

# **Eight Steps and Three Types of Meditation**

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How can we effectively implement the Mindful Peace Academy Curriculum? The key lies in mastering the Nine-Word Guideline<sup>1</sup> and practicing the Eight Steps and Three Types of

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<sup>1</sup> The Nine-Word Guideline is an important guiding principle in the Mindful Peace Academy Curriculum. It includes the attitudes of “honesty, earnestness, and commitment,” the methods of “understanding, accepting, and applying,” as well as the transformation of “views, mindsets, and life quality.”

Meditation. Therefore, as the focus of advisor<sup>2</sup> training, we should understand and apply the Nine-Word Guideline. Everyone, including Class Assistant, Assistant Advisor and all levels of advisors, must master the relevant content. If advisors themselves are unable to grasp the Nine-Word Guideline or apply the Eight Steps and Three Types of Meditation, how can they effectively lead a class and guide students to do such practice?

Today, I will share with you from five aspects.

# I

## Honesty, Earnestness, Commitment

In the Nine-Word Guideline, the attitudes of “honesty<sup>3</sup>, earnestness<sup>4</sup>, and commitment<sup>5</sup>” are essential for effectively applying the methods and achieving the desired results in our study and practice. So, how crucial are these attitudes in implementing the Mindful Peace Academy Curriculum? This is a question often asked by many new beginners. Some students may even feel resistance, thinking: “We are here to learn the wisdom of the Buddha’s teachings. Isn’t this starting point too low for us? Are we elementary school students? Is this really something worth emphasizing?”

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<sup>2</sup> Advisors are students who have benefited from and progressed relatively quickly in the Mindful Peace Academy Curriculum. They also volunteer to assist class students in their study and growth. Their roles are defined as learners, supporters, sharers, and servers. Advisors are divided into levels, progressing from lower to higher: Class Assistant, Assistant Advisor, Junior Advisor, Intermediate Advisor, and Senior Advisor.

<sup>3</sup> Honesty: Use the Dharma as a mirror to honestly face the afflictions in your life. Realize that you are an ordinary being, filled with delusion and afflictions—a seriously ill patient trapped in samsara. Have the courage for self-reflection—don’t deceive yourself or shy away from your afflictions. Only by clearly seeing these issues can you approach study and practice with the mindset of treating an illness. Otherwise, learning the Dharma may become nothing more than an ornament in your life. We must be honest not only in facing ourselves but also in facing the Dharma and the teacher. Like a patient eager for recovery, regard the Dharma as a medicine to heal your illness and the teacher as a skilled doctor who can save your life.

<sup>4</sup> Earnestness: Devote yourself wholeheartedly to study and practice, holding yourself to high standards. Follow the guidelines for listening to the Dharma as outlined in the *Stages of the Path*, and deeply engage with the teachings of each lesson. Repeatedly listen, reflect, and fully grasp the meaning of the Dharma, allowing it to integrate into your mind and transform your life from within.

<sup>5</sup> Commitment: Once you recognize the value of the Mindful Peace Academy Curriculum, follow it sincerely with single-minded focus. Don’t let a chaotic worldly mindset lead you astray or cause you to cling to external distractions. If you fail to cherish this opportunity to engage with the curriculum and settle your mind on learning, it will be difficult to gain any true benefit.

Actually, this emphasis is specially tailored for today's learners. We live in an era marked by a lack of honesty, earnestness, and commitment, which is completely opposite to the attitudes required for the study and practice of Buddhism. In fact, this is precisely the crux of why many fail to benefit from their study and practice. Without honesty, we are unclear of our goal, not understanding that the purpose of studying Buddhism is to tame the mind and heal the sickness. Without earnestness, we will only skim the surface of the teachings, like taking too little medicine to gain any effect in curing a disease. Without commitment, we flit from one approach to another, trying different treatments and formulas without waiting to see effective results. In summary, without honesty, earnestness, and commitment, it is impossible to recover from the disease of cyclic existence through the medication of the Buddha Dharma.

In the *Stages of the Path*, the guidelines for listening to the Dharma teach us that we should “avoid the Three Faults<sup>6</sup> and cultivate the Six Contemplations.” How does this advice relate to the attitudes of “honesty, earnestness, and commitment” in the Mindful Peace Academy Curriculum?

The unenlightened mind is characterized by ignorance and self-attachment. Due to ignorance, our understanding is influenced by feelings, emotions, and perceptions, leading to various wrong views. Because of self-attachment, we become self-centered, taking our wrong views of the world as real, and clinging to them. We trust our feelings, but they are often misleading. This makes it very difficult to change ourselves unless we are able to recognize our own problems and embrace the teachings of wisdom culture.

Buddhist teachings not only help us identify problems but also offer us insights of wisdom. However, the extent of its healing effect on us depends on each individual. Only by adopting the attitudes of “honesty, earnestness, and commitment” can we truly open our minds to embrace the Dharma and improve our lives. Otherwise, we are like an upside-down vessel: even though the rain of Dharma falls on everyone, we remain caught up in our self-centered feelings, untouched by even a single droplet of wisdom. Or, like a contaminated vessel, we twist everything we learn through our self-centered feelings, turning it into “my Dharma” instead of the Buddha's Dharma.

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<sup>6</sup> Three Faults refer to the upside-down vessel, the contaminated vessel, and the leaky vessel in the following texts. These three types of vessels serve as metaphors that represent the common faults encountered when studying Buddhism.

Cultivating the Six Contemplations is fundamental to the attitudes of “honesty, earnestness, and commitment.” In today’s world, studying Buddhism has become fashionable. However, many people treat it as nothing more than a hobby, akin to tasting tea, smelling incense, or appreciating music, merely embellishing their lives. The key reason for such attitude lies in the absence of the Six Contemplations: “seeing oneself as a patient, the Dharma teacher as a doctor, the teachings as medicine, the practice as taking the medicine for healing, the Tathagata (Buddha) as a true sage, and aspiring for the Dharma to endure.” Among these, the most important is seeing oneself as a patient.

