

THE ESSENTIALS
of
BUDDHIST MEDITATION

Tiantai Master Zhiyi's Classic Meditation Manual:

*The Essentials for Practicing
Calming-and-Insight & Dhyāna Meditation*

English Translation by Bhikshu Dharmamitra

CHAPTER FOUR

Making Adjustments

4. SECTION FOUR: MAKING ADJUSTMENTS

a. PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

Now, when the practitioner first takes up the study of sitting in dhyāna meditation, as one who wishes to cultivate the Dharma of the Buddhas of the ten directions and the three periods of time, he should first make the great vows to bring all beings to liberation. In vowing to pursue the unsurpassed way of the Buddhas, he makes his mind as solid as *vajra* and resolves to be industrious and courageous to the point that he will not even spare his own life and will never retreat from his quest to perfect all buddha dharmas.

Next, seated in meditation and employing right mindfulness, he deliberates on the reality aspect of dharmas. These include those dharmas commonly referred to as: wholesome, unwholesome and karmically neutral; the inward and outward sense faculties and sense objects; the error-ridden consciousnesses; and all of the dharmas associated with outflow-impurities and afflictions. They also include the conditioned dharmas throughout the three realms and the dharmas of cause-and-effect associated with cyclic births and deaths. [He observes that] they all exist solely on the basis of mind.

Accordingly, the *Sutra on the Ten Grounds* states, "Throughout the three realms, there is nothing else at all. It is all created solely from the mind."¹ If one realizes that mind is devoid of [any inherently-existent] nature, then [one realizes as well that] all dharmas are not genuinely real. If the mind becomes free of defiling attachment, then all of the karmic activity in the sphere of birth-and-death comes to a halt. After one has carried out this contemplation, he should then take up the cultivation according to the proper sequence.

What is meant by "making adjustments?" Now, to draw upon familiar subjects as analogies for this dharma, it is just as when a common potter wishes to create various sorts of vessels. He must first skillfully make adjustments in the clay such that it is neither too stiff nor too soft. Afterwards he may move to the potter's wheel.

It is also like playing the lute. One should first make adjustments to the strings, properly setting their tension. Then one may proceed to play, producing all sorts of marvelous melodies.

When the practitioner cultivates the mind, it is just the same. One must make skillful adjustments in five different matters and must make those adjustments appropriately. Then samādhi will develop easily. If there is some factor which has not been properly adjusted, then there will be all sorts of obstructive difficulties and it will be hard for roots of goodness to develop.

b. [ADJUSTMENTS IN FOOD]

First, making adjustments with respect to food. Now, as for food's function as a dharma, basically it is consumed out of a desire to supply the body so that one may advance along the Path. If one eats to the point of becoming too full, then the breathing will be strained, the body will feel stuffed, the energetic channels will not flow freely, the mental faculties will be blocked up, and, when sitting, one's thoughts will not be tranquil.

If one eats too little, the body will waste away, the mind will be too tightly strung, and mental deliberation will be unstable. Neither of these two situations is the way to the realization of meditative absorption.

If one consumes contaminated food, then it will cause a person's mind consciousness to become dull and confused. If one consumes foods which are not appropriate, then it will stimulate all sorts of dormant residual disorders to arise and will cause the four great elements to be thrown far out of balance.

This is the beginning phase of one's cultivation of meditative absorption. Thus one must be extremely careful in the way one proceeds. In this connection, we have [two] scriptural citations:

If the body is content, the Path may flourish.

If one maintains awareness of proper measure in food and drink,
If one is always happy abiding in a remote abode, and
If, with the mind stilled, one finds happiness in diligent effort—
This accords with the teachings of all buddhas.²

c. [ADJUSTMENTS IN SLEEP]

The second involves adjustments in sleep. Now sleep is a matter of being covered over by a state of ignorance and delusion. One must not give free rein to it. If one sleeps too much, one not only wastes

the opportunity to cultivate the Dharma of the Āryas, but one also destroys any meditative skill. Thus one may cause the mind to be cloaked in darkness and the roots of goodness to become entirely submerged.

