

Twenty-Five
Doors to
Meditation

A HANDBOOK FOR
ENTERING SAMADHI

William Bodri & Lee Shu-Mei

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by
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and
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Introduction

The purpose of this book is to introduce a wide variety of cultivation techniques to people who are searching for an appropriate spiritual practice. From the wide selection of techniques within, there are sure to be one or two methods which will interest any aspiring practitioner. Thus, any of these techniques can serve as the initial basis of spiritual practice.

The very first requirement of the cultivation path is to accumulate merit, for without merit it's impossible to succeed at the task of self-realization. But to succeed in enlightenment, you must also devote yourself to some form of spiritual practice, for otherwise you can't possibly attain Tao. The formula for progress in spiritual cultivation, which is valid for all other forms of endeavor as well, is Method + Effort + Time + Experience = Result. Thus you can expect the positive results of self-realization only after you put time and effort into following a proper cultivation technique (sadhana).

From your familiarity and experiences with an initial form of meditation practice, your understanding of cultivation principles will naturally grow, and from this progressive increase in wisdom and experience, your practice can be adjusted accordingly. In this way, matching experience with wisdom and theory, over time you make tremendous progress on the cultivation path. So with effort, experience, time, and practice you will definitely achieve substantial spiritual results.

It's often said that there are 84,000 different afflictions in one moment of the mind, and so there are also 84,000 various methods of cultivation practice, called "dharma doors," that you can use to appropriately address these vastly different afflictions. The biggest problem in our lives is that these mental afflictions continually arise and give us no peace, thus blocking the path to attainment. Hence all the genuine cultivation methods in existence are aimed at quieting your thoughts, and when thoughts stop we attain a state of mental stillness or cessation called samadhi.

Samadhi is not a state of mental dullness or torpor, for within samadhi your mind remains clear, open and aware. It's an experiential realm where clear awareness and mental quiet are conjoined, for within samadhi the mind experiences such one-pointed concentration that the busy extraneous thoughts which normally bother us totally drop away.

This is the initial stage on the path to spiritual development: a state of mental quiet within which our miscellaneous random thoughts seem to disappear. Sometimes we call this state of quiet “emptiness,” which is just a synonym for the absence of our discriminative monkey mind.

The samadhi of mental quiet marks just the very beginning stages of spiritual cultivation, for the ultimate attainment of self-realization requires that we develop transcendental wisdom as well. Transcendental wisdom, or prajna, is that discriminative but completely nonintellectual awareness that empowers us to perceive the true nature of the mind. Samadhi is just a stage of quiet and calm: it's still a phenomenal realm even though we say it's empty. When you attain samadhi, however, this emptiness of normal mentation allows you to realize how to detach from clinging to your mental experiences, and this is the necessary lesson we need to learn so that we can use our wisdom to turn around and perceive enlightenment.

The cessational aspect of samadhi is also important because it's through samadhi that we can purify and transform our physical bodies, and that's when all our spiritual powers and kung-fu (mind-body attainments) come out. On the spiritual path, both these aspects must be mastered—we must purify both our bodies and minds in order to reach the highest levels of attainment. But ultimately, prajna-transcendental wisdom is the factor we must rely upon for identifying and learning the enlightenment way. Without prajna-wisdom, you cannot awaken to enlightenment. Prajna-wisdom enables you to recognize the true mind.

Now, if people start practicing a particular cultivation method but don't understand the principles involved, they're likely to get lost on the path of spiritual cultivation. Unless one's beliefs are based on wisdom, practice without understanding is equivalent to being superstitious. Hence developing prajna-transcendental wisdom is all important, and to cultivate self-realization everyone must develop samadhi since samadhi is the means by which we realize our prajna.

In other words, samadhi is the pathway to cultivating spiritual wisdom; from within a quiet mind, you can develop the spiritual wisdom that lets you recognize the true mind and succeed on the path of cultivation. You can perform all the religious ceremonies you like and attend all sorts of spiritual services, perform a wide variety of meritorious acts, exercise your intellect in all sorts of ways, strictly follow religious injunctions and codes of conduct, and even memorize reams of religious dogma. These can all be extremely worthwhile activities, but no matter what you do, there is no such thing as true spiritual progress unless you attain samadhi and prajna. All these other activities are just expedient means designed to guide you to this goal.

Some methods of arriving at samadhi begin with the mundane realm of reality and apply various techniques to arrive at a state where discriminative thought disappears, where the mind is calm and still—what we call empty or void. Some methods begin by cultivating this emptiness directly. Some cultivation practices involve form; other methods involve formless doors to samadhi. Sometimes a method will involve adding burdens to the mind in order to get rid of mental chaos, other methods will involve subtracting burdens to arrive at an absence of internal mental chatter. Certain methods will involve cultivating one's jing (seminal essence) or chi (vital energy or prana), while other methods will involve cultivating one's shen (spirit). Some methods will investigate the insubstantial nature of worldly appearances, while others will abandon phenomena altogether and work solely on investigating the formless mind which is able to perceive phenomena.

There are cultivation methods which focus on elements within space and time, and methods which focus on elements outside of space and time. Some cultivation methods deal with tracing the senses back to their ultimate source, and other methods focus on mastering various realms of consciousness. But all these different cultivation methods, if they are genuine spiritual techniques, are equally aimed at giving rise to samadhi, and then to transcendental spiritual wisdom.

In cultivation practice, you first bring about a state of quiet mental cessation, or samadhi, and then use your wordless insight to look into that state of mental calm which you produce. Then you'll be able to see that both “existence” and “nonexistence,” which are our terms for the two states of mentation and emptiness (the no-thought state of samadhi), are both dualistic realms that appear in the bright, formless, clear mind of voidness which extends everywhere. We blind ourselves through fixing it in one location because we're so attached to our body, but the true mind extends everywhere. Because it's everywhere we say it's empty and formless or void. Being empty it encompasses all things. When you can identify that state, which is the true one that knows, then you will begin to truly climb the ranks of spiritual practice. But to get there you have to practice mental cessation and internal contemplation (prajna-wisdom), and these two have to be matched in practice.