We must realize that we are seriously ill patients in the cycle of life and death, afflicted with the severe illnesses of greed, aversion, and ignorance. If we cannot realize this, our study of Buddhism will inevitably remain superficial, making it impossible for us to resonate with the true teachings. Therefore, only when we realize that a life rooted in delusion and afflictions has significant flaws, and that the true nature of samsara (cyclic existence) is suffering, will we be motivated to seek remedies and actively engage in treatment. Furthermore, we need to realize that the Buddha Dharma is medicine, Dharma teachers are doctors, and the practice is the healing process. With these understandings, we can then develop an honest, earnest, and committed attitude toward our study and practice.

Then, what is the relationship between the attitudes of “honesty, earnestness, and commitment” and the study methods of “understanding, accepting, and applying”?

For instance, “understanding” can range from correct to incorrect, and from shallow to deep. “Accepting” can vary from partial to complete and from reluctant to wholehearted. “Applying” can be occasional or consistent, and either rigid or seamlessly integrated. Why are they different? They lie in the attitudes of “honesty, earnestness, and commitment” in the study and practice, as well as the ability to avoid the Three Faults and cultivate the Six Contemplations.

If we are like an upside-down vessel, the Dharma won’t even enter our mind—how can we understand it? If we are like a leaky vessel, no matter how much Dharma we receive, it will all drain away, unable to accumulate the strength needed to transform the mind. And if we are like a contaminated vessel, the Dharma we take in will be processed by our own filters, unable to yield its intended positive effect. And it may even become a condition that increases our afflictions.

Therefore, our attitudes determine how we “understand, accept, and apply” the Dharma, as well as the extent to which we benefit from it—whether we can transform our views, mindsets, and life quality through studying Buddhism.

## **II**

### **Understanding the Eight Steps**

Regarding how to study and practice, we first introduce a Nine-Word Guideline, which covers attitudes, methods, and outcomes, and then further put forward the Eight Steps and Three Types of Meditation. The latter encapsulates the practical application of the Nine-Word Guideline, serving not only as a method but also encompassing the outcomes. Among these steps, the first four focus more on understanding and accepting, while the last four emphasize on transforming life by inheriting the Buddha’s teachings, and applying what has been understood and accepted.

For each lesson in the Mindful Peace Academy Curriculum, only after correct understanding can we truly know what is being taught and then accept it. If our understanding is incorrect or distorted, no matter how much we hear, we will still be living in our own world, unable to truly connect with the Dharma, let alone apply it. Therefore, the Dharma is inherited through the continuum of mind by “understanding, accepting, and applying” it. Then we fulfill our mission of transforming our lives and further help more people on the path to awakening.

Students of the Mindful Peace Academy Curriculum should be familiar with the concept of the Eight Steps. But how to apply it effectively? Not everyone is very clear on that. Actually, the Eight Steps serve as a methodology. Simply speaking, it is a method to transform theoretical knowledge from books into practical life qualities.

There are generally two misconceptions in studying Buddhism. The first is an overemphasis on theory—we may know many teachings and speak eloquently about them but fail to apply them practically in life, with little connection to finding peace and purpose in life. The second is aimless practice—we may be busy with daily rituals and recitations, constantly chanting and praying—but our inner afflictions remain unchanged. This disconnects Buddhist study from daily life.

It should be understood that all the teachings Buddha gave throughout his life, were tailored to different spiritual faculties, and aimed at addressing the problems of sentient beings. In the Buddha's teachings, there are both theory and practice. They form an integrated system that bridges teachings and daily life, and connects views with mindsets. If we view it merely as a theory, a technique for practice, or even just a way of life, it remains incomplete.

How do we integrate theory and practice in Buddhism? The conventional path of Buddhist practice includes the Noble Eightfold Path, the approach of listening, contemplating, and practicing, as well as the principles of faith, understanding, practice, and realization. It also emphasizes following wise teachers, listening to the right Dharma, and contemplating and practicing in accordance with the Dharma. These methods are included in numerous Buddhist texts, representing the common path laid out by the Buddha. However, for today's learners, even gaining a basic understanding of the texts is challenging, let alone comprehending the profound meanings they contain.

In response, I have summarized Eight Steps and Three Types of Meditation tailored to the needs of practitioners today. This framework includes understanding the teachings, reflecting on life, forming correct understandings, and then applying them in our mind to improve the quality of life. This is not only an effective method for practice but also contains the goals that Buddhist study aims to achieve.

## **1. The First Three Steps**

The first three steps of the Eight-Step process are very crucial. The first step is to understand each sentence, the second step is to delve into the meaning of each paragraph, and the third step is to transition from raising questions to solving them, from learning the teachings to forming correct views. These steps form the indispensable foundation of the study.

In the past, the learning approach was usually about summarizing the main idea of each paragraph; nowadays, creating mind maps is getting more popular. I began to use mind maps thirty years ago at Guanghai Monastery while studying the *Expository Notes on the Four-Part Vinaya*. Written by Vinaya Patriarch Daoxuan, this text consists of thirty sections. Each section addresses a specific topic, including how monastics should receive precepts, how to observe the three-month summer retreat, and how to rely on teachers and so on. Each time I finished reading a section, I created a corresponding mind map to clearly outline the main points. This helped me understand exactly what it was all about, and how to approach the matter.

Many of the teaching materials of the Mindful Peace Academy Curriculum are collected from my past lectures. Some are audio-visual materials, while others have been compiled into books. Regardless of the format, there is always a structured outline. For example, a topic is discussed from several aspects, with each aspect covering specific points. Once compiled into texts, there are usually multiple levels of headings. The supplementary materials prepared for the intermediate stage of practice<sup>7</sup> also include mind maps. Everyone can take advantage of them to enhance learning efficacy.

