

# PRESENT MOMENT



# PRESENT MOMENT

Shi Fa Liang





# Forward

It has been nine years since the book “Present Moment” was published.

In this second edition, in addition to some adjustments, the contents were furnished with more precise explanations.

**Long live the Dharma.**

Shi Faliang

Year 2020



# Forward

(First Edition)

Buddhism was founded more than 2,500 years ago, when nature played a significant role in the then agricultural society. We have since progressed to a vastly different age today, when internet and cloud technologies are common place. However, people in both eras face a common issue, which has been confronting us all along but cannot be resolved - the issue of death.

From the standpoint of Buddhism, the issue of death can be dealt with from the viewpoint of faith or wisdom. The teachings of Chan Dharma help us cultivate the ability to face death by the wisdom approach.

The contents of “Present Moment” are formulated based on two major dharma practices of the wisdom approach, i.e. the Four Foundations of Mindfulness practice that is still widespread among Buddhist countries along the Southern route of propagation, and the Chan practice of no-thoughts advocated by Huineng that was once most popular along the Northern route of propagation (China). I have been fortunate to reside in a country where there is religious freedom, and the teachings of various schools of Buddhism are allowed to flourish. Thus, when I travelled to the countries of origin to study teachings of the various schools, I was able to be selective in my learning, which is key to the completion of this work.

In today’s world where education is widespread, we are fortunate to be able to learn from the availability of the myriad

amount of information and the exchanges among the various schools of thoughts. In the study of Buddhism, we need a systematic method congruent with the modern way of learning. As a small contribution to the spreading of the Dharma, my writing of the "Present Moment" serves to meet this purpose. In addition, the "Schematic Diagram of the Present" in the book is kept as simple and concise as possible, as a convenient tool for the propagation of the Dharma.

In conclusion, it is my wish that the "Present Moment" can be a catalyst of some sort to induce more works in this area for the benefits of all learners of Buddhism.

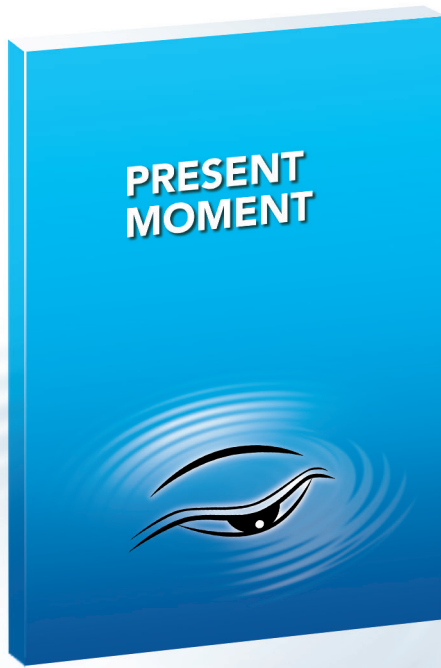
**Long live the Dharma.**

Shi Faliang

Year 2012





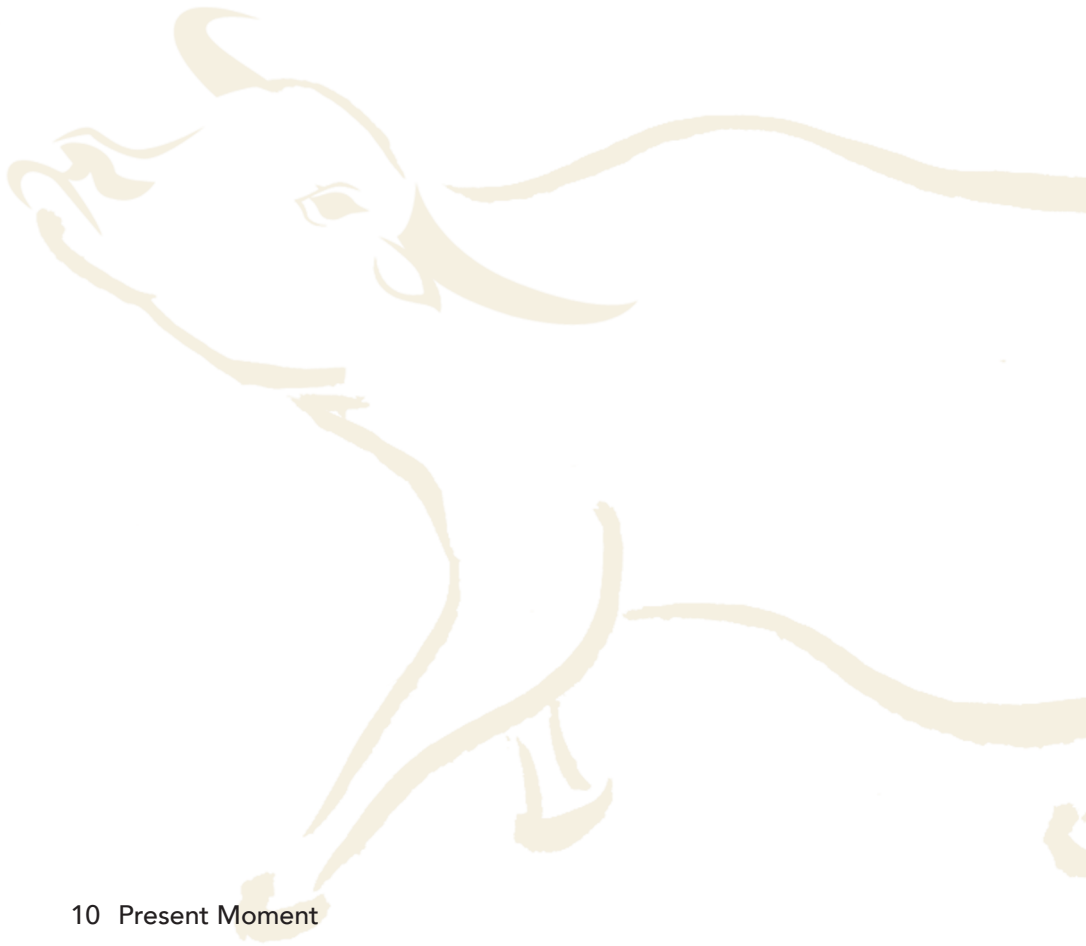


## **An Interpretation of the Cover Design**

The cover of the book depicts an eye in the ripple. The ripple refers to the thoughts in our mind, and the eye represents our awareness. In totality, the picture conveys the following message: "Even as we are generating thoughts, our awareness can still exist."







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# Preface

A Buddhist practitioner would be most regretful if he had missed the theme of his learning after spending much time and efforts. It would be like sailing in the ocean without a compass and become directionless. If it is over a prolonged period, a monk or a nun would forget his or her original motive of renunciation, and a layperson would lose his original passion of cultivating the Buddhist practice. As such, "*Present Moment*" has, throughout the whole book, made "awareness" its central theme, so that it would not lose its direction along the way and confuse its readers.

How to go about reading and understanding the "*Present Moment*"?

Anchoring on "awareness", understand the "four principles" of frankness, simplicity, peacefulness and dignity;

Anchoring on "awareness", link the four components of the "four prayoga" of giving and offering, prostration and repentance, generating bodhicitta, and maintaining awareness;

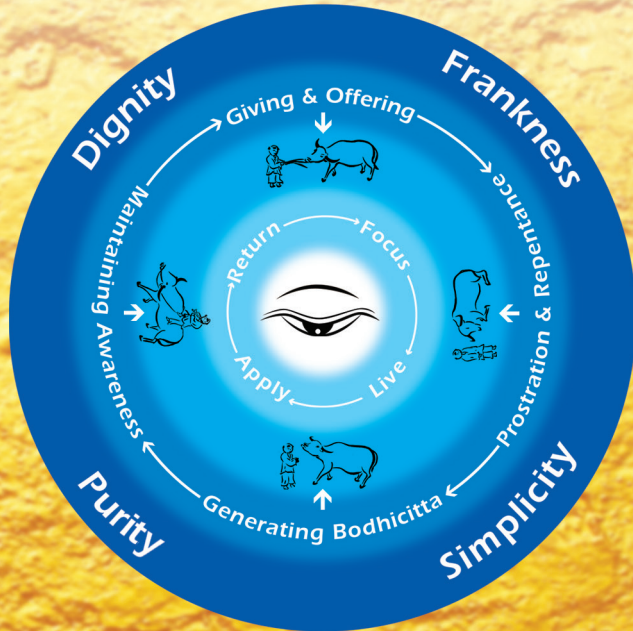
Anchoring on "awareness", practise sudden awakening through nurturing the ox, purifying the ox, transforming the ox, and mastering the ox of the "four ox diagram";

Anchoring on "awareness", connect the "four reminders" of focusing on the present, living in the present, applying the present, and returning to the present ; and

Anchoring on "awareness", scrutinize and explore "present" - the nucleus of "*Present Moment*".

While the contents may stretch from the extremes of simple to complex, superficial to profound, and gradual to sudden, none of them is ever removed (separable) from "awareness".

# Schematic Diagram of the "Present"



# The Four Principles

Principles refer to the guidelines upon which a person's thoughts, speeches and actions are based on. The "four principles" of frankness, simplicity, peacefulness and dignity do not set out the method of cultivating the Buddhist conduct, but are the requisites of a Buddhist practitioner. A practitioner's life is enriched if he embraces the "four principles".

