

dharma in practice



WHAT MEDITATION BRINGS TO OUR LIFE

by MASTER JI RU

Let me start by recounting two early teachings of the Buddha from the Pali Canon which will help us to understand why we practice meditation:

THERE IS ONE STORY ABOUT A YOUNG MONASTIC WHO SERVED AS AN ATTENDANT TO THE ELDER MONK. THE YOUNG MONK ALWAYS LISTENED TO THE PROFOUND TEACHINGS OF THE MASTER. AS HE LEARNED THE DHARMA, HE ACHIEVED RIGHTEOUSNESS OF BODY AND MIND.

IN ANOTHER TEACHING, THE BUDDHA SAYS THAT A BHIKKHU SHOULD PRACTICE ANAPANASATI (MINDFULNESS OF BREATHING). IF A BHIKKHU PRACTICES REPEATEDLY, THE BUDDHA EXPLAINED, HE WILL GAIN CESSATION OF THE BODY AND MIND, LEADING TO AN AWAKENED EXISTENCE, A PURE MIND COMPLETELY DONE.

In these two stories we see some of the important reasons why we practice meditation in Chan Buddhism: to develop (1) righteousness of the body and mind—which is the opposite of seeing, acting and thinking in unwholesome or evil ways; and (2) to achieve the cessation of body and mind—in other words, liberation.

What does meditation practice bring to our life? First, by disciplining of our thoughts, meditation allows us to contemplate and observe, which leads directly to attaining Right Concentration; second, with mindful breathing, through meditation we can take control of our bodies, and in so doing we can achieve a steady joyfulness and state of physical balance.

This benefits us as practitioners by helping us avoid an immoderate body and mind, which would otherwise lead us to all kinds of trouble, both now and in the future. Through meditation we learn to follow a moderate and restrained path, which leads us to liberation, to a life based on the Eightfold Noble Path.

Through meditation we are able to attain moderation and simplicity of living, and also righteousness of body and mind, as well as the cessation of the body and mind.

Let me discuss cessation of the body and mind. Cessation means stopping. When we practice meditation, we concentrate on the sitting, walking, lying or standing postures. Especially when we sit on the cushion, the body stops its overt movement. However, the movement of the mind continues, because of external and internal stimulation.

Externally, our five senses (sound, smell, taste, bodily sensations, and so on) are in contact with worldly phenomena. This sensory contact disturbs the mind. Internally, all kinds of concepts and pictures pop up to distract the mind. With meditation practice the mind is trained to focus on a simple object so as to avoid all disturbances, both externally from the senses, and internally from the conceptual mind. That is why we say that this method is the way to achieve the cessation of body and mind, or, said in another way, to stop the activity of body and mind. This method is called avoiding the five sense desires, all of which disturb concentration.

In ordinary daily life one's mind is not disciplined. Without training, over time, the mind becomes uncontrollable. This is sometimes called having a "monkey mind," and results in mental and physical stress which can adversely affect our immune system and overall health.

With an untrained mind in a disturbed state, we feel upset, in a state of emotional turmoil. Our mind-state reacts to situations with narrowness, stubbornness, and self-conceit. In the Dharma, we call this state the defilement of the self-centered. Life itself becomes very difficult. However, in cultivating a broad-minded view and cultivating compassion, life becomes easier. Through meditation we can regain control over our mind and develop a peaceful life based on compassion and wisdom, with Right View and Right Understanding leading to liberation.

When the mind is trained to become pure, then it actually is the normal mind--frank and upright, without twists and knots. But in today's materialistic mind-state, we are always thinking a lot, ruminating and worrying. Our mind-state becomes tired, restless, conflicted and confused. As a result, many of our pains and sufferings are increased.

Meditation is our practice for addressing those pains and sufferings, for moving us toward an easier, calmer, more peaceful and harmonious life.

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