

Seeing techniques

This article is an introductory summary of the teachings of Zen Master Thích Thông Triệt on the topic, mainly based on the oral teaching of Bhikkhuni Zen Master Thích Nữ Triệt Như given for the Fundamental Meditation Course. For a comprehensive in-depth understanding, the reader is encouraged to attend the complete nine-seminar teaching program and read the writings of Master Thích Thông Triệt that are being progressively translated into English.

Looking at darkness

Why look at darkness?

This technique has the capacity to treat insomnia, strengthen the immune system, and prevent cataracts and tumors (especially in the chest and the brain).

Practice steps

Turn off all the lights and block all external sources of light so that the room is in total darkness.

Then, relax your whole body, open your eyes to look at the darkness, and *just maintain awareness*. Practice for 15-20 minutes. When you start to feel sleepy and your eyelids become heavy, go to sleep. If you wake up after two-three hours, practice again in order to go back to sleep.

If you suffer from insomnia and practice this technique, you will be able to get sleep each time you practice. If you practice consistently, the production of the hormone melatonin by the hypothalamus will be regulated and this will help alleviate your insomnia.

Effect of practice

When we relax our body and use our eyes to look and *just maintain our awareness*, we activate ultimate seeing.

After activating ultimate seeing, the stimulus gets to the limbic system and activates the hypothalamus. The hypothalamus has several groups of nuclei, one of which generates melatonin. This hormone regulates the wake-sleep cycle and helps treat insomnia.

The looking-at-darkness technique is used primarily when we want to treat insomnia. However, as it stimulates our wordless awareness, it has also the effect of activating the parasympathetic nervous system, which releases acetylcholine which, in turn, regulates blood pressure and the cholesterol and sugar blood levels, reduces stress, and generates a feeling of peacefulness.

Looking at the sunlight

Practice steps

In this practice, we look at surfaces hit by the sun's rays, such as a lawn, a paved surface or a wall, but not directly at the sun.

We practice by looking at sunlight for about 15-20 minutes. We will get better results if we stay out under the sun and look at the sunlight around us, than if we stay inside and look out at the sunlight. In countries where there is no sunlight during winter, we can replace sunlight by artificial light, i.e. we stay in a well lit room and look at the light's reflection on a surface.

In this practice, we look at sunlight together with practicing meditation, that is, we relax our whole body and *just maintain our awareness*. If we stay out under the sun and read, walk or talk on the phone etc., our eyes will receive a large amount of sunlight and we will experience good results. However, we will get better results if we practice looking at sunlight together with practicing meditation.

When we practice looking at sunlight, we remove our sunglasses but may keep our spectacles.

Those who suffer from diabetes should not practice this technique. Those who suffer from insomnia should only practice the looking-at-darkness technique, and not both looking-at-darkness and looking-at-sunlight techniques.

Effect of practice

When we practice looking at sunlight, the stimulus hits our eyes and then reaches other parts of the brain. Before it gets to

the thalamus, it passes by the pineal gland that is located just underneath the thalamus. There, it triggers the release of the neurotransmitter serotonin.

Serotonin has the capacity of improving the wellbeing of our body. It helps increase our energy level, generate a feeling of being able to work without needing rest, and generate a positive and active mood and a good appetite. As a result, serotonin helps treat depression as well as migraines.

If we know of people who may suffer from depression, we may invite them for a walk on the beach, or to have a picnic out under the sun. These activities will improve their condition as they result in the release of serotonin.

The pineal gland also synthesizes serotonin into melatonin. Melatonin is a hormone that alleviates insomnia, strengthens the immune system, and prevents cataracts and tumors, especially those affecting the chest and the brain. Melatonin is normally secreted at around 3am. This is why people working on night shifts may disrupt their melatonin producing cycle, causing health issues.

When we practice looking at sunlight together with practicing wordless awareness meditation, we activate ultimate seeing, which then activates the parasympathetic nervous system, resulting in the release of acetylcholine. We will experience the same health benefits as when we practice similar techniques, such as regulated blood pressure, regulated cholesterol and sugar blood levels, reduced stress and a peaceful mind.

Practicing the first flash of awareness

When we look up, the first flash of awareness that occurs before any thoughts have arisen, before any differentiating has taken place, is seeing with the wordless awareness mind. This seeing recognizes everything instantly and as a whole, while there is no silent inner talk in the mind. At that moment, our mind is totally silent.