Now, there are not only a tremendous number of approaches available in cultivation practice, but there are an infinite number of samadhi realms you can attain as well. However, all these possible samadhi realms can be classified into nine large nondenominational stages. The first four ranks of samadhi attainment are called the four basic concentrations, namely the first, second, third, and fourth dhyana. The next four samadhi include the samadhi of infinite space, the samadhi of

infinite consciousness, the samadhi of infinite nothingness, and the samadhi of neither thought nor no-thought. Finally, there is the “Arhat's nirvana,” which is a state of liberation, free from the realm of birth and death, and which is only accessed through the Buddhist path of wisdom cultivation. The first four dhyanas are called Form Realm samadhis, and the next four absorptions are called the Formless Realm samadhis. This is because the four dhyanas still involve various mentalities of subtle form, but the four formless concentrations have for the most part abandoned gross form and thus are involved with great states of emptiness. For a short description of these samadhi, we've included brief details and references in the appendices of this book.

Though there are nine basic samadhi, each of these have further subdivisions, accounting for the numerous realms that people can experience in their cultivation practice. For instance, when people reach the realm in which they experience that “the universe is pure consciousness,” or that “God is everywhere,” they are not yet enlightened but have simply attained the samadhi of infinite consciousness. Sometimes one reaches a realm that can only be described as pure bliss without coarse thought; this corresponds to the third dhyana. Sometimes one can reach a mental realm that can only be described as endless empty space, and this is the samadhi of infinite emptiness that some people mistakenly take as enlightenment. Then there are the countless samadhis you can obtain by tuning your chi or shen to match with some particular state in the same manner that you would adjust the frequencies on your radio.

The characteristics of these various realms are very profound, and in this book we are only providing the initial indications for how to enter these stages of attainment. As a general rule, the amount you can ultimately achieve through your cultivation efforts and the extent of your ultimate progress will correspond to two things: the merits you accumulate on the path, and the depth and devotion of your cultivation practice efforts.

No book can possibly summarize all the various means for attaining samadhi. This book, for instance, is simply an introduction to the wide variety of methods in existence. In fact, to explain each method in detail would require an entire book for each method in turn, which is why we've designed this text for your own initial efforts at self-study and as a handbook for meditation teachers who need a textbook for leading discussions. While we can only introduce the rudimentary principles behind some of the world's most popular cultivation techniques, nonetheless we've provided many references for further study. There are sure to be one or two methods here that will suit your individual

temperament and personality and be appropriate for your own cultivation practice. If you follow these practices according to the proper principles, samadhi and dhyana are sure to result.

Upon learning of a method for developing samadhi, it has always been a practitioner's responsibility to test its effectiveness in body and mind through personal practice and experience. Shakyamuni Buddha, for instance, would recommend different methods to students based upon their qualifications and potential, but the students still had to test out the techniques and adjust their practice or even change their practice based on their personal results. It's like going to a doctor for a prescription and returning for a further adjustment of the remedy. People have different illnesses so not everyone can use the same medicine, and even after you take a medicine, you might have to come back and have your prescription altered a bit. Thus, since everyone has different capabilities and attainments, not everyone will benefit through employing the same cultivation technique, or sadhana, and not everyone should practice in exactly the same way. You have to test each of these cultivation methods to see which one is appropriate to you, and you must use your wisdom in practice to maximize their effectiveness. Each method will be either more or less useful because each embodies a different degree of karmic affinity to your own personal situation.

In one famous lesson found in the Shurangama Sutra, Shakyamuni Buddha asked several of his students to recount the various dharma doors they used to attain samadhi. The various techniques that the students reported were widely different, showing that different people, because of their different karma and different innate capacities, can benefit by using vastly different cultivation practices. Twenty-five of Buddha's students volunteered twenty-five different "dharma doors," or cultivation methods, by which they had achieved some level of attainment, the wide variety of which are illustrative of almost any sadhana practice and its application.

For instance, in scanning the sutra we learn that there are various dharma doors to samadhi and prajna-wisdom that focus on the six sense data:

- Kaundinya attained samadhi by meditation on sound;
- Upanisad attained it by meditation on the impurity of form and on the impure nature of the physical body;
- Bodhisattva Fragrance-adorned attained it by meditation on contact with smells (fragrance), through which he achieved cessation-contemplation;

- The Bodhisattvas Bhaisajya-raja and Bhaisajya-samudgata by meditation on taste, the process of discriminating among flavors;
- Bhadrapala through meditation on touch;
- Mahakashyapa through meditation on (the emptiness of all) dharmas.

Other cultivation methods for samadhi and wisdom are based on the five sense organs:

- Aniruddha, who was blind, attained samadhi by meditation on the organ of sight and learned how to perceive not with his eyes but with his mind;
- Kshudrapanthaka attained it by meditating on the organ of smell (the nose), while cultivating the breath to a state of emptiness;
- Gavampati by meditation on the organ of taste, turning taste back to its knower;
- Pilindavatsa by meditation on the body, whereby he successfully abandoned the conception of a body;
- Subhuti attained samadhi by meditation on the mind;

There are also methods for attaining samadhi and wisdom based on the six consciousnesses:

- Sariputra attained samadhi by means of sight perception;
- Samantabhadra Bodhisattva attained it by meditation on ear perception.;
- Sundarananda attained it by meditation on the perception of smell. He fixed his concentration on the (olfactory) base of his nose while cultivating the breath to cessation;
- Purnamaitrayaniputra by meditation on tongue perception;
- Upali by meditation on the perception of tangible objects, for he mastered control of his body in learning to observe discipline;
- Mahamaudgalyayana by meditation on the faculty of mind.

