



# THE ESSENTIALS OF MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

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**Meditation Teachings at Amrita Retreat Center  
in the Autumn of 2021**

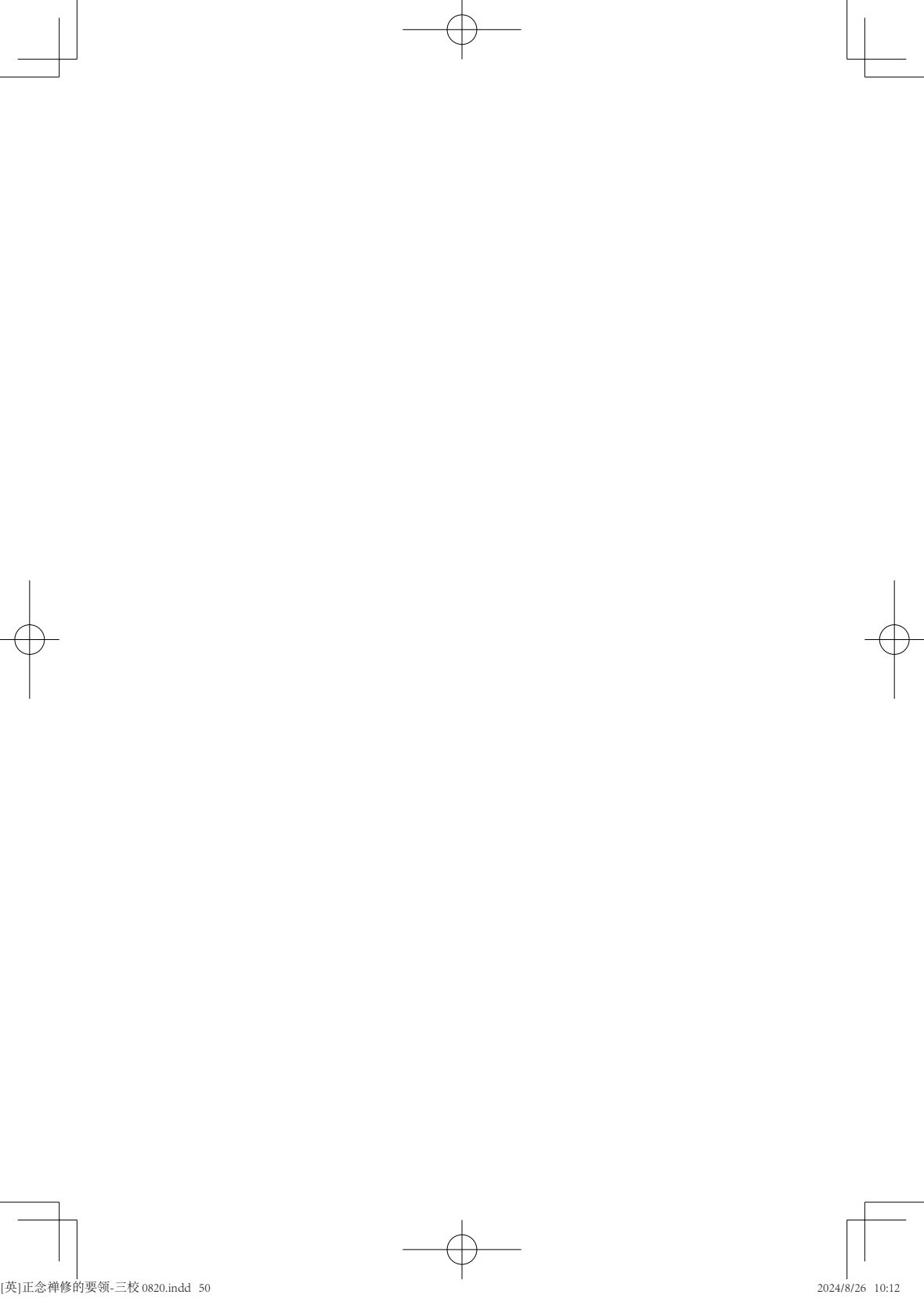
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In the early stage of developing the Mindful Peace Academy Program, we have laid a solid foundation in structured study. Currently, many students are entering into the study of the chapter on *Discussion of the Cultivation of Antidotes*, i.e. the Thirty-Seven Aids to Enlightenment, and are very keen to try meditation. Although we have not yet begun formal guidance, we have already discussed the relationship between mindfulness meditation and the Mindful Peace Academy Program extensively. In particular, since last year, I have been guiding you here in mindful walking, with over 200 related discourses.

