

A stylized illustration of a person with short blonde hair, wearing a light blue t-shirt and pink pants, sitting in a meditative lotus position on a large, tan-colored rock. The rock is situated on the edge of a blue stream with white ripples. The background is a soft, yellowish glow with some faint green foliage on the left and right sides. The overall style is simple and peaceful.

Meditation Handbook

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Chin He

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Preface

by Rev. Heng Sure, Ph.D.,
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Although the authors of this small volume are Buddhist monks, our meditation instructions come with a wish to benefit all practitioners equally, regardless of faith, creed, or prior experience with meditation. Our goal is not to give you a new set of beliefs, but to introduce, in a few illustrated pages, the essence of meditation practice and to show you how to make it part of your life. You will find instructions suited for people of every religious or spiritual background, including people with no religious background. We will consider the project a success if we can awaken a joyful curiosity in the nature of the mind. We encourage you to find out what you can accomplish through turning your attention around and bringing your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind back home. Who meditates? Not long ago when Westerners thought of meditation we visualized solitary individuals beneath pine trees

on mountain peaks, or silent lines of figures on polished wooden floors, sitting while incense smoke drifts. Times change and nowadays you can see meditators in airport departure lounges, subways, laundromats, suburban dens, soccer fields, and factories.

Scholars say it is likely that Jesus meditated during his days in the desert: Sufis meditate to the sound of a sacred name. Jewish Kabbalah contains a variety of meditation techniques: contemplative Christians practice the Prayer of the Heart, and Centering Prayer, and champion athletes meditate.



Military officers, prison wardens, corporate executives, researchers and doctors, and astronauts are all looking and listening within.

Why has meditation gone mainstream? Two possible reasons are that: one, people are seeking an antidote to the disturbing effects of our fast-paced life-styles, and two, the ability to sustain concentration benefits activities from sports to studying, from relationships to child-raising. Slowing down and concentrating are two positive benefits of meditation for 21st century individuals.

Great Master Zhiyi, a sixth century monk, anticipated our current



understanding of the benefits of meditation fourteen hundred years ago when he said that meditation is not a method of achieving anything at all. It is peace and blessedness in itself.

Chan Master Xuyun, a twentieth century meditation master, revealed a goal of meditation for some advanced practitioners. He wrote:

"Meditation is a spiritual exercise, not a therapeutic regimen...Our intention is to enter Nirvana, not to make life in Samsara more tolerable."

We can see that meditation has both immediate and long-term goals. In the short term, it teaches every day virtues such as concentration, equanimity and patience. Long-term, meditation can call forth wisdom and compassion from the human heart.

Meditation is a democratic practice: anybody who sits regularly and patiently will gain benefits. Meditation is practical: we can directly experience our minds' thoughts and emotions.





Meditation is healing: sitting still we wake up to our mental habits and deeper patterns.

Meditation is ageless: it improves with practice over decades.

Kids meditate; elders meditate.

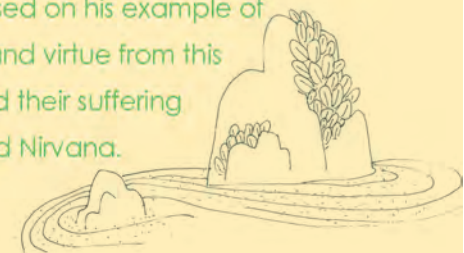
One could make the case that stillness is one of mankind's most evolved activities and a powerful antidote for delusion and chaos. Sitting still allows the senses to settle; we see further, we make connections that otherwise elude us. What's important rises, and the non-essentials vanish. Solutions emerge, and problems dissolve.

Meditation is a scientific experiment done by oneself in the laboratory of one's own body and mind, but its benefits extend beyond the individual. Meditation opens the heart and reveals our deeper relatedness to all beings. One who meditates becomes a better son or daughter, brother or sister, husband or wife, teacher or student. Likewise, the quickest way to deepen our stillness is to set our relationships on a solid footing.

Clearly meditation is not just an ancient tradition, it is a technology for the 21st century. Meditation recently gained advocates when

neuroscience researchers discovered that the best prescription for debilitating stress was not sleep and not medicine but meditation. This research brings meditation out of the realm of the mystical and engages a new realm of empirical knowledge and testable hypotheses. Meditators and brain researchers are becoming partners in the laboratory and in the Chan Hall.

Acknowledgements and thanks to Jeff and Sabrina Nelson and the Vegsource.com staff for inviting us to set forth our thoughts on meditation and presenting them to the Healthy Lifestyle Expo. Bhikshuni Heng Lung, Shramaneri Guo He and Upasika Yuhchirn Liang once again provided patient support and boundless enthusiasm in bringing this booklet into being. Dr. Martin Verhoeven and Upasaka David Rounds offered editorial wisdom. Finally, the late Chan Master Hsuan Hua (1918-1995) provided the inspiration to make meditation part of our lives. Based on his example of compassion we dedicate any merit and virtue from this work to all living beings: may they end their suffering and realize the liberation of Bodhi and Nirvana.



