achieving meditative concentration under such circumstances are few and far between, and for the vast majority of people, it can never happen easily. It may have occurred once or twice to a very few people, but it cannot be frequently repeated at will.

It is because of this that the methods of Chan practice developed in the East are

necessary. If you wish to obtain such experience, and therefore go to study under a Chan teacher, you will find that these methods can make the experience of Chan, otherwise obtainable only by accident, a treasure that everyone has the opportunity to obtain.

## **2. The Precious Human Body**

In seeking the experience of Chan, one does not have to adopt any particular posture. For example, the sick, the physically challenged, and the perpetually busy can follow the method taught by their masters and practice anywhere from a few minutes to several hours, wherever they might be, standing or sitting: in bed, in a wheelchair, in a car, at a bus or tram stop, or in an office.

The quickest and most effective method is of course practicing in the full-lotus posture. However, if beginning Chan students, particularly those of middle age or older, wish to become proficient sitting in the full lotus and to enjoy the pleasures of Chan meditation, they must first prepare to tolerate pain and numbness in the legs. The pain and numbness in the legs is actually a part of the beginners' struggle with their own weakness. Once they have gone through this phase, they would have at least strengthened their resolve and overcome their fear of difficulty and inability to face reality. Thus quietly, they have taken one step forward in the journey of life.

Of all the animals, only human beings have a body structure that allows the adoption of the lotus posture. So, the methods of Chan meditation are designed only for human beings, and only human beings have the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of meditation.

We ought to celebrate being born as a human being, and should treasure this human body that we have. The reason is that as humans, through Chan practice we can derive three major benefits: (1) a tough and pliable physique, (2) an alert mind, and (3) a purified personality. That is why Shakyamuni Buddha often praised the preciousness of human life when addressing his disciples, stressing that among all sentient beings between heaven and hell, those with a human body are most suited to the practice of the Buddhist path.

### **3. The Effects of Chan Meditation as Viewed by Scientists**

The benefits of Chan meditation were discovered from the reactions of the body and mind. According to *Zen no susume* (The Recommendation of Zen) by Dr. Kōji Satō, Professor of Psychology at Kyoto University in Japan, Chan meditation produces the following ten psychological effects:

- (1) increased patience,
- (2) curing of various allergies,
- (3) strengthening of willpower,
- (4) enhancement of the power of thought,
- (5) refinement of personality,
- (6) rapid calming of the mind,
- (7) mood stabilization,
- (8) raised interest and efficiency in activity,
- (9) elimination of various bodily illnesses and
- (10) attainment of enlightenment.

Furthermore, Usaburō Hasekawa, MD, writes in *Shin igaku zen* (New Views on Medicine and Zen) that Chan meditation proves effective in the treatment of the following twelve diseases:

- (1) neurosis,
- (2) hyperacidity and hypoacidity,
- (3) tympanites,
- (4) tuberculosis,
- (5) insomnia,
- (6) indigestion,
- (7) chronic gastroptosis,
- (8) gastrointestinal agony,
- (9) chronic constipation,
- (10) dysentery,
- (11) gallstones, and
- (12) high blood pressure.

The highest objective of Chan meditation is without doubt the transcendence of delusion

and the attainment of enlightenment. However, if we begin with lofty talk on the issues of delusion and enlightenment, except for a small minority who have good karmic roots, it will be of little use for the majority of people. So, we cannot but cite the results of scientific studies to introduce readers to the effects Chan meditation may bring to a person physically and mentally. To those who have had personal experience in Chan meditation, these scientific reports are of no use, but to beginners who would like to give meditation a try, these reports may serve as a lure.

#### **4. Ensuring a Safe Body and Mind**

In daily life, people's understanding of their own body and mind is extremely limited. As for the mind, you have no time to examine how many thoughts come and go in a day, or even in the minute that has just slipped by. You may have some impressions of a few major thoughts, but about the numerous trivial ones that just flashed by, you are not clear. Furthermore, physically, your cellular metabolism has not for a single moment stopped. You may know of this fact since it is common knowledge, but in no way can you actually sense and feel it. Of course, there is no need for us to clarify these matters either.

What is important is that we, living in a modern society, must always use a high level of intellect and great physical energy—whether in our studies or daily work, whether making a living or contributing to the public welfare. Yet few people realize that deep within our own reservoir of intellectual and physical energy, there is a huge leak through which tremendous amounts of energy meaninglessly leak out, when at the same time our production of energy is way below our capability and our need. This is at once a waste of energy, and a stagnation in production: we have failed not only to do our best to broaden our sources of energy, but also to properly reduce its expenditure. This truly is a great pity.

