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## Summary

**T**his article, titled The Expedient Study of Ch'an, by the Venerable Pai Sen, explains the role and practice of seated meditation, and its primary importance, particularly in relation to the needs of the beginner when applying themselves to the study of Ch'an - 'because it is easier for beginners to apply themselves to the study of Ch'an if they have first mastered the procedures involved in seated meditation'.

The article proceeds with an explanation of the three things which need to be settled or adjusted when one sits down to meditate: namely: settling the body; settling the breath - with a clear outline of the method to be followed; and settling the mind - about which the writer explains, to understand this third stage, as - 'there are many kinds of "mind", before we can begin our practice, we must know which mind we are to start from - and so he expands into further explanation.

The concluding section bringing the reader to a correct view of the Ch'an school '...which speaks only of sitting properly, making the breath tranquil, and keeping the mind free of delusive thoughts.' As only '... when this has been achieved, can a practitioner proceed to "raise the conundrum (Hua-T'ou or Koan)" and ponder it with a fully concentrated mind.'

### The Expedient Study of Ch'an

By Venerable - Pai Sen

#### The Practice of Ch'an Through Seated Meditation

**T**he human body performs a great many different actions. Generally speaking, however, these may be reduced to the following four basic types: walking, standing, sitting, and lying. When speaking of the diligent practice of Ch'an, the ancient masters would say:

Walking, standing, sitting down,  
Or lying, one should not desist  
From this, for once the practice stops  
The opportunity is missed

Or again:

No matter whether you walk or sit,  
Your meditation should not stop

Speaking, silent, active, still  
Never let the practice drop

From this we can see that Ch'an meditation can be practiced while moving around, as well as sitting down. Here, however, I shall speak only of sitting, because it is easier for beginners to apply themselves to the study of Ch'an if they have first mastered the procedures involved in seated meditation. If they try to practice Ch'an without doing this, they will find it hard to compose their minds while moving about; they will not be able to sustain their practice when they are standing; and they will tend to fall asleep and dream if they practice while lying down. Therefore, the other three modes of activity walking, standing, and lying down are less suitable for the practice of Ch'an than quiet sitting. It is true that the masters of ancient times have said:

The Buddha's name is not recited with the mouth;  
One does not practice meditation with the legs

But this was spoken for the benefit of experienced people who are well versed in the practice of Ch'an; or for old people whose bones are too stiff to allow them to sit for long periods; it was certainly not meant for the average beginner. So, what I want to speak of here are precisely those methods and rules that need to be carefully attended to by anyone who has become interested in studying Ch'an and is just beginning to practice seated meditation. According to present day masters of the Ch'an School, there are three things that need to be settled or adjusted when one sits down to meditate: namely, the body, the breath, and the mind.

#### SETTLING THE BODY.

The procedures taught by the Ch'an school for adjusting the posture of the body are the first things the beginner should attend to when he sits down to meditate. Before seating himself, he should arrange a bench or platform about two feet square and one foot two inches high to sit on. On this he should place a soft padded cushion to raise his buttocks one or two inches, so that the back bone may be kept straight while sitting. In summer one should use a straw mat, so that the legs will not become stiff and painful after long sitting. When one sits on the raised seat, one must be careful to keep both legs crossed, and not allow them to stretch out or hang down; for extended or dangling legs will be injured by long sitting.

There are two ways of sitting with the legs crossed. One may have only one leg crossed (the 'half-lotus' position), or one may cross both legs (the 'full-lotus' position). How does one sit with one leg crossed? In this case the right leg is bent and placed on the mat, and the left leg is then lifted up

onto the right leg. The heel of the left foot is drawn up close to the right-hand side of the lower abdomen, with the sole of the foot facing upwards. The distance between the two knees should be something over one and a half feet, and one should sit up perfectly straight, like a clock. This is the position called in the sutras *ardha-paryanka*, and commonly referred to in English as the 'half-lotus posture'.

And how does one sit with both legs crossed? Here, one first lays the bent right leg on the mat, and places the left foot on the right thigh - just as in the half lotus position. Then the right foot is also placed on the left thigh. (If one has become proficient in sitting cross legged, one can simply place the left foot on the right thigh, close to the right-hand side of the lower abdomen, and then place the right foot on the left). Then one is sitting in the full 'lotus position', in what the sutras call *Spryanka* and refer to as the 'auspicious position'. One may also reverse the above procedure by placing the right foot on the left thigh first, and then the left foot on the right thigh; this will produce, the *Cajrasana*, the diamond, thunderbolt, or adamantine posture, also called the 'Mara quelling posture'. Either the auspicious posture or the vajra posture may be adopted, depending on one's inclination. In Tibetan Buddhism these postures are known by slightly different names, but the lack of a uniform terminology in no way affects the basic idea.

