

# Dhyana

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***Dhyana* : Meditation , contemplation, concentration.... by Guy Mokuhô Mercier**



The word *Dhyana* is translated into Chinese as Chan and in Japanese by *Zen*.

Generally speaking, the word indicates a state of mental contemplation resulting from an effort of concentration. Pure concentration beyond subject and object, which we call *Samadhi*.

Some schools, like those of Chan and Soto Zen based their legitimacy and dynamic truth on the practice of meditation, *zazen* (sitting in Zen) as it was practised by Buddha during his awakening and throughout his whole life.

Seated meditation, legs crossed in Lotus position (called *padma-asana* in yoga) allows one to be in the best physical position for bringing calm to one's mind and seeing one's own original true nature. Not so easy!

This meditation posture has become the very symbol of realisation, of awakening. Even non- Buddhists or agnostics recognise it as signifying peace and wisdom. And this is probably why *dhyana*, which should be manifested in daily life, is considered a practice of perfection, a *paramita*.

According to the legend, everywhere the baby Buddha walked, a lotus flower bloomed. The lotus, a sacred flower for Buddhists, represents purity of the body and the awakened mind which surges up in the middle of the suffering of Samsara.

The lotus flower, which is so beautiful and pure in comparison to the muddy bottom of the pond where it grows, symbolises the beauty of awakening, emerging in splendor from the mud of illusions and attachments.

The famous Lotus Sutra is one of the most important texts of Mahayana Buddhism and the foundation of the Pure Land schools.

In the original Buddhism, the Theravada, the accent is on *Vipassana*, the vision and clear understanding of things, and *Samatha*, lasting peace of mind, which complement each other in the heart of *dhyana*. The meditator experiences the impermanence of forms, feelings, perceptions and thoughts and this leads him to see the emptiness of his nature. The practitioner installs himself, even without being aware of it, in a state of non-dual concentration, where the duality of subject and object disappears. It is immensely restful and liberating to disengage for a moment from our stress, born from worldly tensions and from the idea of a goal to be attained.

In Soto Zen, *zazen* is the central practice. It is transmitted from Master to disciple, beyond even the words used to teach it. Explanations are surpassed by the experience itself which leads to the awareness that it is impossible to control thoughts, whether in their appearance or disappearance.

This fact results in the question of “who is thinking” and who is this “me” that we fancy ourselves to be, and finally the question “ Who am I ?”

The reply to this existential question can be found in Presence, as the Masters keep on teaching. But the thinking mind, always keen on grasping things, tries to verbalise the experience, although it is always running behind. This desire to understand by means of words, or more precisely this addiction to willing to seize things, is in conflict with the joy that is obtained this immobile return to the mind in its luminous home, empty and unwordly, the space of absolute freedom. Beyond thought, which the Buddha called perfect wisdom *Prajna* ( *Hannya* in Japanese.)

*“ No reference points for perfect wisdom can be thought, but the mind can perceive them. One of them is the dissolving into pure presence of the awareness of self. Another is simply awakening to reality. Another is recognition of the essence which is stripped of the essence of everything in the world. Yet another, is the luminous knowledge, which knows without a knower. No way of thinking of the ordinary mind can imagine or touch them, nor approach them in any way whatsoever. This is why they are termed as beyond thought.”*

In the heart of meditation, all formulation and even all practice are left behind, as there is no longer a person who practises, the ‘me’ is no longer there!!

This is how *dhyana*, zazen itself, is awakening or *satori*.



But once meditation is finished, when we leave the dojo, the discriminating mind and our habits pop up again. Indulging in the idea of obtaining something is a serious obstacle for a practitioner who is euphoric or arrogant. This is why it is recommended to practice with others in the dojo and to seek out the kindly authority of a master. And it is at that moment that *dhyana* defines itself as the practice of perfection, *paramita*, and means that the disciple puts into place what he has received in zazen, wisdom and compassion, with the support of the other

*paramitas.*

### **What should be implemented, according to the texts, for the practice of the *dhyana paramita*?**

In the texts, *dhyana* is also called “ecstasy” because it brings joy in its reliance on generosity ( *dana*) morality ( *shila*), patience ( *ksanti*) and energy ( *virya*) which are the Gateways of merit.