What is this leak? It is our disorderly wandering thoughts, which consume our physical energy and lower our intellect. Among them, thoughts which stir our emotions, such as strong desire, hatred, arrogance, despair, etc., in particular can disturb the balanced functioning of our physiological system. If you learn the methods of Chan meditation, you can reduce these disorderly and useless distractions, and constantly keep your mind in a restful state of relaxation and calmness, so whenever it is needed to solve a problem, it can always function to the full. Moreover, Chan meditation can make the various endocrine glands in your body work in seamless cooperation with one another, and enhance the coordination between the



sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems.

For instance, the pituitary, pineal, parotid, and thymus glands of the sympathetic nervous system can cause the constriction of blood vessels to raise blood pressure, thus increasing the sympathetic tone of the body; the outward expressions are alertness and quickness in reaction. On the other hand, the adrenal, ovarian, testicle, and pancreatic glands of the parasympathetic nervous system can cause the dilatation of blood vessels, lowering blood pressure and reducing the sympathetic tone; the outward expressions are calmness and stability. Combining the merits of both systems will form a perfect personality, whereas inclination to either side will lead to defects in character.

As we are aware, the pressure of work, overtaxation of one's brain, and external-stimulus-induced strong emotion, whether it be wild rapture or violent rage, can all give rise to constricted blood vessels, increased pulse rate, rising blood pressure, and shortness of breath, resulting possibly in such conditions as cerebral hemorrhage, insomnia, palpitations, tinnitus, neuroticism, and indigestion. This is because when you experience severe emotions, the functioning of your endocrine glands become imbalanced, thus creating toxins in the blood.

The endocrine system normally promotes a healthy body. However, if it loses balance, it will light up your body's red light warning system. Chan meditation can transform fluctuating moods into a clear and peaceful state of mind. Eventually, no danger will make you afraid, and no pleasure will make you wild with joy; no gain will make you feel wealthy, and no loss will make you feel deprived; no opposition will irk you, and no compliance will delight you. Therefore, Chan meditation can ensure the safety of your body and mind.

## **5. The Harmonization and Liberation of Body and Mind**

To clarify the above, a balance between the body's sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems should be constantly maintained; otherwise, one will not only be unhealthy physiologically, but also be unhealthy in respect of psychological and character development. If the balance tilts toward the sympathetic nervous system, then one will tend to be sensitive, selfish, impatient, irascible, unfriendly, and unlikable. If the balance leans toward the other side, then one will be simple, sincere, steady, optimistic, and genial.

In the first case, on the positive side, one might become a proud and aloof philosopher, a shrewd and steel-willed general, or a cynical scholar who detests the world and its ways. On the negative side, one might become an opinionated, violent, vile, and unruly rogue. In the second case, on the positive side, one might become a compassionate religious leader, a magnanimous statesman, or a broad-minded artist. On the negative side, one may become a person lacking ambition and principles who pays no heed to the line between good and evil and right and wrong, and who says yes to every request.

Of course, if the balance is totally inclined either way, the result will certainly tend to be negative. If one already exhibits positive traits, then it definitely is due more or less to the harmonious cooperation between the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems.

Chan meditation is a method to harmonize the functions of the body's organs and tissues, helping them to work normally and to achieve their best performance. It starts with tuning the body, breath, and mind, so as to reduce the burden on the sympathetic nervous system, weaken the influence of subjective consciousness, and gradually expand the boundary of self-centeredness until ultimately the existence of self is forgotten, and subjective consciousness melts away into objective consciousness. For those having reached the stage,

their mental afflictions, though not yet thoroughly eliminated, can no longer pose a threat to their physical and mental health.

The reason one has such vexations as greed, hatred, unforgivingness, and resistance to self-reflection and reasoning lies in one's excessive subjectivity. People with such a mind-set believe that although they are separate from all things, nothing should contradict their subjective thinking. When they don't have what they want, they will strive after it; after attaining it, they fear losing it if it is really enjoyable, but fear not being able to dispose of it if they find it detestable. In other words, when they are unable to get what they want, they are no doubt afflicted, but even after attaining what they want, they are still encircled by various afflictions.

Only Chan meditation can gradually transform our self-centered subjective mind-set into an objective one. It will slowly raise us from the depths of the pit of distorted perceptions and afflictions to the free world of objective consciousness, thus liberating our body and mind.

## **6. Longevity and Happiness**

Proper breathing bears a lot on relieving the burden on the sympathetic nervous system. Generally, people use their lungs and chest as a central point for breathing. Chan practitioners, however, shift their center of breathing to the lower abdomen, or what we call dantian or qihai. The idea is to use the abdominal pressure as a medium, and then to employ the will to control the parasympathetic nervous system, so as to dilate blood vessels, lower blood pressure, reduce the sympathetic tone, and increase the secretion of acetylcholine to achieve tranquility, serenity, and detoxification.

To shift the center of breathing from the chest to the lower abdomen cannot be accomplished with just a couple of days' practice. Some teachers of yoga and qigong suggest adopting abdominal breathing to achieve this purpose. But this method is not suitable for everybody. If those for whom abdominal breathing is not physically suitable due to congenital or acquired conditions force themselves to engage in such practice, illness may result.