Where and When to Meditate

Meditation is essential to one's health and well-being.

Regular practice requires little effort,
but over time yields great rewards.

To begin, choose a place away from distractions
and a time free of interruptions.

Arrange a clean and quiet room, a space of your own.

A good time is before breakfast,
and at day's end (sunrise and sunset).

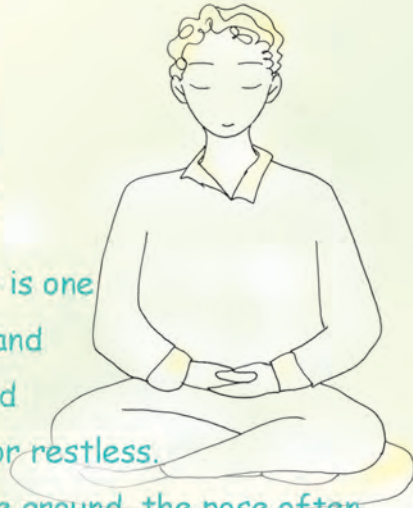
Or, if you prefer, join a local group that practices together.



Meditation Posture



A good meditation posture is one that allows you to be still and alert for a sustained period without becoming drowsy or restless. Sitting cross-legged on the ground, the pose often used to depict the Buddha in meditation, is the most traditional and widely used posture. If someone has physical limitations, he or she may use a chair with back support, or a meditation bench. If seated meditation is not possible, one can also meditate standing, walking or even lying down.



Before sitting, it is good practice to gently stretch the body.

If the weather is cold, cover your legs with a blanket during meditation but leaving your head uncovered helps keep you alert and clear.

After meditation, before standing up, rub and massage your legs until they regain their full strength.

Cross-legged Posture

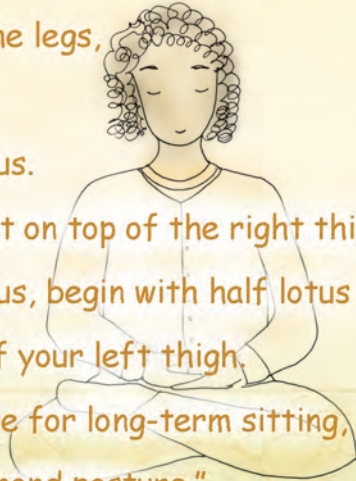
Spread a mat or folded blanket on the floor; place a cushion on the mat and sit on the front half of the cushion.

There are several ways of crossing the legs, from sitting with legs simply folded on the floor, to half lotus and full lotus.

To sit in half lotus, place the left foot on top of the right thigh.

To advance from half lotus to full lotus, begin with half lotus and then put your right foot on top of your left thigh.

Full lotus is the most balanced posture for long-term sitting, and for this reason is called "the diamond posture."



Cross-legged sitting, especially the full-lotus position, may seem difficult at first, but with perseverance and practice, it not only becomes easier, but feels most natural. Regardless of where you begin, eventually anybody can sit crossed-legged comfortably, even in full lotus.

Back & Head

Allow the spine to assume its full,
natural upright reach, as if your spine were aligned
from a thread attached to the top of your head.

With your back straight and upright,
and free of tension or muscular effort,
gently align the shoulders,
hips and ears along the same plane.

Relax the muscles of the face,
especially the jaw and the eyebrows.

Keep the jaws slightly apart and unclenched.





Eyes, Mouth, Hands

Keep your eyes slightly open.
Closed eyes induce sleepiness;
wide open eyes invite distraction.

Avoid staring at the tip of the nose, rather, look downward
at a 45 degree angle past the point of your nose
without focusing or straining your eyes.

Keep your tongue slightly curved,
with its tip touching the roof of your mouth.

Place the right palm on top of the left
with thumbs slightly touching, and rest them on your lap.

Another option is to rest the hands on the knees,
with palms facing either upwards or downwards.

This is the basic body posture for meditation.