Finally, meditations on the seven elements can lead to samadhi and transcendental wisdom:

- Ucchusma, who was burdened with sexual lusts, attained samadhi by meditation on the fire element, employing the skeleton-method visualization in conjunction with kundalini cultivation;
- Dharanimdhara Bodhisattva attained samadhi by meditating on the earth element, contemplating the identity of his body with the earth element spanning the universe;
- Candraprabha Bodhisattva attained it by contemplation on the water element and its pervasive nature;
- The Bodhisattva of Crystal Light attained samadhi by contemplation on the wind element that is embodied in all kinds of movement, including the arising of thoughts;
- Akasagarbha Bodhisattva attained samadhi through a meditation on boundless space;
- Maitreya Bodhisattva by meditating on the element of consciousness-only;
- Mahasthama meditated on the element of perception to attain samadhi, which he achieved through Buddha-mindfulness.

Due to this wide variety of techniques, whether or not a method is appropriate for your own practice can only be answered through personal testing; devotedly cultivating a method for awhile is the only way to determine whether it is suited to your needs. As a warning, a method you abhor may very well be the one best suited to your needs, since bad karma tends to oppose our efforts to cultivate practice and transform karma in a positive way. Cultivation always has a positive effect on changing negative karma for the better, and thus resistance and obstacles will always arise when we sincerely start to cultivate. Conversely, a cultivation method you love may also prove ineffective despite your personal preference, for it may draw you into a realm of torpor, indulgence, self-satisfaction or laxity. Hence you are best advised to try a variety of cultivation techniques. In fact, we strongly feel that everyone should try the following meditations:

- the practice of cessation and contemplation practice called

- shamatha-vipashyana ([chapter 4](#));
- watching the breath ([chapter 6](#));
- the white skeleton visualization practice ([chapter 5](#));
- the Zhunti mantra ([chapter 7](#));
- Kuan-Yin's method of listening to sound ([chapter 3](#)).

The nine-step bottled wind method of breath retention ([chapter 10](#)) should also become a daily part of everyone's cultivation routine, like brushing one's teeth, and all people should be taught this method for health reasons whether they are meditators or not. While the practice of breath retention and internal cleansing in the nine-step bottled winds practice may not ultimately result in spiritual progress, it will definitely lead to better health and increased longevity for every practitioner.

When people cultivate a particular spiritual practice correctly, certain phenomena are sure to arise that will manifest in accordance with the practitioner's stage of accomplishment. A discussion of such mind-body changes, or kung-fu, is beyond the scope of this book, but the reader is referred to *Tao and Longevity: Mind-Body Transformation, Working Toward Enlightenment, and To Realize Enlightenment*, by Nan Huai-Chin, for extensive information on such transformations. These works, published by Samuel Weiser, contain the best information available on this topic. In time, we hope to produce a further work on "Measuring Meditation" or "The Various Stages of the Spiritual Experience" that will also address these various phenomena and the stages of the path as described by the world's different cultivation schools. In the meanwhile, we've indicated further helpful reading in the appendices.

We hope this short work will lead to further understanding and advances in your current cultivation practice, or open the doorway to cultivation practice if you aren't already involved with some particular meditation technique. We also hope it reveals the highly scientific, nondenominational, and cross-cultural nature of the path. The techniques within this book represent most of the basic doorways for attaining samadhi, and we cannot emphasize enough that samadhi and prajna-wisdom are the crux of spiritual development. But since our primary purpose in writing this book is to help people ultimately reach Tao, we must also point out time and again that samadhi is not Tao, but just a stepping stone on the path.

After a person attains samadhi, he or she must still cultivate prajna-transcendent wisdom or the fruit of ultimate attainment will always stay out of reach. One who attains samadhi but doesn't cultivate transcendental wisdom is like an individual who decides to make a trip

to a fabulous palace but gets sidetracked by all the pretty scenery along the way. If he ends up playing in the gardens of samadhi, he'll lose his way and never reach his ultimate destination. The greatest samadhi is absent of both samadhi and mundane mentation and that's why it's called great. That's Tao, whereas the various samadhi are simply experiential realms of rarified mentation. So if you keep thinking that samadhi is the path, but don't cultivate the wisdom that is letting you realize or be aware of the samadhis, you'll never be able to truly experience the Tao.

Thus our best wishes are extended to you for your ultimate success in cultivating both samadhi and wisdom. We hope that this book helps you attain the fruit of the path in this lifetime.

Chapter 1

Union with Child Light to Realize Mother Light

There are two types of light in the universe called “mother light” and “child light,” respectively. “Mother light” is the invisible, formless basis of light that can give rise to physical light, and physical light is the light we can see or measure because it has form or appearance. The images of the physical world we see with our eyes—including brightness, darkness, shades, and colors—are the light with form that cultivation schools term “child light.” While child light is visible, the true mother light is not something we can see with our eyes, because it is fundamentally formless. Cultivation science says that our true self-nature is akin to this mother light, but its formless radiance is something we realize with the mind rather than something we perceive through the senses.

To see any form of child light requires that we use our eyes. Because our eyes possess this inherent capacity to see, we can view all sorts of colors and phenomena—such as brightness, form, movement and depth. But the thing that ultimately enables our eyes to see all these appearances is not a type of light, and the path of cultivation is the search to find that one thing that is ultimately, foundationally behind all our seeing and knowing. We call this thing the “true mind” because it is the ground state of awareness, and we call it the “fundamental nature” because it's our true essence of being, the one that stands behind all our knowing and awareness states.