One should awaken to the import of impermanence, regulate and subdue sleep, cause one's spiritual energy to be clear, and one's mindful thought to be bright and pure. In this way, one will establish one's mind in the mental state of the Āryas and cause samādhi to manifest before one.

Accordingly, a sutra states, "Nor should there be any wasted time in either the first or last phases of the night... One must not, on account of sleep, cause a lifetime to pass by emptily with nothing whatsoever achieved. One should remain mindful that the fire of impermanence burns up the entire world. Thus one should seek early on to bring about one's own deliverance. One must not indulge [a tendency to enjoy] sleep."³

d. [ADJUSTMENTS IN BODY, BREATH, AND MIND]

The third, adjustments in the body, the fourth, adjustments in the breath, and the fifth, adjustments in the mind—these three ought to be considered together. They cannot be discussed separately. However, there are differences in technique at the beginning, middle, and end. This being the case, there are differences in their features when entering into, abiding in, and coming out of a session.

1) [ADJUSTMENTS WHEN ENTERING MEDITATION]

a) [ADJUSTMENTS IN THE BODY WHEN ENTERING MEDITATION]

i) [IMPORTANT PHYSICAL CONSIDERATIONS WHEN NOT MEDITATING]

Now, as for the physical adjustments undertaken when one first desires to enter dhyāna, there are issues of appropriateness in the physical adjustments undertaken by the cultivator wishing to enter samādhi. For instance, when one is abiding outside of meditative absorption, whether walking, standing, commencing an activity, or stopping one, whether moving or still—it is essential to be meticulously attentive in all such situations.

If one's actions are coarse and impetuous, then one's breath will become correspondingly coarse. Because the breath is coarse, then the thoughts will become scattered and difficult to register clearly. Additionally, when one returns to sitting, he will be agitated and muddled and the mind will not be tranquil or contented. Even though one's body may not be abiding in a state of meditative

absorption, still, it is essential to employ one's mind to implement skillful means in a counteractive manner [preventing any such disturbance of tranquility].

ii) [PHYSICAL ADJUSTMENTS WHEN BEGINNING THE MEDITATION SESSION]

(1) [SITTING DOWN]

Later, when one enters into dhyāna, it is essential to be skillful in stabilizing the body properly. When one first arrives at the sitting cushion, one must first establish oneself in the sitting location in such a manner that all is peaceful and secure so that nothing will interfere with remaining for a long time.

(2) [ARRANGING THE FEET]

Next, one should arrange the feet correctly. If one is sitting in the half-lotus posture, one places the left foot so that it is on top of the right leg and then pulls it in so that it is close to the body proper. In doing so, one causes the toes of the left foot to become aligned with the right thigh while the toes of the right foot become aligned with the left thigh. If one wishes to sit in full lotus, one next corrects the arrangement of the right foot so that it rests atop the left leg.

(3) [ARRANGING CLOTHING]

Next, one loosens the belt on one's robe, making sure that it is straight all around and cannot fall open while one is sitting.

(4) [ARRANGING THE HANDS]

Next, one should arrange the hands. One lays the open left hand on top of the right hand so that they fit together and rest atop the left foot [in the case of half lotus]. One then draws them in toward the body so that they are centered and stable.

(5) [CONSOLIDATING THE POSTURE]

Next, one should properly arrange the body, first making sure that the body is erect, and then seeing also that the limbs are set symmetrically, moving them back and forth as many as seven or eight times, as if massaging them into place. One must not allow the hands or feet to slip out of correct posture. Having done this, one then sits up perfectly straight, ensuring that the spine is neither slumping nor thrust forward.

(6) [LINING UP HEAD, NECK; SITTING STRAIGHT UP]

Next, one should straighten up the head and neck so that the nose and the navel are lined up and so that the head is not tilted to the

side, held at an angle, drooped downward, or raised upward. One faces forward and remains straight.