Over the past few decades, mindfulness meditation has become popular worldwide. Although mindfulness originates from Buddhism, in practice, it is primarily used as a technique, such as mindfulness-based stress reduction and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, etc., which are adopted in healthcare, science research, education, and corporate management to address the physical and mental issues of modern people. Such a technique is mainly used for medical treatment and health preservation. However, the right mindfulness described in Buddhism aims at liberation and awakening, which requires a connection with the entire Buddhist cultivation system.

In the Noble Eightfold Path, which serves as a common practice in Buddhism, Right Mindfulness is one component, along with Right View, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, and Right Concentration. This Right Mindfulness is not simply a technique; it permeates the entire practice, encompassing both the foundational mindfulness training and the aspect of no-thought attained in Chan practice.

In a sense, no-thought represents the highest form of Right Mindfulness.

We know that Chan Buddhism flourished during the Tang and Song dynasties, with many eminent masters emerging. *The Record of the Transmission of the Lamp* alone documents the lineages of over 1,700 Chan masters who attained enlightenment through meditation practice. Unfortunately, Chan Buddhism declined since the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. Chan emphasizes “pointing directly to the original mind” and seeks to enable practitioners to directly realize their originally enlightened nature. This is the very heart of the practice, but it requires a very sharp spiritual aptitude and the guidance of an insightful master, both of which are generally lacking in modern people. They don’t have a sharp spiritual aptitude, and an insightful master is hard to find. Therefore, the “essential step” provided by Chan Buddhism is actually beyond their reach. What can be done? We need to construct a ladder, establishing a foundation to improve spiritual aptitude through gradual and

progressive practice.

All sentient beings are equal and possess Buddha-nature, so why is there a disparity in spiritual aptitude? The key lies in the degree to which the mind is obscured by defilements. The purpose of gradual cultivation is to sweep away these defilements, gradually thinning the clouds of the mind until they disperse, allowing one to directly perceive their true nature. Therefore, spiritual aptitude is not fixed; just as a dull sword can be sharpened through grinding, spiritual aptitude can also be transformed. The Mindful Peace Academy Program is designed to guide individuals through effective training, shifting from dull spiritual aptitude to sharp spiritual aptitude.

The difficulty in Chan practice also lies in not knowing where to start, as the ancient masters said, “A mosquito bites an iron bull and cannot find its way through.” Therefore, the practice requires a method and a sequence. On the level of doctrine, it emphasizes strengthening taking refuge, generating bodhicitta, and cultivating the Right



View; on the level of actual practice, it involves training in concentration, mindfulness, and contemplation. Only in this way can doctrine guide cultivation, thus achieving synergy between the two. Without a method, one might know the goal but not the path to reach it, leading to mere lip service about enlightenment. The preliminary doctrinal learning and contemplation, including the methods of the Eight Steps and Three Meditations, not only help to resolve coarse afflictions but can also be combined with right mindfulness meditation to become an expedient means of realizing emptiness.

Next, I'll briefly introduce the essentials of right mindfulness meditation and the aspects that need to be emphasized in future study and practice.

# I

## ADJUSTING THE BODY

The focus of Chan meditation revolves around regulating the body and the mind, which is inseparable from sitting meditation. Influenced by Chan Buddhism, some believe that walking is Chan, sitting is Chan, and even mundane tasks like carrying firewood and fetching water are Chan, leading them to undervalue sitting meditation. This is a significant misunderstanding. Although Chan meditation is not limited to sitting, sitting meditation is an indispensable foundation. Through physical stillness, one can achieve mental stability, thereby enhancing concentration and unlocking wisdom.

In the early stages of sitting meditation, many people may experience physical discomfort, such as back or leg pain, and may find it difficult to sit for long periods of time. This is often related to improper posture. In the traditional approach, the correct posture is the *Seven-Point Postures of Vairochana*, which consists of seven requirements for the body. When properly adjusted, it can not only facilitate the flow of qi and blood, thus removing physical obstacles, but it can also help calm the mind. As the saying goes, “When the body is at ease, cultivation flourishes.”

First, sit cross-legged.

In Buddhist practice, the ideal sitting posture is the “full-lotus position,” where both insteps of the feet are placed on the opposite thighs, also known as the “cross-legged position.” However, not everyone can sit in this position, and it may be difficult to sustain for a long time. If the body is not flexible enough, one can opt for a “half-lotus position.” The right foot can rest on the left

thigh (Vajra position), or the left foot on the right thigh (Easy pose). If even the “half-lotus position” is challenging, an “easy pose” can be adopted. Due to individual differences in physical conditions, there’s no need to force yourself into a specific position. The key principle is to sit with a comfortable and upright posture, allowing for gradual progress. The cushion should be of moderate firmness – too soft can cause sinking, while too hard can cause leg pain. In addition, a cushion under the hips can help the knees touch the floor, stabilizing the legs in a triangular shape. This is especially helpful for beginners, as it prevents them from leaning backward. Those who can maintain the full-lotus position for longer periods of time can choose according to their own preferences based on their long-term sitting experience.