Breath

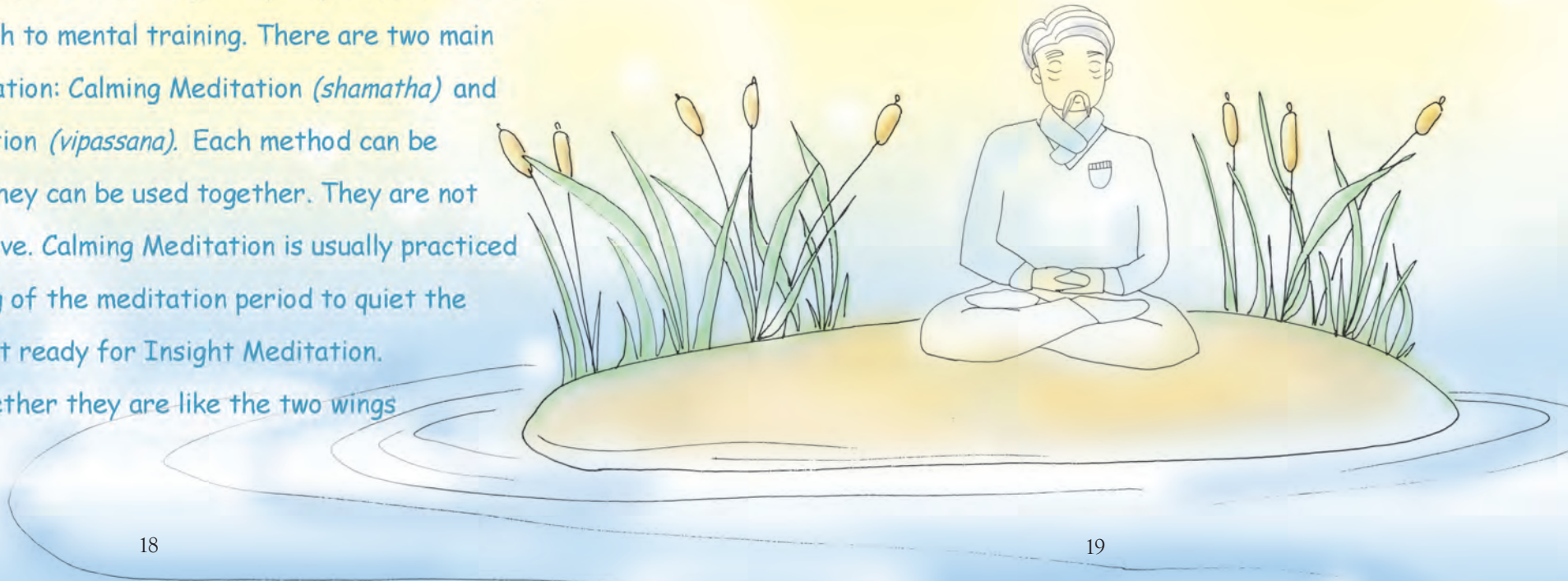
Once you are established in a comfortable posture, bring your attention to the breath. Take a few deep breaths, exhaling all tension away. Then breathe in and out naturally, without forcing, and always through the nose. Breathe with the diaphragm, letting it rise and fall naturally. Counting breaths can be an effective way to settle the mind at the beginning of the meditation period. As you inhale and exhale, count 'one.' Again, as you inhale and exhale, count 'two.' Continue counting up to ten breaths. Return to one and start again. When the mind wanders, simply bring it back to counting. Five to seven sets of breaths, counted from one to ten, should suffice to settle the mind and make it ready for the next step in meditation.



Mind Techniques

Most meditation techniques share common teachings regarding posture and breathing. They may differ, however, in their approach to mental training. There are two main forms of meditation: *Calming Meditation (shamatha)* and *Insight Meditation (vipassana)*. Each method can be used alone, or they can be used together. They are not mutually exclusive. *Calming Meditation* is usually practiced at the beginning of the meditation period to quiet the mind and make it ready for *Insight Meditation*. When used together they are like the two wings of a bird.

Other popular techniques of meditation include *Loving-Kindness (metta)*, *Visualizations* and "*Investigating a Meditation Topic*" (*hua-tou*).



Calming Meditation

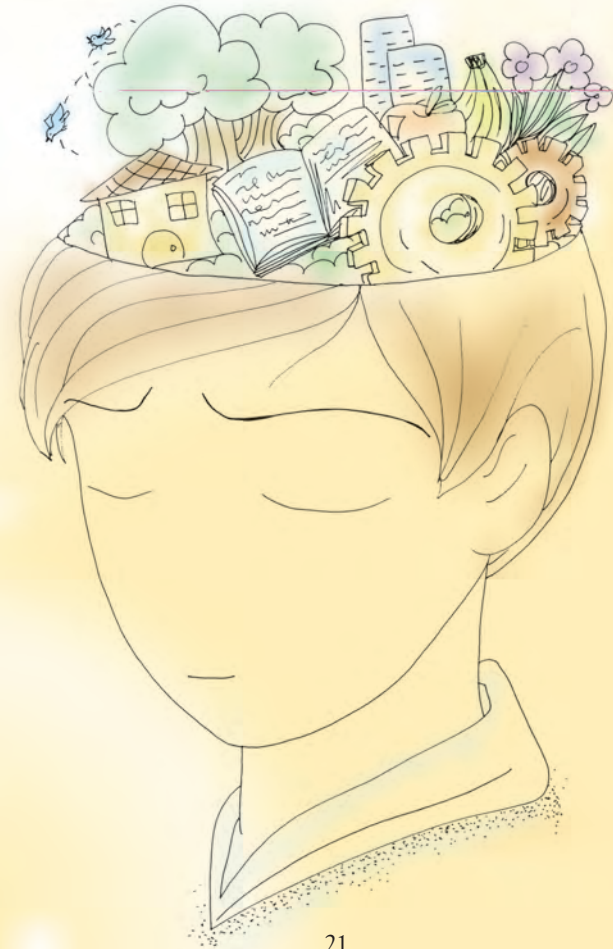
This technique aims to compose and clear the mind by bringing attention to a single point of focus.