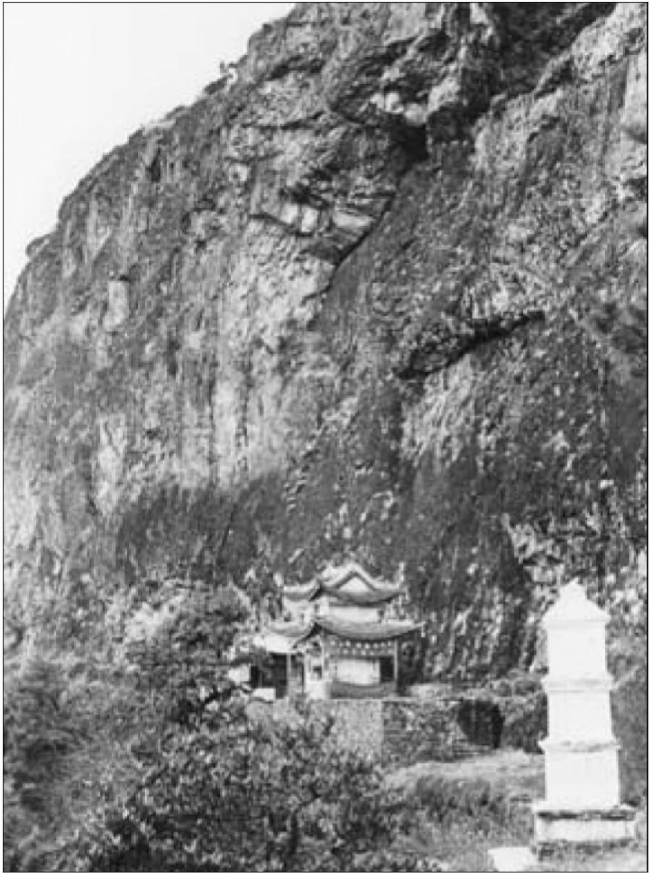


Figure 1. The first Indian Zen master, Mahakashyapa, resides sealed within this rock face on Chicken Foot Mountain in China, waiting for the coming of the next Buddha Maitreya. Zen master Mahakashyapa

abides in samadhi within, practicing the method of union with Mother light. Hence he is often known as the “drinker of light” or “eater of light.” Photograph courtesy Bill Porter.

Now the method we'll introduce for cultivating the seeing of light is different from the methods used in Taoism, Hinduism, yoga, or Tibetan esoteric Buddhism. These other schools all have various cultivation practices for seeing light, but they substantially differ from this one. Our method starts by utilizing our eyes in looking at natural light, and it doesn't matter what form of natural light we employ. We can use the sunlight, the light of the moon or stars, or even the artificial light from light bulbs. Unlike other cultivation practices that rely on specific forms of light, in this method we can use any source of light that comes our way.

This cultivation technique starts by having you look straight ahead in front, with your eyes facing the light and without moving your eyeballs. To be able to do this requires some kung-fu, because you have to allow your eyes to point straight ahead without tiring, and they must remain relaxed without movement. At this moment, whether the eyes are open or closed, an image of light will always appear to the eyes. For instance, in the daytime we say the light is bright, but when you close your eyes the degree of brightness is indeed decreased but you aren't seeing absolute blackness; you're just seeing dimmer light. This is true even in the night time, for there's never a perfect absence of light. It's always just a situation of dimmer light.

With your motionless eyes now facing the light, relax your body and mind and just stay in that state. Let your body and self merge with the light, no matter what type of light you're seeing, and gradually forget your body. In time, the light you see will extend to fill the universe and it will seem as if there is no such thing as space or time. No matter how the light changes, there should be no other realization than “I am the light” and “the light is me.” Practicing in this way, emptiness, light, and you will merge into one. This is the basis behind the New Testament saying “God is Light,” but Tibetan Buddhism and Hinduism also recognize this stage of spiritual recognition.

This, however, is still a child-light scenario belonging to the realm of form since it still emphasizes the light that eyes can see, and you are still depending on the mind of discrimination in this practice. When you can realize “I am light,” you're still at the stage of conception and ideational consciousness wherein you know and comprehend things at an intellectual level. But the thing that enables us to comprehend light and its fundamental energy is not a light with form, nor does it belong within

the domain of consciousness. That's the thing we want to recognize.

When you reach the stage of ultimate, fundamental no-form, you already forget about the knower, the knowing, and the object to be known. You forget about what you see, the process of seeing, and what fundamentally enables you to see. This is a state of true no-form. This is when the mother light and child light conjoin—the light of formlessness and form come together so that there is no discrimination whatsoever, which is the samadhi of true wisdom. In this practice, you merge your prajna knowing developed through the path with the primordial wisdom which has always been there, and the child light merges with the mother light. This is how one should practice if they wish to cultivate the child light as a path to Tao.

Chapter 2

Zen, the Method of No-Method

Zen is considered the highest of all possible cultivation schools in existence because it doesn't rely on any method at all—it just directly points to the true nature of the mind. In terms of the pathway to Tao, it is neither an adding nor subtracting method of cultivation; Zen doesn't rely on any artificial techniques. In Zen you don't add anything to the mind in order to attain samadhi, nor do you try to subtract anything from the mind. In other words, with Zen practice you neither accept nor reject your thoughts in trying to attain samadhi, but you simply let them come and go without clinging. Since there's no effort involved at all, except for the effortless fundamental watching or knowing that is always there, Zen is therefore called the method of no-method.

In Zen, as in Tibetan Mahamudra, you simply ride the function of awareness and turn it inward, reflecting it back to its source, to perceive the fundamental essence of this knowing. Some refer to this process as “resting,” since it means “dropping the busy mind” or “letting everything go,” while the function of knowing continues to stay. Thus in Zen, the mind is perfectly open and aware, yet mental busyness naturally comes to a rest. Some people mistakenly consider this a particular form of cultivation technique, but since awareness is a perfectly natural process that's always there, where is there any special method or any artificial contrivance? Whether we know something or don't know something, our true mind knows that we know or don't know, so awareness always shines. In cultivation, it's the root source of this awareness we must find.

Our minds are forever visited by chaotic and confusing thoughts, so in Zen we treat these thoughts like hotel guests that come and go without prolonging their stay. If you give them no service but simply watch them without adding any energy to the situation, in time all the guests will depart and you will arrive at samadhi. The Zen master Chia-shan said, “The dragon carries the ocean pearl in its mouth, paying no attention to the fish swimming by [the mental realms which arise].” Hence if you continue to shine effortless awareness on your mind's activities and the experiential realms that may arise, without becoming

involved in these multitudinous phenomena, you will naturally scale the various ranks of samadhi and attain self-realization.

