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Introduction

Chan is a school of Buddhist meditation that is found throughout East Asia. It is known as Zen in Japan, Thien in Vietnam, and Son in Korea. Its distinctive form first took shape in China some fifteen hundred years ago. The aim of Chan is to live life with wisdom and compassion through realization of our interconnectedness with all things. Chan involves active awareness, participation and engagement in daily life. The foundation of this goal is seated meditation. In this booklet, Master Sheng Yen discusses the benefits of seated meditation in the context of Chan practice and scientific findings about meditation. He does not elaborate the methods of practice in great detail because meditation cannot be learned by reading a book. Interested readers are encouraged to find a Chan meditation center and receive instruction on the actual practice from a qualified teacher.

The Wealth of Chan Meditation

Modern science has solved many problems encountered in the natural environment, as well as those found in physiology and psychology. Yet despite the advancement of civilization and technological innovations, the number of problems to be solved has increased. Up until the day the Earth ends, it will be impossible to completely overcome the problems posed by nature. Similarly, until the day we die, it will be impossible to completely control the way our bodies function. We are incapable of preventing the gradual diminishing of the sun's thermal energy, so the weakening and eventual destruction of the Earth is inevitable. Neither can human beings stop their own aging — the death of the physical body is inevitable.

But as long as the Earth remains our home, we should do what we can to improve the environment. And while we are still alive, we should do our best to maintain and improve physical and mental health, so that we can live happier and more comfortable lives. Science may help us with these tasks, but we should not leave it to science alone. The practice of Chan meditation is the most reliable method to realize intellectual and physical potential. Through Chan we

can improve our lives immeasurably.

The methods used in Chan meditation originated in China and have their roots in India. However, the principle behind these methods, founded on developing one's body and mind through concentration and insight, is universal. Thus, it can be said that all great religious figures, philosophers, statesmen, scientists, writers, and artists all over the world, from the past to the present, have, in their own way, experienced the benefit of Chan. Although such people may not practice Chan or assume seated meditation postures, their extraordinary ability to focus and develop insight is the basis of their achievements in their respective fields. These abilities are in accord with the effects of Chan meditation.

There are great differences in the methods and strategies that people use to improve themselves and deal with their everyday problems. Some paths take longer than others; some are circuitous. Chan holds that its methods of practice are the most direct and the best means of developing our full potential. In the course of practice, Chan training can make the sick healthy, the average brilliant, the weak-minded strong.

In Chan there is no fixed way to practice. The sick, the physically challenged, and the perpetually

busy can follow the methods taught by Chan teachers and practice from a few minutes to several hours in any location, whether standing or sitting, in bed, in a wheelchair, in a car, at a bus or subway stop, or at the office. Chan provides the best means we have to improve ourselves, which will in turn improve society and the environment.

Chan practice is not limited to meditation. It is not simply about being calm and peaceful. The ultimate goal of Chan practice is to personally realize true freedom within our original nature and to know the depth of our connectedness with others. This is the wisdom and compassion of Chan.

The Precious Human Body

Of all animals, only humans have a physiology that can adopt meditation postures. Only humans have a proclivity for spiritual practice and are blessed with the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of practice. That is why Shakyamuni Buddha, who founded Buddhism 2500 years ago, often praised the preciousness of human life, stressing that among all sentient beings between heaven and hell, human beings are most suited to the practice of the Buddhist path.

The most effective physical posture for seated meditation is the full-lotus. Through this posture, the practitioner's meridian channels can be penetrated, energy settled, and a sense of stability established. To assume the full lotus leg posture, put the right foot on the left thigh, then put the left foot crossed over the right leg onto the right thigh. It is acceptable to reverse the folding of the feet. However, the full lotus position can be difficult for a beginner, particularly those middle-aged or older. As an alternative, the practitioner can assume the half lotus position, which requires that one foot be crossed over onto the thigh of the other. The other foot lies underneath the raised leg. Practitioners can adopt other postures as well for seated

meditation.