In the "*Present Moment*", the "four principles" is positioned at the lowest level in the schematic diagram. But we should not ignore or overlook it, taking it to be the lowest form of the Dharma. Like the earth, although it is below our feet, it is the mother of all rivers and oceans, the foundation upon which tall buildings stand, and a witness of numerous events in the history of mankind. We should not look down upon mother earth just because it is at the lowest level.

## **1. Frankness**

Be honest and true to ourselves. Be sincere and genuine in dealing with others. Do not cover up our wrong doings. Do not flatter others.

## **2. Simplicity**

Eat, dress, and live simply with little entertainment. Avoid vices and quarrels. Keep thoughts simple, and maintain a peaceful and alert mind.

## **3. Purity**

Externally, keep away from evil or malicious deeds, analyse and understand the nature of greed, lust, reputation, power and struggle. Internally, live in our awareness and experience its characteristics of luminosity, peacefulness, innocence, sensitivity and pliancy.

## **4. Dignity**

Maintain dignity with calmness and clarity in our bodily actions. Free our mind from attachments, feel at ease and develop loving kindness and compassion. Be meticulous in the cultivation of the Buddhist practice with the ability to have in-depth analysis of the Dharma. Work hard in the learning of the Dharma with good understanding of its applications. In so doing, achieve fineness, precision, and perfection without impediments.



# The Four Prayoga

The four prayoga refers to the four expedient ways to accumulate merits, purify our conducts, expand our magnanimity and develop our concentration power. They are: "giving and offering", "prostration and repentance", "generating bodhicitta", and "maintaining awareness".

## 1. Giving and Offering

"Giving and offering" is to give "goodness" to other sentient beings. While the aim is to counter our greed and attachments, we would also be able to build good relationship with others and accumulate fortune and blessings. As a practitioner, we should practise it daily.

There is no substantive difference between "giving" and "offering". If the object given is of high value, such as Buddhist scriptures or Buddha statues, or the recipient is an elder or someone highly respectable, the act of giving is referred to as "offering".

On the other hand, if the object given is something quite common, or the recipient is a junior, a subordinate, a weak or sick person, or an animal, then the act is termed "giving". There are three ways of practising giving, viz. giving of material wealth, giving of dharma, and giving of no-fear.

### a. Giving of material wealth

Material wealth can be divided into internal wealth and external wealth. External wealth refers to material things such as money, valuables, clothing, food, land and houses. Internal wealth refers to

matters related to our body, such as organs, blood, and labour. The giving of material wealth is the giving of external wealth and internal wealth.

## **b. Giving of dharma**

The “giving of dharma” can be divided into giving of mundane dharma and supra-mundane dharma. The former refers to the worldly knowledge, the skills of making a living, and intellectual guidance; while the latter refers to teachings to attain liberation such as the Four Noble Truths. The giving of dharma is the giving of mundane dharma and supra-mundane dharma.

## **c. Giving of no-fear**

“No-fear” means to have no fear. The “giving of no-fear” is to let sentient beings to be in the state of no fear. Giving of no-fear can be carried out in two ways: firstly to help sentient beings removed from fear and uneasiness; and secondly to keep them from the fear of being harmed when they are with us by observing the precepts ourselves.





## 2. Prostration and Repentance

What is repentance? As stated in the *Platform Sutra*, repentance is to be aware of our past misdeeds and not to commit them again in future. In other words, it is to admit mistakes and to rectify them. By way of prostration and repentance, we accomplish the aim of admitting mistakes and rectifying them through our bodily action of prostrating to the Buddha and Bodhisattvas. A common practice is to prostrate to the "Eighty-eight Buddhas".

**"Prostration and repentance" has the following requisites:**

### a. Confess to the Buddha

To confess to the Buddha is to divulge our shortcomings and misdeeds before the Buddha and Bodhisattvas. Our mind is like a depository. When there are more worthless things than valuable things in the depository, its value is diminished. Thus we ought to be aware of the amount of worthless things in our mind, which is why we confess to the Buddha. How to know whether the contents in our mind are of value or not? Quite simply, when our mind associates with the ten unwholesome actions, i.e. killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, slandering, rude speech, foolish babble, greed, hatred and ignorance, we have stored worthless things.

## **b. Admit own mistakes**

After confessing to the Buddha, we have to admit our mistakes and face them squarely. If we admit our own wrongdoings but still think that the opposite party errs more, then it only shows that we dare not or are not willing to repent. The logic is as follows: "He has to face his wrongdoings on his own, and you have to face your wrongdoings on your own. It is his business to have done wrong, and it is your own business to have done wrong. He cultivate his practice and you cultivate yours." As the saying goes, "Each knows when he is full when each has his meal; and each has to settle his death on his own".

## **c. Vow to correct mistakes**

Why vow to the Buddha not to commit the misdeeds again in future? This is because we need strength to turn a new leaf. However, why is it that often we are not able to make good even we have confessed to the Buddha, admitting and willing to rectify our wrongdoings? This is because we commit unwholesome actions due to the push of the force of our afflictions. Hence, we need a greater force to overcome the urge to do evil, and that is to make a vow before the Buddha. Thus, we make the following vow to the Buddha and Bodhisattvas,  
"I vow to liberate boundless sentient beings,  
I vow to eradicate the inexhaustible afflictions,  
I vow to learn the immeasurable Dharma practices,  
and  
I vow to realise the unsurpassed Buddha Way"



#### **d. Practise virtuous acts and avoid evil deeds**

Once taken a vow, the next step is to follow up with action. While we must not perform unwholesome acts, we should endeavour to perform virtuous acts. In the cultivation of the Buddhist conduct, besides accumulating merits through the conduct of virtuous acts, we should also learn to eliminate incorrect views and bad behaviours, as they would otherwise destroy the good merits accumulated. This is similar to the early removal of weeds in the cultivation of vegetables, otherwise the young shoots would be destroyed. Thus we have to practise virtuous acts and avoid evil deeds in our daily life, abiding by the ten wholesome actions, i.e. avoidance of killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, slandering, rude speech, foolish babbles, greed, hatred and ignorance.

### 3. Generating Bodhicitta

To generate bodhicitta is to search for our awareness and have the desire to attain enlightenment from the bottom of our heart. There are two types of bodhicitta:

#### a. Bodhicitta based on specifics

In addition to aspiring to attain Buddhahood, one also undertakes to save all sentient beings and help them attain Buddhahood. Like the great vow of the Earth Store Bodhisattva – I shall not attain Buddhahood until the hell is empty, similar vows will help transform one from a narrow-minded person with attachments to someone who is magnanimous and constantly striving to upgrade oneself.

#### b. Bodhicitta based on emptiness

All sentient beings are born with the Buddha nature which needs not be cultivated. Thus, Patriarch Huineng said, "Our original Buddha nature is pure. All we need to do is to put our own Buddha nature to work to attain Buddhahood." This concept of each of us comes with the Buddha nature conveys a very important message - to attain Buddhahood, one needs to explore inward deeply.

Whether it is "bodhicitta based on specifics" or "bodhicitta based on emptiness", both are necessary building blocks in the process of cultivating the Buddhist conduct.



## 4. Maintaining Awareness

To maintain awareness is to maintain the state of being aware with our awareness at all times throughout day and night. It can be achieved through the following methods:

### a. Chanting Buddha's name

Pick the name of a Buddha or a Bodhisattva and recite it silently in your mind. Whether you are walking, standing, sitting or lying down, your mind must hear the name clearly.

### b. Counting "1"

As you exhale, count "1" silently in your mind. You may adopt any posture, but your mind must hear the count of "1" clearly, and you should feel the warm exhaled air meeting the upper lip.

### c. Reciting a mantra

Recite a mantra silently in your mind, such as "om mani padme hum". You may adopt any posture, but your mind must hear the mantra clearly.

### d. Reciting a sutra

Recite silently in your mind a short sutra, such as the Heart Sutra or the Sutra on The Eight Realisations. You may adopt any posture but your mind must hear the recited sutra clearly.

### **e. Being aware of bodily action**

Pay attention to the action of your body, your hands and legs, and your head. Maintain the state of being aware of your bodily action.

“Maintaining awareness” is to cultivate our strength of mindfulness. With the strength of mindfulness comes the power of concentration.



御牛圖  
日夜持明  
玄高玄低  
若問功德  
騎牛自在  
喜悠悠  
妙不加  
玄不  
何處  
有



# The Four Ox Diagram

There are two ways to cultivate the Chan practice – the gradual method and the sudden method. The four ox diagram is an explanation of the four prayoga with the sudden method. “Giving and offering” of the four prayoga corresponds to “nurturing the ox” in the four ox diagram, “prostration and repentance” corresponds to “purifying the ox”, “generating bodhicitta” corresponds to “transforming the ox”, and “maintaining awareness” corresponds to “mastering the ox”.

Giving and Offering



Maintaining Awareness



Prostration and Repentance



Generating Bodhicitta





# 1. Nurturing the Ox



*In practising the prayoga of giving and offering, we let go of greed, hatred and ignorance. Where are the merits? In letting go the three poisons, we realise the state of no-desire.*

The first picture is entitled "nurturing the ox". "Nurturing" encompasses the meanings of both rearing and educating. In the picture, an ox herder feeds the ox with a bunch of grass. Here, the act of the herder feeding the ox represents the prayoga of "giving and offering", meaning uncovering one's intrinsic awareness and dwelling in it through the prayoga of "giving and offering".