The safe way is to breathe naturally. Just focus your attention on the breath—don't strive for a quick result—and maintain normal breathing while you practice. After a period of time, your breathing will naturally slow down, reduce in frequency, and extend in depth. One day, you will find that your center of breathing has already moved down from the chest to the lower abdomen.

Abdominal breathing can transport blood stored within the liver and spleen to the heart to put the stored blood into use. The liver and spleen produce and store blood, holding a third of the body's total blood supply. Another third is in the heart and another in the rest of the body's muscle tissue. The blood stored within the liver and spleen does not normally enter the circulatory system. Only when necessary is it used to compensate for a deficiency in the

heart's blood supply. Abdominal breathing is equivalent to adding an auxiliary heart to the human body, causing the blood volume in the circulatory system to increase onefold.

Increasing the amount of blood in the circulatory system enhances its capacity to deliver nourishment, thus revitalizing and restoring atrophied cells or tissues, and enabling blocked and dying cells or tissues to gradually revive and regenerate. Because of this, Chan meditation can help cure various kinds of rare and serious medical conditions and chronic diseases.

If you ever contract an unusual illness that barely responds to treatment, you might as well learn to practice Chan meditation. Although Chan meditation cannot cure medical conditions as swiftly as removing one's appendix would appendicitis, it can nevertheless stabilize your moods, reduce your panic and fear of your illness, and ease the suffering caused from the sickness. Of course, there is a limit to our life span. Meditation cannot make you stay young and alive forever, but it is certainly within its power to help you live a longer, happier and more interesting life.

## **7. Cultivating a Perfect Personality**

A perfect personality can be nurtured through education, art, religion, etc., but these are not entirely dependable. Some, lured by the temptations of fame, fortune, and power, may take up education, art, or religion, and appear to be of noble character and saintly behavior, but in the depths of their hearts, they harbor unspeakable ambitions and intrigues. These people, we refer to as having a two-faced personality.

Therefore, in this world there are hypocrites who have received good education, and devils hidden in churches amidst the clergy. This is because religious doctrine, ethics, and art appreciation are all inculcated from outside—and sometimes even imposed high-handedly by the authorities—and so they do not necessarily correspond with the inner desires of each individual.

Chan meditation is the best way to cultivate a perfect character. It helps one achieve the goal of perfecting character by triggering one's inner awakening—no dogma is needed to apply any pressure. To a Chan practitioner, ethics and morals are unnecessary. Besides, religious doctrine, ethical standards, and moral judgements all lose their applicability due to changes in time, environment, and person. This is why so many new religions and sects within established religions have emerged in recent decades, almost like bamboo shoots popping up after a spring shower. Buddhism is also no exception to this trend.

Although Chan stems from Buddhism, as it does not rely on external conditions or on words and letters, it is a method of cultivation that will always fit the needs of the time. The practice of Chan meditation is a process of baring one's "self," just like peeling the stem of a banana tree. After layer after layer of deluded thoughts are stripped off, not only is there no affected self to be seen, but there's not even a naked self there. First you try to expose your

self, but ultimately you find there is nothing to expose at all.

Therefore, Chan practitioners do not need to hide anything from others, or feel any external pressure for trying to reform themselves, much less struggle intensely as if enduring severe pain when cutting out a tumor.

Chan meditation is simply to follow the method of practice to gradually reduce your wandering thoughts. Once you reach the state of “no-thought,” you will naturally realize that your existence in the past was just a series of accumulated afflictions and deluded thoughts, which are not your true self.

Your true self is inseparable from all objective phenomena: the existence of each objective phenomenon constitutes a part of your subjective existence. So, you do not have to strive for anything or despise anything. Your responsibility is to make your entire being more orderly and more perfect.

Chan practitioners, having reached this stage, will deeply love humanity and all other sentient beings. Their character will be as clear and bright as the spring sunshine. Even though for the sake of conversion and enlightenment they may assume emotional facial expressions, their mind will nevertheless constantly remain as tranquil and clear as a crystalline autumn pond. We call such people enlightened, sages, or noble ones.

Shakyamuni Buddha once said: “All sentient beings possess the wisdom and merit of the Buddha.” So, if you long for the benefits that a Chan practitioner can receive, your wish will certainly come true. Irrespective of gender, age, intelligence, physical strength, profession, social status, or religious belief, the door of Chan is open to all.

Now, there is just one thing extremely important that I must mention: what you have just

read is an article on Chan, and this article is absolutely not the same as Chan itself. To know what Chan really is, you have to determine to personally and perseveringly learn under a Chan teacher whom you trust. Otherwise, these pages will have just provided you with some more information that may tangle you up, and will not in any way assist you in your worthy wish to learn Chan.

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