In Zen practice, you never hold onto any mental realm or phenomenon that arises because of your cultivation, nor do you ever identify any stage of progress as being the ultimate attainment. If you fixate on any state as being “it,” you’re already out of Zen. Once you think that any stage of progress is real, you’ve already produced an illusion that masks the true nature. For instance, even thinking about emptiness creates a thought of emptiness, and the thought is actually an impurity that will mask any stage of emptiness you may have already achieved. So the method of practicing Zen is that of simply shining awareness on all the mental realms that arise, and in time they will naturally depart without staying, like clouds dispersing in the open sky. Then you’ll be left with true emptiness, and the awareness of knowing that state. But since that emptiness is also an object of your knowing, it’s not the true self. Hence you have to turn around and see what gives rise to this knowing. Progressing with this exercise of wisdom, you will eventually arrive at fundamental mind, which is the fundamental nature.

Every thought and every type of mental realm, including the various samadhi, have to depart because nothing stays—death will certainly come to thoughts as it does to all other phenomena. Only one thing remains unmoved during all these transformations—the true self, which is the ultimate source of awareness. You can go east or go west, but that one thing has never moved, has never left, and has never gone anywhere; it’s just that the experiential realm within it has transformed. Thus it is that Zen Master Pao Chih said:

If you only learn to cultivate unmindfulness at all times while you’re walking, standing, sitting, and reclining, then you may fail over time to leap over to true Reality only because your strength is insufficient. But if you continue practicing in this way for another three, five, or ten years, you will surely awaken to Tao in the end. It is because you cannot practice in this manner that you set your mind on the academic study of Zen and Tao, but this is irrelevant.

Thus we say that “the mind can give birth [engender thoughts] without abiding anywhere.” There’s nothing wrong with thoughts themselves, it’s just that you shouldn’t cling to them. In fact, the mind should not dwell in any experiential realm. Furthermore, we must note that on this road of practice it’s very easy for your breath to combine naturally with your thoughts so as to transform the physical body and bring about all sorts

of kung-fu. Thus Zen has all the esoteric changes and stages of attainment described by the world's other cultivation schools, but makes no fuss about any of these matters. It ignores such phenomena because they're transient manifestations, just like any other, which are always in a process of transformation, and thus Zen discards any preoccupation with these states and proceeds directly to the true nature.

In the other schools, however, people end up getting attached to prana, chi channels, chakras, astral bodies, and all sorts of other experiential realms with the result that hardly anyone makes it to enlightenment. Making no fuss and paying no attention to these things, most Zen practitioners tread the straight path to Tao, whereas other practitioners get lost along the way.

The Fourth Zen Patriarch said to Fa-yung:

The hundreds and thousands of gates to Tao are all ultimately in the mind; the subtle virtues as numerous as river sands all lay in the source of mind. All aspects of discipline, samadhi, prajna, and the manifestations of various spiritual powers are all inherently there; they're nowhere else but in your own true mind. All your mental afflictions and obstructions caused by habit energies are originally empty and void. All the causes and effects of mundane existence are like dreams and hallucinations . . . So in true cultivation you just let your mind be free. You do not perform contemplative practices, and you do not promote efforts to make your mind clear. Don't arouse the emotions of greed or anger, and don't fall into sorrow or worry. Flowing unhindered and unobstructed, be free in all ways, however you might be. When there is no doing good and no doing evil, then in all your activities and circumstances, everything that meets your eyes will be the inconceivable function of Buddhahood. It is blissful and sorrowless, so we call it Buddhahood.

Chapter 3

Kuan-Yin's Method of Listening to Sound

The most famous cultivation technique in the Shurangama Sutra is the method reported by the Bodhisattva Kuan-Yin, who used hearing to realize the self-nature. Using hearing, he was able to enter samadhi and ultimately attain complete enlightenment. Manjushri, who is the Buddha of Wisdom and teacher of the other Buddhas, said that this technique surpassed all the other dharma doors in existence. Describing this technique in full would require a level of sophistication beyond this text, but the basics of this practice can certainly be introduced.

A cultivation saying runs, “Whoever hears the sound of water without using the sixth consciousness for thirty years will achieve Kuan-Yin's all-pervading wisdom.” So in this practice, you let sounds come to your ears without trying to distinguish them. Remaining natural, relaxed, and detached, you spontaneously know what the sounds are without trying to recognize them or deliberate their meaning. Eventually you will find you can hear quiet as well as sounds, and will discover that they are both the same thing—sounds and silence are both objects of hearing, they're both phenomena. Sounds, and the state where they're absent, will still exist but will start to seem more and more separate from yourself. Since now they have less to do with you, they won't bother you so much anymore and you can detach from them both to enter into samadhi.

A famous individual who used this technique was the Chinese Zen monk Han-shan, who practiced Kuan-Yin's method of hearing on a bridge next to a noisy torrent of water. Han-shan reported that at first the noise of the water was quite audible, but in time it could only be heard when his thoughts arose, and not when they ceased. Then one day, his practice improved such that he did not hear the sound of the water any longer; sounds and noises vanished completely.

When describing this method in the Shurangama Sutra, Kuan-Yin said:

I entered into the stream of the self-nature of the sense of hearing, thereby eliminating the sound of what was heard.

Now proceeding from this stillness, both sound and silence ceased to arise. Advancing in this way, both hearing and what was heard melted away and vanished. When hearing and what is heard are both forgotten, then the sense of hearing leaves no impression in the mind. When sense and the objects of sense both become empty, then emptiness and sense merge and reach a state of absolute perfection. When emptiness and what is being emptied are both extinguished, then arising and extinction are naturally extinguished. At this point the absolute emptiness of nirvana became manifest, and suddenly I transcended the mundane and supramundane worlds.