(7) [PREPARING THE BREATH]

(a) [EXPPELLING THE TURBID]

Next, one should expel the turbid breath. The method for expelling the breath requires that one open the mouth and release the breath while not allowing this process to be either coarse or urgent. One should make it soft and smooth as one releases the breath and sends it forth. One should imagine that, throughout the body, any blockages within the numerous energetic pathways are moved on out as one exhales.

(b) [INHALING THE PURE]

Then, one closes the mouth and inhales pure breath through the nose. One should do this up to three times. If the physical respiration is already correctly adjusted, then only once is adequate.

(8) [LIPS, TONGUE, EYES, SPINE]

Next, one should close the mouth such that the lips and teeth are held together while the tongue is held up against the hard palate. Then one should close the eyes only enough that they block off the light from outside. One should straighten up the body and sit upright like a stele. One cannot allow the body, the head or the four limbs to move about even slightly.

iii) [SUMMARY]

This is the technique for making physical adjustments as one first proceeds to enter dhyāna absorption. To speak of what is most essential, being neither too loose nor too tight is the mark of correct physical adjustment.

b) [ADJUSTMENTS IN BREATH WHEN ENTERING MEDITATION]

Fourth, the technique for making adjustments in the breath when first entering dhyāna meditation. The breath may possess any of four characteristics: first, windy breathing; second, uneven breathing; third, normal breathing; and fourth, subtle respiration. The first three are indications of inadequate adjustment, whereas the last one is characteristic of correct adjustment.

i) [TYPES OF BREATHING]

(1) [WINDY BREATHING]

What is meant by “windy” breathing? When one is sitting and one senses the presence of a sound as the breath comes into and goes forth from the nose this is “windy” breathing.

(2) [UNEVEN BREATHING]

What is meant by “uneven” breathing? When one is sitting and, even though the breath makes no sound, there is still a catching and halting such that it does not move on through, this is “uneven” breathing.

(3) [ORDINARY BREATHING]

What is meant by “ordinary” breathing? When one is sitting, even though the breath makes no sound and there is no catching and stopping, still, it is not subtle. This is “ordinary” breathing.

(4) [SUBTLE BREATHING]

What is meant by “subtle” respiration? There is no sound, no catching, and no coarseness. The exhalation and inhalation of the breath are smooth and of extended duration such that they are as if still there, and yet as if they have disappeared. This circumstance supports the spirit’s abiding in peacefulness and stability. One feels pleased and content. These are the marks of subtle respiration.

ii) [EFFECTS OF EACH BREATH TYPE]

If one maintains windy breathing, then one becomes scattered. If one maintains uneven breathing, then one becomes stuck. If one maintains ordinary breathing, then one becomes weary. If one maintains subtle respiration, then one enters meditative absorption.

If, when one is sitting, there occur any of the three characteristics of windy breathing, uneven breathing, or ordinary breathing, these are indications of inadequate adjustment. In a case where one applies mental effort under these circumstances, they also bring about mental disturbance and make it difficult for the mind to enter meditative absorption.

iii) [ADJUSTMENT TECHNIQUES]

If one wishes to correct them, then one should rely on three techniques: First, stabilize the mind by anchoring it below, [at the navel]; second, relax and release the body; and third, visualize the breath penetrating through to all of the pores, going forth and coming in without any obstructions whatsoever. If one makes one’s mind subtle, one causes the breath to become very fine. If the breath becomes regulated, then the manifold disorders do not arise. One’s mind easily enters meditative absorption.

iv) [SUMMARY]

This constitutes the practitioner's technique for regulating the breath when first entering meditative absorption. To speak of the essentials, it is neither coarse nor "slippery."⁴ This is the mark of regulated breathing.

c) [ADJUSTMENTS IN THE MIND WHEN ENTERING MEDITATION]

Fifth, the adjustment of the mind when first entering meditative absorption involves three concepts: first, entering; second, abiding; and third, emerging. The first, entering, involves two ideas.

i) [DISORDERED THINKING]

The first is the regulation and control of disordered thinking so that one's thoughts are not allowed to run off.

ii) [SINKING, FLOATING, URGENCY, LAXITY]

As for the second, one must cause conditions involving "sinking," "floating," "laxity," and "urgency" to regain correct adjustment.