If one's legs are too stiff, so that one cannot get the feet up on the thighs, it will be sufficient to just cross the legs scissor-fashion; or if old age or sickness prevents one from crossing the legs, it will be enough to merely sit up straight.

But this kind of sitting cannot be kept up for too long at a time, so it is best to sit and walk, walk and sit alternately then there will be no danger of harming the legs. In the meditation halls of Ch'an monasteries, however, everybody is obliged to sit in the lotus position, because the monks or nuns there live a communal life and are not free to follow their own personal inclinations.

If it is winter and the weather is cold, one must cover the legs, once they have been crossed, with the lower part of a jacket, provided that it is wide enough (say, three feet or so). If the jacket is too small, one may use a blanket or rug, or something of that sort. In any case one must make sure that both legs are well wrapped up, for otherwise they might be adversely affected by the cold and develop chronic pain at some future date.

## B. SETTLING THE BREATHING.

Before sitting for an "incense period" of meditation (i.e. for as long as it takes one stick of incense to burn away), one should practice circumambulation for the same, length of time, in order to exercise the body and mind. When one has been circumambulating briskly and in the correct way to breathe, which is to exhale the bad air through mouth and inhale the fresh air through the nostrils. So, in the Ch'an meditation hall, after the wooden board has given the signal to stop circumambulating and everyone has halted, the monk in charge will say: "First breathe out sound hsu twice, and then breathe in and out through the nose. Do not breathe through your mouth or you will injure the windpipe". But all this still only concerns the adjustment of one's breathing when one is active and moving about, and our principal topic now is the adjustment of the breathing during seated meditation.

Four different degrees of fineness or coarseness may be distinguished in our inhaling and exhaling. They are called "windy" "heavy" "strained", and "quiet" breathing. When speaking (as we are doing now) of how to adjust the breathing we must regard the first three kinds (windy, heavy, and strained) as signs that the breath, has not yet settled down, for they are coarse and unstable, and prevent collectedness of mind. Only when the breathing is fine and subtle can we say that it has been adjusted or harmonized; and only then can the mind be stilled and the thoughts made clear, so that one is led gradually into practice of true meditation.

How are the four kinds of breathing to be distinguished? "Windy" breathing occurs when we first sit down after circumambulation. Then we can feel the breath blowing in and out of our nostrils like wind, and even making an audible sound. Of this, past Ch'an masters have said: "Windy breathing will scatter the mind". It makes proper application of the mind impossible, so it is a sign that harmonious adjustment of the breathing has not been achieved. "Heavy" breathing occurs when the noise of the breath in the nostrils has gradually faded away, but the breathing itself feels impeded and does not flow freely; so it may still be regarded as a kind of gasping or panting. Of this the ancient masters have said: "Heavy breathing leads to bondage". This also prevents mental application, and shows that the breath has not yet been settled. We speak of "Strained" breathing when although no sound can be heard in the nostrils, and there is no longer any sense of blockage or obstruction, the breath still feels coarse and lacking subtlety as it passes through the nose, and the mind cannot be made calm and still. So Ch'an masters of earlier days have declared that "Strained breathing results in fatigue". Again, the mind cannot be properly applied, and the breathing is unharmonized.

And what is "quiet" breathing? In this case, the breath makes no sound in the nostrils, its flow is not impeded, and there is no sense of coarseness or

instability. One is simply aware of the breath going in and out in unbroken continuity, so fine and delicate that it seems almost to have disappeared. Consequently, one feels calm and relaxed, by imperceptible degrees, the realm of Samadhi (pure concentration). So, the masters of old have said: "Quiet breathing leads to samadhi ". When the breathing is quiet, this shows that it has settled down and that the mind is being properly applied to meditation.

Again, when one is about to sit for meditation, he must see that his belt is properly tied - but not done up so tightly as to interfere with the breathing or impede the circulation of the blood. If it is summer, a fan should be used to keep the body cool and drive the mosquitoes away. If you have an "alertness board" (a larger, flat piece of bamboo about one and a half feet long), it should be laid over the crossed legs, with the hands resting on top of it. This will help to keep the mind alert and the body cool. If it is winter, one must be careful not to put on too many clothes. This advice applies especially to beginners, who will inevitably suffer pain in their legs and a certain amount of mental distress when they start meditating, so that their backs will often become damp with sweat. (Experienced Ch'an meditators, on the other hand, are always perfectly calm and quiet).