Seated meditation can cause discomfort in the legs. This sensation is actually part of the process of opening the many blocked channels of the body, eliminating stiffness from the body, and strengthening the practitioner's resolve, or will. Many people turn away from painful experiences. We should recognize that such resistance stems from our tendency to block pain and to pursue a life free from difficulties. We should not seek pain, but it is often a fact of life. In meditation, it is merely one of many sensations that occur when we adopt a particular posture. If the pain is caused by an incorrect sitting posture, then correct it. If it is caused naturally by not being used to the posture, then the practitioner should do stretching exercises and massage before and after the sitting. During sitting, just treat pain as a bodily sensation. Do not exaggerate it to be "suffering" or think that "I am having pain!" Rather, recognize that a particular area of the body is having pain, not "you".

Once you have gone through this phase of resistance and seen pain for what it is, you may gain increased insight into the nature of the body and have strengthened resolve and overcome the fear of difficulty. Imperceptibly, you have taken one step

forward on the path toward freedom. We are fortunate to be humans, so we should celebrate this by devoting ourselves to something that is beneficial to others as well as ourselves.

Scientists' Views on Meditation

The physiological and psychological benefits of meditation derive from concentrating the mind, either on an abstract or concrete object. This is best accomplished through seated meditation.

There have been many studies of the benefits of seated meditation in general and Chan specifically. According to *Zen no susume* (The Recommendation of Zen) by Dr. Koji Sato, Professor of Psychology at Kyoto University in Japan, regular practice of Chan meditation produces the following ten psychological and physiological 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, and
- 9) Elimination of various bodily illnesses.(1)

Furthermore, Usaburo (?) Hasegawa, M.D. writes in *Shin igaku zen* (New Views on Medicine and Zen) that Chan meditation proves effective in the

treatment of some of the following diseases:

- 1) Neurosis,
- 2) Gastric hyperacidity and hypoacidity,
- 3) Insomnia,
- 4) Chronic constipation, and
- 5) High blood pressure.⁽²⁾

In recent years, studies at Harvard University and the University of Wisconsin, Madison have shown that meditation boosts the immune system and increases the activity of the frontal cortex (the area of the brain associated with positive emotion).⁽³⁾ Meditation produces a variety of psychological benefits, including reduction of anxiety, enhanced sense of well-being, increased empathy, and a greater sense of self-actualization.⁽⁴⁾

In the 1970s and 80s, most scientific study focused on concentration meditation. Herbert Benson, M.D. had many researches showing how concentration can enhance one's physiological response regarding stress.⁽⁵⁾

Meditative concentration can be achieved in any posture: walking, standing, sitting, or lying down. Whether engaged in contemplation, silent prayer, prostration, recitation, or even close observation or attentive listening, whenever we are single-minded,

there is the possibility of attaining meditative concentration.

Most people, beginners and more experienced practitioners alike, will find that achieving deep concentration in the midst of daily life is very difficult. Deep concentration may happen, but it cannot be sustained or regenerated at will. It is for this reason that the specific Chan methods of seated meditation and instruction from a qualified Chan teacher are necessary.

Physiological and psychological benefits can also come from insight or mindfulness meditation. Current scientific studies tend to focus on this type of meditation. Studies show that mindful meditation helps people be aware of their thought patterns and negative habits. As a result of developing awareness, many people become less influenced by these thoughts. The most well-known researchers in this field are Jon Kabat-Zinn and Daniel Goleman (who borrowed Buddhist ideas and developed the concept of Emotional Intelligence).⁽⁶⁾

To those who have personally experienced the benefits of Chan meditation, these scientific reports are not necessary. To beginners who would like to try meditation, these reports are encouraging.

- 1.Koji Sato (?) 佐藤幸治, Zen no susume 禪のすすあ. Tokyo: Kodansha, 1964.
- 2.Usaburo Hasegawa (?) 長谷川卯三郎, Shin igaku zen新醫學禪. Osaka: Sogensha (?) , 1964.
- 3.Stephen Hall, “Is Buddhism Good for Your Health?,” New York Times, September 14, 2003.
- 4.In addition, there are psychotherapy treatments founded on the theoretical concepts and practice of Zen such as “Dialectical Behavioral Therapy” and “Morita Therapy.”
- 5.See, for example, Herbert Benson, with William Proctor, Beyond the Relaxation Response: How to Harness the Healing Power of Your Personal Beliefs (New York: Berkley, 1985).
- 6.Jon Kabat-Zinn, Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness (New York: Dell, 1991); Daniel Goleman, Emotional Intelligence (New York: Bantam Books, 1995).