The prayoga of "giving and offering" emphasises the act of giving and offering. Superficially, the act of "giving and offering" seems to accumulate fortune and blessings. However, it also trains our mind to be accustomed to "willing to let go" instead of "reluctant to let go". The reason that laypersons are not able to realise their awareness through the sudden method is due to their attachments, i.e. "reluctant to let go".

Why the need for "nurturing the ox"? "Nurturing the ox" emphasises the realising of awareness through the sudden method. Once we allow our mind to be accustomed

to “willing to let go” through giving and offering, it is no longer a problem to discover our intrinsic awareness (the ox). This is the deeper meaning of “giving and offering”.

To a practitioner who has discovered his awareness, the next step is to, anchoring on the awareness, let go his attachment to form, sound, smell, taste, touch and thoughts (greed, hatred and ignorance). At this point, if we are willing to let go our attachments, we would be able to experience the state of “there is nothing in the first place”, our original form, propounded by Patriarch Huineng.

In the training of the Chan school, the requirements are to, internally, realise awareness through the sudden method; and externally, let go of all things (let go of the attachment to form, sound, smell, taste, touch and thoughts).

“Nurturing the ox” is equivalent to the generosity paramita of the six paramita.

### **Verses for “nurturing the ox”:**

*In practising the prayoga of giving and offering, we let go of greed, hatred and ignorance. Where are the merits? In letting go of the three poisons, we realise the state of no-desire.*



## 2. Purifying the Ox



*In practising the prayoga of prostration and repentance,  
we purify our body, speech and mind. Where are the merits?  
In purifying the three karmas of body, speech and mind,  
the true Buddha protects us.*

The second picture is entitled “purifying the ox”. Here, “purifying” refers to purifying the body and the mind. The ox represents the awareness of sentient beings (the intrinsic nature, the Buddha nature). The ox kneeling with the head bowed represents the prayoga of “prostration and repentance”, meaning the discovering of one’s intrinsic awareness and dwelling in it through the prayoga of “prostration and repentance”.

Among the four prayoga, the prayoga of “prostration and repentance” emphasises the act of prostration and repentance, targeting the repentance of specific mistakes or wrongdoings. On the other hand, “purifying the ox” emphasises the discovery of our innate awareness (the ox) through the process of prostration and repentance, representing a higher level requisite than the prayoga of “prostration and repentance”. This is as what the Sixth Patriarch Huineng has said in the chapter on “Repentance”

in the *Platform Sutra*, “Good knowledgeable ones, anchoring on our intrinsic nature, we should purify our mind with each of our thoughts at all times.”

In performing “prostration and repentance”, it is important that we experience the following two key aspects:

**a. The body is the body, the awareness is the awareness**

Watch (feel) our body attentively. When we are bending forward, we are aware that we are bending forward. When we squatting downward, we are aware that we are squatting downward. When both of our hands are touching the floor, we are aware that both of our hands are touching the floor. When our head is touching the ground, we are aware that our head is touching the ground. All we do is to watch (feel) our body with great clarity. During the process, sense diligently that the body is the body, and that the awareness is the awareness. There is a “gap” between the two.

**b. The thoughts are the thoughts, the awareness is the awareness**

Clearly be aware of each thought generated, and sense diligently that the awareness is the awareness”, and thoughts are thoughts. There is a “gap” between the two.

The emphasis of purification in “purifying the ox” is to purify, among the three karmas of our body, speech and mind, the karma of our mind. At this stage,



we are not speaking of eradicating unwholesome thoughts to achieve purification, but to realise that behind the arising and cessation of thoughts, there exists an “awareness” that is neither coming into being nor vanishing. (Here, the “neither coming into being nor vanishing” of awareness should be viewed in relative to the arising and cessation of thoughts). Hence, anchoring on our awareness, we should be cognizant that our thoughts possess the characteristics of impermanence, dependent origination, and emptiness; and their contents are inseparable from wholesome, unwholesome and “neither wholesome nor unwholesome” thoughts, as well as the three minds of the past, the future and the present. Consequently, once we let go of our attachment to our thoughts (not entangled in it), our mind is naturally purified. The “purification” in “purifying the ox” is not the elimination of thoughts, but the transcendence of thoughts.

### ***Verses for “purifying the ox”:***

*In practising the prayoga of prostration and repentance, we purify our body, speech and mind. Where are the merits? In purifying the three karmas of body, speech and mind, the true Buddha protects us.*

### 3. Transforming the Ox



*In practising the prayoga of generating bodhicitta, we liberate ourselves and other sentient beings. Where are the merits? In liberating the sentient beings in the three realms from suffering, we experience freedom from all troubles and worries.*

The third picture is entitled "transforming the ox". As sentient beings go through continuous rebirths because of attachments, the purpose of transformation is to convert attachments into vows, and afflictions into Bodhicitta. The "ox" symbolises the awareness of sentient beings (our own nature, the Buddha nature). In the picture, the ox raises its head showing great confidence and the herder sings praises by clapping his hands, denoting the prayoga of generating bodhicitta. The picture conveys the message that through the prayoga of generating bodhicitta, we realise our innate awareness and dwell peacefully in it.

Of the four prayoga, the prayoga of "generating bodhicitta" depends on the generation of thoughts to initiate the mind of realising awareness and achieving Buddhahood. On the other hand, in the four ox diagram, "transforming the ox" builds on the foundations of "nurturing the ox" and "purifying the ox", constantly



reminds ourselves the need to return to our awareness and dwell peacefully in it. This is a requisite of shifting the emphasis from a thinking mind to that of a watching mind (awareness). That is why Grand Master Huineng said,

“I vow to liberate the boundless sentient beings of my own mind

I vow to eradicate the inexhaustible afflictions of my own mind

I vow to learn the immeasurable Dharma practices of my own nature

I vow to realize the unsurpassed Buddha Way of my own nature.”

To achieve Buddhahood is to become a person who has realised awareness, a holy person whose mind constantly dwells in a state of watching with awareness and without attachment to form, sound, smell, taste, touch and thoughts (no greed, no hatred and no ignorance).

### **Verses for “transforming the ox”:**

*In practising the prayoga of generating bodhicitta, we liberate ourselves and other sentient beings. Where are the merits? In liberating the sentient beings in the three realms from suffering, we experience freedom from all troubles and worries.*

## 4. Mastering the Ox



*In practising the prayoga of maintaining awareness,  
we let go of all concept of dualism. Where are the merits?  
Just like the herder on the back of the ox,  
we are at ease and blissful.*

The fourth picture is entitled "mastering the ox". "Mastering" has the meanings of commanding, steering and controlling. The "ox" symbolises the awareness of sentient beings (our own nature, the Buddha nature). In the picture, the herder appears at ease and leisurely, denoting the prayoga of "maintaining awareness". The picture conveys the message that through the prayoga of "maintaining awareness", we realise our innate awareness and dwell peacefully in it.

In the four prayoga, the prayoga of "maintaining awareness" is accomplished through indirect or contrived methods such as chanting Buddha's name and reciting a mantra. On the other hand, in the four ox diagram, "mastering the ox" builds on the foundation of "maintaining awareness" to engage directly and dwell in the state of awareness for a prolonged period, by discerning the state of confusion and the state of awareness, without resorting





to any method of convenience. This is the first requisite of “mastering the ox”.

A Buddhist practitioner who is capable of directly engaging and maintaining the state of awareness for a prolonged period normally faces two types of situation when he encounters form, sound, smell, taste, touch and thoughts. Either he is associated with the mind of attachment of greed, hatred and ignorance, or he is associated with the mind of non-attachment of no greed, no hatred and no ignorance. While the former is a shackled mind, an untamed ox, the latter is a liberated mind, a gentle ox that has been tamed. The shackled mind is easily detected as we are familiar with it. On the other hand, the liberated mind is not easily detected as we are not familiar with it. Therefore, once a practitioner is able to maintain the state of awareness for a prolonged period, the next step is to discover and be familiar with the state of having the mind of liberation, which is the home in which the mind of a Buddhist practitioner should dwell peacefully. This is the second requisite of “mastering the ox”.

### **Verses for “mastering the ox”:**

*In practising the prayoga of maintaining awareness, we let go of all concept of dualism. Where are the merits? Just like the herder on the back of the ox, we are at ease and blissful.*

# The Four Reminders

The “four reminders” refers to “focusing on the present”, “living in the present”, “applying the present”, and “returning to the present”. It is a progressive practice with “present” as the nucleus.

“Present”<sup>1</sup> literally means “in front of the eyes”. When we direct our eyesight downward, fixing at a point about a foot in front of us, we would be able to minimise the external influence of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch. To bring about the state of being cognizant with awareness by directing our eyesight downward - this is the meaning of “present” and its fundamental interpretation<sup>2</sup>.