However, the table of contents and mind maps lack details. Therefore, just by browsing them, we are still unclear about what they say. So, it is necessary to study the relevant audio-visual materials and books. Why does the Mindful Peace Academy Curriculum require studying each lesson at least three times? Actually, this is the minimum requirement for “understanding.” Without watching the teaching videos or reading the materials repeatedly for three times, it’s difficult to comprehend what it truly conveys. Indeed, this is a consensus reached by many students after serious study.

After reading the text for the first time, we may feel like we’ve grasped most of it; on the second reading, we may discover that many details were previously overlooked. By the third reading, we’ll realize that there were still neglected contents and that our understanding wasn’t deep enough. If we keep reading, new insights will likely emerge. Even if the first three readings seem thorough and nothing was left out, as our understanding of the Dharma deepens, we will uncover new insights from the same content.

Some may wonder, is this really necessary? Many people can grasp some principles of the Dharma from just a paragraph or even a single sentence and find it beneficial. However, we need to recognize that receiving Dharma in this way is incomplete. A serious Dharma student will not be satisfied by just slightly reducing the afflictions and making the mind a bit more peaceful. Truly studying the Dharma is about freeing oneself from delusion to awakening, and from samsara to liberation. This requires a complete, accurate, and thorough understanding of the Dharma, and each of the three standards is indispensable.

The first standard is completeness. For example, the *Buddhist View on Wealth* aims to tell us about the relationship between wealth and life. The content covers various aspects such as “how to view wealth, the relationship between wealth and morality, whether Buddhists can

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<sup>7</sup> Mindful Peace Academy Curriculum includes the preliminary, intermediate and advanced stages of practice.

pursue wealth, how to pursue wealth, and how to manage wealth reasonably.” These topics collectively provide a complete understanding of wealth, rather than just focusing on a single aspect. Without this completeness, one may hold a biased and incomplete view on wealth.

The second standard is accuracy. Achieving accuracy requires watching teaching videos or reading texts repeatedly. In this way, we will truly understand the teachings being conveyed. Therefore, going over the contents three times is a basic requirement. In fact, to accurately grasp the meaning, it often requires many more times. Just as an ancient saying goes, “Read a book a hundred times, and its meaning will naturally reveal itself,” which speaks to their experiential wisdom. Moreover, the Dharma is vast and profound, with many teachings unfolding layer by layer. As our study and practice deepen, each time we revisit the text, we will gain new insights. Therefore, as long as time permits, we should listen, read, and reflect more times, ensuring our understanding remains accurate and free from misconceptions.

The third standard is thoroughness. Only by understanding the teachings completely and accurately will we be fully clear about the meaning, allowing the wisdom of the Dharma to constantly enter our minds. Otherwise, our understanding will remain superficial. It may seem as if we understand, but what we grasp is only skin-deep: simple yet not useful. In calligraphy, there is a standard known as “strength penetrating the back of the paper.” Similarly, in studying Buddhism, we must deeply engrave the teachings in our minds, constantly recalling them, so that we can effectively apply them when we face real-life situations.

Our understanding of the teachings involves two levels: the theoretical and the practical. First of all, the ability to effectively apply the Buddhist teachings depends on whether our theoretical understanding is complete, accurate, and thorough. With this foundation, we can then put them into practice, reflect on them, test them, and ultimately internalize them. For example, impermanence is a theoretical concept but also a reality. All theories we learn must be repeatedly contemplated and verified in real life.

Buddhism teaches impermanence, but is it true in reality? It states that life is suffering, but is this the truth? It describes money as both a poisonous snake and pure wealth; does money indeed have the dual aspects in real life? We must examine all these questions against the backdrop of our actual experiences. Only by doing so can we internalize the right views gained from listening and contemplation, making them a true part of our understanding.



We are ordinary beings filled with delusions and afflictions. All our suffering, the cycle of rebirth, and our deluded thoughts arise from ignorance. We possess invaluable inner treasures yet know nothing about them. Instead, we merely drift through the cycle of birth and death and live like a beggar day after day. What a pitiful way to live! The Buddha's teachings are not meant to provide us with a set of theories or to impart knowledge, but to help us understand the true nature of life and the world, and to find the key to unlock the treasures within. Therefore, after we study the theories from books, it is essential to connect them with real life through contemplation, thereby establishing the right views. This process is called Contemplative Meditation.

The wrong views arising out of ignorance bring endless suffering to our lives. To counter this, we need to replace these wrong views with the wisdom of right views. This wisdom cannot simply be copied and pasted into our minds; it must take root deeply. Without deep roots, it may easily be swept away when real-life challenges arise, leaving us utterly powerless to resist. Only by observing and clearly seeing that the truth of life and the world aligns with what the Dharma teaches—not with our previous perceptions—can we wholeheartedly embrace the Dharma. The right views will then be deeply engraved in our minds, unshaken by any trials or tribulations.

In my nearly forty years of studying Buddhism, I have increasingly realized that the Buddha articulated the truths of life with unparalleled clarity and depth. Just as a saying goes, "All the finest teachings in the world have been spoken by the Buddha." These finest teachings are the words of wisdom and the words of truth. Therefore, the Dharma convinces us through wisdom, not through any other means. Only after we understand this can we introduce the Dharma to others with genuine confidence. Then we will not merely parrot what we've heard, or just like a tape recorder, simply repeating what was said by the Buddha, the ancient masters, or our teachers. Of course, it is fine to quote them, the crucial point is to truly understand and internalize their teachings, and form our own insights. When our insights come from within, our words will flow from the mind and naturally resonate with others.

## **2. Step Four**

Built on the first three steps, the fourth step is to establish the right views, or meditation on views. The right views include both theoretical and practical insights. The theoretical insight refers to the Buddha's teachings of dependent origination, cause and effect, impermanence, and no-self. The practical insight encompasses our views on life and the world, as well as our values.