Second, form a Dhyana Mudra with the hands.

Place both hands in front of the body, with the right hand resting on top of the left, and the thumbs lightly touching, positioned below the navel. Alternatively, the hands

can be gently placed on the knees.

Third, maintain an upright spine.

The ancients likened the sitting posture to a bell, signifying a state of centered stability. However, this uprightness is not achieved through deliberately tensing the body, nor is it the same as the common notion of “chest out and chin up,” which can lead to physical tension. One can visualize each vertebrae stacking up as a building block, each one resting on the other, standing straight but without a specific point of exertion. Deep breathing can also help guide the breath down to the dantian (the center of the body, one inch below the navel), creating a sense of the body being inflated, much like pumping air into a tire to make it round and full. Unlike a deflated tire which slumps and tilts, an inflated tire appears firm and upright. The body should not lean forward or backward, sway from side to side, or rely on any support. While some may prefer to meditate leaning against a wall for comfort, doing so may lead to drowsiness, turning the practice into rest rather

than meditation. A proper posture not only reflects the dignity of life but also promotes the unimpeded circulation of qi and blood, contributing to a calm mind.

Fourth, keep the shoulders level.

They should neither hunch forward nor be uneven in height. Avoid slouching or leaning forward or backward. Instead, imagine a horizontal beam across the upright spine, evenly supporting the entire body.

Fifth, keep the head upright and the neck straight.

The head should be positioned on the shoulders through the neck, which should be held straight. The head itself should also be upright, neither leaning forward nor backward, nor tilting to the side. One can visualize a gentle string hanging from the ceiling, lifting the crown of the head slightly, naturally aligning the head. At the same time, the chin should be slightly tucked in, but not in a deliberate manner.

Sixth, lower the eyes.

Usually, the eyes are slightly closed, allowing a bit of light to filter through and rest on a point about one to two meters in front of you, without focusing on anything specific. This helps prevent drowsiness. If you find your mind to be rather agitated and that closing your eyes brings more tranquility and makes it easier to concentrate, then you can keep them closed.

Seventh, place the tongue against the roof of the mouth.

Lightly touch the palate just behind the front teeth.

These are the key points for adjusting the sitting posture, particularly for beginners. After assuming the posture, it's important to check each part of the body. As we can see, athletes need to standardize their basic movements in any training regimen. Only by getting the posture right can one develop their physical potential and achieve results. It is the same case with sitting meditation. The focus of

postural adjustment is to correct the posture. Whatever posture one takes, the principles are relaxation, naturalness, and comfort; there is no need to exert deliberate force or become stiff. With the body properly adjusted, one can sit steadily and calmly. Then, through consistent training, one will become increasingly at ease, and their power of concentration will also grow.



## II

### ADJUSTING THE MIND

Adjusting the body is important, but it is only a supportive condition for meditation. The purpose of meditation is to adjust the mind, which is the key to practice. There are three levels of adjusting the mind: first, selecting an object to cultivate concentration and awareness; second, bringing this awareness into daily life, staying with it constantly, and continuously strengthening it; and third, letting go of awareness to realize a state of no-thought.

#### 1. Choosing an Object of Focus to Cultivate Concentration and Awareness

Choose an object as the target to train concentration and awareness. For example, when walking in meditation, settle your mind on the action of walking, being clearly aware of each change with “foot lifting, stepping forward, foot landing; foot lifting, stepping forward, foot landing.” During the practice of taking refuge, we can take the name of Buddha as the object of focus, silently repeating “Buddha, Buddha,” and keeping the mind centered on the name. The same principle applies to activities like washing dishes or weeding; the activity itself becomes the meditation object. In short, choose a target that does not produce side effects. Especially in the early stages of practice, the meditation object must be simple and not likely to provoke emotional responses. Choosing something you particularly like can lead to attachment, while choosing something you dislike can stir up aversion.

When sitting in meditation, we can take the breath as our object of meditation, maintaining a natural state of breathing, and then focus on it. The *Satipatthana Sutta* provides detailed instructions on this: being aware of long

breaths when they are long, short breaths when they are short, subtle breaths as subtle, and deep breaths as deep... In essence, be aware of the current state of the breath exactly as it is, without addition or subtraction, clearly and distinctly. If practicing while walking, anchor your mind on each step; if engaged in an activity, focus on the task at hand. “Concentration” here means to let the mind dwell continuously and stably on the chosen object of meditation, preventing the rise of distracting thoughts.