In this method, you listen to and gradually detach from both sound and silence. When there's no sound, we call this silence, and we conventionally say there is no hearing. But that doesn't mean that the nature of hearing has ceased. It's simply that the function of hearing now recognizes a state of no sound, or silence. Since the nature of hearing can ascertain the state of sound and no sound, it's easy to use this method to realize the nature of duality and then to detach from both existence and non-existence. That's the method of practice.

Both quiet (stillness or silence) and un-quiet (sound or disturbance) are phenomena, so tying oneself to either extreme is wrong. That's why the state of samadhi (mental quiet) isn't Tao either, even though you need to practice samadhi in order to awaken self-realization. For instance, if you don't detach from the phenomenon of silence, you'll never find out what's hearing silence. Thus the quiet one recognizes in samadhi is not Tao, and the task you must perform is to return the hearing to hear the self-nature.

To progress past the quiet calm of samadhi through continued cultivation efforts, you must also practice prajna-wisdom. All the various methods of cultivation first get you to the point where the mind is calmed and still, but this doesn't qualify as perfect penetration to the vast source of the mind. It's just a phenomenal realm of quiet, another false creation of the mind. To attain Tao you must shine awareness on this state, without engaging in some form of mentation, so as to go further and achieve some genuine realization. That's the practice of prajna-wisdom.

As Kuan-Yin said, you must cultivate to the extent that your awareness of samadhi and the state of samadhi both become extinct.

Then it is real samadhi. Proceeding in this manner, you will eventually reach enlightenment. What is Kuan-Yin's method? It's withdrawing your energy from a focus on the outside, turning the function of hearing around to return it to its source. Hearing returns to listen to its self-nature, and through this method you can penetrate through all the various obstructions to achieve ultimate enlightenment.

Chapter 4

Watching Thoughts: Cessation and Observation Practice

Many of the world's cultivation techniques are based on the principles of cessation and contemplation practice, also known as shamatha-vipashyana, in order to generate samadhi. For instance, the Chinese Tien-tai cultivation techniques, Confucian introspection, Tibetan Gelugpa meditation on the mean, the Hindu yoga practices of observing the mind, and orthodox Buddhism's emphasis on right views are all based on the principles of cessation and contemplation, or stopping and observation (wisdom or insight) practice.

The basic method behind cessation-contemplation practice involves using some mental exercise to stop the flow of random thoughts, and then turning one's awareness within during the state of mental stillness you produce to contemplate the mind (the state without thoughts). This is not only a means for attaining samadhi, but a way to police one's thoughts and normal behavior.

The detailed explanations of this method can be found in Chih-i's *The Greater Cessation and Contemplation* and in Tsongkhapa's *Lamrim chenmo* (Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment). However, for brevity's sake, the basic practice of watching thoughts to attain cessation and contemplation can be abbreviated as follows:

1. First, sit comfortably to relax your body and your respiration. We call this first step the “preparatory practices,” or physiological adjustments, for tuning the physical nature. Basically, you want to situate yourself so as to lessen any physical disturbances or distractions. Then after your body is calmed, you start quietly observing your inner thoughts and emotions. In other words, you simply watch your internal psychological functions as if you were a third-person observer. This third person doesn't interfere with what's going on, or participate in the activities they're observing. He's like a great host at a banquet who can accept everything that's going on around him. He just stays there watching, neither rejecting nor clinging to anything; he simply sits there silently observing, without becoming involved.

2. You continue watching your internal process of mentation until you reach the point where you can clearly observe every thought and idea that appears in the mind without any vagueness or ambiguity. Naturally, you are not tightening your body or mentally straining during this practice. Rather, you always remain relaxed while clearly observing your internal mental processes. After a while, you will eventually be able to distinguish that the process of mentation has three parts: a preceding thought that has gone, a thought that has not yet arisen, and the immediate, clear, radiant state of present mind. With continued watching, the separation of these three states becomes quite evident.

3. With continued observation, you progress a bit further and next realize that the past, present, and future thoughts never stay. Since they don't stay they can never be grasped, hence we say that fundamentally they have no basis. This observation of the appearance and disappearance of thoughts is called "observing birth and death," for the coming and going of thoughts is a ceaseless, never-ending process of arising, and then disappearance or decay. This is the realm of birth and death, and while you attach to this realm you cannot achieve liberation. That's why people who focus on their in-breathing or out-breathing never make progress in the Tao, for they must learn to focus on the state of stillness between the breaths which is outside the realm of coming and going.

By observing this stream of birth and death, you will gradually learn how to detach from the mental processes and you will become more familiar with the false mind of consciousness. In other words, you will be able to drop the illusion that our mental process is a fundamental reality. Rather, you will gradually see that all mental states are ungraspable, transient phenomena that come and go without end, and they're more like insubstantial bubbles of foam or particles of dust that have no fixity of nature. Because of their ceaseless birth and death and the gap inbetween, what we normally imagine as a continuous continuity of thoughts is actually an illusion, like the unbroken wheel of light we see when a stick of fire is spun in the air. Thus, through this process of inner watching you will begin to realize that our mental state is an ongoing process separate from our true self. The true self is what's watching this play scene, like an internal knower who never moves. If you go from here to the North Pole and back, the scenery always changes, but that inner knower never changes—it never moves. In fact, it never leaves, and has never come either. It just is. That's what we're seeking, though on a more profound level than we can explain here.