## 1. Focusing on the Present – Discover our awareness, and experience its characteristics of transcendence

First, bring about the state of being cognizant with awareness by directing our eyesight downward. Next, anchoring on this state, go on to feel that there is a

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**1** “Present” is “right mindfulness” in early Buddhism. “Right mindfulness” is not used as the title of this publication for the reason that it has various meanings. For example, it can take on the meaning of generating virtuous but not evil thoughts. It can also mean holding a correct view of the true nature of everything. Yet another example is the right thoughts about attaining nirvana through the threefold training of morality, concentration and wisdom, and the five insight meditation methods to eliminate afflictions. In this book, “right mindfulness” is interpreted based on the practices of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, i.e. maintain a state of awareness of our body, feelings, mind, and thoughts.

**2** As we normally tend to make use of our eyes more than any other organs, the book “Present Moment” is written based on this characteristic. In reality, all our six organs are capable of sensing “Present”.



gap between such a state and form, sound, smell, taste touch and thoughts. Because of the gap, we would be able to transcend the relative concepts of beautiful vs ugly, good vs bad, and pure vs impure, etc., and let go of our attachment to form, sound, smell, taste touch and thoughts.

## **2. Living in the Present** – Maintain our awareness, and be vigilant on its continuity

Sentient beings are unable to become liberated because of their ignorance (“without luminosity”) accumulated through aeons. Because of ignorance, we are attached to form, sound, smell, taste touch and thoughts. Once we discover the state of being cognizant with awareness, our mind is no longer without luminosity, but becomes “luminous”. “Living in the present” is to maintain such a state, gradually getting used to its existence, so that it remains uninterrupted. This is what is referred to as “bao ren” (保任) (meaning maintaining continuous awareness) in the school of Chan. “Living in the present” is the next level of requisite following “focussing on the present”.

## **3. Applying the Present** – Put to use our awareness, and bring about its flexibility

The ancestral masters of the Chan school said: “A dragon would not hide in a pool of still water”. It means awareness needs to be flexible, just like a writhing dragon can only be found in deep and wide oceans. A dragon would not hide in a pool of still water. Here, “a pool of still water” refers to the practice of deep concentration that

is associated with the attachment to self. The applying of awareness plays an indispensable role in preventing one from falling into the rigidity and dullness of deep concentration. This is the reason for the need of “applying the present” following “living in the present”.

There are eight requisites for “applying the present”, referred to as the eight merits. They are the ability to be high or low, the ability to be separated or merged, the ability to be hard or soft, and the ability to be still or lively. Metaphorically, it is like water, which has the characteristics of being flexible. It has the ability to be high or low, the ability to be separated or merged, the ability to be hard or soft, and the ability to be still or lively.

What is meant by being able to be high or low? Water condenses and becomes clouds at a high location, and it gathers and converges into an ocean at low places. What is meant by being able to be separated or merged? It evaporates from all things and becomes separated, and it permeates into all things and becomes merged. What is meant by being able to be hard or soft? When it is hard it solidifies into a glacier, and when it is soft it takes on the shape of a container. What is meant by being able to be still or lively? When it is still it is as calm and clear as a mirror, and when it is lively it is as violent as stormy waves.

All along, our mind has these eight types of merit of water, except we tend to neglect them. The ability to be high or low is to be able to behave humbly even if one has high social status, to be able to appear unintelligent even one has a high level of wisdom, and to be able to take on great responsibilities and yet be able to manage trivial matters. The ability to be separated or merged is to be



able to be removed from the crowd, living with loneliness and solitariness, and yet be able to merge into the crowd, putting up with the chaos and noise; and to be able to let go of sight and sound and dwell in awareness, and yet be able to make use of sight and sound to help other sentient beings. The ability to be hard or soft is to be able to subdue sentient beings with stern reprimands, and yet be able to pacify them with kind soothing words; and to be able to demolish resolutely the devils in one's mind at an instance, and yet be able to handle them calmly over a long period of time. The ability to be still or lively is to be able to be as demure as a maiden and yet as quick as a rabbit; and to be able to dwell quietly in one's awareness and yet be able to learn the immeasurable Dharma practices.

#### **4. Returning to the Present** – dwell peacefully in our awareness, be responsible for the liberating nature of awareness.

The “liberation” that the Buddha spoke about is not a kind of dharma named “liberation” that exists in reality. Instead, it is a state of mind arising from the combination of awareness and non-attachment. It is a liberating state of mind that while one maintains a state of being cognizant with awareness, one is also not attached to form, sound, smell, taste, touch and thoughts. In other words, living in the state of being cognizant with awareness alone cannot determine whether one has attained liberation or not. Therefore, the so called “liberation” is something that arises from causes and condition, it is referred to in relation to the shackles of lay people when they do not live in their awareness, and are also attached to form, sound,

smell, taste, touch and thoughts.

This liberating state of mind is intrinsic to us, except we do not experience it because of our attachments. Even if we experience it, we quickly fall into the attachment of the mind of craving, as we do not think it should be such an ordinary state, and again plunge into the affliction of the cycle of rebirth. "Returning to the present" reminds us not to pursue something extraordinary or eccentric, but return to our awareness and dwell peacefully in it, and lead a daily life as does an ordinary person (the ordinary mind is the way), and be a down-to-earth practitioner (precepts is the spiritual master). In so doing, we experience the eight characteristics of "present", viz. serene but not dull, luminous but not ostentatious, pliant but not timid, agile but not frivolous, innocent but not ignorant, truthful but not callous, meticulous but not calculative, and ordinary but not vulgar. We would be deemed to be responsible to our awareness if we utilise these eight characteristics to examine the extent of exactness and pureness of our liberating state of mind.

## **Serene but not Dull**

Originating from awareness, the state of serenity is a common experience of Chan practitioners. There are basically two types - one being serene with dullness, and the other being serene but without dullness. The serene with dullness state is associated with a mind with attachments. Because of the attachments, the practitioners are afraid of losing the state of serenity, resulting in them not daring to generate thoughts. The serene without dullness state is not associated with a mind with attachments. Without



attachments, the practitioners are not afraid of losing the state of serenity. As a result, they dare to generate thoughts to contemplate the dharma. Before experiencing enlightenment, Chan master Mazu often settled into dull meditation to seek enlightenment. His teacher Master Huairang alerted him by deliberately grinding a piece of brick with the aim of turning it into a mirror in front of him when Mazu was meditating.

### **Luminous but not Ostentatious**

Here, the luminosity does not refer to the lights appeared during meditative concentration, but the confidence, fearlessness and steadiness arising from the cultivation of Chan practice. According to the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch, Venerable Fada, who had been reciting *Lotus Sutra* for three thousand times daily, was reprimanded by the Sixth Patriarch for his arrogance. Besides displaying the luminosity of confidence, fearlessness and steadiness, Fada also showed the ostentatiousness of arrogance of self. Having luminosity but with ostentatiousness, he was unable to get into “no-self”. However, if Fada were vigilant in safeguarding his awareness and not allowing himself to be associated with the affliction of arrogance, he would naturally be able to achieve luminosity without ostentatiousness.

### **Pliant but not Timid**

Pliancy refers to having a gentle and amenable character. We are unable to be pliant because of our competitive and stubborn streaks, a consequence of the afflictions of arrogance and ignorance. We are timid because we are afraid of being hurt, a consequence of

the afflictions of greed and ignorance. If a practitioner who lives in his awareness displays pliancy with timidity, his awareness is certainly a mind with afflictions that is associated with life and death. Conversely, if he displays pliancy without timidity, his awareness is a liberated mind that is associated with no-self.

### **Agile but not Frivolous**

The agility of the body and mind is the effect of being serene but not dull. However, one needs to beware of heedlessness (a major-grade secondary affliction) that is associated with an agile mind. With this type of affliction, agility could turn into frivolousness. A practitioner who lives in his awareness ought to guard his awareness gingerly, so that it would not be associated with afflictions. Only an awareness that is not associated with afflictions can be a liberated mind that is associated with no-self.

### **Innocent but not Ignorant**

Innocence is the manifestation of awareness. While it temporarily engenders a practitioner to stay away from the concepts of relativity such as right or wrong, attractive or unattractive, etc., on its own it still lacks the wisdom to perceive the reality of all things. This is innocence with ignorance. Here, ignorance refers to not recognising the characteristics of impermanence, dependent origination, and emptiness pertinent to all things, caused by the affliction of the lack of right wisdom. A practitioner who lives in awareness ought to have, in addition to the innocence of awareness, right wisdom. Simply put, being innocent and not ignorant is the same as having both right mindfulness and right wisdom.





## **Truthful but not Callous**

Remembering the past is the mind of the past, thinking about the future is the mind of the future, and living in the present awareness is the mind of the present. The mind of the present is the state that a practitioner feels most real. The state that is most real allows him to treat the people, events and objects surrounding him objectively. This is a manifestation of wisdom. However, if he simply presents what he considers right all the time, oblivious of others' feelings and thoughts, he would be truthful but callous. Conversely, besides treating people, events and objects surrounding him objectively, if he also cares about others' feelings and thoughts, he would be truthful but not callous. He would be acting with wisdom, loving kindness and compassion.

## **Meticulous but not Calculative**

Being meticulous means being precise and paying great attention to detail. It refers to a kind of ability that a practitioner who lives in his awareness should possess. If, with this ability, a practitioner knows about the relativities of true or false, right or wrong, success or failure and gain or loss, and yet is still trapped by them resulting in the arising of afflictions, he is being meticulous and calculative. Conversely, if a practitioner with this ability knows that the relativities of true or false, right or wrong, success or failure and gain or loss are in effect impermanence, dependent origination and emptiness, but he is not trapped by them and afflictions do not arise, he is being meticulous but not calculative.