The Nine Stages of Training the Mind outlines a progression from placement of the mind, continuous placement, repeated placement, followed by close placement, taming the mind, pacifying the mind, and finally culminating in fully pacifying the mind, single-pointing, and balanced placement. However, in the practice of meditation, the mind is not always compliant. This is because distraction is a habitual state of the mind, and simply sitting in meditation does not immediately quell wandering thoughts; most people need to undergo repeated training. In this process, two major issues must be addressed: one is the

scattering and lifting of attention, getting lost in thoughts or emotions, wandering aimlessly; the other is dullness and lethargy, being unaware of the present physical and mental state.

How to solve these problems? It is necessary to maintain awareness. The emphasis of early-stage meditation is not to study the object of attention, but to use it as a focus for training the mind's stability and awareness. With this reference point, when the mind deviates from the focus, we can promptly realize it and restore our attention, allowing the mind to emerge from states of ignorance, dullness, distraction, and restlessness.

## **2. Abiding in Awareness and Bringing it into Every Moment**

After training in awareness during seated meditation, we also need to bring it into every moment of our daily life. In the mind assessment section of the Bodhi Navigator App, we need to examine the extent of our afflictions in

three dimensions: mild, moderate, or severe. How long do afflictions linger in our minds? Do they occur occasionally or frequently? Once they arise, are we immediately aware of them, or does it take a long time to become aware, or do we not notice them at all?

This is related to the degree of ignorance on one hand, and the strength of right mindfulness and vigilance on the other. If the cloud of ignorance is thick, we will always remain unaware, finding it difficult to arouse awareness. However, if you are well-trained and the lamp of your mind has already been lit to a certain extent, or even if it remains constantly lit, then you can immediately become aware of any thoughts that arise. Meditation is about developing this power of awareness and making it increasingly stronger.

Mindfulness training in society also emphasizes the power of awareness, but it often stops there. From the perspective of Buddhist practice, mindfulness also encompasses elements of wisdom, which are inseparable from Right

View and Right Thought. Mere awareness is insufficient. Without wisdom, awareness alone cannot lead us towards liberation.

During the process of meditation, we need to keep being aware not only of the intended object but also of our mental activities during meditation. Are the mental activities during meditation different from those in real life? It can be said that they are both the same and different. Although their manifestations vary greatly, they all occur within our minds; they are all functions of the mind. In life, there are wonderful sensations, as well as painful experiences and various delusions, even unimaginable ones, and the same is true in meditation.

Without the discipline of mindfulness training, we may approach our thoughts with the ingrained habits and cognitive patterns of samsara. These samsaric patterns are characterized by the poisons of greed, hatred, and ignorance: clinging, indulging, and yearning for what pleases us; and aversion, suffering, and rejection towards what

displeases us. We must maintain awareness of all these phenomena, clearly recognizing what is unfolding in the present moment. Yet, this recognition should not lead us into a system of judgment, nor should it provoke deliberate conceptual discrimination. This aligns with the principles of Vipassana meditation, which advocates for equanimity, where there is neither attachment nor aversion, no judgment or rejection.

This resonates with the practice of Chan Buddhism. The opening lines of the *Faith in Mind* by the Third Chan Patriarch state, “The Way is not difficult, it only abhors picking and choosing. Without love or hate, everything becomes clear and undisguised. A hair’s breadth difference, and heaven and earth are set apart.” The Way refers to the highest truth. The truth itself is not difficult, for it is always there, and everyone possesses the potential to recognize it. However, the moment we start to discriminate and choose, we inevitably fall into the trap of duality and judgment, entering the system of mental discrimination, and thus stray from the truth.

If we have truly realized the Way, then distinctions themselves are not a problem; they are simply the function of discerning wisdom. As stated in the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, “One who can wisely discern the characteristics of all phenomena remains unmoved in the ultimate truth.” To abide in the realm of emptiness is to possess discriminative wisdom while transcending discrimination. However, the discriminations made by ordinary beings often come with strong attachments, trapping them in a world of duality, making it impossible for them to realize their pure, original nature.

Why does Chan Buddhism emphasize practice in daily life? It is because Chan practice is an exploration of the mind, a way for us to recognize the true nature of our mind. Through this, we can bring such mindfulness into our daily lives, facing everyone and everything with awareness and maintaining a state of clarity. This kind of awareness prevents us from getting caught up in external conditions because it helps us to keep a distance from them. We do not fall into clinging, nor are we disturbed



by distinctions. Furthermore, this inner observation can help calm the disturbances brought about by external circumstances and our own thoughts.

The problems faced in meditation are essentially twofold: the presentation of mental images, and various mental activities, including afflictions and emotions. People actually live in these mental images and thoughts. Because they cannot see clearly, they become ensnared in attachments to these mental images and thoughts, unable to break free. In fact, the power of these images and thoughts is related to how much we care about them. The more we care, the greater the emotional power accumulated in our minds, and consequently, the greater the disturbances produced.