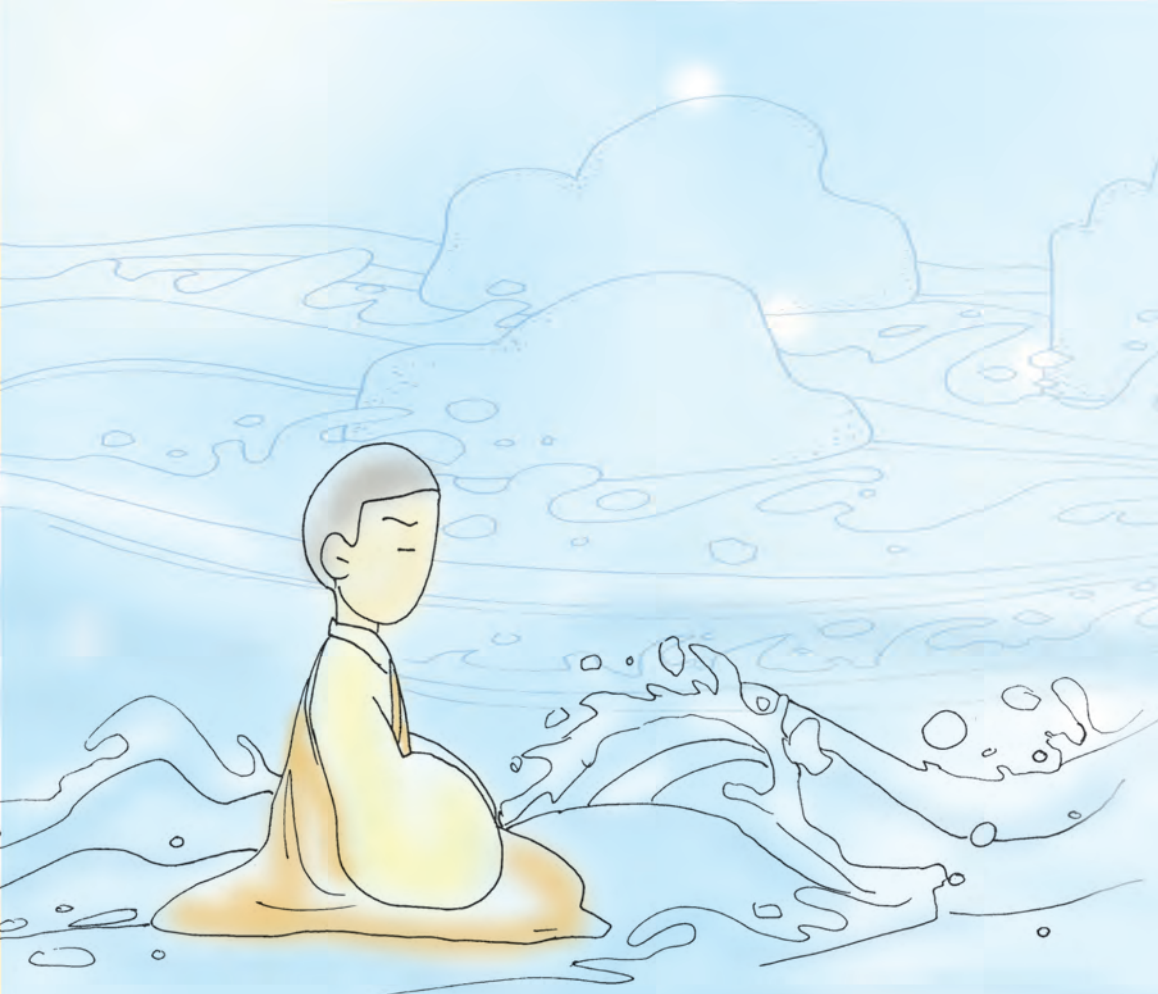
Specific meditation topics can be objects or points of focus, such as the breath, a sacred image, a rock, or silently reciting a mantra or sacred name, among others.

A common method for beginners is to watch the breath with one's attention located slightly behind the navel.

When we notice our thoughts wandering, we gently bring back our attention back to that spot.

The mind simply follows the rhythmic and subtle movement of the belly as it expands and contracts during each breath.





Insight Meditation

The goal of Insight Meditation is to witness with impartiality our thoughts, sensations and emotions as they rise and fall in the mind, simply letting that process happen without following or elaborating on them.