Ensuring a Healthy Body and Mind

If we want a healthy body and mind, the first step is to observe and understand how they work. We really understand very little about our own bodies and minds. We know that cellular metabolism does not stop for a moment, but we do not actually sense it. We seldom think about how the food we eat affects our health. We seldom pay attention to how many thoughts come and go in a single day or even in a minute. At the end of the day, we may have some impressions of a few major concerns we may have dwelt upon, but we are never clear about the actual number of thoughts in our mind at any given moment.

Worse, we constantly waste energy. Establishing a career, engaging in study, or contributing to the community requires considerable mental and physical energy. But in the process of doing these things, we are tense, nervous, and scattered, and, consequently, we lose a tremendous amount of energy and fail to replenish it. We must conserve our energy in order to use it wisely. Scattered thoughts cause us to lose energy; they consume not only physical energy but diminish mental acumen. Harmful thoughts, such as strong desire, hatred, arrogance, and despair, stir our

emotions and disturb physiological balance.

Chan meditation reduces scattered and harmful thoughts, so in all situations we learn to maintain a relaxed, focused, and clear mind. This state of mind is reflected in our bodies. Whenever a situation or problem requires attention, we will respond to it with our fullest attention and ability.

Physiologically, Chan meditation enhances the endocrine system, which supports the coordination between the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems. The pituitary, pineal, parotid, and thymus glands of the sympathetic nervous system can cause the constriction of blood vessels, thus increasing the sympathetic tone of the body. Its outward expressions are alertness and quickness in reaction. On the other hand, the adrenal, ovarian, testicular, and pancreatic glands of the parasympathetic nervous system can cause the dilation of blood vessels, lowering blood pressure and reducing sympathetic tone; the outward expressions are calmness and stability. Nourishing a balanced coordination of both systems will ensure a healthy personality. Inclination to either side will lead to defects in how we behave and relate to the world.

The demands of life can tax our brains and bodies. When we react with strong emotions, whether wild

excitement or violent rage, blood vessels constrict, pulse rate quickens, blood pressure increases, and we breathe more rapidly. All of these factors can lead to such conditions as cerebral hemorrhage, insomnia, palpitations, tinnitus, neurosis, and indigestion. When we experience severe emotions, endocrine gland functioning becomes imbalanced, and toxins are produced in the blood.

The endocrine system normally promotes a healthy body. When it loses balance, however, it will signal alarms in the body. The practice of Chan meditation transforms fluctuating moods and nourishes a clear and calm state of mind. Such a clear and stable state of mind is useful in meeting the challenges of life. We will not be overwhelmed by stress and we will not be overly excited when things go well; gain and loss will not cause pride or depression.

One foundational method used in Chan to achieve focus, insight, and health is meditation on the breath. Proper, natural breathing allows the sympathetic nervous system to be balanced and healthy. People generally use their lungs and chest to breathe. Chan practitioners shift the center of breathing to the lower abdomen, or what we call dantian or “elixir field.” This method uses abdominal pressure as a medium to

control the parasympathetic nervous system. Blood vessels dilate, lowering blood pressure, reducing the sympathetic tone, and increasing the secretion of acetylcholine, which enables the practitioner to achieve tranquility, serenity, and detoxification.

Shifting the center of breathing from the chest to the lower abdomen cannot be accomplished with just a few days of practice. Some teachers of yoga and qigong suggest forced abdominal breathing to achieve improved health, but this method is not suitable for everybody. For those who find abdominal breathing physically unsuitable due to congenital or acquired conditions, the practice may result in illness. Using force on the lower abdomen may cause irregular menstrual cycles in some women. Therefore, meditation on breath in Chan must be practiced in a natural way, without focusing on the lower abdomen.

If the practitioner is unsure whether or not concentrating on the abdomen while breathing is inappropriate, then concentrating on the breath at the nostrils is the safest method. Just focus the attention at the tip of the nose and maintain natural breathing. After a period of time, breathing naturally slows down, reduces in frequency, and extends in depth. Eventually the center of breathing will move down from the chest

to the lower abdomen on its own accord.