In Chinese history, the *Diamond Sutra* and the *Heart Sutra* have become popular classics among the masses because of their profound right view of emptiness. When people come to understand that “all conditioned phenomena are like dreams, illusions, bubbles, shadows, dew, and lightning, and should be viewed as such,” they can, to

varying degrees, alleviate the disturbances brought about by external circumstances and internal states of mind.

### 3. Letting Go of Awareness to Realize No-thought

Awareness has two dimensions: one is the level of consciousness, and the other is the level that transcends consciousness. After a certain amount of meditation practice, we also need to let go of various setups, goals, and pursuits in order to experience a mind like the void.

Emptiness and luminosity are two qualities of the mind. During the practice of taking refuge, I guide everyone to see for themselves, what is the nature of their own mind? Does it have a color, does it have a shape? Through introspection, we will find that the mind is formless. At this point, we can experience its emptiness and ungraspable nature. However, this emptiness is not non-existence; it also possesses the function of luminous knowing. Therefore, truly advanced practice doesn't require doing anything. When you no longer become entangled in

confusion, afflictions, or delusions, you can see the original face of the mind. This pure mind has always been there, neither arising nor ceasing, neither defiled nor pure, neither increasing nor decreasing.

In the three levels of meditation, the first is to select the object of attention in order to train concentration and awareness. The second is to abide in awareness and bring it into each present moment, which is the focus of the practice. Our understanding of the world includes both the subjective and objective aspects. The subjective pertains to our mental state, while the objective refers to external phenomena. Whenever we face any object, a series of mental processes are triggered. Thus, we must not only be aware of the object but also be mindful of various mental states, observing what state the mind is in: is it greed, anger, jealousy, or pride? This includes being clearly aware of various sensations that arise during meditation – have we become attached to them or have we rejected them?

When concentration and awareness have been trained to

a certain level, and the mind feels overly tense, one can engage in the practice of letting go. Without any aim or intention, the mind completely releases everything. However, this kind of letting go is not unconscious; it is a thorough awareness of all surrounding phenomena and the activities of the body and mind. In Buddhist terms, the mind is like a clear mirror – a huge mirror that can reflect everything, yet without any attachment, without liking or disliking.

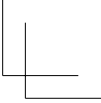
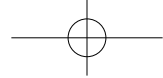
During the Mid-Autumn Tea Ceremony, I encouraged everyone to learn how to naturally refrain from intentionally doing anything and to experience the state of not doing anything. Of course, thoughts may still arise in the mind, and we don't reject them either. It can be challenging to force ourselves not to think at all, and doing so may even lead to greater delusion. In fact, it's okay to have thoughts. The key is to be aware of them, as the Chan tradition teaches, "Being aware leads to no fault."

This kind of practice requires a certain foundation to

transcend all concepts and let go of everything, including meditation, enlightenment, and liberation. In fact, all these are merely expedient means to help us realize the pure mind. In the pure mind dimension, none of those things exist. However, in order to guide sentient beings, the Buddha provided so many Dharma Gates specifically targeting our attachments, afflictions, and the cycle of birth and death.

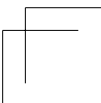
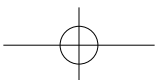
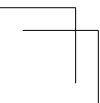
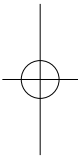
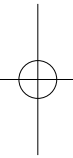
When we learn to do nothing, we can directly experience the raw, unadorned mind. As the *Surangama Sutra* states, “When the mad mind ceases, cessation is enlightenment.” When the mind truly comes to rest, it becomes empty and pure, yet at the same time, clear and aware. This mind may seem ordinary, but it is precisely what all cultivation aims to realize. Then, we need to continuously familiarize ourselves with it, allowing this state to permeate every moment and every situation. This requires effort because our ignorance, afflictions, defilements, and habitual patterns are deeply ingrained.

We can integrate these three steps and, based on the foundation of the first two steps, practice the third step appropriately. When we feel insufficient strength, we can return to the previous two steps for training. Once the defilements have been stripped away to a certain extent, we can move on to practice the third step. Eventually, we will develop the ability to completely relax, let go, and experience a mind like the void. This is what the *Platform Sutra* refers to as “no-thought as the principle, no-form as the essence, and no-abidance as the basis.” No-thought means the mind that transcends conceptual thought; no-form means the mind that is like the void, devoid of any form or image; no-abidance refers to the mind’s illumination, not dwelling and not clinging to any phenomena. This state is like the saying that goes, “Passing through a thicket of flowers, not a single leaf adheres.”