The method is to stay centered always in the here and now, fully alert and present.

As mindfulness develops, one is more focused and less easily confused by any situation.



Loving-Kindness

In "Loving-kindness" Meditation (*metta*), one directs positive thoughts and wishes, first to oneself, and then progressively to all beings in every direction. This contemplation can be extended to include family, friends, strangers and even enemies -- wishing all of them happiness and well-being. Seemingly paradoxical, when we share our merit, our own happiness and well-being does not diminish, but expands and deepens with this spiritual exercise.



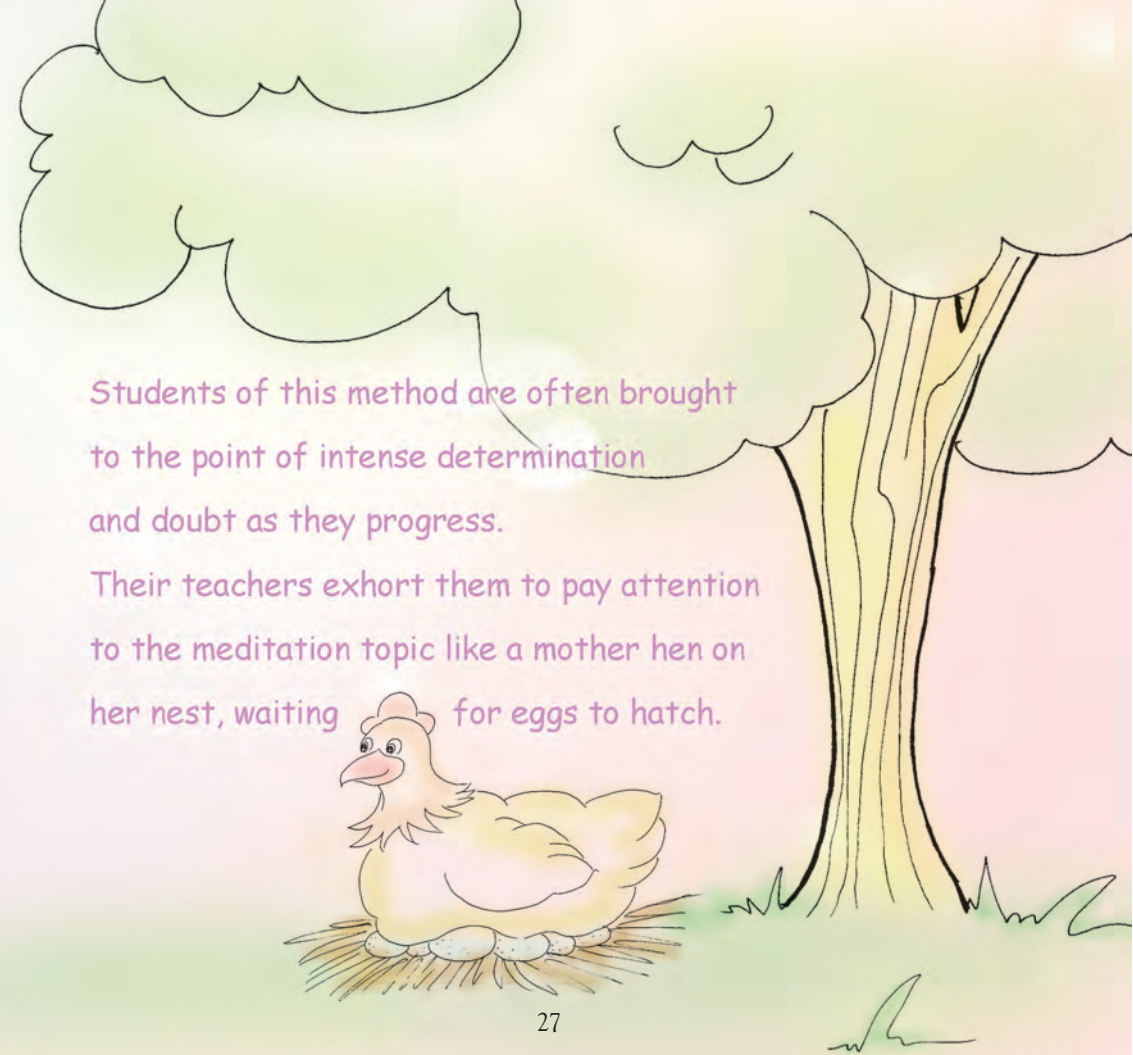
Investigating a Meditation Topic ("*Huatou*")

A more advanced mental exercise is the use of what in Chinese is called a meditation topic ("*huatou*," literally 'word-head'). It consists of looking into a specific enigmatic question, bringing it up for examination relentlessly until the mind, absorbed in the investigation, suddenly breaks through the limitations of language and ordinary thought.