(1) [SINKING]

What constitutes the mark of "sinking"? If when one is sitting, one's mental state is murky and dim, if one doesn't remember anything, or if one's head tends to droop downward, these all constitute marks of "sinking." At such a time, one should anchor one's mindfulness at the tip of the nose and thus compel one's mind to abide in the midst of objective conditions so that there will be no breaking up and scattering of the mental focus. This technique is able to counter "sinking."

(2) [FLOATING]

What are the indicators of "floating"? If while one is sitting, the mind prefers to drift off and move about, if the body, too, is ill at ease, or if one brings to mind various outward objective conditions, these are all marks of "floating." It is appropriate at such a time to stabilize the mind by directing it downwards and anchoring it at the navel, thus controlling chaotic thinking. The mind then immediately abides in stability. This being the case, it is then easy to establish the mind in stillness.

To speak of the essentials, it is being neither sinking nor floating which is the mark of the regulated mind.

(3) [URGENCY]

The meditating mind may also possess marks of laxity or urgency. As for the marks of the meditating mind afflicted with the "urgency"

malady, they arise from a situation where one has focused the mind and has brought mindfulness to bear. Because of this, one has entered a state of meditative absorption. Based on this circumstance, [the focus of one's attention] has moved upward and brought about intense pain in the chest. One should relax and release his mental focus downward. The subtle energetic breath will then all flow on down. If one were to do this, then the disturbance would naturally be cured.

(4) [LAXITY]

As for the marks of mind afflicted with the "laxity" malady, one realizes that one's mental determination has become scattered and dilatory and that one's body has tended to become slack and slumped. It may even be that there has been a flow of saliva from the mouth. At times, one may be dull and unclear. At such a time, one should draw up the body and make one's mindfulness more urgent. One should compel the mind to abide in the midst of objective conditions while compelling the body to maintain correct posture. One uses this technique to counter [laxity in] the mind.

In the event that the characteristics of being either rough or slippery manifest, if one infers from this, [the appropriate corrective actions] will become obvious. These constitute the techniques for regulating the mind when one first enters meditative absorption.

2) [SUMMARY OF ENTRY-RELATED ISSUES]

Now, entering meditative absorption is fundamentally a process wherein one proceeds from the coarse to enter the subtle. This is on account of the fact that the body is relatively coarse, the breath abides within it, and it is the mind which is the most subtle and still. Thus one's adjustments move from the coarse to that which is subtle, thereby causing the mind to become stable and still. These then are the initial skillful means involved in entering meditative absorption. This is what constitutes the regulation of the three⁵ matters as one first enters meditative absorption.

3) [ADJUSTMENTS WHEN ABIDING IN MEDITATION]

Second: As for the regulation of the three matters that takes place as one abides in the sitting posture, the practitioner should apply his mind in the focusing of mindfulness whether the given session of sitting meditation is long or short and whether it extends for one, two, or three of the twelve two-hour periods in a day. One must clearly recognize the characteristics which indicate whether or not

the three phenomena of body, breath, and mind are in a state of correct adjustment.

a) [THE BODY]

As one continues with a given session of sitting, if, even though one has already finished making adjustments to the body, it nonetheless occurs that the body becomes either lax or tense, either tilted or crooked, or either drooped or arched upward, so that the body is not upright and straight—as soon as one becomes aware of it, one must then correct it. One must ensure that, as one abides in peacefulness and stability, one remains free of any laxity or urgency, and that one remains in a posture which is level, straight, and upright.

b) [THE BREATH]