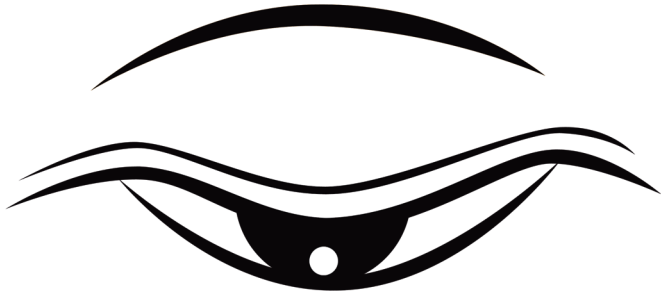
## Ordinary but not Vulgar

Chan Master Congshen is a disciple of Chan Master Nanquan Puyuan. One day, Congshen asked Master Nanquan about the meaning of the “path”? Nanquan replied that the ordinary mind is the path. Here, “ordinary” takes on two meanings. Firstly, awareness is ordinary as it is innate in every human being. Secondly, the achievement of the path is ordinary as it is not something mysterious, but the peaceful dwelling in one’s awareness that is not associated with the afflictions of greed, hatred and ignorance. A practitioner who has discovered his awareness but who is associated with the afflictions of greed, hatred and ignorance is said to be ordinary and vulgar. Conversely, a practitioner who has discovered his awareness but who is not associated with the afflictions of greed, hatred and ignorance is said to be ordinary but not vulgar. He has a liberated mind that is associated with no-self.



<b>Focusing on the present</b>	<b>The characteristic of transcendence</b>	Discover awareness, experience its characteristic of transcendence
<b>Living in the present</b>	<b>The characteristic of continuity</b>	Discover awareness, be vigilant about its characteristic of continuity
<b>Applying the present</b>	<b>The characteristic of flexibility</b>	<p>Apply the awareness, bring out its characteristic of flexibility</p> <p>Eight merits: The ability to be high or low, the ability to be separated or merged, the ability to be hard or soft, and the ability to be still or lively</p>
<b>Returning to the present</b>	<b>The characteristic of being responsible</b>	<p>Dwell peacefully in awareness, be responsible to its liberating characteristic</p> <p>Eight attributes: Serene but not dull, luminous but not ostentatious, pliant but not timid, agile but not frivolous, innocent but not ignorant, truthful but not callous, meticulous but not calculative, and ordinary but not vulgar</p>

# Present Moment



How to interpret the eye as shown in the diagram? Notice that it has the following three features: Firstly, it is neither on the left nor on the right, it is the eye of the “Madhyamika (Middle Way) teaching”; secondly, it is both the highest and the lowest, hence it cannot be said to be high or low, but it connects and permeates - it connects and permeates through all dharma practices; and thirdly, it is not a physical eye, it has neither form nor shape, hence it is called the “present”. When we bring our eyesight downward, we see a patch of space at about a foot in front of our eyes. Our distinct awareness of this patch of space is the “present”, our intrinsic awareness.

The following two practices constitute the “present”:

- a. The four foundations of mindfulness (Satipatthanas)
- b. “The method of no thought”



# 1. The Four Foundations of Mindfulness

*(To avoid confusion, the term "present" is avoided in the following paragraphs on the four foundations of mindfulness. The original term "right mindfulness" is used instead. Please refer to footnote 1.)*

What are the four foundations of mindfulness? They are the body mindfulness (Kaya Satipatthana), the feelings mindfulness (Vedana Satipatthana), the mind mindfulness (Citta Satipatthana), and the thoughts mindfulness (Dhamma Satipatthana). Simply put, these are the four localities through which we maintain our right mindfulness. The body mindfulness refers to maintaining right mindfulness through the body, the feelings mindfulness refers to maintaining right mindfulness through the feelings, the mind mindfulness refers to maintaining right mindfulness through afflictions in the mind, and the thoughts mindfulness refers to maintaining right mindfulness through thoughts.

There are three levels pertaining to the practice of the four foundations of mindfulness:

- a. Maintaining right mindfulness through the body, feelings, mind and thoughts;
- b. Basing on right mindfulness, observe and contemplate the impurity of the body, the suffering of feelings, the impermanence of the mind and the non-self of thoughts; and
- c. Acquire realisation of true purity, true bliss, true permanence, and true self.

## **Verses for the Four Foundations of Mindfulness:**

*Be aware and cognizant of our body, whether while walking, standing, sitting or lying down, observe the impurities within and without, and in so doing realise true purity;*

*Be aware and cognizant of our feelings, whether there be sorrow or bliss compelled upon us, observe that our body and mind are the roots of suffering, and in so doing realise true bliss;*

*Be aware and cognizant of our mind, whether there harbours greed, hatred or ignorance, observe the changes of our mind and their impermanence nature, and in so doing realise true permanence;*

*Be aware and cognizant of our thoughts, whether there be arising or cessation of thoughts, observe the reality of no-self and the unreal nature of our thoughts, and in so doing realise true self.*



## 1.1 The Body Mindfulness

Here, “body” refers to our body.

**The first requirement for practicing body mindfulness: maintain right mindfulness through our body.**

When walking, “be aware” that we are walking; when standing, “be aware” that we are standing; when sitting, “be aware” that we are sitting; and when lying down, “be aware” that we are lying down. To ensure that we are living in “right mindfulness”, in these instances we can tell ourselves, “‘I am aware’, ‘I am aware’.”

In short, when stationary, “be aware” that we are stationary and when moving, “be aware” that we are moving. The state of always maintaining awareness and cognizance is called “right mindfulness”.

**The second requirement for practicing body mindfulness: observe and contemplate the impurity of our body**

“Right mindfulness” is the foundation of the second requirement, without which is akin to trees without roots and birds without wings. Besides allowing a practitioner to remain in a more stable state, more importantly, “right mindfulness” is the nucleus of our life, necessary for one’s transcendence.

Anchoring on “right mindfulness”, observe and contemplate that our body is made up of 32 components<sup>3</sup>, including hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, etc. The purpose of such contemplation is to clearly understand that our body is impure, and hence we should not be attached to it. This is the practice of “contemplating the impurity of the body”.

**The third requirement for practicing body mindfulness: awaken to the true purity.**

The first requirement (“right mindfulness”) and the second requirement (contemplating the impurity of the body) are both tools for the practice. They are the causes leading to awakening. However, not all who have completed these practices will “awaken”. Some will give up their life upon performing the practice as they would find no meaning in everything around them.

Therefore, in addition to contemplating the impurity of the body, we have to recognise and experience “true purity”, which is our true self. In fact, “true purity” is our “right mindfulness”, having gone through the process of “contemplating the impurity of the body”, no

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**3** Mahasatipatthana Sutta (The Great Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness): “And again, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu examines and reflects closely upon this very body, from the soles of the feet up and from the tips of the head hair down, enclosed by the skin and full of various kinds of impurities, (thinking thus) ‘There exists in this body: hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, membranes (including the pleura, the diaphragm and other forms of membrane in the body), spleen, lungs, intestines, mesentery, gorge, faeces, brain, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, solid fat, tears, liquid fat, saliva, mucus, synovia fluid (i.e. lubricating oil of the joints) and urine.’”





longer attaches to our body upon realizing that it body is impure, and is willing to return to dwell peacefully in "right mindfulness" (the state wherein our awareness does not associate with the mind of attachments). This is the meaning of "realising true purity". The importance of "realising true purity" cannot be understated, as such a "realisation" allows a practitioner to persevere with confidence, and continue the cultivation of the practice meticulously.

Using the analogy of "seeing mountains as mountains, seeing mountains as non-mountains, and seeing mountains still as mountains" of the Chan school, the realising of "true purity" is akin to "seeing mountains still as mountains". This brings us back to the fundamental basis for the path to Buddhahood – a Buddha is one who has awakened, referring to the state when our awareness (right mindfulness) does not associate with the mind of attachment.

## 1.2 The Feelings Mindfulness

“Feelings” refers to the sensation of the body as well as the sensation of the mind. However, whether body or mind, they only have the following three types of sensation, viz. pleasant feeling, unpleasant feeling, and neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling.

What is unpleasant feeling? An example is when we are not feeling well. When our body suffers, our mind resists the unpleasant feeling, and we become temperamental and easily agitated. This is unpleasant feeling of the mind.

What is pleasant feeling? It is the feeling that causes our body to be comfortable or having pleasant sensation. When we become joyful as a result, we have pleasant feeling of the mind.

What is neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling? It is the feeling that causes our body or mind to have neither pleasant nor unpleasant sensation.

As long as we are alive, each of us has a body and associated with it, feelings. While the body mindfulness allows us to understand our living self through the body, the feelings mindfulness is more abstract. It is also a more refined practice than the practice of body mindfulness.

**The first requirement for practising feelings mindfulness: maintain “right mindfulness” through the feelings**

First we must maintain a state of awareness of the feelings of both our body and mind, i.e. pleasant feeling, unpleasant feeling and neutral feeling.



If our body has unpleasant feeling, we must “be aware” of it. Similarly, if our mind has unpleasant feeling, we must “be aware” of it. To ensure that we live in “right mindfulness”, we tell ourselves in our mind: “‘I am aware’, ‘I am aware’.”

