

Buddhist meditation practices: anupassanā, samatha, samādhi, paññā

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.

Summary

During his 45 years teaching the dhamma, the Buddha has adapted the level of his teaching to the innate spiritual capacity of his audience. Later, his teaching was grouped into four main meditation practices called anupassanā meditation, samatha meditation, samādhi meditation, and paññā meditation.

Anupassanā Meditation

Người Trung Hoa dùng chữ Quán để dịch ra nhiều từ có nghĩa khác nhau trong tiếng Sanskrit/Pāli, như các từ *Anupassanā*, *Bhāvanā*, *Parikṣā* và *Vipassanā*.

There are four Pāli words describing spiritual practices that have similar meanings, to the extent that they are translated into the same Chinese/Vietnamese word “Quán”. These terms are: *anupassanā*, *bhāvanā*, *parikṣā* and *vipassanā*. Here we will present the practice called *anupassanā* (S: Anupaśyanā) which can be translated into English as “contemplation”, “investigation”, “examination”. *Anupassanā* is made up of two words. “Anu” means “repeated many times”, “occurring again and again”. “Passanā” is the noun related to the verb “passati” which means “seeing with the eye of wisdom”. Therefore, *anupassanā* means looking repeatedly at worldly phenomena to recognize their true nature.

The true nature (V: tánh) of worldly phenomena cannot be recognized by the normal eye as the normal eye can only see their appearance (V: tướng).

When the Buddha was enlightened, he recognized that the true nature of worldly phenomena consists of suchness, indivisibleness, identicalness, specific conditionality, change and transformation, emptiness, equality and illusion. He also recognized the Three Characteristics of Worldly Phenomena: impermanence, suffering, and no-self.

When we study the Buddha’s teachings, reflect on them, observe the world around us to reconcile with them, and practice them in our daily life, we are practicing anupassanā meditation. In this practice, we use our consciousness to listen, understand and differentiate right from wrong; we use our thinking mind to reflect; we use our intellect to reason and predict. Therefore, anupassanā meditation still uses language and the pre-frontal cortex. However, the Buddha’s teachings have started to change our perspective of life and our intellect has awakened to spirituality. Our mind has started to become objective and quiet, and we have started to recognize our true nature and that of worldly phenomena. This is why the Buddha has said that, at this stage, we have “entered the holy stream” (V: nhập dòng thánh or nhập lưu).

At this stage, our thoughts are purified, our words carry kindness, and we like to do good deeds. Mental defilements, old habits, fetters and underlying tendencies have started to lose their noxious energy, and therefore we have started to generate good karma and transform our old karma. Our spiritual insights still involve language at this stage, but they relate to transcendental subjects.

When we practice samādhi meditation, we activate our wordless awareness mind which generates new discoveries. This is called spontaneous wisdom. We realize things that we have never known or learned before. This is also called paññā wisdom. The insights that we gain through anupassanā meditation are not paññā wisdom as they still lack creativity and come from following the Buddha’s teaching.

Anupassanā meditation is the same practice as that which the Buddha called “the three study methods” (V: tam học or tam tuệ): study (P: suta-mayā, V: văn), reflect (P: cinta-mayā, V: tư) and practice (P: bhāvanā-mayā, V: tu).

Samatha Meditation

In Pāli (and Sanskrit), *samatha* means “serenity”, “tranquility”, “calmness”, “quietness of heart”. Samatha is often used together with *bhāvanā* which means “practice”. Therefore, *samatha bhāvanā* means the practical techniques to achieve a quiet, silent, serene mind.

The techniques commonly used to achieve a quiet mind are practical techniques such as listening to the bell, relaxing the

tongue, walking meditation, looking at the light, looking at darkness, looking with just a glance, looking into the distance, looking at the space in-between. The common characteristics of these techniques are:

- They impact on one or several of ultimate seeing, ultimate hearing, and ultimate touch
- The objects have no content and this helps keep the mind objective and not attached
- They involve seeing, hearing and touching without any verbal chatter arising in the mind
- The practitioner should maintain and lengthen wordless awareness during practice.

The samatha meditation techniques are simple and have an immediate effect on the mind. Zen Master Thích Thông Triệt has compared them to “snacks” as they are easy to execute; to “firefighting” as they can quickly quieten the mind like firefighters putting out a fire; and to “instant noodles” as they can quickly fulfill a need like instant noodles can alleviate hunger. When the state of serenity and quietness is still unsteady and does not last long, we call it samatha meditation. When it is solid, stable and long-lasting, we call it samādhi meditation.

