

Sitting in Chan

Instructions for Practitioners¹

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Abstract: *In this excerpt from his instructional talks, a patriarch in the Wei Yang lineage of Chan Buddhism gives instruction in the Chan meditation method of focusing the mind on the topic “Who is this who is mindful of the Buddha?” The method raises doubt about the reality of the self. He also describes some of the subjective experiences that may be encountered during extended periods of effort in this form of spiritual practice.*

When you practice in the silent meditation tradition of Chan, concentration is of vital importance. Your body, mind and thoughts must be focused. When it’s time to walk, you walk; when it’s time to sit, you sit; when it’s time to lie down to rest, you lie down. Whether you’re walking, sitting or lying down, you follow the rules. You don’t think about it; you don’t think about anything except your meditation topic. Then the mind can be concentrated. Your thoughts should be devoid of greed, devoid of anger and devoid of delusion. You single-mindedly inquire into your meditation topic.

In China, from the Qing dynasty onwards, most people have inquired into the meditation topic, “Who is this who is mindful of the Buddha?” Investigating the word *who* is the most important part. “Who?” As long as you don’t know, then it’s still “who.” Knowing “who” is to be enlightened. You practice mindfulness of the Buddha, perhaps by reciting his name. Well, who is it who is mindful? You want to find this out. You need a feeling of doubt to arise in your mind. You may say: “It’s me. ‘I am mindful of the Buddha!’” But who are “you”? Nurture that doubt. If it’s “you” who is mindful of the Buddha, then suppose “you” die and are cremated; where has this “you” gone to? If it’s “you” who is mindful of the Buddha, then it shouldn’t be that “you” have to die.

There are many other meditation topics that can be used instead in practicing Chan. Some people inquire, “Who was I before my mother

bore me?” Others may inquire into the word *nothing*. *Nothing* means that nothing actually exists; there isn't actually anything at all. Or does everything exist? They investigate *nothing* and *existence*. They investigate how things cease to exist. Everything in the world is subject to coming into being, abiding, decaying and ceasing to be. What is there that is not subject to coming into being, abiding, decaying and ceasing to be? That's what they look into. There are many such meditation topics. Whichever topic you respond to best is the one for you.

Practicing Chan inquiry is like drilling a hole. You drill and drill until you drill through the wood, and then you can see through to the other side. That's what becoming enlightened is like. Before you break through, you just do the daily work of drilling. Prior to becoming enlightened, you inquire into the question, “Who is mindful of the Buddha?” You must drill the hole today, drill it tomorrow and drill it the next day, drilling and drilling until your work bears fruit and you break through. That breaking through is enlightenment. What you weren't clear about before, you will then be clear about. What you didn't understand, you will then understand.

So when sitting in silent meditation, don't spend your energy on what is outside yourself. Turn your light around and shine it inward. Put the “who?” into your mind and then listen with your ears. Don't pause in your pursuit of “who?” Don't let your efforts disperse. Inquire into this topic in everything you do. A verse says:

*Walking, standing, sitting, reclining,
Don't be apart from this.
If you depart from this,
You've made a mistake.*

What is “this”? It is the question, “Who is this who is mindful of the Buddha?” You don't have to ask this question out loud; ask it in your mind and listen to it with your ears. Listen inside, not outside. And then, eventually, in some unexpected way, at some unexpected moment, you will suddenly become enlightened.

The thought of inquiring within about “who?” is also a thought, of course, but we wield this one deluded thought to defeat all the other deluded thoughts. It's like a cat poised to catch a mouse. The cat waits beside the mouse hole. If the mouse comes out, the cat catches it with one swipe of its claws. Your investigation of “Who is mindful of the Buddha?” is like a cat stalking a mouse. Your stream of thoughts is the mouse, and the phrase “Who is mindful of the Buddha?” is the cat. Like the cat, we must pay attention to our work at all times and inquire without interruption.

Practitioners alternately advance and retreat in their work. We may be vigorous for a few days, but then, feeling that we aren't getting any benefit, we slack off. After being lazy for a while, we become vigorous again. In our practice we should follow the Middle Way and be neither too hasty nor too relaxed. We shouldn't be nervous and shouldn't be lax. We should enjoy developing our skill. We should develop it to the point that we are free and at ease when walking, free and at ease when sitting, free and at ease when standing, and free and at ease when sleeping. In each of the four departments, we should be masters of ourselves. This signifies that our skill is increasing. Then we will be able to truly practice Chan inquiry, and even if we consider stopping, there will be no way to do so. We will become one with our practice.

It is said:

You eat each day, but it is as if you hadn't eaten a single grain of rice.

You wear clothes, but it is as if you hadn't put on a single stitch.

You do eat, but you aren't attached to eating, so it's as if nothing had happened. You wear clothing, but you are not attached to it. Whether you are walking, standing, sitting or lying down, you forget everything. You forget about eating and wearing clothes—not to speak of everything else—and all matters are no problem.