One example of a common *huatou* is:

"Who is mindful of the Buddha?"

Or simply: "Who?"



Students of this method are often brought to the point of intense determination and doubt as they progress.

Their teachers exhort them to pay attention to the meditation topic like a mother hen on her nest, waiting for eggs to hatch.

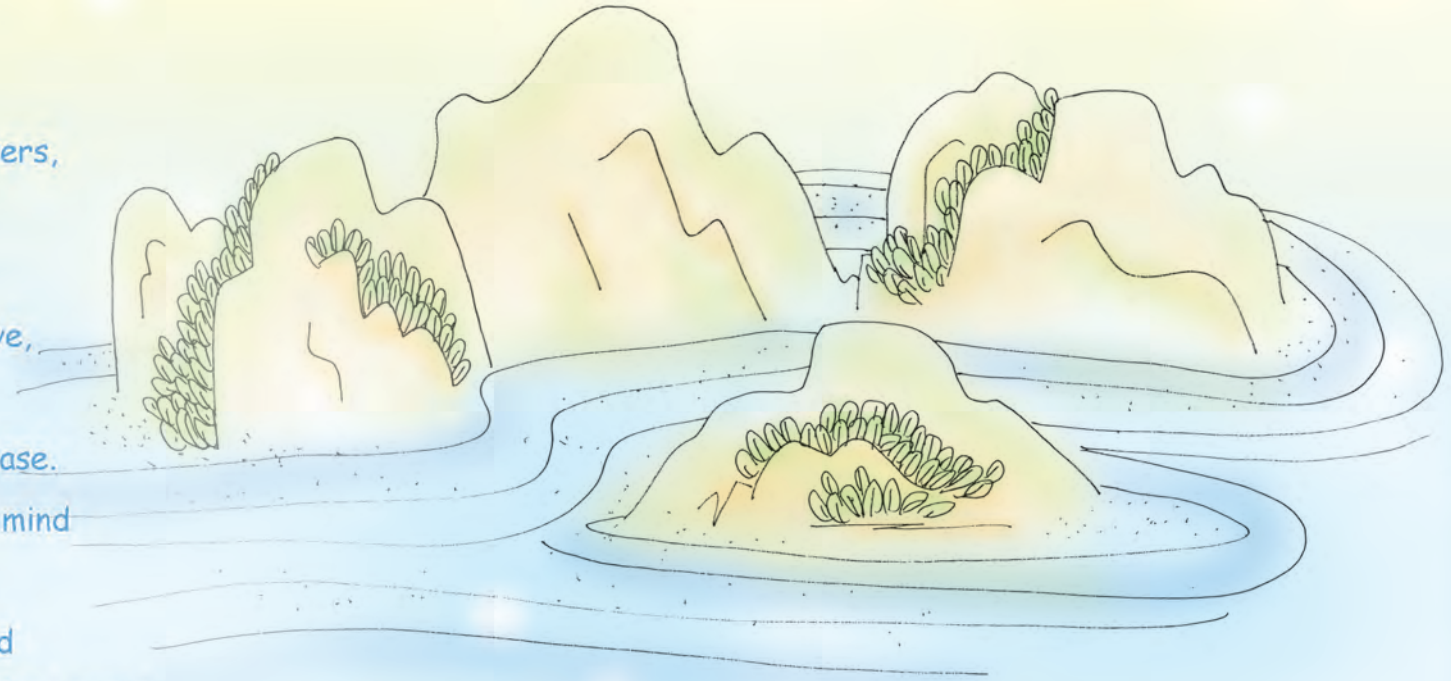
Concentration vs. Restlessness

Restlessness and difficulty in sitting is a common experience for beginners.

Without training, the mind drifts and scatters, like a frisky monkey in a tree, jumping from branch to branch.

Since the body and mind mutually interweave, a restless body reflects a restless mind and an unquiet mind makes the body ill-at-ease.

By repeatedly and patiently refocusing the mind on the topic of meditation, the “monkey mind” naturally quiets down and the body settles into a relaxed and stress-free state.



Patience with Pain

Most meditators initially encounter some degree of pain while sitting, usually in their legs and back. Unless one has a prior medical condition or has specific physical impairments, the pain that appears during meditation is temporary and harmless. Over time, as our practice matures, so does the unimpeded circulation of blood and energy (*qi* or *prana*) through our body. As this circulation increases, pain naturally subsides, and we will have more endurance to cope with it. Pain in meditation often reflects the body's natural purging of toxic blockage in the arteries and meridians.

Patience and perseverance are the keys to transforming pain. By neither fearing pain nor pushing it away, but simply holding steady one's concentration, all discomfort soon fades away.

This is why patience is so highly esteemed and extolled by meditation teachers. Patience is one of the paramitas, virtues that can cross over all difficulties and perfect spiritual development.