One important element of samatha meditation is “just knowing” (V: chỉ biết). “Just knowing” is maintaining the first flash of awareness when the senses come into contact with the object. This is the awareness of the wordless awareness mind. “Just knowing” is not the same as “only knowing”. “Only knowing” means knowing only the task that we are performing and not letting the mind wander to other thoughts. “Only knowing” requires paying attention, it requires an effort to stay focused on the task, and therefore it involves the will to achieve and the ego. On the other hand, “just knowing” is the wordless awareness. It is also the right awareness of the Noble Eightfold Path: “awareness without differentiation”, “awareness without the mind being agitated, disordered”, “awareness without the mind getting attached to objects of the six senses”, or “awareness without thinking good or evil”.

Another important element of samatha meditation is to practice in all daily activities. Buddhism calls this practicing in “the four positions” (V: bốn tư thế or bốn oai nghi), the four positions being walking, standing, lying and sitting. When we practice constantly and steadily in the four positions, our mind is constantly serene, verbal chatter does not arise and the six senses do not get attached to objects. When we practice in the four positions, we live constantly in the here-and-now.

Practicing samatha meditation in the four positions means also practicing in all circumstances of life, especially in situations where we are criticized, scolded, praised, honored, or when we see attractive people. One Zen Master urged: “See like the blind, hear like the deaf” (V: Thấy như mù và nghe như điếc). See like the blind, hear like the deaf does not mean seeing nothing, hearing nothing. On the contrary, it means seeing and hearing everything very clearly, but not reacting to the sight or sound, not letting emotions arise, and therefore to the ordinary person we may appear as if we are blind or deaf.

The Buddha is called the “silent sage” (P: muni). “Silent” here means that the mind is devoid of inner verbal chatter, it does not mean the absence of spoken words. Wordless awareness is awareness without any verbal chatter in the mind. It shows outwardly as a calm and serene demeanor. It does not mean not saying anything while the mind is awash with verbal chatter. In the same vein, comparing the mind of the enlightened person with the mind of a baby can be misleading. A baby does not yet know worldly matters and its mind is innocent and pure. However, mental defilements, old habits, fetters and underlying tendencies lie dormant in it. On the other hand, the enlightened person knows everything very clearly, but his/her mind does not get attached.

Samādhi Meditation

use the word samādhi throughout this text. The Buddha, at times, defines the state of samādhi as the “unified mind” (P: cetaso-ekodibhāva, V: tâm thuần nhất), meaning “the mind in which there is only awareness and nothing else in it”. Elder Moggaliputta Tissa, who presided over the Third Buddhist Council sponsored by King Ashoka in the third century BC, defined samādhi as the “one-pointed-mind” (P: citta-ekagattā, V: nhất tâm). This led to some translations of samādhi as “concentration” or “mindfulness”. These translations are not consistent with how Zen Master Thích Thông Triệt views samādhi. Master Thích Thông Triệt defines samādhi simply as wordless awareness. It does not involve paying attention, or concentrating on an object. Consequently, when we practice samādhi meditation, our mind is totally relaxed, and this activates our parasympathetic system. This, in turn, reduces stress and other psychosomatic illnesses that are created by a disturbed mind.

The Buddha went through four stages of samādhi during his process of spiritual realization and enlightenment.

The first stage is called “preliminary samādhi” (V: sơ định). The Buddha called it “samādhi with inner talk and inner dialogue” (V: định có tâm có tứ). The Buddha attained this stage by saying silently: “I know I am breathing in, I know I am breathing out” while sitting in meditation. The focus of this stage is “awareness with inner talk”. The effect is to shut down the habit of generating inner verbal chatter of the thinking mind, intellect, and consciousness. During this stage, the Buddha experienced a feeling of vitality, comfort, serenity and elation. Awareness with inner talk is an effective foundation step to silence the false mind.

The second stage is called by the Buddha “samādhi without inner talk and inner dialogue”. During this stage, he maintained

a very clear awareness of the breath coming in and going out, whether it was long, short, deep or shallow, but this awareness happened without any words arising. It was a silent awareness. His mind became clear, still and very aware of all sensations from his body. A feeling of joy and elation enveloped his whole body, but, as he recounted, *“pleasant feelings arose and remained in me, but they did not influence me”*. When we are in a state of samādhi without inner talk and inner dialogue, the feeling of peace comes from our wordless awareness mind, which generates an uninterrupted flow of wordless awareness. Inside the mind, the language formation process becomes completely silent. What remains is a wordless “single thought awareness” which is an uninterrupted and steady flow of wordless awareness.