Abdominal breathing can transport blood stored within the liver and spleen to the heart, thus making more efficient use of the blood. The liver and spleen produce and store blood, holding a third of the body's supply. Another third is in the heart and 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 increases the blood volume so much that it is equivalent to adding an auxiliary heart to your body.

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 to gradually revive and regenerate. Because of this, Chan meditation can help cure various medical conditions and chronic diseases.

For someone who contracts an unusual illness that responds poorly to conventional medical treatment, Chan meditation may be of great benefit. Although, it may not cure a medical condition as swiftly as removing an appendix cures appendicitis, it can stabilize moods, reduce panic and fear, and ease the

suffering caused by the illness. Life span is limited, of course. Meditation cannot keep you young and alive forever, but it certainly can help you live a longer, happier and healthier life.

Cultivating a Strong Character

Strong character can be developed and nurtured through education, art, and religion, but these avenues of self improvement are not entirely dependable. Some, lured by the temptations of fame, fortune, and power, take up education, art, or religion, and appear to be of noble or saintly character, but in the depths of their hearts, they may harbor unspeakable ambitions and schemes.

There are hypocrites who are highly educated and bad people who attend churches and temples. This is because religious doctrine, ethics, and art are imposed from the outside— —sometimes in a very authoritarian manner— —so they do not necessarily resonate with one's inner state.

Chan meditation is the best way to cultivate strong character. It enhances character through practice and self-realization, not through external dogma or pressure. Outwardly imposed ethics and morals are unnecessary because Chan practice is itself a path of self-awareness, self-discipline, and self-transformation. Moreover, not only do we benefit, but, more importantly, so do those around us.

Religious doctrine, ethical standards, and moral

judgments change according to time, environment, and individual attitudes, so that throughout history many new religious doctrines and practices have emerged in response to social and environmental forces, Buddhism not excluded.

While Chan is a school of Buddhism and does not deny its teachings, it transcends the boundaries of Buddhism as an established religion. It is a timeless spiritual path that adapts to human needs. It aims to nourish and strengthen body and mind through a fourfold process of facing, affirming, harmonizing, and emptying the self. This process is like peeling an onion. When the layers of deluded thinking are peeled off, there is no objective and subjective self to be seen. The peeling away of delusion is accomplished through meditation practice, specifically through the practice of concentrating the mind and developing insight into the nature of mind.

When our minds are concentrated and clear, we can understand ourselves deeper and discover our strengths and shortcomings. This stage is called “facing the self.” The next stage is called “affirming the self,” where we accept all that is good and not good about ourselves. At this stage, we become aware of our negative behavior patterns, but the power of

concentration and mindfulness prevents us from being overcome by them. Only then can we truly enter the third stage: “harmonizing the self.” Here we refine the self by engaging in wholesome activities and abandon harmful ones. Finally, “emptying the self” refers to realizing that there is no permanent “self” to be found. What we identify as our opinions, views, and experiences continually change, as do the external circumstances that accompany them. Everything we consider as “I” or “mine” is intimately connected with the world. While there is consistency in our mental continuum from one moment to next, we see that our thoughts constantly change and are connected to everything around us. There is no independent, unchanging “self” within us. A direct experience of this interconnectedness and impermanence is liberating—the practitioner realizes that all things are connected and yet nothing is rigid or fixed. Realizing the emptiness of the self is like peeling an onion, at the core, there is no core to be found.

This fourfold process of facing, affirming, harmonizing, and emptying the self corresponds to the fourfold process of mental development in meditation. The practitioner first discovers a multitude of wandering thoughts, then concentration develops,

then thoughts become unified and single-pointed, and finally the practitioner realizes no-mind or no-self.(1)

All this begins with a sustained practice of meditation. By simply following the breath in meditation, we gradually reduce wandering thoughts. In time, we develop a strong sense of stability, independent of negative habits and habitual thought patterns such as self-disparagement and arrogance. Now these thoughts are like passing clouds in an open sky. They come and go; yet they have no effect on the sky. Likewise, we may identify emotions, even very negative emotions, but they will not disturb the nature of our mind.