Alertness vs. Drowsiness

Once we learn a relatively comfortable posture, the most serious problem is no longer pain but drowsiness. Remember to keep your eyes slightly open when you meditate, even if you find it is easier to focus with them closed. If you avoid closing your eyes then you will not develop drowsiness.

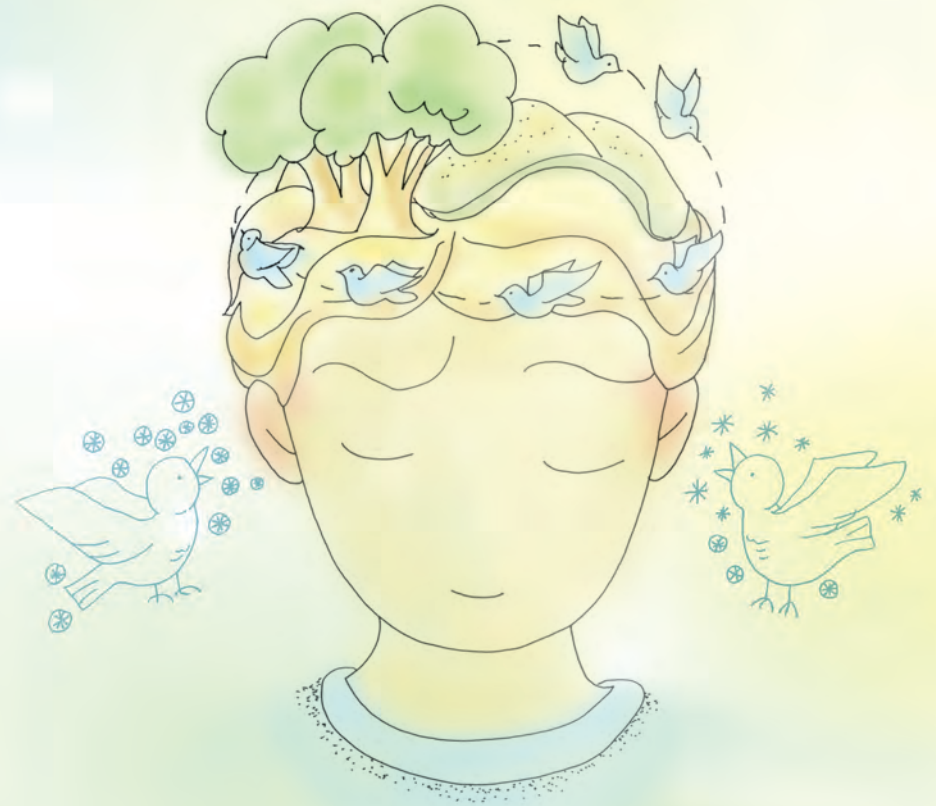
Our posture is on track when we are profoundly relaxed, without physical or mental tension, while at the same time we are present, alert and free of drowsiness.



Mental Disturbances

When our chattering mind falls still,
the contents of our psyche may come to light.
From time to time, longings, doubts, fears, fantasies,
or strong emotions both positive and negative
can rise to awareness.

Such experiences are perfectly natural;
they come and go like waves along the ocean shore.
Neither reacting to them, nor repressing them allows us a
third option: simply observing them as they come and go.
By calmly observing the rise and fall of all these
various states, we take away their power to sway us,
and eventually equanimity returns.



Special States

During meditation some people experience or seek for unusual physical and mental sensations such as intense bliss, or rapture, even clairvoyant or clairaudient perceptions, and so forth.

The ancient texts on meditation are quite clear about this: neither seek for nor cling to any altered state of body or mind.

They are all illusory and empty--

"like dreams, illusions, bubbles, and shadows."

If you can view them as illusory and neither fear nor anticipate any mental state, and always return to your meditation topic, then your practice will be unhindered and highly beneficial.

Meditation is its own reward.



Exercise & Healthy Habits

It is important to balance the stillness of meditation with movement that stretches the whole body.

Yoga, tai chi, or martial arts are beneficial to our well-being.

Stretching regularly will improve our meditation, make us flexible and massage our internal organs.

Five minutes of stretching a day enhances not only our sitting experience but the quality of our lives.

Consuming alcohol, drugs, tobacco, or any other addictive substances harms both body and mind, resulting in serious obstacles to progress in meditation.

Fogging the mind with substances delays wisdom, distorts perception and impedes clarity.

As we gain mental discipline through meditation, we will be able to naturally overcome addictive habits; "getting high" will gradually lose its allure.



Diet

Among the factors that influence meditation, diet may be the most important one.

Our physical health, emotional balance and mental clarity are intimately related to our eating habits. In general, a healthy lifestyle of regular exercise, a diet rich in fruits, grains, and vegetables, and reducing the sensory over-stimulation of TV is an integral part of meditation.

Meditation quite naturally fosters compassion because it dissolves the artificial boundaries between self and others, the human world and the natural world.