## Appendix:

# MINDFULNESS AND No-THOUGHT



**2023 Spring Lecture  
at Amrita Retreat Center, Taining**

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This time when I came back, I coincidentally caught the lilacs in full bloom. I thought of sitting down with everyone, having some tea, and enjoying the flowers together.

Last year, we also had a Lilac Tea Ceremony here. That was a beginner tea ceremony, focusing on brewing and drinking tea. Time flies, and now it's another year of lilac blossoms, and the tea ceremony has advanced to the intermediate level. The intermediate tea ceremony has been in discussion for quite some time, and this is my first time

participating in such a formal rendition, brewing and drinking tea.

# I

## LISTENING TO TEA, OBSERVING THE MIND

Just now, everyone sat together in silence, listening to the tea gradually boiling. This segment is the third step of the beginner tea ceremony “Seven Steps to Mindful Tea” — “Boiling Water, Listening to Tea” — which I later renamed “Boiling Water, Observing the Mind.” Since the intermediate tea ceremony replaced boiling water with brewing tea, this step is now called “Brewing Tea, Observing the Mind.”

In the intermediate tea courses, “Brewing Tea, Observing the Mind” is performed very well. This entire period

is completely blank. The tea is brewing on the charcoal stove, neither hurried nor slow; people are sitting on meditation cushions, silent and still. Everyone is quietly idle, each in their own way. During the lilac season, we are here, just sitting, with nothing special to do...

During the tea-brewing session just now, I wonder if everyone was observing their mind or waiting for something. Was there nothing to expect, or was your expectation dashed? Did everyone drink the tea that was brewing?

During this process, we are just sitting here, simply sitting. Even though the object of focus is weak and nothing is done, this mind that does nothing has not lost its effect. Our mind has awareness, not like wood; we have a mind that can perceive, not a clay or wooden statue of a bodhisattva. Although we are just sitting leisurely, we can feel the vastness of the universe, the breath of spring, the revival of life, and the presence of all things. At the same time, we can also hear the sound of tea brewing. All of this is clear and vividly known.

Besides the external world, we also feel our inner self. What is the state of our mind at this moment? Is there anxiety, expectation, curiosity, boredom? Doing nothing? Or is it very quiet and joyful? In fact, the state of mind is not important, and we do not necessarily need our mind to be in a particular state. At this moment, there are no requirements, no expectations, no settings.

What we need to do is to clearly feel everything in the present, with the mind dwelling nowhere, like the universe, so vast and infinite; like all things, just there, without contrivance; like the tea, brewing when it should, naturally; like the lilacs, blooming and falling year after year.

At this moment, when the mind no longer has a focal point, one can feel the vastness of the mind.

## II

### MINDFULNESS AND NO-THOUGHT

In mindfulness meditation, two types of mental powers are cultivated. One is concentration: when drinking tea, one focuses solely on drinking tea. The other is awareness: while drinking tea, one maintains a clear awareness of the process. This clarity is the inherent clear power of our mind.

Mindfulness meditation involves intentional effort, whereas no-thought meditation involves letting go of the object of focus and letting go of intentional effort.

Letting go of the object of focus means allowing the mind

to have no focal point and not needing to concentrate on one point.

Letting go of intentional effort means simply being aware — aware of everything happening in the present moment, aware of everything occurring in nature, and also aware of everything happening within the mind. Just knowing is enough. No-thought meditation has a characteristic: “See the nature of thoughts and realize their emptiness.” As long as you recognize the thought, it will return to the ocean of awakening, just as all waves are essentially water.

The mind can be aware because everyone inherently possesses a clear and pure mind. The clear and pure mind is like a clear lake, and also like a bright mirror, having the function of clear knowing. This power does not need to be obtained through intentional effort.

Of course, in the beginning, it is still necessary to cultivate concentration and awareness to initiate awareness. Therefore, in the three levels of mindfulness meditation, from

beginner to intermediate meditation, we initiate awareness. In advanced meditation, we let go of awareness and realize no-thought.

No-thought is the clear, uncontrived mind in the present moment.



# III

## CONTRIVED AND UNCONTRIVED

As we sit here brewing tea, drinking tea, and observing the mind, we actually don't need to do anything. At this moment, just sitting here is practice.

This is because there are two different levels of practice: one is contrived, and the other is uncontrived. Contrived practice involves intentional actions; uncontrived practice is experiencing the clear and pure mind directly, which is inherently complete and requires no effort.

In the beginning and intermediate stages of mindfulness meditation, we still need to practice with effort. This is

because when the clear and pure mind cannot function, we still live within the system of deluded thoughts. When the mind is drowsy and scattered, it cannot escape the torrent of habitual patterns. The torrent of habitual patterns obscures the pure mind, and only through diligent effort and mindful practice can we escape the torrent and return to clarity.