Through the first three steps of the Eight-Step process, we should achieve a complete, accurate, and thorough understanding of each aspect of Buddhist teachings, thereby attaining the right views. Moving forward, we must transit to contemplate these right views in real life. Without this critical step, there won't be a connection between theoretical knowledge and practical insight, thus no effect can be made. If we consider theory as a seed, then listening and contemplating are just acquiring the seed. Contemplative Meditation, on the other hand, is the key process of cultivating and planting the seed, allowing it to take root and sprout.

### **3. Step Five**

After establishing the right views, the fifth step is to apply them and develop positive mindsets. People often ask, "Why can't I apply the Buddhist teachings effectively?" If a seed hasn't been planted in the soil, how can it grow? Similarly, if the teachings haven't become part of your understanding, how can you apply them? Another common issue is, "I understand the teachings, but I can't put them into practice." In fact, if we truly understand the teachings, we can certainly put them into practice. Just as we won't taste poison because we know it is fatal. So why do we still make mistakes even when we know they are wrong? Fundamentally, it is due to an insufficient understanding of the teachings and their consequences. We may know something is wrong, but if this understanding remains at a conceptual level, it is not fully internalized. As a result, it doesn't become true practical insight, leaving us unable to apply it.

As such, the real impact comes from practical insight. Once the Buddhist teachings are transformed into our own understanding, we will naturally apply them—it will become impossible not to do so. Just as greed arises when we see something we like, without any thinking process. Because our greed has been conditioned to operate automatically, it activates as soon as the opportunity arises. Therefore, applying the teachings depends on the transformation of our views and how deeply these views are ingrained.

### **4. Step Six**

The fifth step is about applying the right views and establishing positive mindsets, while the sixth step involves completing the transformation of the mindsets. Both fall under the meditation on the mindsets. Many students, after a few months of study and practice, have experienced less afflictions and more harmonious relationships. Why is it so effective? It's

because the Dharma has started operating within their life systems, it will naturally take effect. This effect is first manifested as a transformation in mindsets.

There are two paths in life: the path of samsara and the path of liberation. It is one or the other. Samsara is the development of a deluded mind. Due to wrong perceptions and views, we develop a series of negative mental states such as narrow-mindedness, selfishness, greed, opposition, and indifference, which bring various afflictions to our lives. If we do not wish to continue suffering in this way, we must establish the right views and re-contemplate the world. Through contemplation, we can let the right views take root in our minds, gradually replacing our original wrong views. As these wrong views diminish, our afflictions and suffering will also decrease. The Buddha was able to eradicate afflictions, achieve the virtue of cessation, and dwell in infinite tranquility because his right views were perfected.

Therefore, the meditation on mindsets stems from the meditation on views; the transformation of mindsets depends on the transformation of views.

## **5. Step Seven**

After transforming our mindsets, the seventh step is to continually reinforce positive mindsets and improve our quality of life. Since beginningless time, the habits of samsara have been dominating our lives, with deeply ingrained power. In contrast, the positive mindsets developed through study and practice are still unstable and require constant nurturing. On one hand, we must recognize the harm caused by negative mindsets and avoid falling back into old patterns—no affirming, endorsing, supporting, or engaging in them. On the other hand, we need to understand the value of positive mindsets, and consistently focus on appreciating, supporting, and reinforcing them. This process is what Buddhism refers to as “sweeping away dust and impurities, transforming defilements into purity.”

## **6. Step Eight**

As the positive mental state strengthens, we reach the eighth step, ultimately transforming the quality of life. From the perspective of the Three Types of Meditation, the seventh and eighth steps focus on the meditation on life quality. The greatest difference between buddhas and sentient beings lies in the quality of life. The life quality of ordinary beings is based on greed, aversion, and ignorance, while the life quality of buddhas and bodhisattvas is characterized by perfect compassion and wisdom. This life quality is not innate; it is cultivated through practice.

The Eight-Step practice is designed to guide us toward achieving such a quality of life. First, we must let go of the deluded mind and eliminate negative mindsets, which Buddhism refers to as the virtue of cessation. Next, we cultivate positive mindsets that embody infinite wisdom and compassion, referred to as the virtue of wisdom and the virtue of compassion. These qualities need to be achieved through the Three Non-Outflow Methods of precepts, samadhi, and wisdom. Similarly, the Mindful Peace Academy Curriculum is structured around achieving these goals.

In addition to the Eight Steps, we also have Four Key Principles: “Establish Right Views, Recognize the Truth, Eliminate Wrongness, and Reinforce Correctness.” The first four steps help us “Establish Right Views and Recognize the Truth,” while the last four steps guide us to “Eliminate Wrongness and Reinforce Correctness.” If the first four steps, especially the third step, are not completed, we cannot establish the right views or recognize the truth, let alone eliminate wrongness or reinforce correctness.

Therefore, the Eight-Step practice encompasses the entire process, from learning the teachings to transforming life quality. Among these, the first and second steps form the foundation, the third and fourth steps are the key, the fifth and sixth steps enhance the application, and the seventh and eighth steps achieve perfection.

### III

## Contemplative Meditation and Abiding Meditation

Many Buddhist practitioners have a yearning for meditation, thinking that the Mindful Peace Academy Curriculum lacks meditation and always want to experience it somewhere else. This stems from our misunderstanding of meditation, as many people think that it only involves sitting cross-legged with eyes closed.

The Chan School had addressed this view over a thousand years ago. The *Platform Sutra* states, “While alive, we can sit without lying down; once dead, we lie down and cannot sit. Just a pile of stinking bones—what use is it for attaining enlightenment?” The body is merely a shell; how can we judge the state of practice based on whether we are sitting or lying down? On this, Chan School also has a famous koan:

Mazu Daoyi was once diligently practicing sitting meditation. Master Nanyue Huairang recognized him as a Dharma vessel capable of shouldering great responsibility, and decided to guide him. Thus, Huairang began grinding a brick next to where Mazu meditated.