Others' well-being becomes the same as our own well-being; others' suffering becomes our own suffering.

Thus, as our compassion opens, we discover how meditation seamlessly carries over into all aspects of one's life.

A positive first step in this direction is to change to a plant-based diet.



Integrity

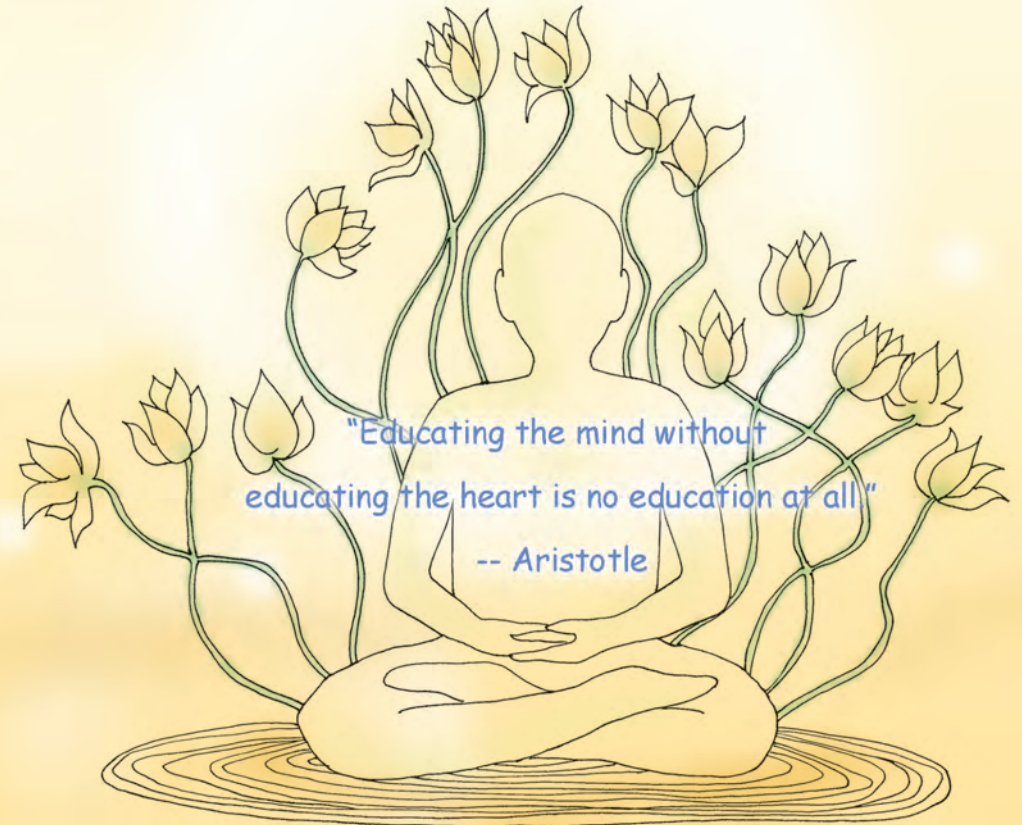
The quality of our meditation depends on what we do when we're not sitting, just as our everyday life reflects the effectiveness of our meditation.

An ethical life leaves the heart light and mind untroubled.

As a result, a deep stillness settles in once we cross our legs.

Clear conscience; clear mind.

The ancient formula for successful meditation thus remains unchanged: ethical goodness nourishes concentration, and concentration opens into insight.



"Educating the mind without
educating the heart is no education at all"

-- Aristotle

Meditation in Action

Meditation begins with formal sitting periods but naturally expands to every moment of our lives. Without even knowing it, our quiet and solitary practice touches the lives of others. As we become attuned to our deep heart's core, we unexpectedly discover a far-reaching interconnectedness that pervades everything and everybody in the world. With this simple exercise of stilling the mind in almost imperceptible ways, we gradually reconnect with the fundamental roots of our being--we come back to the intrinsic wholeness and harmony within our own minds, our relationships with other people, and the natural world. Meditation reveals to us what was always there: goodness and peace of mind that was with us all along. We perhaps forget it, or turned away from it, but it never left us. That is why this timeless practice of meditation is called "returning to the source."

As a wise ancient said,
"In this Way, the only motion is returning."





Dedication of Merit

May every living being,
Our minds as one and radiant with light,
Share the fruits of peace,
With hearts of goodness, luminous and bright.
If people hear and see,
How hands and hearts can find in giving, unity,
May their minds awake,
To Great Compassion, wisdom and to joy.
May kindness find reward,
May all who sorrow leave their grief and pain;
May this boundless light,
Break the darkness of their endless night.
Because our hearts are one,
This world of pain turns into Paradise,
May all become compassionate and wise,
May all become compassionate and wise.

Meditation is not a method of achieving anything at all.

It is peace and blessedness in itself.

-- Great Master Zhiyi (538 - 597)

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