



Buddhism - The Way to Liberation

Mel Chan – Mississauga Meditation Class, Toronto Chapter

Saddened by the world around him at the time, Siddhartha Gautama engaged himself in deep meditation for an extensive period to seek an elucidation of the nature of existence. He came to the realization that the cause of all ‘suffering and sadness of sentient beings’ emanates from within – our mental realm. The ‘pain and suffering’ in Buddhist terms encompasses mental and physical ills which originate in the mind and are associated with the mind-body (or mental-matter) relationship. So he recognized that there is an intrinsic ‘cause and effect’ interdependency in the mental-matter relationship and that the *way to achieve liberation from suffering* is to work on the *cause*.

The existence of sentient beings is comprised of the inter-relationship of three parts – Mind, Brain, and Body. These three parts are intimately connected to the “whole self” of sentient beings. The *Mind* is the centre where thought, creativity and the individual identity reside. The *Brain* is the executive entity; it consciously or unconsciously executes the thought processes generated in the mind. The results are the psychosomatic manifestations of the physical *Body*. Since the mind is the controller in this complex inter-relationship, the practise and exercise of *settling the mind (or clearing the mind)* is an important aspect of meditation.

With the mind cleared there is no arising of wandering thoughts, no emotional pain and no undue suffering... Therein lies the principal difficulty - how to achieve the settling or clearing of the mind.

In the Ch’an or Zen tradition of Buddhism, meditation plays a central role in the cultivation practise. The essential aspects of meditation are tranquility, calmness, correct posture, and physical fitness – the optimum balance of mental and physical well-being. An important part of this practise is to exercise every part of the physical body to enhance relaxation, flexibility and strength, so as to prepare the body to be fit for meditation. The purpose is to maintain or develop a healthy mind and body, and to restore the natural rhythms to synchronize with the intent to achieve *Enlightenment*.

The Chan practise in Huayen School of Buddhism has an even higher intent - to manifest the Dharmakaya. The starting point of the practise is to prepare oneself physically and mentally for Huayen Chan meditation. As a prerequisite, the practitioner needs to have a decent character and upright personality. Chan training requires the *practice* of determination and persistence, and, first and foremost, the ability to endure the discomfort of bodily and mental transformations and the sincere desire to seek Enlightenment.

The first basic step towards *The Way* through meditation is to strengthen the mind and heart to succeed in overcoming of the physical discomfort of the posture. Every little achievement in this respect alone represents

the completion of a step on the Way to Enlightenment. Even if complete Enlightenment cannot be achieved in this life, every successful step towards that way is in itself a victory on the enduring road to Buddhahood.

The core practice of Chan is the *settling of the Mind*. This process in itself is somewhat contradictory because the mind of a sentient being, in all waking hours, is active and alive – thinking, wandering, creating, and generating thoughts. How to do this then is an early hurdle. One has to go through the process of consciously relaxing each physical part of oneself starting from the forehead, then the eyes, neck, shoulders, arms, back, legs and right down to the toes. The technique consists of consciously telling oneself to relax each part in succession. After the body is totally relaxed, one examines and reconciles one's breathing. Next, the method of counting the breaths can be used to focus and settle the mind. Breathing, a very natural and crucial function which we all perform without thinking, is one of nature's rhythms within each of us. Being aware of one's breath and consciously contemplating one's natural breathing helps the body to restore the innate synchronisms in the whole physical self and raise the energy level. Another technique is to mentally or verbally chant a mantra (sacred formula). This takes practice and persistence too. Not quitting is already a winning step on the way. 'No wandering thoughts' is the call of the Monitor; 'If your mind wanders bring it back!'. This call is an exhortation to stay on course and keep with the Practice during the walking meditation and it echoes throughout the sitting meditation.

The commitment to cultivation will, in time, certainly yield results. In the long run devotion and persistence will be rewarded with a profound understanding of one's self. With a clear mind, one should be able to contemplate and perceive that the self is impermanent and not to be obsessed with or over-attached to external attributes. With a better understanding of our true nature, we can take charge of our mind and our actions.

A focused mind, calmness, observation of one's inner self... What are the enemies? Negative and delusive thoughts which cause "pain and suffering". To paraphrase Sun Tsu 'to defeat the enemy one must know the enemy'. Further studies in Buddhism reveal the nature of negative thoughts and delusions. Then one can know the enemy. With the achievement of a clear mind and inner calm, one then begins to understand the meaning of *Buddhism is the Way of Liberation* and *Buddhism is all about Practise and not Dogma*.

With determined commitment to the practice of Chan, months or even years later, one becomes aware that compared where we started, there are noticeable improvements both physically and mentally. A vigorous mind and fit body go hand in hand. Along the path, we become aware of ourselves and the consequences of the mind's actions.

Achieving Enlightenment or Perfection is the objective but not necessarily the only outcome. The Way is made up of thousands of small steps. Determination and persistence are some of the steps and will be rewarded accordingly. The Practise of Buddhism is certainly not as easy as becoming initiated, accepting the dogma and then following the rules. The Way is a lifetime of the Exercise and Practise of overcoming 'pain and suffering' of all sorts. Any degree of Enlightenment resulting from the Practise will result in a calmer, well-balanced mind; an individual with strength of Mind and Heart.

The endeavour of continual Practise of Buddhism brings with it the reward of a Peaceful Mind, Body and Spirit which cannot help but be communicated to the surrounding society and environment.