Disturbed by the noise, Mazu asked, “What are you grinding the brick for?”

Huairang replied, “I am trying to polish it into a mirror.”

Mazu wondered, “How can you make a mirror by grinding a brick?”

Huairang retorted, “If a brick cannot be polished into a mirror, how can sitting meditation alone make you a buddha?”

He continued by asking, “When an ox cart is not moving, should you whip the cart or the ox?”

Meditation is about cultivating the mind; the key is to change our mind, and sitting meditation is merely a supportive method. The true practice of mind extends across all times and places, including all activities like walking, standing, sitting, lying down, and even eating and going to the bathroom. As long as we maintain mindfulness, we are in a state of practice anytime, anywhere. Many people don’t understand how to cultivate the mind. They neither study the teachings nor change their views or adjust their mindsets, but simply sit aimlessly, thinking this is the only way to practice meditation. Actually this is a misunderstanding of meditation.

Returning to the point, if lying down and walking can be forms of meditation, then naturally, sitting cross-legged can be as well. In fact, this is a conventional method of meditation. However, what truly matters is that we know what we are sitting there for. Meditation is not about maintaining a specific posture; it’s about engaging the mind, not the form. For this reason, the Chan approach has always been flexible and unstructured, but the mind engagement is thorough and consistent, ensuring no moment is missed or wasted.

In Buddhism, there are many methods of meditation. For example, Samatha and Vipassana are about cultivating concentration to attain wisdom of contemplation; Vipassana involves cultivating awareness to achieve insightful reflective power; and visualization is about using imagination to adjust our mindsets. The Mindful Peace Academy Curriculum places emphasis on Contemplative Meditation, which is also the method promoted in the *Stages of the Path*.

By listening to the teachings, we use rational thinking to establish the right view of the world. As teaching the Dharma was an important method used by the Buddha throughout his life to enlighten others, studying his teachings is also a conventional path of practice he established for us.

## **1. The Mental Foundation of Contemplative Meditation**

Studying Buddhism is to gain wisdom and see the truth, and wisdom is related to human rationality. Why are humans considered the most spiritually advanced of all beings? Why has humanity developed a civilization over five thousand years? Why do all buddhas and World-Honored Ones achieve enlightenment in the human form, not in other forms? It is because humans possess rationality. To escape suffering and attain happiness, we continually explore life. In this process, we seek to understand what life is and what the world is truly about. At the same time, by reflecting on and examining our current understanding, we see our shortcomings and strive to change them—transforming defilement into purity, and consciousness into wisdom.

This rationality is shaped by our lifestyles and the cultural education we receive. In turn, the cultural education we receive influences our rationality and determines the kind of person we become. Historically, there were some criminals and even tyrants. They were influenced by negative cultural inputs, so they formed wrong views that led to harmful behaviors, endangering themselves and society.

Fortunately, today, we are embracing a culture of awakening and wisdom. Otherwise, we would never see the true nature of the world or find a way out of life's eternal questions, such as "Who am I?" and "What is the meaning of life?" These are beyond our capacity to answer. Although the path is right there and ancient buddhas had walked through it before, ordinary beings are unable to find this path on their own, apart from Pratyekabuddhas (solitary buddhas) with exceptionally sharp faculty.

Throughout history, some philosophers and artists, after achieving fame and success, ended up in despair. They were not driven by financial needs or struck by any particular misfortune, but rather, they could not find meaning in life. Many people in the world can spend their entire lives busily pursuing career success, wealth, and family, finding joy in these pursuits and never growing weary. However, there are always some who are not satisfied with just these. When they truly begin to explore life, they will discover that it is a foggy, rugged, and challenging path that requires both great diligence and wise decisions.

The Buddha not only found this path, but also presented various teachings, tirelessly guiding us with great patience and compassion. Despite these conveniences, and even though we are fortunate to have been born as humans and to hear the Dharma, the Buddhist sutras are vast. Many people spend their entire lives searching within them, but fail to grasp the essence. In light of this, we have specially designed a Mindful Peace Academy Curriculum tailored for people today. With the attitudes of “honesty, earnestness, and commitment,” the more effort we put forth, the more benefits we can gain.

## **2. The Teaching Principles of Contemplative Meditation**

Listening, contemplating, and practicing form the basic sequence in the study of Buddhist teachings. Here, “contemplating” refers to correct reasoning. This “correct reasoning” is extremely important. Ordinary beings are constantly thinking, but they engage in deluded discriminations and idle distractions. This fails to solve problems, and creates various mental afflictions. Just as the saying goes, “The world has no inherent troubles; it’s the meddlesome who trouble themselves.” Thus, rationality is a double-edged sword; it must be used properly to help us break free from delusions and attain enlightenment. Otherwise, it only leads us to deeper delusions.

The Four Dharma Practices state that “following wise teachers, listening to the right Dharma, and contemplating and practicing in accordance with the Dharma.” Among these, contemplating in accordance with the Dharma is crucial. From following wise teachers to listening to the right Dharma, we are receiving wisdom. Based on this, we contemplate in accordance with the Dharma, so we understand what the Dharma truly tells us, allowing us to practice accordingly and move towards enlightenment.

Within the Noble Eightfold Path, the Right View comes first, followed by the Right Thought. Once we have embraced the right view of the Dharma, we must integrate it in our mindsets and use it to observe the world and reflect on life, rather than blindly following delusive thoughts. The Yogacara School also explains that through four types of investigation—namely, the Investigation of the Name<sup>8</sup>, the Investigation of Substances(or

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<sup>8</sup> Investigation of the Name means that the bodhisattva sees with regard to a name that it is just a name.

Given Things)<sup>9</sup>, the Investigation of the Designated Intrinsic Natures<sup>10</sup>, and the Investigation of Designated Differences<sup>11</sup>—we can develop these four types of true wisdom.