When the above conditions have all been met, one should close the mouth (according to some authorities, the tongue should be touching against the upper tooth-ridge) and half-close the eyes, resting the gaze on the tip of the nose - for there is a saying that one may see into the mind and heart through the nose. With regard to the eyes, the ancients used to say that beginners should keep their eyes closed to avoid mental distraction and confusion; but more experienced meditators should keep their eyes open, for otherwise they may become torpid and drowsy.

This completes our outline of the method to be a follower when settling the body for meditation. If you can sit in meditation two or three times each day, following the above procedures, with each session lasting about an hour (longer would be even better), then you will find that this is a very effective way of improving your health, curing illness, and prolonging life - even if you cannot practice the deeper aspect of Ch'an meditation. (This has been verified time and again by the experience of the present day who have made a practice of quiet sitting. If you are sceptical try it and see! You will find that it will keep you in good health).

The practice of Ch'an meditation is carried out by the mind. Yet there are many kinds of "mind", so before we can begin our practice, we must know which mind we are to start from - and this requires some further explanation.

According to Buddhist teachings a general distinction may be made between five kinds of "mind", as follows:

1. The physical base or heart-mind. ("Heart" and "Mind" are represented by the same word in Chinese: Hsin). The heart is simply a lump of flesh in the body, formed by a combination of the four elements: earth (symbolising solidity or spatial extension), water (fluidity, cohesion), fire of the "heart" in this sense, we are referring to a purely physical organ. It is a piece of insentient matter... and is certainly not the mind. It is a great mistake when ignorant beings assume that this organ is their mind. The Surangama Sutra condemns precisely this error when it says:

Beings, perverted in their views,  
Mistake mere matter for self.

2. The conditioned, discursive mind. The mind, which is equivalent to the sixth consciousness or Manovijana, consists of the thoughts that arise in us in dependence of the six kinds of sense data. Its sole function is to reflect the phenomena that appear to the senses:

It is present when sense-objects are,  
And disappears when they are not;  
It has no being apart from them,  
For it consists of delusive thoughts  
Alone: it is not the authentic mind.

What a pity then, that sentient beings make the mistake of regarding it as their mind - for as the Sutra of Complete Enlightenment points out, "beings foolishly suppose that the shadows created by the six sense-objects are the mind".

3. The appraising mind. This mind - the seventh consciousness or Manas - is the mind with which we think, reason, and ponder. Its function is to consider and appraise unreal Dharmas (phenomenal) while stubbornly clinging to a belief in their reality. When we persist in regarding the five aggregates (form of matter, feeling, cognition, mental activities, and consciousness) that compose our body and mind as a real self, when we can see through nothing, and are unable to lay down our affairs, it is all owing to the pernicious activity of this appraising mind.

4. The cumulative mind. This mind is the eighth consciousness - the Alayavijnana or "store consciousness", which gives rise to all the phenomena of the universe that appears before us, by accumulating, as so many mental images, the faculties that make up our corporeal existence the "vessel" that is the material cosmos, and the "seeds" of continued

becoming planted by our activities. This mind is the primal foundation of the universe in which we live, and it has both a real and an illusory aspect, as the Awakening of Faith indicates when it speaks of the Alayavijnana as being made up of suchness (reality) and ignorance (illusion) in combination.

5. The true and enduring mind. This mind is our natural and innate endowment. It is firm and true; it neither arises nor perishes. Because it cannot be tainted by delusive thinking, it is said to be inherently pure; because it is by its very nature possessed of all virtue and truth, it is called the womb of the Tathagatas (Tathagatagarbhi). Such terms as true suchness (Bhutatathata), the Buddha nature, the Dharmakaya, the true nature of things, bodhi nirvana, ultimate reality and prajna all refer to this true mind with which we have been endowed from the beginning. The names differ but the essential meaning is the same. According to Tsung Mi (780-841), the Fifth Patriarch of the Hwa Yen or Avatamsaka School, "all beings have this true mind whose nature is emptiness. From the beginningless origin of things it is intrinsically pure, bright, and unclouded, luminous with intelligence and eternal wisdom, outlasting the inexhaustible future.

Called the Buddha nature or the womb of the Tathagatas, or the mind as ground of all things, it was this mind that the Bodhidharma transmitted when he came to China".

From these four kinds of breathing, then, we can see that beginners in meditation must learn to quieten their breathing which has been settled and made harmonious.