If our body has pleasant feeling, we must “be aware” of it. Similarly, if our mind has pleasant feeling, we must “be aware” of it. To ensure that we live in “right mindfulness”, we tell ourselves in our mind: “‘I am aware’, ‘I am aware’.”

If our body has neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling, we must “be aware” of it. Similarly, if our mind has neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling, we must “be aware” of it. To ensure that we live in “right mindfulness”, we tell ourselves in our mind: “‘I am aware’, ‘I am aware’.”

Hence, “feelings mindfulness” is allowing ourselves to maintain a state of awareness at all times through the above three types of feelings of our body and mind.

**The second requirement for practising feelings mindfulness: building on the foundation of “right mindfulness”, observe and contemplate the suffering aspect of all feelings**

As mentioned earlier, our body and mind have three types of feelings, viz. pleasant feeling, unpleasant feeling and neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling. However, when we are faced with the compelling effect of impermanence, including the processes of getting old, falling sick and dying, the pleasant feeling and “neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling” will turn into unpleasant feeling; and the unpleasant feeling will become even more

intense. This is the theoretical basis for “contemplating the suffering aspect of feelings”, which is why Buddha refers to the mundane world as “a sea of suffering”.

Thus, when we sense the three kinds of feeling in our body and mind, we must think: “Feelings is suffering. We should let go our attachment to feelings.” This is the practice of “contemplating the suffering of feelings”.

### **The third requirement for practising feelings mindfulness: awaken to true bliss**

As mentioned earlier, in practising body mindfulness by contemplating the impurity of the body, some may give up their lives as they find no meaning in everything around them. We may encounter similar situations in practising feelings mindfulness.

Thus, in contemplating the suffering aspect of feelings, we need to perceive and experience “true bliss”. “True bliss” means our “right mindfulness”, having gone through the process of contemplating the suffering aspect of feelings, no longer attaches to our feelings with the realisation that they are in essence suffering, and is willing to return to and dwell peacefully in “right mindfulness”. The importance of “realising true bliss” cannot be understated, as such a “realisation” allows a practitioner to persevere with confidence, and continue the cultivation of the practice meticulously. At this stage of “seeing mountains still as mountains”, “true bliss” means allowing ourselves to be in a state of mind of the world of ultimate bliss.



### 1.3 The Mind Mindfulness

The “mind” in the mind mindfulness refers to our afflictions of greed, hatred and ignorance, or the three poisons.

What is greed? We live with the feelings of our body and mind. When we have pleasant feeling, we would easily crave for more of the good feeling if we were not in the state of mindful awareness. This mental “craving for more” is greed.

What is hatred? We hope to eliminate the feelings of suffering immediately whenever they appear. This mental rejection is “hatred”.

What is ignorance? We are generally insensitive to “neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling”, remaining in a state of being unaware (without awareness) and without knowing (without wisdom). Such a state of insensitivity is “ignorance”.

While the feelings mindfulness allows us to perceive and experience our pleasant feeling, unpleasant feeling, and neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling, the mind mindfulness enables us to further understand the greed, hatred and ignorance arising from these three types of feelings.

**The first requirement for practising mind mindfulness: maintain right mindfulness through the presence or absence of afflictions in our mind**

When “greed” arises in our mind, we have to “be aware”. When “greed” does not arise, we must also “be aware”. To ensure that we are living in “right mindfulness”,

in these instances we can tell ourselves, "'I am aware', 'I am aware'."

When "hatred" arises in our mind, we have to "be aware". When "hatred" does not arise, we must also "be aware". To ensure that we are living in "right mindfulness", in these instances we can tell ourselves, "'I am aware', 'I am aware'."

When "ignorance" arises in our mind, we have to "be aware". When "ignorance" does not arise, we must also "be aware". To ensure that we are living in "right mindfulness", in these instances we can tell ourselves, "'I am aware', 'I am aware'."

**The second requirement for practising mind mindfulness: building on the foundation of "right mindfulness", observe and contemplate the impermanence of the mind of afflictions**

In comparison with body mindfulness and feelings mindfulness, the "observing and contemplating" in mind mindfulness are carried out quite differently. The requirement is to first "observe", then "contemplate".

How to "observe"? "Observing" refers to, under the state of without generating any thoughts, allowing ourselves to habitually and quietly observe the arising of greed, hatred and ignorance, until they disappear. This is how we cultivate the practice of "contemplate the impermanence of the mind" through "observing".

How to "contemplate"? We can practise the following contemplation with the generation of thoughts: "As the mind of afflictions of greed, hatred and ignorance arises



and vanishes because of impermanence, we should let go of our attachment to the mind of the afflictions of greed, hatred and ignorance." This is how we cultivate the practice of "contemplate the impermanence of the mind" through "contemplating".

After carrying out "observing" and "contemplating", we arrive at the following outcomes:

"Observing" – The mind of the afflictions of greed, hatred and ignorance (especially hatred) vanishes under the contemplation of "right mindfulness". There are two ways of vanishing, viz. instantaneous vanishing and gradual vanishing. In both cases, each specific mind of the afflictions vanishes here and now.

"Contemplating" – By contemplating that "the mind of the afflictions arises of greed, hatred and ignorance arises as well as vanishes all the time because of impermanence" over a long period of time, we gradually lessen our attachment to our mind of afflictions.

Both the above outcomes are necessary for the realisation of the practice of "contemplating the impermanence of the mind". However, as we habitually tend to "contemplate" instead of "observe", there is a need to emphasise the practice of first "observe", then "contemplate".

### **The third requirement for practising mind mindfulness: awaken to true permanence**

After contemplating the impermanence of the mind, next we need to realise the existence of "true permanence".

Here, "true permanence" is the "right mindfulness", having gone through the process of "contemplating the impermanence of the mind", no longer attaches to greed, hatred and ignorance upon realising that they arise and vanish because of impermanence, and is willing to return to dwell peacefully in the "right mindfulness" which is non-arising and non-vanishing (relative to the afflictions). This is the state wherein our awareness does not associate with the mind of attachments. The importance of "realising true permanence" cannot be understated, as such a "realisation" allows a practitioner to persevere with confidence, and continue the cultivation of the practice meticulously. At this point, the realising of "true permanence" is akin to "seeing mountains still as mountains".





## 1.4 The Thoughts Mindfulness

In cultivating the practice of the four foundations of mindfulness, from body mindfulness to feelings mindfulness and mind mindfulness, basically we are progressing from things specific to abstract, and coarse to fine. In this order of cultivation, thoughts mindfulness which concerns the thoughts in our mind, is the finest practice amongst the four, and relatively more difficult.

The “thoughts” in thoughts mindfulness refer to thoughts generated in our mind. There are three types of thoughts: unwholesome thoughts, wholesome thoughts, and neither wholesome nor unwholesome thoughts.

What are unwholesome thoughts? They are related to the ten unwholesome acts of killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, foolish babbles, slandering, rude speech, greed, hatred and ignorance.

What are wholesome thoughts? They are related to the ten wholesome acts of avoidance of killing, avoidance of stealing, avoidance of sexual misconduct, avoidance of lying, avoidance of foolish babbles, avoidance of slandering, avoidance of rude speech, avoidance of greed, avoidance of hatred and avoidance of ignorance. More positively, they include, in addition to avoiding killing, performing releasing of lives; in addition to avoiding stealing, performing offering; in addition to avoiding sexual misconduct, observing celibacy; and in addition to avoiding lying, offering kind speech. All these are wholesome thoughts generated in our mind.

What are neither wholesome nor unwholesome thoughts? They are thoughts not related to unwholesome

thoughts and wholesome thoughts, e.g. I am going to have a meal, today is a cold day, I am going to work, etc.

**The first requirement for practising thoughts mindfulness: maintain right mindfulness through the presence or absence of thoughts in our mind**

When unwholesome thoughts arise in our mind, we have to “be aware”. When there are no unwholesome thoughts arising in our mind, we have to “be aware”. When wholesome thoughts arise in our mind, we have to “be aware”. When there are no wholesome thoughts arising in our mind, we have to “be aware”. When neither wholesome nor unwholesome thoughts arise in our mind, we have to “be aware”. When there are no “neither wholesome nor unwholesome thoughts” arising in our mind, we have to “be aware”. To ensure that we are living in “right mindfulness”, in these instances we can tell ourselves, “‘I am aware’, ‘I am aware’.”

**The second requirement for practising thoughts mindfulness: building on the foundation of “right mindfulness”, observe and contemplate that our thoughts, our mind, our feelings and our body are no-self**

The requisite for the process of “observing and contemplating” in thoughts mindfulness is similar to that of mind mindfulness. The requirement is to first “observe”, then “contemplate”.

How to “observe”? “Observing” refers to allowing ourselves to habitually and quietly observe the arising of wholesome thoughts, unwholesome thoughts, and neither wholesome nor unwholesome thoughts under the state



of without generating any thoughts, until they disappear. This is how we cultivate the practice of “contemplate the no-self of thoughts” through “observing”. (The phenomenon of thoughts arising and vanishing owing to impermanence shows that thoughts do not exist in reality, hence the no-self of thoughts.)