Now, in watching thoughts without adding any energy to the process, you'll begin to understand how dreamlike our consciousness actually is,

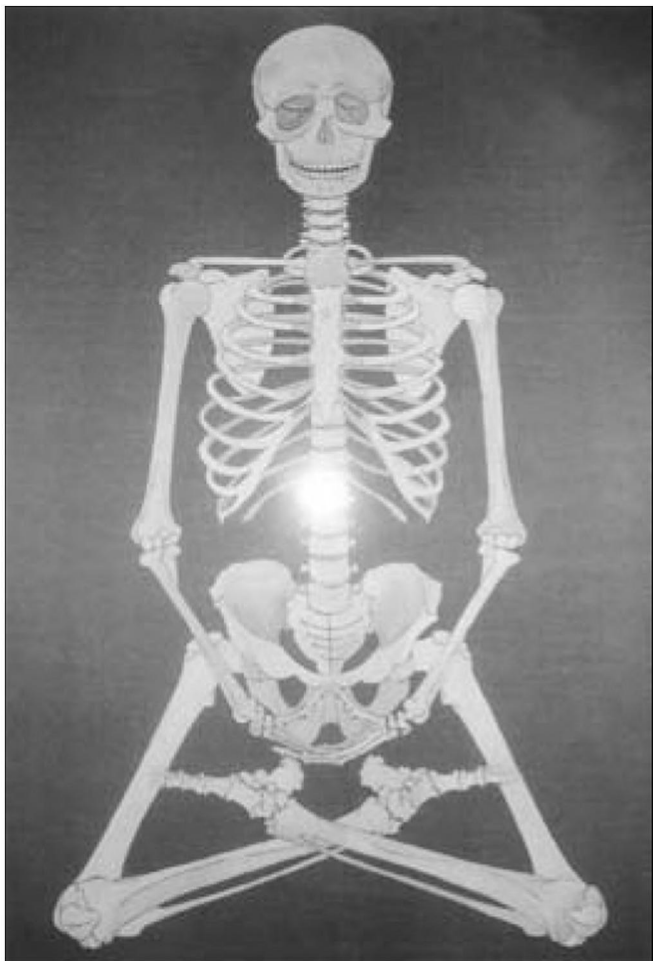
because the reality it gives birth to seems to be there and yet the concreteness of this reality isn't real. Phenomena are empty, and yet they are conventionally real, but this conventional reality is also empty. So eventually, through observation with detachment, you'll reach the stage when you can mentally relax while “giving birth to the mind without abiding anywhere.”

Through continued observation you will notice that thoughts or phenomena (existence) are born from emptiness (mental silence) and that even the existence of emptiness relies on phenomena. Existence and emptiness are both manifestations of one nature—its single source, our true self—so on the road of cultivation you don't cling to either side. Both sides are phenomenal constructions, or false relativities, so both sides are not real. Hence in shamatha-vipashyana practice, you start to contemplate the mean between stillness and activity. In contemplating the mean, you penetrate to the source.

In practicing this inner watching, you'll get progressively better at becoming mentally free because you'll stop clinging to or rejecting your thoughts, emotions, and sensations. Thus your mental awareness will increasingly open and your ability to function in the world will increase as well, so you'll actually be expanding your awareness while saving a lot of energy that you'd normally waste in useless clinging. Furthermore, your internal state of peace and calm will progressively develop with every increase in clarity. Thus if you keep observing the origin and destruction of thoughts while paying particular attention to where they come from and go to, you'll eventually interrupt the stream of consciousness.

4. With the stream of consciousness disrupted, you will then notice a momentary gap of stillness or silence between all your thoughts. In other words, if you practice this method of inner observation for a long time—by wordlessly watching thoughts without injecting any energy into the thought stream—the process of silent observation will itself disrupt the stream of mentation. The state of mind in the immediate present will gradually open up to reveal a tiny gap of mental quiet, or emptiness; when a previous thought has disappeared and a subsequent thought has not yet arisen, the mind will seem quiet. This mental silence is not a gap of dullness or stupor, nor should it be a forced silence or blankness you create through suppressing thoughts. Rather, it will be a lucid, clear, and open awareness, and these characteristics will gradually unfold as more time is spent in this state.

In other words, after quietly observing your mental processes for quite some time, you will eventually notice a tiny, silent pause between thoughts, which is known as the initial stage of “cessation.” If we



Chapter 12

Bardo Practices

This book contains cultivation techniques to be practiced while an individual is alive. However, if you know the proper techniques, there are certain cultivation practices you can follow immediately after you die, when you're in the intermediate transition phase between death and rebirth. The Tibet school has many teachings on this topic, but it's impossible to cultivate these practices unless you are familiar with the techniques before you die. Otherwise, without this prior familiarity, you'll simply continue to be pushed along by the winds of karma in the afterlife, and will not be able to use this opportune time (when you're finally free of the constraints posed by the coarse physical body) for cultivation. The intermediate period between rebirths is called the "bardo stage" and the cultivation practices for this period of time are called bardo stage yogas. In actual fact, however, any intervening period is a bardo stage and can become the subject and focus of cultivation efforts.

In terms of bardo intermediate states, we must note that there is a silent period of resting between any two periods of dissimilar activity. Whether it is between two thoughts (cessation and contemplation practice), two breaths (pranayama practice), between waking and sleeping, dreaming and nondreaming, or between death and rebirth, the transitional state between two different phases always entails a minor period of resting. This gap of stillness can serve as an entry point by which we can realize the true nature of the mind. In fact, one of the reasons there are so many cultivation methods in the world is that different techniques are designed around different types of these intercessional periods. For instance, the bardo state between sleeping and waking is the basis of the dream yoga practices, the silent gap between thoughts is the basis of Tien-tai cessation and contemplation practice, and the pause between respirations is the basis of pranayama breathing practices. All these practices focus on periods of cessation when the mind is momentarily at rest. If you can extend the amount of time you stay in that state while maintaining your awareness, this open but silent awareness can eventually converge into samadhi. If you apply

wisdom to observe the state produced, then you can increase your stage of cultivation and eventually enter into the Tao.