On our seven-day and twenty-one-day Chan retreats, we sit for periods of sixty minutes, alternating with twenty-minute periods of walking, beginning at 3:00 A.M. and continuing till midnight, with an hour for lunch and an hour's rest in the afternoon. As to the periods of walking, you don't race and you don't keep a slow pace either. How should you do it? You should be very orderly and yet at ease. During the walks you should still be inquiring into your meditation topic: "Who is mindful of the Buddha?" Then at the end of each walk, run once or twice around the hall, three times at the most so that you don't become tired and winded. You just want the circulation of your blood and your energy, your *qi*, to become lively. So as soon as your body heat rises, it is time to stop the run. Then the next sit should begin.

What is the method for sitting? In sitting, your mind should be calm and your breath tranquil. Sit upright like a great bell, your eyes directed toward your nose, your nose directed toward your mouth, and your mouth contemplating the mind at all times. Don't lean to the front or the back or to the left or to the right. To sit in the full lotus posture is the very best, because it makes it easier to enter a deep absorption—to enter samadhi. Place your left foot on your right thigh, and then pull your right foot over onto your left thigh. If you can't manage full lotus,

half-lotus posture, with your left foot placed on your right thigh, is the second best. If you cannot bear that, then you can sit in any way that's comfortable, but keep your back straight. Curl the tip of your tongue up and back so that it rests against the roof of your mouth, thus connecting the energy channels. Once these channels connect, your blood and energy will circulate well and you will feel very comfortable. If your saliva collects, you can swallow it. Your saliva is like an ambrosia that nourishes your sprouts of awakening.

Self-cultivation is a matter of the mind, not of the legs, though. If you can be free of discursive thinking, you can practice in any posture at all. If your mind is filled with a stream of thoughts, then you won't succeed in your practice no matter how you sit. Your mind must constantly observe your stream of thoughts to see which thoughts are predominant. Do the majority of your thoughts concern greed and desire? Do your thoughts contain more anger and hatred than anything else? Does stupidity dominate your thinking? Reflect inwardly and examine yourself. If you can purify your mind of these thoughts, then you are having a good response to your efforts. Whether you sit in full lotus or half lotus or in some other expedient position, the essential thing is to get rid of discursive thoughts so that genuine wisdom can appear. As long as the false is not ended, the true will not manifest.

After sitting awhile, you will begin to feel warmth in your body. It will start in your belly, spread throughout your body, and then return. The repeated experience of warmth is known as the "stage of heat."

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After a period of time, you will experience further changes in your body's chemical factory and you will reach the "stage of the crown of the head." There will be a sensation on the crown of your head that seems to be there and yet not there. It is invisible and intangible. After the "stage the crown of the head" comes the "stage of patience." During this stage, the sensation on your head will become very hard to bear, and yet you must bear it. It feels as if a hole were being drilled into your skull. If you can endure the discomfort, then after a while the hole will be drilled all the way through, and you will be able to go out the top of your head, like a bird happily flying out from its cage. This is the "stage of being foremost in the world."

In the course of meditation, you may also enter a state of serenity, which is quite comfortable and enjoyable. When you attain this state of being, filled with Dharma-bliss, you can go without food and not feel hungry, go without sleep and not feel tired, and even go without clothing and not feel cold. This is an experience associated with the initial stages

of self-cultivation. Whether you are sitting or walking, you will feel as if you have no self. You won't know where your ego went. But don't get attached to any of these experiences.

Those who truly know how to work do not lose track of the topic "who?" and little by little, as they inquire into "who?" the mind, intellect and consciousness all vanish. The mind becomes empty; the body also becomes empty, the intellect, empty, and the consciousness, empty. Then no thought can influence you. Sustained investigation of this "who?" brings you to the point that your breath ceases, your pulse stops, your thoughts come to a standstill, and you enter a profoundly great sama dhi. At that time, there is no heaven above you, no earth below you, and in between them, no people and no objects of the senses . Absolutely everything is empty. Even emptiness does not exist. Once emptiness is obliterated, what could remain? Where could your old deluded thoughts reside? Where could your desires be located? At that time, it's very easy to become enlightened.

But not only can you gain results from your work on a daily basis, you can gain results from even just a moment's work; and due to this you can become enlightened. A proverb says:

*Sitting in stillness merely for a moment is worth more
Than building countless temples made of seven precious things.*

If you can enter a genuine state of stillness for even an instant, that itself can eradicate an infinite number of the karmic offenses that result in your being bound to the cycle of death and rebirth.

Notes

1. This article was adapted from *Chan: The Essence of All Buddhas*, a pamphlet in the series *Venerable Master Hua's Talks on Dharma* (Talmage, California: Dharma Realm Buddhist Association, 2000), and from the forthcoming *The Śūraṅgama Sutra: A New Translation, with Excerpts from the Commentary of the Venerable Master Hsüan Hua* (Talmage and Berkeley: Buddhist Text Translation Society and the Institute for World Religions, Spring 2009).