It is evident that contemplating in accordance with the Dharma is extremely important in studying Buddhism. The *Stages of the Path* advocates Contemplative Meditation, which is based on this conventional path of practicing instead of blazing a new one. Ignoring this key aspect can lead one off the right path unknowingly. Why have there been so many issues with Buddhist practice over the years? Some people enjoy discussing abstract and esoteric teachings, merely showing off their rhetorical skills; others blindly practice without true understanding, focusing only on superficial efforts. The Dharma itself is a profound wisdom, but the current Buddhist community is increasingly neglecting the study of texts. For example, Chan practitioners do not read Buddhist texts, thinking that Chan is not realized by written texts, but by a special transmission outside the texts; those who recite Amitabha's name do not study the texts either, saying, "Let others study the Tripitaka and its Twelve Divisions for enlightenment." What does it mean not to study the texts? It means we are unable to transmit Buddha's teachings and wisdom effectively.

Whether practicing Chan or reciting Amitabha's name, both are simplified methods of cultivation based on numerous texts, and not merely the forms we see. Behind these methods lie a comprehensive theory and a system of cultivation and realization. If we remove the theory, the understanding, and methods of using the mind, what remains is just a point of inquiry (*hua tou*) or Amitabha's name, like a label stripped of its content, completely hollowed out. In this case, where do we gain strength?

The greatest difference between Buddhism and other religions lies in the right view. Many religions also have precepts and meditation practices, which are shared by Buddhism. Especially with Indigenous Indian religions, Buddhism shares many similar concepts like nirvana, liberation, karma, and samsara, which have long existed in other Indian religions. However, why is it that only the Dharma can lead people to liberation? It is precisely because the views differ, and the analyses and interpretations of these concepts vary, that the resulting

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<sup>9</sup> Investigation of Substances (or Given Things). With regard to a given thing, seeing that it is just a given thing is the investigation of the given thing.

<sup>10</sup> Investigation of Designated Intrinsic Natures. With respect to designations for essential nature, clearly seeing those as just designations for essential nature is the investigation of designations for essential nature.

<sup>11</sup> Investigation of Designated Differences. With regard to designations for particularity, seeing those as just designations for particularity is the investigation of designations for particularity.



principles of practice also become different. This is where the true uniqueness of the Dharma lies.

Of course, rationality alone cannot directly reach the truth, but it can help us find the direction and approach the truth. Only when one finally enters the meditation on emptiness should they let go of discrimination and unlock non-discriminative wisdom. Prior to this, rational thinking is indispensable.

### **3. The Unenlightened Mind Is Established Through Contemplative Meditation**

In fact, for ordinary beings, Contemplative and Abiding Meditations are not something new. Because the mind of an ordinary being is also built through Contemplative and Abiding Meditations, it can be said that we have been practicing both since the beginningless time. For example, when we like something, we repeatedly think about its benefits and desire to possess it; this is Contemplative Meditation. Eventually, this thought becomes extremely strong, lingering in our mind for a long time, or even to a point where only this thought remains; this is Abiding Meditation. For instance, some people have a very high opinion of themselves or feel good about themselves, which also comes from Contemplative Meditation. They constantly think about their strengths and the more they think, the prouder they feel. They believe that they are better than others, eventually giving rise to immense arrogance. Then, they are indulging in this feeling, allowing a sense of superiority to permeate everywhere. Where does this feeling come from? It is actually cultivated by oneself.

In summary, Contemplative Meditation involves repeatedly examining a specific issue from various perspectives. This process helps develop corresponding thoughts and gradually expand them. Since beginningless time, ordinary beings, driven by ignorance, attachment to self, and attachment to phenomena, have shaped their current personalities by contemplating various issues. Therefore, this method of practice is well-suited for ordinary beings. We once experienced suffering and the cycle of rebirth due to incorrect Contemplative and Abiding Meditations. Now, we just follow the same mental operation pattern, but with a different path of direction. By contemplating Buddhist teachings, we can gain the right views, which enable us to address issues, transform our mindsets, eliminate afflictions, and ultimately transcend the cycle of rebirth.

Changing our mindsets involves two aspects: on one hand, eliminating negative mental states that lead to samsara, and on the other hand, establishing positive mental states that correspond to liberation. This is not just empty talk; it can be continuously realized through study and practice. As long as we follow the Eight Steps with honesty, earnestness, and

commitment—focusing especially on the third and fourth steps—we can understand the meaning of the teachings, establish the right views, reflect on life with these views, and inevitably transform our mindsets.

#### ***4. The Application of Contemplative Meditation in the Stages of the Path***

The entire *Stages of the Path* outlines a systematic approach to cultivating the mind, centered on “abandoning the unenlightened mind and generating bodhicitta.” It is divided into four parts. First, the foundational practices in Before the Path, such as relying on a wise teacher, appreciating the preciousness of human life endowed with leisure and opportunities (meaning the time and ability to learn, and practice the Dharma). Second, the Path of Lesser Being focuses on contemplating the impermanence of death<sup>12</sup>, reflecting on the suffering of the three lower realms<sup>13</sup>, and taking refuge in the Three Jewels<sup>14</sup>, and a firm belief in karma and its results. Third, the Path of Middling Being focuses on developing the aspiration for liberation. Fourth, the Path of Great Being focuses on developing bodhicitta and engaging in the practices of a bodhisattva. Each segment helps us to eliminate wrong views and establish right views—this is the practice of meditation on views. Through contemplation of these insights, we free ourselves from the unenlightened mind and cultivate an awakening mind—this is the practice of meditation on mindsets.

This process needs to be implemented step by step. For example, the guidelines for listening to the Dharma teach us that, if we cannot abandon the Three Faults and cultivate the Six Contemplations, we cannot become a vessel for the Dharma, nor can the pure teachings enter into the continuum of our mind to effect a change in our life quality. Similarly, without an “honest, earnest, and committed” attitude towards study and practice, there can be no “understanding, accepting, and applying,” let alone improvement in “views, mindsets, and life quality.”