At the initial stages of cultivation, the periods of cessation we've cited are all states where it's possible to drop, even though it's only a short while, the "sixth mind" of ordinary conscious meditation. That's the busy consciousness of mental chatter we usually refer to as "mind." During all these transition periods, however, our mental activity is greatly diminished and ordinary mentation seems absent. Thus these are periods where we can attain mental peace because thoughts are still. Since fundamental awareness always exists, we can use our knowing awareness during these intercessions to try and realize the true nature of the mind. Capturing this idea of bardo contemplation, the Tantraloka symbolically states, "Do not worship the Lord during the day. Do not worship the Lord during the night. The Lord must be worshipped at the meeting of day and night." In other words, the transitional state is the period of cessation when it is "neither one nor the other," so this is where you should focus your cultivation.

We typically refer to these intercessory gaps as being empty, but "intercessational periods" are simply lower stages of mental activity. For instance, when we hear sounds we identify them as such, and when we don't hear any sound, we call it silence. But actually, sounds and silence are both forms; silence is just the sound of no disturbance. However, there's that one thing above both sound and silence that can comprehend their true nature. It's this one that we are seeking, and the focus during the bardo gap of silence is to realize its true nature. Thus the various bardo meditations involve making use of the temporary experiences of minor stages of emptiness in order to progress toward true emptiness. Hence, concentrating on various gaps is just a means of abandoning excessive external pollution, giving the mind time to introspect, to turn around within and realize its true body.

As to the famous bardo yoga practices for the period between death and rebirth, these belong to a specific form of cultivation technology which is very similar to kundalini yoga. The problem in our ordinary lives is that we're always preoccupied with our bodily sensations, and so we can't enter into samadhi because of our clinging to these distractions. One way to defeat this type of clinging, or playing with sensations, is to practice imagining you're dead. Even though our mind is formless and extends everywhere, it's extremely difficult to get rid of the view of possessing a body, and the Zen school goes out of its way to point out that you really need great wisdom to let go of this perspective. This is why imagining you are dead and letting go of your thoughts and sensations is one very important way to practice while you're still alive.

But when you really die and have not yet gone on to rebirth, there is yet another way to practice.

Shortly after death, every being is free of the restrictions of the body and will momentarily experience the formless “clear light” that accompanies the fundamental state of reality. If you can realize the clear light, this is the same stage as “seeing Tao.” The chance to realize the clear light is always there, but you can only notice it when your mind is free of obstructions, as happens during the bardo periods. Because it's the fundamental nature of reality, then when you're finally free of the confines of the body (before you assume a new body) and subject to less distraction due to this transition, you might be able to realize it. That's why, in preparation, people practice discarding their thoughts and physical form during the normal process of cultivation because it's then easier to access this realization. In fact, the clear light also appears every time we're just about to wake up from sleep, and so it's also the focus of the Tibetan “clear light of sleep” practices which ask you to concentrate on the heart chakra. While they're related, the bardo state clear light of death practices are different from this form of cultivation, but both aim at helping you awaken to the original nature of the mind, which is called “clear light” because of its open clarity and emptiness. Naturally, this “clear light” isn't referring to a physical light at all.

When you die, you can use your more subtle, intermediate body, which is composed of chi like the body you seem to possess in dreams, to cultivate the clear light when it appears. If you have the requisite merit and are familiar with the after-death bardo practices, as long as you have previously achieved some level of accomplishment in your meditation practice and are not frightened during this period, then you may be able to “see Tao” at this point in time.

The detailed instructions for this form of practice are too lengthy for inclusion within this book but can be found in the Tibetan Book of the Dead and various other Tibetan works which greatly expound upon this technique. The basis of practice is to perceive that realm of primordial formless awareness that Tibetans call the clear light, which corresponds to neither existence nor nonexistence. Although the full teachings of bardo yoga are lengthy, the stages of death and the accompanying bardo practices that are relevant to the path of cultivation can be summarized to some extent as follows.

The first element to start dissipating upon death is the chi of the earth element. When the earth element starts to dissipate, your arms and limbs will begin to feel heavy, as if you can't move your body anymore. It's a very dull, indistinct feeling because you're losing the sensation of the earth element, due to the fact that the earth element chi is dissipating.

Similarly, for people who die because of sickness, their bodies will slowly lose their weight and mass, a forewarning of this element's dissolution. But when the earth element is really leaving, your power of sight and vision will start to diminish, objects may seem to appear as if they're in the distance or, as we often see in the movies, the eyes will slow their flickering and become dull and lifeless.

These are just the initial stages of death, and you can still recover at this stage. But next the water element in the body starts to dissipate, and a very sticky sweat secretes from the body along with other bodily fluids. At the same time as the water element is diffusing, your power of hearing will also diminish, so you won't be able to hear sounds clearly anymore; sounds will seem as if they're coming from far away. Next the sphincter muscle will release and the last bowel movement will occur. The urine will pass out of the bladder, and the individual will also release their seminal or sexual fluids. Then the individual will enter a state of unconsciousness or semiconsciousness where everything seems chaotic and moving about. The individual will no longer be able to recognize the meaning of different objects but will be caught in their own mental world. Thus they won't be able to recognize the people about them or even the names of visitors and family members.

Now, the loss of urine and feces shows that the downward moving chi of the body is dissipating, but the upward moving chi also wants to leave the body, so phlegm will begin to form in the throat during this process. In fact, when the water element is dissipating, the mouth will become dry and the individual may not be able to speak clearly anymore or will only be able to mumble indistinct sounds. Because the upward moving wind is dissipating, one's breath will also become extremely shallow and will only reach to the throat rather than to the bottom of the lungs. Thus many people will seem as if they're choking, or struggling to breathe and speak, which is the upward flowing wind undergoing the state of dissolution. At this time the sixth consciousness of discrimination is still there, but it's operating in a very restricted state.

When the individual goes through this choking phase, the last bit of the water element is leaving the body. Soon the wind element will also leave, and at that time the individual will take his or her last breath. But at this current point in the process, the perceptions of the outside world will have stopped and the individual will rest in his or her own thought-world separated from the input of the senses. This state has often been described as a yellowish or shadowy state of mind, or the road to Hades. After this stage, the heat and wind elements will then begin to leave the body.

As these last elements leave, at this point a doctor or hospital staff