(1)For further details, readers can read my books, *Subtle Wisdom: Understanding Suffering, Cultivating Compassion through Chan Buddhism*(New York: Doubleday, 1999); *Getting the Buddha Mind: On the Practice of Chan Retreat*(New York:Dharma Drum Publications,1982, 2005).

From a Balanced Body and Mind to a State of Liberation

The body is intimately connected to the mind—inseparable really—according to Chan. To speak of them as if they were separate is to project modern, scientific constructs of “body” versus “mind” onto a continually changing reality. These terms are used for convenience. Body and mind are not two discrete and separate entities. What we experience physiologically directly relates to our psychological makeup. To be completely healthy is to be liberated. Scientific findings can elucidate these phenomena.

To begin with, the body's sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems should be in constant equilibrium; poor balance leads to poor physical and psychological health. If the balance tilts toward the sympathetic nervous system, then the mental state tends to be sensitive, selfish, impatient, irascible, unfriendly, and unlikable. If the balance leans toward the parasympathetic nervous system, then the mood tends to be simple, sincere, steady, optimistic, and genial.

Someone with an unbalanced sympathetic nervous system may become effective in a particular career

or endeavor, but negative tendencies may arise. For example, a brilliant philosopher may be proud, a skillful general may be devious and unbending, an insightful scholar may be overly opinionated. A totally unbalanced system might produce an opinionated, violent, vile, and unruly rogue.

A tilt towards the parasympathetic nervous system might produce a compassionate religious leader, a magnanimous statesman, or a dynamic artist. The negative side might produce someone lacking in ambition and principle that blurs the line between right and wrong and ceaselessly manipulates others.

When the balance is totally inclined in one direction, the result will tend to be negative. Someone with positive traits undoubtedly experiences harmonious cooperation between the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems.

Chan practice is a holistic path that first harmonizes the functions of the body's organs and tissues so that they work smoothly and efficiently. Next, body, breath, and mind are in tune with one another. This reduces the burden on the sympathetic nervous system, weakens the influence of subjective consciousness, and gradually expands the boundary of self-centeredness until it is transcended, and subjective

consciousness melts into objective consciousness. At this stage, mental afflictions, though not yet thoroughly eliminated, no longer affect physical and mental health.

To be healthy on a holistic level, we have to take care of body and mind. Chan meditation leads to liberation, a state free from selfish attachments. The erroneous sense of self leads to greed, hatred, resentment, and resistance to self-examination and reason. Self-centered people feel distant and separate from others and the environment. They are intolerant of anything that contradicts their views or feelings. They strive for what they can't have, and if they get it, they shudder to lose it. If what they get turns out to be unpleasant, they fret about getting rid of it. Distress follows them wherever they go. Negative mental states may result in sickness no matter how healthy you are.

Correct practice of Chan meditation can eliminate vexations and self-centeredness. We move from a subjective pit of distorted perceptions and affliction to a liberating way of experiencing everything as it truly is.

We do not exist separately from everything around us; but our perception of each objective phenomenon misleads us into holding onto a strong sense of subjective existence. In Buddhism and Chan this is not the experience of emptiness or no-self. The experience

of no-self is not a state of vacuity or nothingness. It is the complete experience of the interconnectedness of everything. In simple terms, emptiness means relationships. With this realization, we find that we do not have a separate, independent existence; that we are connected to everything around us. This is the true self of no-self. Such realization leads to the perfection of genuine wisdom and compassion.

Chan practitioners who reach this stage deeply love humanity and all living beings. Their character is as clear and bright as spring sunshine. They may exhibit emotions for the sake of helping and enlightening others, but their minds remain tranquil as a crystalline autumn pond. We call such people enlightened, sages, or noble ones.

In one of the scriptures, Shakyamuni Buddha said, “All sentient beings possess the wisdom and merit of the Buddha.” This means we possess the full potential for perfect wisdom and compassion. If you think the benefits of Chan practice are desirable, then you must begin to practice. You will certainly succeed in your endeavors. Irrespective of gender, age, intelligence, physical strength, profession, social status, or religious belief, the door of Chan is open to all.

Real Chan practice is more important than simply

reading about Chan methods. This booklet is not Chan. To know Chan, you have to personally experience it. Otherwise, these pages will have provided nothing more than a tiny stream of words that will soon fade and be forgotten.