*“Even when far away from beings, the thoughts of the bodhisattva never abandon them. By the strength of dhyana, he swallows the medicine of wisdom and returns to beings and becomes among them father, mother, spouse, or son, master, servant or head of a school and guides them in all manner of teachings and salvific means. True wisdom comes from non- fixing the mind on the process of thought and from meditation.*

*If he lacks the shelter of meditation, wisdom can still exist but will be limited in its usefulness. This is why those who wish to obtain pure wisdom practise dhyana. When the oil and the wick are pure, the light of the lamp is also pure.*

*The bodhisattva frees himself from distracting thoughts, for if their flight is not restrained, they fly faster than a hurricane. They appear and disappear faster than a bolt of lightning. Meditation is the treasure that guards and protects wisdom. It is by continued attention and sustained effort, without slacking off, that the disciple is eventually able to gain wisdom.”*

Without the ability to efface oneself before another and to leave the space of one's own perception open and kind, we cannot welcome others or give them any help whatsoever. Forgetting oneself happens in meditation and permits wisdom, joy and equanimity to appear. We have to practice this every day for the benefit of others. It isn't easy, as others tend to think that they deserve everything. The practice of *dhyana* develops clear vision which allows the investigation of the self ; and also permits to see what resists in that opening which we find hard to consent to, but which we know we are capable of. The texts list many of the obstacles along the way.



**The practice of dhyana should help us to eliminate the five desires and the five obstacles which obstruct the way.**

- **Eliminate sensual desires** which *“progress like a fever or a gale and only last an instant. When the pleasure has disappeared, great pain follows. “*
- **Eliminate the five objects of desire.**
  - Reject the colours that are associated with sensual and sexual attraction
  - Condemn the sounds which have instability as their characteristic. Once they have been heard, they melt away.
  - Detach oneself from smells that open the door to shackles.
  - Reject pleasant smells, for *“sentiments of greed will soon arise in me.”*
  - Reject agreeable touch, which is *a dangerous way between all. It is the root which binds thought, for the instinct to touch is spread through the whole body.*
- **Avoid obstacles** (which compromise the purity of *dhyana*)
  - Avoid greed, the base of all sorts of vexations and disorders.
  - Avoid wickedness, the enemy of all happiness, the captor of good thoughts, the reservoir of injurious words.
  - Avoid laziness and sloth which can destroy the triple advantage of the present world (pleasure, riches, merits)
  - Avoid dissipation which damages the contemplating mind and regret which brings torture by fear.
  - Avoid doubt which opposes contemplation and gives rise to a lack of understanding of the teachings.

**Equally, it is said there are five dharmas to practise.**



- Zeal
- Observance of the precepts, a measured amount of food, unification of thought
- Memory applied to the joy of practising *Dhyana*
- Clear sightedness which helps us to see that the world of desires is an illusion whereas dhyana is inestimable.
- Fixed thoughts, that is to say, the capacity to keep the thoughts centered on an object ( concentration)

According to individual characteristics, some of these Dharmas, attitudes of the body as much as of the mind, are more difficult to practise than others. We need to approach them with the same attitude as the researcher who tries many possibilities in the face of a pandemic which has caused so much mental confusion. And as the Zen schools constantly emphasise, the spirit of *dhyana* supports all the acts of daily life, even the most dull, *carry water, chop wood, and when you have eaten, do the washing up.*

There is no awakening that is separate from the everyday commitment to serve the common good. To commit oneself firmly to the ideal that the bodhisattva's values propose, is to find once more the space for humanity, and to accept to challenge oneself each time an obstacle arises in the course of things. Nirvana does not exist outside Samsara.

What the world is in the process of discovering today has given rise to as much selfishness as altruism. To determine which priorities to bring into play, it is a good idea to sit down and influence one's future actions, from the space offered by *dhyana*. It is as if, in meditation, there is direct access to possible and generous situations. To manifest non-profit (*mushotoku*) is the universal response that each one should draw on in the heart of meditation. All the paramitas are activated in this stillness, this "simply sitting" with no expected rewards.

It is also coming back to consciousness free of all forms of dualist thought, realised in the practice of *dhyana*. This practice doesn't belong to anyone and has no end.

It is also to realise that what we identify with, a body and mind that change all the time, a despotic, conditioned 'me', is not us, and that our true identity cannot be affected by circumstances, phenomena and objects perceived by the senses.



Viable and durable solutions we are expecting for us and for all beings can only come from wisdom and the vision of *dhyana* : each thing, in its impermanence itself, has a reason to exist, its own place in the universe of illusion and awakening. The Buddhas teach, but each person is responsible for his or her own practice.

Let us sit down in peace and see what comes to us, with a gaze that is ready to accept, with kindness, compassion and gratitude.

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