Chan masters of the past often said, “Is there something to practice in meditation? Is there something to do in meditation?” Actually, realizing the mind does not require doing anything. But breaking through habitual patterns requires effort. When sitting in meditation, feeling bodily aches, having continuous thoughts, and struggling with drowsiness are all manifestations of the ordinary mind. The Buddha taught 84,000 Dharma gates and spoke of precepts, concentration, and wisdom to help us break through the torrent of habitual patterns. Mindfulness meditation is a key practice among them.

In mindfulness meditation, practicing Samatha cultivates

concentration, which quiets the mind. Practicing Vipassana on the basis of concentration awakens the inner power of observation and awareness. Through the meditation of Samatha and Vipassana, the mind gradually quiets down, allowing us to slowly experience inner clarity without contrived efforts. With the support of certain conditions, even deluded thoughts can become empty.

At last year's Mid-Autumn Tea Ceremony, I told everyone to try to experience the mind's uncontrived capacity. Just like today, sitting quietly, like a lilac falling on the grass, doing nothing and for no reason — this is the power of being uncontrived.

Doing nothing might seem foolish and easy. Is being uncontrived still a kind of capacity? Actually, achieving uncontrived practice is not easy. When we study the *Treatise on the Hundred Dharmas*, the first ninety-four are contrived phenomena, and the last six are uncontrived phenomena. What does “contrived” mean? It means intentional actions. What does “uncontrived” mean? It means

no intentional actions. The uncontrived mind needs to be realized through meditation.

Some might say, “Then I’ll just let my mind be completely without effort, without any thoughts arising.” Can you control your mind? No, you can’t. Can you make it stop generating thoughts just because you want it to? It’s not possible.

The uncontrived mind does not mean it cannot have thoughts; it means not deliberately doing anything. The essence of uncontrived meditation is to experience this uncontrived mind. What we need to do is, on one hand, not to exert effort in the mind, and on the other, to experience the uncontrived mind.

We are not like wood; we still carry the habitual patterns of samsara, and intentional actions are inevitable. Do thoughts running around matter? Both yes and no.

Saying it matters means that if the mind follows the

thoughts, falling into them and getting entangled, then it matters. Or if there is resistance and dislike towards the thoughts, it also matters. Chan Buddhism talks about not welcoming or rejecting, and mindfulness meditation speaks of non-judgment, both telling us, “The Way is not difficult, it only abhors picking and choosing.” When thoughts arise and you distinguish good thoughts from bad thoughts, then it matters.

Saying it doesn’t matter means that when thoughts arise, just recognize them. As mentioned earlier, “See the nature of thoughts and realize their emptiness.” Every thought has two aspects: clarity and delusion. Choosing the aspect of clarity or following the aspect of delusion is the key to meditation practice. If we face thoughts with habitual patterns of samsara, they will become the conditions for further samsara. If we face them with awareness, each thought can return to the ocean of awakening in the present moment, because the nature of thoughts is awakening and inseparable from awareness.

Therefore, meditation is not about eliminating thoughts completely but learning to face each thought with awareness.

The uncontrived mind has the characteristics of emptiness, clarity, and stillness.

Emptiness means the mind is as vast as the void. How big is our mind? How vast is it? The *Surangama Sutra* tells us that the void is within our mind, like a few clouds. The uncontrived mind is so broad, vast, and boundless. When the mind is not caught in thoughts, it can experience this void-like vastness. Once caught in thoughts, thoughts become our entire world, and naturally, we can not see the vast mind.

Clarity means clearly knowing. As everyone sits here doing nothing, the mind can clearly know everything. The slight boiling of tea, the falling of the lilac flowers, the visit of past events... from all external movements to all internal movements, everything can be perceived clearly.

Stillness means that when resting in the non-dual mind of emptiness and clarity, we can feel that the mind at this moment is still. Stillness does not necessarily mean the absence of all thoughts. When resting in the non-dual mind of emptiness and clarity, whether there are thoughts or not, the inner peace remains. As it is said, “The vast sky does not hinder the flying white clouds.” Whether the sky is full of rosy clouds or rolling dark clouds, they do not obstruct the existence of the void. Similarly, thoughts do not affect the stillness of the mind.

# IV

## GRASPING OR RELAXING

Mindfulness meditation and no-thought meditation can be combined.

For beginners in meditation, mindfulness meditation should be the primary focus, with an appropriate amount of no-thought meditation practice.

For example, when concentrating on an object for a long time, one may feel very tired. At this point, you can let go of the object, let go of the effort, and try to rest in awareness and clarity of the mind. During this time, the mind actually won't be scattered. If you enter a state of



ignorance, the mind will scatter.

