

Introduction to Ch'an Meditation



CloudWater Zendo
The Zen Center of Cleveland

WHAT IS CH'AN?

Ch'an is a way of looking at one's own true, enlightened nature. We all have the capacity to come to a very direct understanding of what we really are and what our relationship to the universe around us truly is if we will just look. Ch'an is a way of looking, a way to focus our attention on the truth of our own life.

A famous saying describes this practice as "A finger pointing to the moon." The moon's brilliance is there for all to see and the finger points the way. The finger itself is merely a way, a path, a vehicle for us to get at the truth. In essence Ch'an has nothing to do with rites, rituals and so forth; it is concerned with getting at the truth. By cultivating awareness we allow the mind to settle into its natural state. From there we begin to get a glimpse of our true relationship with the world.

ORIGINS OF CH'AN

Ch'an can be traced to the teachings of both Taoism and Buddhism. Taoist classics such as the *I Ching* and the *Tao Te Ching* described the nature of change and the cyclical characteristics of change. The term Taoism comes from the Chinese word *Tao* (pronounced "Dow") which means "Way," referring to the Way of the universe. Over 2500 years ago in India, the Buddha taught the Middle Path to Enlightenment. The word Buddha means "One Who Has Awakened," in this instance, awakening to the true nature of the universe. The Buddha taught that our life is filled with dissatisfaction and discontentment because we attach ourselves to a false notion of the way things really are. If we were able to abandon our attachment to things, he taught, we would be able to become one with all things, which is our true nature, our "Buddha-Nature," our inherent capability to awaken to Universal Truth. The Buddha taught that through meditative practice one may discover how the habituated mind can affect the way we see things. A thousand years later, the meeting of Buddhist and Taoist thought would establish the foundation for the practice of Ch'an as we know it today.

BODHIDHARMA



Bodhidharma was an Indian Buddhist scholar who visited the court of the Chinese Emperor Wu of Liang in the sixth century CE (Common Era), following which he spent nine years meditating in a cave near the fabled Shaolin Monastery. Bodhidharma is considered to be the First Ancestor of *Ch'an*, a Chinese pronunciation of the Sanskrit word *Dhyana* which refers to Meditative Concentration, but which the Chinese interpreted as meaning "awareness." Ch'an taught people how they could use meditative practice to see their own nature more fully. By Bodhidharma's time, Taoist thought was over 3000 years old and was woven into the fabric of Chinese society. Taoist and Buddhist scholars had intermingled for several hundred years, and many books looking at Buddhist teachings in a Taoist way had been written. The two systems were considered very complimentary.

THE SPREAD OF CH'AN



Shaolin Monastery

By the seventh century CE, significant numbers of Ch'an monks were gathering in organized monasteries to practice and study. For the next several hundred years, Ch'an continued to grow and mature in China. The period of the T'ang Dynasty (7th to 10th centuries CE) is considered to be the golden age of Ch'an. In the late 12th and early 13th centuries, Ch'an was imported by Buddhist monks from Japan and was known as *Zen*. After some initial struggles Zen began to grow rapidly in Japan, 21 of the 24 lines of Ch'an having been brought there. Well-known teachers such as Eisai, Dogen, Ingen and Bankei solidified the Zen tradition in Japan over the next 700 years.

Both Ch'an and Zen came to the west in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In North America, Alan Watts, a former English clergyman, helped push Zen into the national consciousness. He coined the phrase "Beat Zen" to describe the kind of Zen practice which had become fashionable on the West Coast in the 50s. By this time, small Zen groups were forming and the number of practitioners was increasing. Watts' most famous book, "The Way of Zen," is credited with bringing many people to Zen practice. In the 60s, Zen centers on the West Coast were flourishing. The first Zen monastery in the U.S. was the San Francisco Zen Center, founded by Shunryu Suzuki Roshi who authored the Zen classic, "Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind." Both Ch'an and Zen monasteries and satellite meditation groups began to spring up all over the country.

CH'AN IN CLEVELAND

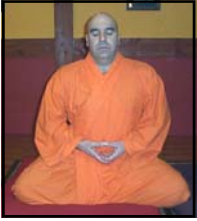
What began as a small meditation group in Lakewood, Ohio in 1992 has blossomed into CloudWater Zendo, the Zen Center of Cleveland. The Zendo occupied a small storefront facility in 1994, then a larger facility in Fairview Park from 1995 to 2000. In the summer of 2000, the Zendo moved to its current location on Cleveland's west side. Zendo activities now include group meditation, Ch'an retreats and intensives, classes on Buddhism and meditative arts, and classes in T'ai Chi and Chinese Internal Arts. The Zendo also operates affiliate meditation groups in Canton, Akron and Pittsburgh, as well as meditation groups at two Ohio correctional institutions.



SEATED CH'AN MEDITATION

To practice seated Ch'an meditation, one must be able to sit in a balanced position that allows the free and natural flow of breath. If the body is balanced the mind will be balanced as well, since the two are really not separate. One may do seated Ch'an meditation on a round meditation cushion, on a meditation bench, or on a regular chair.

A round cushion may be used in one of two ways: sitting on the flat part of the cushion or straddling the cushion, which is in an upright position like a wheel. The straddle method is very similar to sitting on a meditation bench.