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<sup>12</sup> Contemplating the Impermanence of Death in the *Stages of the Path* includes three aspects: first, contemplating the certainty of death—realizing that death is inevitable and cannot be avoided; second, contemplating the uncertainty of the time of death—realizing that the moment of death is unpredictable and beyond our control; third, contemplating the futility of worldly matters at the time of death—realizing that, apart from the Dharma, nothing else—neither wealth nor loved ones—can provide true support when death arrives.

<sup>13</sup> Three Lower Realms, often referred to as the realm of animals, the realm of hungry ghosts, and the realm of hell beings, represent states of existence characterized by intense suffering in Buddhism.

<sup>14</sup> Three Jewels are the foundational elements of Buddhist practice: the Buddha (the Teacher), the Dharma (the Teachings), and the Sangha (the Community).

Moreover, the Path of the Lesser Being focuses on establishing faith in the Three Jewels, generating aspiration of taking refuge, and deeply believing in karmic results; the Path of the Middling Being focuses on deeply realizing that the nature of samsara is suffering, and developing the aspiration for liberation; the Path of the Greater Being focuses on cultivating the Seven-Point Cause-and-Effect<sup>15</sup> and the practice of Exchanging Self and Others<sup>16</sup>, so we can understand the merits of bodhicitta, develop bodhicitta, engage in bodhisattva practices, and practice the view of emptiness. Each of these three paths involves corresponding Contemplative and Abiding Meditations.

In the *Twenty-One Meditation Manual*, the key segments of the *Stages of the Path* are developed into meditation practices. The Contemplative Meditation summarizes the relevant teachings of the *Stages of the Path* in a concise language. Just as we engage in the daily practice of refuge, we should contemplate the great significance of a precious human life, the impermanence of death, and the sufferings of the three lower realms, thus giving rise to a genuine mind of taking refuge in the Three Jewels. The key here is not reciting the related texts, but through the contemplation of these phenomena, we feel from the bottom of our hearts that: the Three Jewels are immensely important to us, as they serve as our sole reliance and refuge in life. When a strong mind of refuge arises, reciting the Three Refuges will be truly powerful. This allows us to abide in the merits of the Three Jewels and align our mind with the essence of the Three Jewels.

Besides taking refuge, we can apply such Contemplative and Abiding Meditations to every teaching, including relying on a wise teacher, developing renunciation, and generating bodhicitta. Without the Contemplative and Abiding Meditations, our study of the Dharma often remains theoretical and fails to integrate into our minds and lives. In such cases, the Dharma we learn merely becomes a superficial decoration in our lives, rather than a profound, transformative force.

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<sup>15</sup> Seven-Point Cause-and-Effect is a systematic method in Mahayana Buddhism for cultivating bodhicitta by recognizing the interconnectedness of all beings. It emphasizes developing loving-kindness and compassion through a progressive seven steps.

<sup>16</sup> Exchanging Self and Others is another method for cultivating bodhicitta. It emphasizes the equal importance of self and others while reversing the habitual self-centered mindset.

# IV

## **Eight Steps and Three Types of Meditation**

The focus of meditation lies not in whether one is sitting, standing, or walking, but in cultivating and transforming the mind. By clearly understanding this central point, we can achieve a transformation in views, mindsets, and ultimately life quality.

In the Mindful Peace Academy Curriculum, achieving this goal involves reading the texts and watching the teaching videos, as well as small group and class discussions. Some may ask: How does this differ from the way people usually read books? The difference lies in the application of the Eight Steps. Without applying the Eight Steps, we are merely studying culture, knowledge, or theory. Even if we study the Dharma, without transforming it through the Eight Steps, it cannot be considered true practice. Conversely, if we study with the Eight Steps, whether contemplating the Dharma individually or participating in discussions, we all regard it as a form of meditation.

Because meditation aims to transform the wisdom of Dharma into your own understanding and views, this transformation doesn't necessarily require sitting with your eyes closed; it can happen while reading a book or during group and class discussions. The key is to understand the meaning and function of meditation and to focus on the right aspect: if the cart is not moving, are you hitting the cart or whipping the ox? If you miss this focus, no matter how hard you try, you won't progress. This is like whipping the cart instead of the ox; the cart might fall apart, but the ox won't move. Once you truly internalize the wisdom of Dharma into your own views and mindsets, you will become free anytime, anywhere, unbound by attachment. As Chan Buddhism says: "Walking is Chan; sitting is Chan; whether speaking or silent, moving or still, one is always at ease."

To carry out the Dharma, we propose Three Types of Meditation based on Eight Steps: meditation on views, meditation on mindsets, and meditation on life quality.

### **1. Meditation on Views**

The first to fourth steps focus on the meditation on views. By reading the texts, watching the teaching videos, and discussing supplementary materials, we can accurately understand the meaning of the teachings. Furthermore, we learn to use these teachings to understand the world and reflect on life. By comparing and testing them against real life, we realize that

everything the Buddha taught us is true and unfailing. Thus, we can discard wrong views and establish right views. With the right views in place, we can eliminate afflictions and move toward liberation.

All courses in the Mindful Peace Academy Curriculum aim to help us establish the corresponding right views. For instance, the preliminary stage of practice addresses issues like faith, wealth, environmental protection, and various global issues from a Buddhist perspective. Why is it structured this way? Because our afflictions come from various aspects of life—some stem from family, some from relationships, some from careers, and some from social interactions—in short, every type of affliction has a source. Then, what is the source? Why do these issues bring us afflictions? This is because, based on ignorance, we use wrong views to address the issues. In other words, this is the result of wrong Contemplative and Abiding Meditations.