How to “contemplate”? We can practise the following contemplation with the generation of thoughts: “As the phenomenon of wholesome thoughts, unwholesome thoughts, and neither wholesome nor unwholesome thoughts in our mind arise and vanish because of impermanence shows that thoughts do not exist in reality, i.e. no-self of thoughts, we should let go of our attachment to these thoughts.”

In addition, we should practise the following contemplation with the generation of thoughts with regard to our body, our feelings and our mind of afflictions: “The birth and death of our body, the arising and vanishing of our feelings and the arising and vanishing of our mind of afflictions show that our body, feelings and mind of afflictions are subject to birth and destruction owing to impermanence. As the phenomenon of impermanence shows that our body, our feelings and our mind of afflictions do not exist in reality, i.e. no-self of thoughts, we should let go of our attachment to them.” This is how we cultivate the practice of “contemplate the no-self of thoughts” through “contemplating”.

After carrying out “observing” and “contemplating”, we arrive at the following outcomes:

“Observing” – The thoughts in our mind vanish under the contemplation of “right mindfulness”. There are two ways of vanishing, viz. instantaneous vanishing and gradual vanishing. All thoughts in our mind will vanish either way. ( The phenomenon of all thoughts in our mind arise and vanish because of impermanence shows that thoughts do not exist in reality, hence the no-self of thoughts.)

“Contemplating” – By contemplating that “the mind of the afflictions of greed, hatred and ignorance arises as well as vanishes all the time because of impermanence” over a long period of time, in our mind, we gradually lessen our attachment to our mind of afflictions.

As the realisation of the practice of “contemplate the no-self of thoughts”, both the above outcomes are important. However, as we habitually tend to “contemplate” instead of “observe”, there is a need to emphasise the practice of first “observe”, then “contemplate”.

### **The third requirement for practising thoughts mindfulness: awaken to true self**

Besides contemplating the no-self of thoughts, we need to experience the existence of a “true self”.

This “true self” is the “right mindfulness”, having gone through the process of contemplating the no-self of thoughts and realising that our body, feelings, mind of afflictions and thoughts are in reality no-self, is no longer attached to our body, feelings, mind of afflictions and thoughts, and willing to return and dwell peacefully in “right mindfulness” (the state wherein our awareness does not associate with the mind of attachments). This is



what is meant by “awaken to true self”. The importance of “awakening to true self” cannot be understated, as such an “awakening” allows a practitioner to persevere with confidence, and continue the cultivation of the practice meticulously. At this point, the awakening of “true self” is akin to “seeing mountains still as mountains”.

## 1.5 The Four Foundations of Mindfulness and the Right Mindfulness that is No-self

Who do you love the most? The answers may be many. Although different, they can be all correct. But is there a common answer? The answer is yes, i.e. everyone loves oneself. This is what is referred to as "attachment to self", the attachment to ourselves.

What is "self"? A layperson's "attachment to self" may consider his body as self, his feelings as self, his mind as self, and his thoughts as self. However, through the practice of the four foundations of mindfulness, we realise that "right mindfulness" is yet another hidden "self". Actually, "right mindfulness" can be both "self" and "no-self". It is "self" if it is associated with attachments, and it is "no-self" if it is not associated with attachments.

At the first level of the practice of the four foundations of mindfulness, the main objective is to bring out "right mindfulness" by discovering that besides our body is self, our feelings is self, our mind is self, and our thoughts is self, "right mindfulness" is also "self".

At the second level of the practice of the four foundations of mindfulness, we dispense with "body is self" and realise that "body is no-self" by contemplating the impurity of the body; we dispense with "feelings are self" and realise that "feelings are no-self" by contemplating the suffering of feelings; we dispense with "mind is self" and realise that "mind is no-self" by contemplating the impermanence of the mind; and we dispense with "all things are self" and realise that "thoughts, the mind, feelings and the body are no-self" by contemplating the no-



self of thoughts. At this juncture, our "right mindfulness", having gone through the conditioning of "contemplating the impurity of the body", "contemplating the suffering of feelings", "contemplating the impermanence of the mind" and "contemplating the no-self of thoughts", is gradually heading towards direction of associating with the mind of no attachments.

At the third level of the practice of the four foundations of mindfulness, The realisation of "true purity", "true bliss", "true permanence" and "true self" refers to returning to dwell peacefully in "right mindfulness". Here, the "right mindfulness" is the "right mindfulness" that is no-self (the state wherein our awareness does not associate with the mind of attachments).

So is it wrong to have "attachment to self"? It is not a matter of right or wrong, but a matter of cause and effect.

One who possesses very strong "attachment to self" definitely does not have the ability to face death, as all he can think of is eternal life. However, we are well aware that all are equal in the face of death. With the cause of very strong "attachment to self", the effect is the mentality to run away from death. With the mentality to run away, the effect is the inability to face death. With the cause of inability to face death, the effect is the negative mentalities of having fear and worries, etc. when dying.

Ask ourselves: "Since death will fall upon on me one day, have I been doing sufficiently in mental preparedness to fact it?"

## 2. The Method of No-Thoughts

What is “the method of no-thought”? “The method of no-thoughts” refers to the specific method of training the mind, with the emphasis on “no-thoughts”. Hence the name “the method of no-thoughts”. To understand “no thoughts”, one must first be clear about the meaning of “thoughts”.

Here, “thoughts” refer to the manifestation of the root of mind during the process of thinking. Generally, such manifestations are none other than the pictures (written words) and sound (spoken words) in the mind. The pictures are the mind-objects of form, and the sound are the mind-objects of sound. This is the pattern of our thinking process (generating thoughts).

What is “no-thoughts”? If we interpret “no” as “nothingness”, then “no-thoughts” becomes “there are no thoughts”, which is a misinterpretation of “no-thoughts”. As propounded in the *Heart Sutra* - in emptiness there is no five aggregates, no eighteen realms, no twelve link-chain of dependent origination and no four noble truths, the “no” here does not mean “nothingness”, but “no real substance” instead. Therefore, the phrase “no-thought” should be interpreted as “there is no real substance in thoughts”, and the reason for being no real substance alludes to the characteristics of impermanence and dependent origination of thoughts. Because of this, our ancient sages said, “It is not the generation of thoughts that one should be worried about, but the slowness in awakening.” As our thoughts can arise as well as vanish, we need not take any action against them, except to maintain a state of vigilance of them. By understanding





“the method of no-thoughts” from this viewpoint, we know that it requires us to remain in a state of being aware with our awareness, instead of remaining in a state of totally without thoughts for a lone period of time.

We are always in a state of generating thoughts or not generating thoughts. The question is whether we are aware that we are generating thoughts and not generating thoughts, or we are not aware that we are generating thoughts and not generating thoughts. To be aware that we are generating thoughts and not generating thoughts is to be in a state of being aware with our awareness. Not to be aware that we are generating thoughts and not generating thoughts is to be in a state of confusion. As such, if we use the generation of thoughts and no generation of thoughts as a dependent condition for our maintenance of the state of being aware with our awareness, we can achieve the aim of nurturing and maintaining the state of being aware with our awareness by constantly awakening our strayed mind.



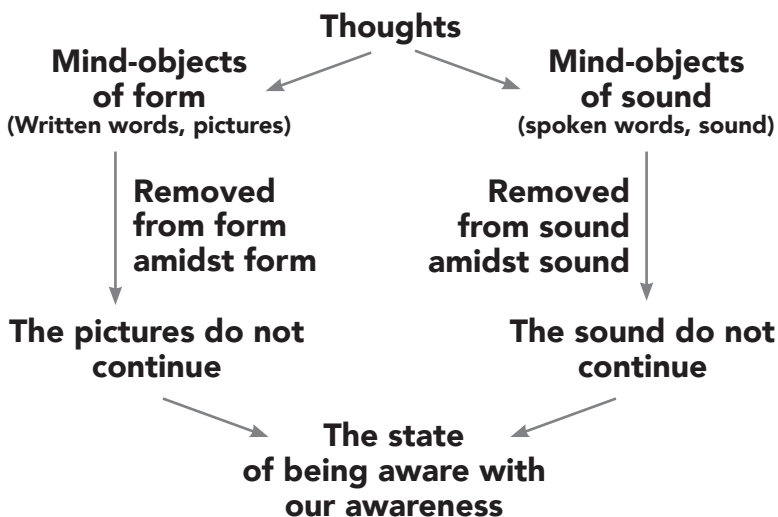
*The states of being aware and confusion*

Of course, since we are in the state of generating thoughts most of the time, naturally the use of thoughts (pictures and sound) as the dependent condition for the maintenance of the state of being aware with our awareness becomes an asset for practising the method of no-thoughts. How to ensure that we maintain the state of being aware with our awareness without being inhibited by thoughts? With regards to the pictures that have arisen, we have to be "removed from form amidst form"; and with regards to the sound that have arisen, we have to be "removed from sound amidst sound". Once we are "removed from form amidst form", the pictures would not persist, and once we are "removed from sound amidst sound", the sound would not persist. When both pictures and sound stop persisting, we are maintaining the state of being aware with our awareness without being inhibited by thoughts.

