

## What is Sunyata Meditation

Sunyata Meditation, developed by Zen Master Thích Thông Triệt, combines the essence of the Buddha's process of cultivation, realization and enlightenment, Early Buddhism, Theravāda Buddhism, Developmental Buddhism, Zen Buddhism and its meditation techniques, and findings from neuroscience. It also incorporates Master Thích Thông Triệt's own spiritual realizations into a profound yet clear and effective practice of meditation.

As early as 1982, when Master Thích Thông Triệt had his first spiritual realization, he vowed to explain Buddhist meditation in simple terms that go straight to the essence of the teaching, without getting lost in the jungle of academic and obscure terminology frequently found in meditation commentaries. Based on his own strenuous years of meditation practice, which saw him looking like an 80-year-old man when he was in his 40s, after a few years of incorrect practice, and then back to looking healthy and radiant after just a few months of correct practice, Master Thích Thông Triệt also vowed to inquire into the effect of meditation on the brain, creating such a profound impact on the physical well-being of the practitioner.

Master Thích Thông Triệt chose the Early Buddhism tradition, which is Buddhism from the time of the Buddha until approximately 100 years after his death, as the foundation of his Sunyata meditation school. The processes of cultivation, realization and enlightenment of the Buddha are the guiding light and aim of the student practitioner. These processes represent the essence of Buddhist meditation and are founded upon Awareness (P: Pajānati, V: Niệm Biết). Master Thích Thông Triệt analyzed in detail the four stages of the Buddha's samādhi meditation. In the first stage, the Buddha used a single thought of awareness of his breath. This first stage is called samādhi with inner talk and inner dialogue. In the second stage, the Buddha achieved silent awareness of breathing in and breathing out. This stage is called samādhi without inner talk or inner dialogue. In the third stage, the Buddha achieved awakening awareness in which he had a full and clear awareness without getting caught in that awareness. This state is called "full and clear awareness", or "letting go of elation and dwelling in equanimity". Finally, the Buddha achieved wordless cognitive awareness with bare awareness of the environment. This state is called immobility samādhi. The state of bare emptiness that the Buddha reached in his fourth stage of samādhi is the "tathā-mind", which is a state of solid stillness where there is only cognitive, empty, clear and wordless awareness.

Master Thích Thông Triệt considers the tathā-mind as the quintessence of Buddhist meditation, the key to developing our potential for enlightenment. He aspires to teach students a direct path to experiencing the tathā-mind. In 1982, Master Thích Thông Triệt had his first realization that "stopping the silent verbal chatter in the mind leads to samādhi". No-Talk, the extinguishing of verbal chatter became the cornerstone of his meditation technique. After a full year retreat in 2011, he developed and taught a body of meditation techniques he called "The Seven Steps to the Tathā-Mind", which took the student through a gradual process from the false mind, to the holy mind and finally to the tathā-mind.

When Master Thích Thông Triệt saw the impact that correct or incorrect meditation practice had on his own body, he had the intuition that the mind and meditation practices directly affect the brain. He thought that when one follows the correct meditation practice, certain biochemical substances are secreted that make one healthy, happy and radiant. On the other hand, when one follows the incorrect meditation practice, other biochemical substances would be secreted leading to premature aging. Since then, he vowed to spell out the scientific and neuroscience underpinnings of meditation. Upon arriving in the United States in 1992, he pored over various neuroscience books. He was able to explain how the false mind affects brain structures that activate the sympathetic nervous system, which in turn has an adverse effect on the body. On the other hand, the true mind affects brain structures that activate the parasympathetic nervous system that has a positive impact on the body.

He also had a dream of using modern brain imaging technology to find brain structures that correspond to the different stages of meditation taught by the Buddha, especially the location of the four functions of ultimate seeing, ultimate hearing, ultimate touch and ultimate cognition. But it was not until 2007, when causal conditions were finally met, that this dream became a reality. From 2007 to 2013, with the help of researchers at the University of Tübingen, Germany, he had his brain scanned while in meditation and non-meditation using fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) and EEG (electroencephalography) technologies. As a result, the three minds taught by the Buddha - false mind, holy mind and tathā-mind, were found to originate in different areas of the brain. The language pathway that feeds the false mind, made up of the thinking mind, intellect and consciousness, the inner talk area, the inner dialogue area (as taught by the Buddha) could also be assigned different locations in the brain. The location of ultimate seeing, ultimate hearing and ultimate touch was clearly identified. Through images taken when he was in the state of wordless cognitive awareness, we now know that the tathā-mind or wordless cognitive awareness mind is a function of the precuneus located in the parietal lobe.

Through neuroscience and the brain imaging program, Master Thích Thông Triệt can show the effect of meditation on our body, mind and spiritual insight. He demonstrates how these relationships really play out when one follows the correct meditation practice, as well as when one follows the incorrect practice. This demonstrates that meditation is truly an experimental spiritual science. It is a science, since it is grounded in factual and objective evidence; it is a spiritual science, since its object is to develop our spiritual insight; and it is experimental, as it is based on the experiences of the Buddha and

Zen Patriarchs, which are repeatable by all who follow the prescribed practice. Sunyata meditation is truly about training our neuronal cells to acquire a new habit, the habit of silence and stillness.

Master Thích Thông Triệt taught that internalizing the tathā-mind is one of the paths that lead to enlightenment. The key is to establish a stable state of wordless cognitive awareness. This requires the student to clearly understand the role of cognition in meditation. Wordless cognitive awareness is the only path that leads to the internalization of key transcendent Buddhist themes, notably suchness, emptiness and illusion. Internalization means that the student and the theme of the meditation theme become one. In this way, the theme of suchness is inherent in one's cognitive wordless awareness, and can be evoked wordlessly. Wordless cognitive awareness also leads to the development of intuition, premonition, creativity, innovation, as well as benevolence, compassion, empathetic joy and equanimity, and is the foundation of paññā wisdom. In order to establish the cognition of a transcendental theme, we need to gain a clear understanding of the theme by developing a compressive cognition map. We then need to repeatedly practice in order to etch this map into our memory and store it as non-verbal compressive cognition. We can later evoke the cognition of the topic while in a state of wordless awareness. This is why Master Thích Thông Triệt identified cognition as the most powerful key to successfully practicing meditation.

Finally, for Master Thích Thông Triệt, the main aim of meditation is to serve society and create harmony. First, meditation creates harmony within the mind and body of the practitioner, leading to physical and mental wellbeing and spiritual growth. Second, meditation creates harmony within the family unit, the community and wider environment by promoting an objective perspective on life, seeing things objectively *just as they are*, by weakening the noxious energy of the ego and mental defilements and by fostering benevolence, compassion, empathetic joy and equanimity. Last, for those who want to go further on the spiritual path, Buddhist meditation is the gate that leads to the end of suffering, enlightenment and liberation from the cycle of deaths and rebirths.

The Sunyata meditation curriculum consists of three courses totaling nine seminars, starting with the Fundamental Meditation Course (one seminar), through to the Intermediate Meditation Course (four seminars) and to the Buddhist Psychology-Advanced Meditation Course (four seminars).