For most people who want to attempt a cross-legged sitting position on a flat cushion, the "Burmese" posture is very reasonable. The dominant leg is crossed to the inside, while the other leg is crossed to the outside. Both legs are on the floor or the square mat, with the knees touching down. The ankles are never crossed, nor does one leg rest on the other. A small support cushion may be used if one has difficulty getting the knee to touch down.

In the "Quarter Lotus" position, the top of the outside foot is placed on the calf of the inside leg. Be very careful, as this position may cause the inside leg to fall asleep due to pressure on the calf. In the "Half Lotus" position, the top of the outside foot may be placed atop the inner thigh with the sole of the foot pointing upward. In the "Full Lotus" position, the tops of both feet are placed, soles up, on the opposite thighs. This position is considered to be the most stable position for seated meditation.



[IMPORTANT NOTE: Never, under any circumstances, attempt to sit in a Half Lotus or Full Lotus position unless you have first done a series of stretching exercises taught to you by a qualified instructor such as a Yoga teacher or Personal Trainer! You risk doing serious damage to muscles, ligaments and tendons if you attempt a Full Lotus posture without being stretched out properly. Remember, a gradual, consistent program of stretching exercises may enable you to attain a Half Lotus or Full Lotus position in time. NEVER, EVER try to force your way into a cross-legged sitting position!]

Stretching is extremely important when attempting to attain a comfortable, stable sitting position of any kind. You should always do some kind of gentle stretching both before and after you meditate in *any* seated posture. Exercises such as T'ai Chi or Yoga are very helpful in this regard.

SITTING ON A MEDITATION BENCH OR STRADDLING A CUSHION



Using a bench or straddling a round cushion requires one to straighten the upper body in the same way one does when sitting on the flat part of a cushion. The rules of posture, hand position and breathing are the same as indicated below.

SITTING ON A CHAIR

The use of a regular chair requires that one sit forward on front half of the seat with the feet flat on the floor about shoulder-width apart. If one has severe back problems it is reasonable to use a round cushion to support the small of the back, but this is only recommended for those who have physical difficulties. All others should attempt to sit on the front half of the seat. The rules of posture, hand position and breathing are the same as indicated below.

POSTURE

A balanced posture insures that one's breathing is slow and even and that one's natural bodily energy flows easily. The head should be held erect, but not stiffly, atop the body. Don't try to sit up as straight and tall as you can, as this can lead to back pain. To straighten the back, simply move the navel forward a few inches, supporting the vertebrae from beneath. Place the tip of the tongue behind the top of your front teeth at the gum line. Tuck the chin in slightly. The gaze gently rests on a point no more than three feet in front of you on the floor. The eyelids hang about halfway down the eyeballs. Don't squint, but don't close the eyes entirely either. *Relax the shoulders!* This allows you to breathe naturally

THE HANDS

One way for beginners to balance the hands is to place them, palms up, on each thigh. Place the flat part of the thumbs over the tips of the index fingernails. Allow the other three fingers to come together in a gentle curve with no space between them.



A more traditional hand position involves what is known as "quieting the dominant hand." Place the inside edge of the little finger of your dominant hand against the abdomen; the palm faces upward. Place the other hand, palm up, on top of the dominant hand. Now place the tips of the thumbs together lightly, as if you are holding a large egg in your hand. The point at which the thumb tips touch should be at the level of your navel. The thumb tips do not touch the body. Adjust the hands as needed to maintain this position.

BREATHING

The breaths are slow, deep, gentle, and absolutely silent. Breathe gently through the nose into the abdomen instead of the chest cavity, allowing the abdomen to gently inflate in the in-breath and deflate on the out-breath. Breathe into the abdomen, but don't try to see how much breath you can cram into it. Then gently release the breath back through the nose.

WATCHING THE TAN-T' IEN

Place your attention on the spot that's two finger-widths below the navel, known as the Tan-t'ien. Keep your attention gently but firmly focused on this spot as you breathe in and out. Whenever thoughts, sounds, sensations or combinations of the three take your attention away from this spot, simply bring your attention back to the spot *every time this occurs*. Remember that there are only two things to do: stay on the spot and return to the spot.

Thoughts may be especially distracting since they come and go so quickly and may return again and again and again. But even if you must re-center your attention constantly, that's all right. You are learning how to calm

and harmonize the mind as well as how to recognize distractions and return to a state of mindful concentration. In Ch'an practice you really cannot make a "mistake," since it's simply a process of staying and returning, so there's no such thing as "great" Ch'an practice or "bad" Ch'an practice. Just Ch'an practice.

WALKING MEDITATION

The practice of walking meditation has two purposes: it balances the quiet act of sitting with a slightly more active form, and it gives practitioners a chance to stretch their legs out. The walking pace itself is slower than normal, yet not extremely slow. The body from the waist to the top of the head is in the same position as it is when sitting, with the chin tucked in slightly and the eyes slightly downcast, head resting comfortably atop the spinal column.



The focus of your concentration during walking should be the *entire body*. Simply observe the entire act of walking, from the point where your feet touch the floor to the top of your head, as your body moves around the Zendo. Remember to bring your attention back to the walking body whenever anything takes it away.

The hand position for walking practice is as follows: with the dominant hand, gently grasp the thumb of the non-dominant hand as if you were grabbing a hammer. Allow the fingers of the non-dominant hand to fall across the clasped fingers of the dominant hand. Relax your shoulders, let the arms drop straight down, and place the thumb of the dominant hand against the navel, then rest the knuckles of the dominant hand against the abdomen.