Therefore, **we do not annihilate the thoughts, but learn how to be "removed" from them.** In dealing with our thoughts, the moment we have the attitude of annihilating them, we make the following two mistakes. Firstly, we have taken each thought as a "self", and we want to annihilate it because of the existence of the "self". This is the wrong view of the existence of birth and destruction, also called "the view of all things are self". Secondly, the desire to "annihilate" is associated with the affliction of hatred. As the ultimate objective of cultivation is to be not associated with afflictions, if we try to eliminate afflictions with afflictions, there is no end to it. For the same reason, to make their disciples let go of their attachment to the phenomena of meditative concentration (abnormal form, abnormal sound and abnormal smell), sages in ancient



times articulated the following stern words, "Slaughter the Buddhas as they appear, slaughter the demons as they appear." This is directed at correcting the specific incorrect view. However, if we are not careful as listeners, our mind would slip into one that is associated with hatred and arrogance.



*Not attached to the mind-objects of form and sound,  
a mind that does not dwell anywhere*

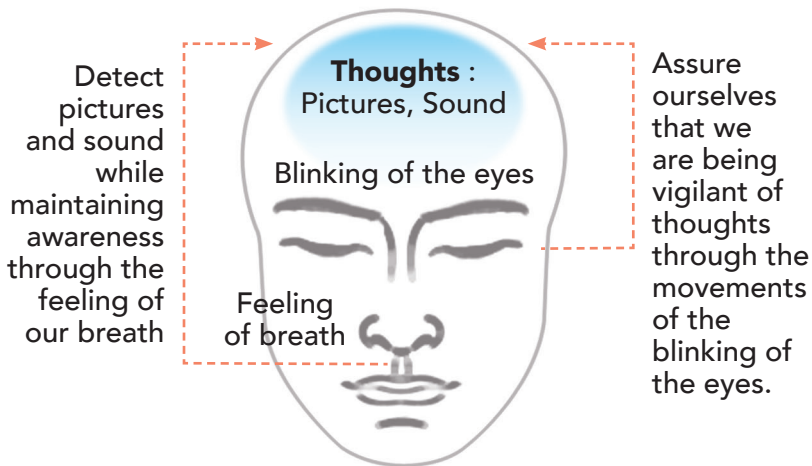
To someone who has never paid attention to the activities in his mind, it is quite difficult for him to maintain the state of being aware with awareness of the pictures and sound in his mind. This is because it is not his habit to do so. On the other hand, once a habit is formed, it is not something that is too difficult. To avoid pulling back in their practice because of the difficulties, practitioners may make use of some augmenting methods in the process of cultivation.

The reason that practitioners find it difficult is because the method of no-thoughts demands a high degree of meticulousness of the mind. Therefore, the problem could be solved with some adjustments to the method adopted. Before detecting the pictures and sound in our mind, we could first feel the inhaling and exhaling of breath (the friction created by the breath between the upper lip and the inside of the nostril) to discover the existence of the state of being aware with awareness, and maintain it. With this as a foundation, next we detect the pictures and sound in our mind (but without being involved in them) in the state of being aware with awareness.

In theory, if we are able to achieve the abovementioned state, we would have met the basic requirements of the method of no-thoughts. However, because of our afflictions, we tend to have strayed thoughts as we feel the inhaling and exhaling of breath, unable to be "removed" from our thoughts. As such, we may resort to certain movements of our body to signal to ourselves the achievement of being "removed" from thoughts. Among the many techniques, the "blinking of the eyes" method harmonises best with our daily life. We blink our eyes the moment we detect the



generation of thoughts, and return to feeling our breath – this is how we develop the feeling of being “removed” from thoughts by the process of directing our attention from our eyes to our upper lip. This is a very important psychological hint, through which we are able to confirm that we are clearly in the state of being “removed” from thoughts.



*Being vigilant of our thoughts by the coordination of the blinking of the eyes and the feel of the breath*

With the cause being the training “to be removed”, the effect is “not to be attached to thoughts”. Only if we are not attached to thoughts would we experience their characteristics of being impermanent and dependent origination. Since they are impermanent and they arise from causes and conditions, they are empty in nature. With such a realisation, our confidence towards the method of no-thoughts would be enhanced and we would be persistent in the practice. And with the persistence in the practice would we be able to accumulate different levels of wisdom. As the saying of the sages goes,

**“The sound of the pine, the bamboo, the bells and the chimes**

**Each speaks of freedom of the mind**

**The forms of the mountain, the water, the smoke and the clouds**

**Each conveys the nature of emptiness.”**

The pine and bamboo make no sound except when blown by the wind. The bells and chimes make no music unless they are struck. However, no matter how the sound is produced, it does not attach to anything. Hence, the sound represents freedom of the mind. Similar to the external sense-object of sound, our internal mind-object of sound is also unreal. The mountain turns green because of the forests, and become white because of the snow; the water becomes clear after the dirt has precipitated, and its surface ripples when blown by the wind; and the smoke and clouds are originally formless, but they take on certain forms the moment they encounter vapour. All the above show that they arise and vanish because of causes and



conditions, and they are illusory and unreal. Therefore, we say they are empty in nature. This applies not only to the external sense-objects of form, but also to the internal mind-objects of picture.

Therefore, we should realise that any external phenomena can interfere with our internal cultivation of the practice, otherwise it is the sound of the pine, the bamboo, the bells and the chimes that is free, not our mind. Similarly, it is the forms of the mountain, the water, the smoke and clouds that are empty, not our mind.

On the surface, it would appear that there is no relationship between the method of no-thoughts and the termination of afflictions, but it is not true. In reality,

— We are countering the affliction of greed once we are able to be not attached to our thoughts (pictures and sound in our mind);

— We are countering the affliction of hatred once we are able not to repel our thoughts;

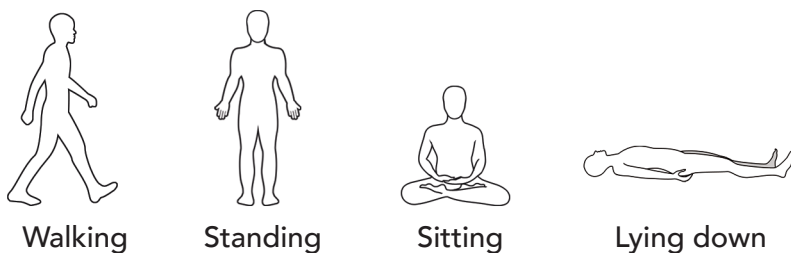
— We are countering the affliction of ignorance once we are able to be neither attached to nor repel our thoughts, as well as being clear about the impermanence, dependent origination and emptiness nature of thoughts;

— We are countering the affliction of arrogance once we are able to transcend the relativity of thoughts so that the propensities to compare and to be victorious do not arise;

— We are countering the affliction of doubt once we are able not to be inhibited by thoughts, so that we naturally have confidence in the practice we are cultivating;

— We are countering the affliction of the view of self once we are able to discern that thoughts do not exist in reality (the no-self of thoughts).

Once we practise this method of no-thoughts during walking, standing, sitting and lying down in our daily life, we would allow our mind to be in a state of maintaining being aware with awareness yet without attachments. This is the kind of mental quality an enlightened person should possess, as well as the kind of state that the method of no-thoughts is seeking to achieve. (A more complete elaboration of “the method of no thoughts” can be found in my other book *“The Open Sky Obstructs No Passing Clouds”*.)



Removed from Thoughts =  
Countering the Afflictions

*To be “removed” from thoughts during walking, standing, sitting and lying down is to counter the afflictions*







# Epilogue

The teachings of the four foundations of mindfulness and Patriarch Huineng's *Platform Sutra* are the two important bases of this book "Present Moment". While the four foundations of mindfulness adopts the conventional method of teaching, Huineng's sudden method is a product of the Dharma infused with the Chinese culture. The practice of the four foundations of mindfulness has a clear sequence of progression, emphasising right mindfulness and right wisdom. On the other hand, the sudden method of the Chan practice advocates a direct exploration of the mind, so as to achieve the state of luminosity and clarity of the mind.

The four foundations of mindfulness is generally perceived as a practice for people with weak roots. This is not true. How can a straightforward practice which focuses directly on the body and mind be regarded as a practice for people with weak roots? As without the body and mind, how else can we carry out the practice? On the other hand, the sudden method of the Chan practice seems to target people with strong roots as it expounds the state of luminosity and clarity of the mind. This is not true either. Are we freed from our body once we attain the state of luminosity and clarity of the mind, and hence need not face the problems of old age, illness and death? The above analysis aims not to enter into an academic debate, but to offer a pragmatic view of the two Chan methods of cultivation.



What is the relation between the “right mindfulness and right wisdom” (正念正知) in the four foundations of mindfulness and “the state of the luminosity and clarity of the mind” (明心见性) in the sudden method of the Chan practice? In the latter phrase, “luminosity of the mind” (明心) refers to staying focused on our mind with great clarity; and “clarity of the mind” (见性) refers to, while focusing on the mind, having deep understanding that the intrinsic nature of the mind is emptiness. In reality, “luminosity of the mind” (明心) is the same as “right mindfulness” (正念), and “clarity of the mind” (见性) is the same as “right wisdom” (正知). More precisely, both are interpretations of “awareness” (觉).

I have completed this work with some trepidation. On the one hand, my limited knowledge may not do justice to the correct interpretation of the Dharma and the teachings of the ancestral masters. On the other hand, I would not be performing my duty and would be ashamed to face the Buddha, the ancestral masters, and my followers if I do not carry out this work because of the above concern. I hope this publication would be of some help in the sharing and study of the Dharma.

## Postscript





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