Then again, during a single session of sitting, although the body may be correctly adjusted, the breath may still not be in harmony. The marks of its not being regulated are as discussed above. Perhaps there is “windy” breathing. Perhaps there is “uneven” breathing. Or perhaps, in addition, the breathing has become so urgent that there is a sense within the body of distention and fullness. In such cases, one should employ the previously discussed methods and thus counter them accordingly. In every case, one should cause the breath-channel phenomena to manifest in a smooth and continuous manner, while seeming to be as if present and yet not present.

c) [THE MIND]

Again, it may be that in the course of a single session of sitting, although the body and the breath are correctly regulated, still, the mind may have failed to achieve meditative absorption on account of being either “floating,” “sinking,” “lax,” or “urgent.” At such a time, when one becomes aware of it, one should employ the previously mentioned regulating techniques to cause it to abide appropriately in between [such extremes].

4) [SUMMARY OF ABIDING-RELATED ISSUES]

These three matters most definitely do not have any fixed sequence of implementation. One accords with whatever aspect is out of adjustment in proceeding to establish appropriate adjustment of it. One thus brings it about that, throughout the course of a single session of sitting, the three factors of body, respiration, and mind abide in a state of appropriate adjustment. They remain free of any mutual interference and thus become fused in a way whereby there is no longer any dual aspect to them.

When this has become the case, one is then able to get rid of any residual disorders rooted in previous existences, one is able to guard against and prevent the arising of obstacles, and one becomes able to establish ascendancy in the path of meditative absorption.

5) [ADJUSTMENTS WHEN EMERGING FROM MEDITATION]

a) [EMERGENCE PROCEDURES]

Third: As for the regulation of the three factors at the time of emerging from meditation, if it is the case that the practitioner's specific session of sitting in dhyāna is about to come to an end, when he wishes to come out of meditative absorption, he should first release his mind onto a different objective condition. Then, he should open his mouth and release the breath while also visualizing it dispersing itself from the many energetic channels in concert with the mental attention.

Afterwards, one should move the body ever so slightly and then move the shoulders and then the hands, the head, and the neck. Next, one moves the two feet and allows them to become entirely limber again. Next, one uses the hands to massage over all of his pores and then massages his hands till they become warm. He then uses them to cover his two eyes and then, afterwards, opens them. Once one has waited for the physical heat to dissipate somewhat, one can then come and go as he pleases.

b) [DANGERS OF NEGLECTING EMERGENCE PROCEDURES]

If one fails to do this, since one may have succeeded in causing the mind to dwell in a particular way during the sit, if one then acts in a sudden and hurried fashion as one comes out of meditation, then the subtle phenomena may not have yet been allowed to disperse. If they thus continue to abide, trapped within the body, they may cause a person to have headaches and to experience a stiffness of all of the joints similar to rheumatism. In subsequent sitting sessions, one may then become afflicted, agitated, and ill at ease. Therefore, when the mind wishes to emerge from meditative absorption, one must always pay careful attention to these points.

This constitutes the technique for regulating the body, respiration, and mind as one emerges from meditative absorption.

6) [CITATIONS RELATING TO ENTRY, ABIDING, EMERGING]

Because one moves forth from the subtle into that which is coarse, this involves a skillful entering, abiding, and emerging as described in a verse:

In moving forward and in stopping, there is a proper sequence.
The coarse and the subtle do not work against each other.
It is just as with the skillful training of a horse.
One wishes to come to a halt and then desires to move along.⁶

In the *Lotus Sutra*, it says: "For the sake of the Buddha Path, the bodhisattvas in this great assembly have already diligently practiced vigor for an incalculable number of tens of millions of *koṭīs* of kalpas. They have become skillful in entering, abiding in, and emerging from an incalculable number of trillions of *koṭīs* of samādhis. They have gained great superknowledges, have long cultivated the brahman conduct, and have become well able to practice in appropriate sequence all of the good dharmas."⁷