It's like organizing a very important event that requires a lot of preparation. When we invest all our time, energy, and physical strength into it, working tirelessly with constant tension, anxiety, and worry until it is finally successfully completed, what kind of feeling do we experience when we can finally rest? We feel a big sigh of relief, a complete relaxation and release. At this moment, we can realize that when the mind is emptied, the joy of relaxation naturally arises. It shows that doing things with attachment is like being bound to a place, making both body and mind suffer. Once the task is completed and we liberate ourselves from attachment, the mind immediately relaxes.

Relaxation is very important in meditation.

What should we relax? The essence of this question is: what problems does practice aim to solve?

The most important aspect of practice is to resolve two types of attachment, namely the attachment to self and the attachment to the world. Ordinary people always have many thoughts, many assumptions, and many expectations about this world; likewise, they have many thoughts, many assumptions, and many expectations about themselves. All these form internal attachments. Where do we live? In fact, we live in the attachments of our minds to various thoughts, assumptions, and expectations.

Relaxation means loosening the mind, completely letting go of these attachments. When the mind lets go of its attachments to the world and the self, it returns to its original state.

The joy of physical and mental relaxation that comes after completing a task is the inherent joy of relaxation; it is rooted within life and comes from the source of the mind.

While practicing mindfulness, you can appropriately try no-thought practice: let go of the object, bring awareness,

and feel everything in the external world and the inner world. Occasionally, calm the mind, let go of the tasks at hand, let go of the plans in the mind, and sit quietly for a while, doing nothing, just sitting idly with a clear and pure mind, feeling everything happening in the present moment.

Entering no-thought practice requires a certain foundation in meditation. If the mind is very scattered, ignorance is like a thick layer of clouds. Without an anchor of focus to hold on, the mind will be muddled, either thinking about this and that or feeling utterly bored, and various problems will arise immediately.

Laying a good foundation in mindfulness meditation and appropriately experiencing the state of no-thought will make no-thought meditation achievable. Further, as the practice deepens, the power of emptiness and clarity in the mind increases, and thoughts decrease, making it possible to practice no-thought meditation more extensively.

# V

## TEA OR CHAN

Using tea as a theme for meditation is a fine tradition in Buddhism.

*The Record of the Source Mirror of the Five Lamps*, the *Records of Pointing at the Moon*, and various other lamp records, as well as the monastic regulations like the *Regulations of the Baizhang Monastery Rewritten by Imperial Decree*, document a wealth of historical facts about practicing meditation through tea activities. In my research, I discovered that the traditional methods of incorporating tea into meditation mainly fall into two categories: loose and structured.

Loose practices refer to Chan practitioners using tea drinking to guide students at any time, which is common in Chan koans. There are no fixed rituals or special forms. It's like Zhaozhou's "Go drink tea," just one sentence. This "Go drink tea" is not asking you to distinguish the variety, reputation, or value of the tea but to experience the mind that can drink tea, to recognize the pure mind of the present moment that is drinking tea. This mind can be deep or shallow, earnest or humorous. If you can truly drink this cup of tea, the essence of the entire Buddhist canon is within it.

Structured practices involve following strict monastic regulations and ceremonies, drinking tea with meticulous organization, complete rituals, dignified demeanor, and respectful conduct, using tea to focus the mind and perceive one's nature. In monastic regulations, the rules, etiquette, and procedures for drinking tea are integrated into various activities and are ubiquitous.

In monasteries, drinking tea is part of the daily life of

Chan practitioners and also a means of guiding students and the public. The influence and role of drinking tea in Chan monasteries have long surpassed its functions of offering to the Buddha, quenching thirst, hosting guests, promoting health, and refreshing the mind. Observing the mind while drinking tea is a regular practice for Chan practitioners and a form of mindfulness meditation throughout all times.

Chan is not a form but a way of using the mind. Further, it's about what kind of mind you use.

What is the mind of Chan? It is the present, clear, and uncontrived mind. Everyone has this mind; it does not diminish in the ordinary person nor increase in the sage. The goal of practice is to recognize it and become familiar with it.

To recognize the true mind is to practice.

Drinking tea can be a way to observe and recognize the

mind, and every activity and moment in life can also be an opportunity to observe and recognize the mind. Our practice today is not limited to drinking tea. The mindfulness daily journal that everyone is practicing now is about bringing Chan into all aspects of life, truly experiencing “Walking is Chan. Sitting is Chan. In speech, silence, movement, and stillness, one is always at ease.”

So, what everyone needs to do is to honestly practice starting with the mindfulness daily journal.

The mind of Chan is right there, not far from us. If you make a good effort, experiencing the clear and uncontrived mind will not be far away either.