We practice by learning to recognize when silent inner talk arises in our mind. As we progress from the inner flash of awareness, differentiating and comparing start to occur. One technique to stop this from happening is to have the tip of our tongue touching the base of our lower front teeth. When we are aware that the tip of our tongue touches the base of our lower front teeth, the mind is not projected towards anything else.

When we name an object in front of us, or when inner talk arises in our mind, our mind becomes agitated, because the false mind starts to operate. The differentiating consciousness and the thinking mind move into operation. When our mind is agitated, we will differentiate between right and wrong, beauty and unattractiveness, correct and incorrect. From there, happiness or sadness, like or dislike and sorrow will result. When we do not name the object, the false mind stops. When it stops, the wordless awareness mind becomes immediately present.

We can practice by looking at an object, *recognizing very clearly* what it is *without naming* it in our head. When we practice, we need to be able to feel the difference between *awareness* and *inner talk*. We can practice by closing our eyes and opening them, immediately recognizing the state of our mind in the first flash of awareness. The first flash of awareness that comes before any thoughts have arisen is the awareness of the wordless awareness mind.

When we look in front of us in a general way, without focusing on any objects, without noting any particular images, we are experiencing the instant awareness that sees the whole picture with wordless awareness. In contrast, when we focus on an object, we see this object clearly, but other objects less so, which means we are experiencing knowing with the consciousness.

Looking at the space in between

Looking at the space in between is looking at the space between us and an object. We practice by pulling our focus to the space between ourselves and the object, while keeping the tip of our tongue touching the base of our lower front teeth.

This is one of the easiest ways to achieve a silent mind, because there is no naming when there is no object, and the consciousness does not get into operation. As a result, what remains is the awareness of the wordless awareness mind.

Zen Master Thích Thông Triệt gave this technique another, more poetic, name: looking at the many dimensions of space. This means looking at space, seeing all of its characteristics, but as it is only empty space, there is no name and nothing to talk about. As there is no object, the consciousness cannot move into action and our mind is silent. In contrast, when we start to give names, we will add comment about colors, shapes, look etc., and expand on other characteristics and qualities of the object and how we feel about them. Our false mind will then arise.

This technique is easy to practice. We can practice it anywhere, anytime. It has the capacity to quickly quieten our mind.

Once we are more experienced, we can go a step further and look straight at an object without naming anything. This step is

more difficult. Looking at the space in between is easier.

Looking at a glance

This technique consists of opening our eyes, keep the tip of our tongue touching the base of our lower front teeth, and darting the eyes to and fro, seeing everything while not silently saying anything. This technique helps us prevent inner talk from arising, because before the mind has time to start talking silently, our eyes have already moved on to something else. When there is no inner talk, our mind is at peace and our awareness is clear.

This technique is also very easy to practice; it can be done anytime, anywhere. Five minutes each time will suffice.

General considerations regarding samatha meditation techniques

Please refer to the article “Four meditation practices” for more details about samatha meditation.

When we practice samatha meditation, we must “*constantly maintain our awareness*”. For example, when we listen to the bell, we are aware that we are listening to the bell; when we relax the tongue, we are aware that we are relaxing the tongue.

When we practice samatha meditation, we also practice “*just knowing*”. Just knowing is maintaining the first flash of awareness when our senses come into contact with an object. This is the awareness of the wordless awareness mind. When we stop there, it is called maintaining the awareness, or just knowing. If we are not able to maintain awareness, thinking, differentiating, comparing and reasoning will come into action. “Just knowing” is maintaining the initial flash of awareness, full stop. “Just knowing” is different to focusing only on the one thing that we are doing, which we may call “only knowing”, and which is sometimes called “mindfulness”.

We should practice maintaining awareness in all our daily activities, and not just when we are sitting in meditation. In so doing, we maintain our awareness of the *here and now*. This is also the awareness of the wordless awareness mind.

When we practice just maintaining awareness, we activate one or several functions of our wordless awareness mind, i.e. ultimate seeing, ultimate hearing, ultimate touch and ultimate cognition. As a result, we feel a sense of peacefulness; the parasympathetic nervous system is activated and triggers the release of a number of biochemicals, first acetylcholine and then others such as dopamine, serotonin, melatonin, insulin, etc. These biochemicals help us feel light, alert, joyful, as well as regulating our blood pressure and our cholesterol and blood sugar levels, and improving our memory, resulting in positive health benefits.