It should be noted that this adjustment of the breath for Ch'an meditation is not the same as breath-counting techniques used in the T'ien T'ai Schools Samatha-vipasyana (mental stillness and insight) method. In the latter case the breaths are counted mentally as they go in and out, starting from one, going as far as ten, and then beginning over again from one; or else counting up to ten and then back again, from ten to one, and so on. This technique of counting the breaths was popular in China during the Wei, Chin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties period, and is called in Sanskrit Anapanasmṛti or Anapanabhavana. It is an Indian form of meditation, and is also often used when practicing Samatha-vipasyana according to the T'ien T'ai method in Ch'an meditation, however, the breathing is quietened solely as a means of calming the mind - it has nothing to do with insight meditation. So, the ancient masters have said: "If the breathing is settled, evils will cease to arise, and the mind will easily become concentrated".



This then, is how beginners in Ch'an meditation should learn to adjust their breathing. This technique has much in common with the Anapana method, despite the basic difference mentioned above, and it is helpful to compare it also with the breath-counting procedure as seen out in the T'ien T'ai School's Little Samatha -Vipasyana (also called Samatha-Vipasyana for Beginners).

When the legs have been covered, one should sit with the body perfectly erect. One must not lean forwards, for then one is likely to go to sleep. Nor should one lean backwards, for that would cause the breathing to quicken and become tense. Nor should one incline to the right or left; and above all, one should not lean the back against the wall, for this may lead to haemoptysis if kept up for too long. The backbone must be perfectly straight, with the neck lightly touching the back of the collar, and the shoulders level. The hands should be placed in the lap, with the palms uppermost and the right hand resting on the left. (Or else one may lay the left hand on the right). They should lie flat, one on the other, with thumbs touching, and should rest on the calves of the legs just below the navel, but not too close against the body, lest the circulation of the blood be hindered.

Before sitting for meditation, it is best to eat neither too much nor too little: one should stop when one feels about three quarters full. Too much food will make the body feel heavy and the breathing become strained; the circulation will be impeded, and many difficulties will arise during meditation. Therefore, before the monks in Ch'an monasteries sit for meditation after each meal, they must circumambulate the meditation hall for as long as it takes to burn one stick of incense. This is done to safeguard their breath. On the other hand, too little food will provide insufficient nourishment and the body will be weakened. This will lead to feeble breathing and mental anxiety during meditation. So, in Ch'an monasteries food is taken at least three or four times every day; and during the seven-day winter meditation session, when the monks sit for about twenty hours each day, the number of meals will be increased to over five or six. This too is essential for the monk's physical well-being.

(TSUNG CHING LU, Ch 34)

From the above discussion of the five types of "mind" we can see that the first, the physical heart, is not the mind; nor are the second and third, or the portion of the fourth that belongs to ignorance to be considered as the real mind. All these are referred to by the Ch'an School as the delusive mind. Only that part of the fourth mind that is true suchness, and the fifth true and enduring mind - only these are called the "true mind" by the Ch'an School. So, when we speak here of settling the mind, our meaning is that all aspects of the delusive mind should be brought under control, and that

the empty and erroneous thinking to which it gives rise should be halted. In the practice of Ch'an meditation, therefore, the principle is to "press beyond the mind (the eighth consciousness or Alayavijnana), the will, (the seventh consciousness or Mana), and the consciousness, (the sixth consciousness or Manovijnana)".

Throughout beginningless time right up to our present existence we have lived our lives under the sways of this delusive mind, so now, if we want to check it and prevent it from arising, we will find ourselves faced with no easy task. This is why we must begin our meditation by settling and subduing the delusive mind in accordance with Dharma. All problems concerning good things and bad, must be set aside. You should not give any thought to such matters, but instead, practice meditation in accordance with the Sixth Patriarch's question: "Just at the moment when you are thinking of neither good nor bad, which is your original face"? Nor should you pay any attention to the past or the future, for, as the Diamond Sutra says: "Past mind is inapprehensible, present mind is inapprehensible, future mind is inapprehensible".

We should make this our guiding principal in the practice of Ch'an. When we are able to understand that the three minds (of the past, present and future) cannot be apprehended, will it be possible for any thoughts and concepts still to exist?

In short, the beginners of Ch'an should try not to follow delusive thoughts when they arise, and they should disregard any external phenomena that appear. So, it is said:

Discard your worries, stop your thoughts,  
Lay down all entanglements,  
Bring the mind to a single point,  
And you will find the way to truth.

The above is a brief summary of the Ch'an School's approach to settling the mind. Former meditation masters also spoke in some detail of the three methods of taming the mind according to the three stages of "entry", "dwelling", and "departure". But this refers to the method of practicing mental stillness (Samatha) and insight (Vipasyana): it is not a good way to practice Ch'an meditation, so the Ch'an School does not use these terms. The Ch'an School speaks only of sitting properly, making the breath tranquil, and keeping the mind free of delusive thoughts. When this has been achieved, one can then proceed to "raise the conundrum (Hua-T'ou)" and ponder it with a fully concentrated mind.

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