Because afflictions arise from wrong views, liberation relies on the foundation of right views. First, it is necessary to understand how Buddhism views these issues. Through reading the texts and watching the teaching videos, we will find that some of our habitual views cannot hold up under scrutiny. We will discover that there are other perspectives we have never explored. Furthermore, the truth is not merely what everyone says; it can only be found through observation, contemplation, and true realization.

Every lesson and every book we study pass on particular wisdom that must be understood completely, accurately, and thoroughly. After establishing the right views, we must also persistently and firmly abide in them, replacing any prior wrong views. If these right views become unclear, we must re-contemplate them. This helps them regain clarity and once again serve as our guiding force.

## **2. Meditation on Mindsets**

The fifth and sixth steps focus on meditation on mindsets. After establishing the right views, we must use them to handle problems and guide our lives. The transition from applying the right views to developing positive mindsets is inseparable from Contemplative Meditation. When we can truly observe the world and life with wisdom, afflictions cease to arise. We must then abide in this wise observation, maintain inner purity and compassion, and extend this state continuously.

When this state becomes unclear and difficult to maintain, we must continue to contemplate the impermanence of death, the suffering of samsara, or the virtues of the Three Jewels. In essence, we should reflect on the relevant teachings to address the current problems and readjust our mindsets accordingly.

Therefore, the Contemplative and Abiding Meditations cannot be completed in a single attempt but require repetitions of tens, hundreds, or even millions of times. This process involves repetitive practices. On the one hand, right views can counteract delusory thoughts, and on the other hand, positive mindsets can counteract negative ones. When the mind can remain settled in a right and positive mindset, it should continue to maintain this state steadily and consistently without further contemplation. Otherwise, further contemplation might actually lead to restlessness.

### **3. Meditation on Life Quality**

The seventh and eighth steps focus on the meditation on life quality. Ignorance and delusion shape the life quality of ordinary beings. If we aspire to attain the life quality of buddhas and bodhisattvas, we must continually cultivate mental states in harmony with awakened nature, and strengthen these mental states aligned with liberation. These mental states will then be stabilized until they take the lead, ultimately transforming our current life quality.

In this process, it is necessary to keep the mind settled and maintain a positive mindset for extended periods. Once it deviates, we must use Contemplative Meditation to bring it back, and then abide in it. This process also entails repetitive practices—crafting a brand-new life quality through reinforcing correctness.

The essentials of Eight Steps and Three Types of Meditation are as follows: meditation on views aims to correct wrong views, meditation on mindsets adjusts our mindsets, and meditation on life quality transforms life quality. This process entails understanding the Dharma to establish the right views, using these right views to develop positive mindsets, and consistently maintaining these positive mindsets to cultivate a noble life quality. This journey transforms delusion into enlightenment, and turns an ordinary person into a sage.

# V

## Seated Meditation and Off-Cushion Meditation

In the Mindful Peace Academy Curriculum, although the *Stages of the Path* is emphasized, it is just one course among many, not the entire curriculum. We define Contemplative Meditation, Abiding Meditation, Seated Meditation<sup>17</sup>, and Off-Cushion Meditation<sup>18</sup> differently from how they are defined in the *Stages of the Path*.

For instance, the *Stages of the Path* teaches Contemplative and Abiding Meditations. Built on this, we have proposed Eight Steps and Three Types of Meditation here. In the brief demonstration of practice methods in the *Stages of the Path*, the practice of each teaching is divided into preparatory practice, actual practice, concluding practice, and non-practice intervals (daily life practice). Here, preparatory practice, actual practice, and concluding practice are considered Seated Meditation, while non-practice intervals are considered Off-Cushion Meditation. In the *Twenty-One Meditation Manual—The Stages of the Path Practical Manual*, the contents are also organized into related rituals.

In these rituals, each practice begins with taking refuge and generating aspirations, followed by Contemplative and Abiding Meditations on a specific teaching. For example, teachings such as relying on a virtuous teacher and contemplating the impermanence of death involve practicing both Contemplative and Abiding Meditation, concluding with the dedication of merits. That is, the main practice is done while seated.

The Mindful Peace Academy Curriculum is specifically designed for lay practitioners at home. We believe that beginners often aren't used to sitting for meditation; either dozing off or getting distracted with random thoughts, which is not effective. Therefore, we extend Seated Meditation to self-study and group discussions. That is to say, as long as the Eight-Step method is applied to practice, whether in self-study or in discussions, it falls within the scope of Seated Meditation.

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<sup>17</sup> As long as you apply the Eight Steps in your study and practice, whether in self-study or group discussions, it falls under the category of Seated Meditation.

<sup>18</sup> Integrating the right views and mindset cultivated during Seated Meditation into daily life is known as Off-Cushion Meditation.

The focus of meditation is to change views, mindsets, and life quality; the form is just a support. From a practical standpoint, when we truly apply the Eight Steps in our self-study and discussions, the effects become clear and noticeable. Once our views have changed, the next step is to integrate these changes into our everyday lives, and adjust the mindsets accordingly. This Off-Cushion Meditation not only puts Seated Meditation into practice but also tests and reinforces it. Over time, it will inevitably lead to improvement in life quality.

Therefore, as long as we use the Eight Steps and Three Types of Meditation correctly and strictly follow this approach, our views and mindsets will undoubtedly become healthier, and we will grow increasingly wise. Our interactions with others will become more harmonious and our ways of handling matters will also become smoother. Conversely, without the guidance of right views, clinging blindly to certain external forms often leads to increased afflictions. Why do many people practice Buddhism in strange ways, not fitting in with others? It is because their study and practice are not based on wisdom but fixated on a specific form, which can easily lead to disconnection from life and conflicts with others.

In summary, the Eight Steps and Three Types of Meditation are effective methods and hold the key to carrying out the Mindful Peace Academy Curriculum. I hope you can deeply discuss how to apply this approach through your personal study and practice, and truly implement it in your practice.