The third stage of samādhi is called by the Buddha “letting go of elation, dwelling in equanimity, attaining full and clear awareness” (V: ly hỷ, trú xả, chánh niệm tĩnh giác). During this stage, the Buddha’s mind was no longer attached to any feeling of joy and pleasure, although this feeling still existed. He dwelt in a state of equanimity, since his mind was no longer attached to any objects. He attained “full and clear awareness”, i.e. he had a clear and complete awareness of the internal and external worlds without the mind being affected. At that point, not only the language formation process but also the thought formation process became silent. This was caused by the feelings and sensations aggregate and the perception aggregate becoming silent. His mind was tranquil and detached. At that stage, his awareness took the quality of awakening wordless awareness.

The fourth stage is called immobility samādhi. During that stage, the Buddha’s mind stayed deep in stillness without any interaction with objects. The energy of his wordless cognitive awareness shone through. The body process became silent, in addition to the language formation process that had already reached that state in the second stage and the thought formation process in the third stage. The silence of the body process is epitomized by the breath which automatically stopped at intervals, a phenomenon called “pure breathing” (V: tịnh tức). At that point, the differentiation between the subject who is aware and the object of awareness no longer exists. What remains is a flow of cognitive wordless awareness, real and steady. The ego totally fades away. In this state, new and prodigious energies and discoveries progressively emerged in the clear and pure mind of the Buddha.

The two main techniques for practicing samādhi meditation are Awareness of the Breath and No-Talk. The awareness of the breath technique was used by the Buddha when he reached spiritual realization and enlightenment. The No-Talk technique was developed by Master Thích Thông Triệt as a straight path to silencing the inner verbal chatter. The two techniques start with the “using inner talk to silence inner dialogue” step to progress to wordless awareness and finally to wordless cognitive awareness.

No-Talk is an order given to the brain to stop the inner verbal chatter. We need to practice this technique assiduously, because our brain has the ingrained habit, continuously repeated since birth, of verbal chattering. The No-Talk technique is a method to train our brain cells to acquire a new habit, the habit of silence.

Paññā Meditation

Paññā meditation consists of two levels. The lower level is called “insight” (P: vipassanā, S: vipaśyanā, V: tuệ minh sát or tuệ trí). The higher level is called “wisdom”, or, for greater clarity, “paññā wisdom” (P: paññā, S: prajñā, V: huệ bát nhã).

When we study and practice the Buddha’s teaching, we acquire insights. Although an insight is a form of intellect, it is higher than the common intellect and is often called transcendental intellect or awakened intellect. The Buddha considered that those who have started to acquire insights have “entered the holy stream”. For these people, mental defilements, old habits, fetters and underlying tendencies have been isolated and are unable to rise and dominate the mind. The mind is therefore purified. However, insights come from studying and practicing the Buddha’s teaching and still lack a creativity characteristic.

When we practice samādhi meditation together with paññā meditation, we activate our potential for enlightenment, and realizations of things that we have never known before suddenly occur to us. This potential for enlightenment is an innate capacity of every human being. When our wordless cognitive awareness stays steady over long periods of time, spontaneous wisdom or paññā wisdom bursts forth.

A paññā meditation technique for beginners is the “Not Labeling Objects” technique. When we look at someone, our perspective about this person is often distorted by our subjectivity, biases, fixed opinions, prejudices, self-interest and egotistical desires. When we look at a person without labeling, we look at him/her objectively just as he/she currently is. In this way, we are not affected by emotions, do not like or dislike, or feel sad, anxious, fearful or angry. We are not attached to the object and our mind is serene and at peace. When we apply the Not Labeling Objects technique, we are still using language, but we have changed our perspective of life, we don’t get attached, and we look at things and events objectively just as they currently are. Progressing further, when we practice Not Labeling Objects while keeping our mind silent of verbal chatter, we are practicing samādhi and paññā meditations in conjunction, and will experience completely novel ideas and knowledge. This is commonly called intuition.

Conclusion

In this text, we have covered the four meditation practices that students of the Fundamental Meditation Course should learn and practice. In more advanced courses, we will discuss more transcendental topics that are central to the Paññā school of Buddhism.

