

A BASIC GUIDE TO TENDAI SHIKAN

By Seishin Clark, Tendai UK, April 2014

INTRODUCTION

My name is Seishin, and I am a Buddhist Priest in the Japanese Tendai school of Buddhism. There have been many great scholarly works on Tendai meditation over the years, however, there are very few basic introductions to Tendai meditation, as this is usually done orally from teacher to student. Presented in this small book is, I hope, a user friendly guide to Tendai meditation. Rather than instructional, this booklet should be taken as a guide to be used in conjunction with a knowledgeable teacher.

This booklet, like me, is not perfect and will contain mistakes, typographical and grammar errors. I am not a scholar, not a master, and I do not consider myself to be a 'sensei'. Although the subject is Tendai Shikan and is based on the T'ian T'ai meditation texts by Chih-i, it is also my own understanding and interpretation. Any error is my own and should not be seen as a reflection of my teachers or the subject matter. However, I hope it benefits those who read it.

T'IAN T'AI MEDITATION TEXTS

The majority of meditation practices in Japanese Tendai come from the Chinese T'ian t'ai (also Tiantai/Tientai) meditation texts compiled by the founder of Chinese T'ian T'ai, Ven. Zhiyi (also Chih-i). These meditations are all based on their Indian predecessors, thus Tendai meditation is still very much based on the early meditation practices of India.

All Tendai priests, at some point in their training, must study and practice these meditation texts, the main four being;

1. 'Mo-ho-chih-kuan' (摩訶止觀 Jp. 'Makashikan') meaning 'Great Calming and Seeing'.
2. Xiǎo zhǐ guān (小止觀 Jp. 'Sho shikan') 'Small Calming and Seeing'
3. 'Liù miào mén' (六妙門 Jp. 'Roku myōmon') 'The Six Gates to the Sublime'
4. 'Shì chán bō luó mì' (釋禪波羅密 Jp. 'Shaku Zen Haramitsu') 'Explanation of the Perfection of Dhyana'

MOHO-CHIHKUAN ('MAKASHIKAN') 摩訶止觀

The Moho Chih-kuan 摩訶止觀 (also rendered as Mohe zhiguan) is Ven. Chih-i's 'magnum opus', a literary master piece, and not just merely a meditation manual. It was the very first 'originally Chinese' meditation text, and possibly the first truly Chinese Buddhist text. It became influential, not only in Chinese T'ian t'ai, but in other Chinese schools, as well as gaining popularity in Korea, Japan and further afield.

The text itself has seven chapters in ten fascicles, the main object of which, is the practice of Śamatha (止 shi in Japanese) and Vipāśyanā (觀 kan).

These are then placed into three categories;

1. Perfect and Sudden Contemplation
(圓頓止觀 Endon Shikan, *sometimes* 円頓止觀),
2. Gradual and Sequential Contemplation
(漸次止觀 Zenji Shikan), and
3. Indeterminate (variable) Contemplation
(不定止觀 Fujō Shikan).

These categories are a description of both the type of meditation, and the capacity of the meditator. Chih-i also used these to categorise the variety of Buddhist teachings and Sutras in his 'Five Periods and Eight Teachings' (Goji Hakkyō 五時八教). All of these meditations take 'ultimate reality' as their focus, however their approach differs.

The Perfect Sudden meditation is for those of superior capacities and abilities*, great beings who are close to enlightenment. It is perfect because there is no need for anything else, and sudden because enlightenment will be acquired quickly and in this lifetime. This meditation is on "The Middle" on things 'just as they are', and is the highest level of practice (see Tendai Three Truths/Sandai 三諦).

The Gradual Sequential meditation is for those of lower capacities and abilities*, those who struggle with their suffering, their desires, their ego etc. In other words, this is your average Joe. It is gradual because enlightenment is not gained quickly but slowly over time, over many lifetimes even. It is sequential because there is a beginning, a middle and an end, practices done one after the other in a sequence, like the steps on a ladder.

The Indeterminate is for those of middle capacities and abilities, those who have made great strides of progress and insight, but still fall back on the gradual sequential teachings from time to time. It is indeterminate because it is neither gradual nor sudden, but somewhere in between.

**Note: the “abilities” here described as “lower” or “superior” are not in reference to intellect or knowledge, but to “Prajñā”. Prajñā is often translated as wisdom but refers to insight gained through meditative absorption, which is beyond words and the intellect. These categories are not meant to diminish the practitioner, merely its stating that because we are all at different places in regards to our Śīla (morality), our Samādhi (meditation absorption) and our Prajñā (wisdom), we may take very different approaches to meditation. Therefore, it is possible for someone to start off with the gradual approach, but quickly progress to the Perfect Sudden within this lifetime. Enlightenment is possible at any stage.*

SHIKAN 止觀

Whether Sudden or Gradual, meditation in Tendai Buddhism is usually referred to as ‘Shikan’, the etymology and reason will be described a little later. To confuse things, ‘shikan’ is sometimes referred to as ‘zazen’ 座禪, which means ‘seated meditation’, as sitting is the most common form of meditation. It should be noted that traditionally, Tendai categorises 4 types of Samadhi known as the ‘shishu-zanmai’ 四種三昧(Four Samadhi), these are;

1. Constantly Sitting (Jōzazanmai 常坐三昧)
2. Constantly Walking (Jogyo Zanmai 常行三昧)
3. Walking and Sitting (Hangyō hanza zanmai 半行半坐三昧)
4. Neither Walking nor Sitting (Hikō hiza zanmai 非行非坐三昧)

Walking meditation, also known as ‘kinhin’ 経行, is often not known in the west but is an important part of Tendai Buddhism, just as they all are. Walking meditation can be done slow and steady, with the breath or with a mantra. Or it can be fast paced and long, like the Tendai ‘Marathon Monks’ of fame (or infamy). This practice is called Kaihōgyō (回峰行 Circling the mountain).

Walking and sitting is done in seamless ‘periods’ of first sitting meditation and then walking meditation without a break in between. In Tendai temples, the Hokke Senbo 法華懺法 (Lotus Repentance Ritual) is a form of walking/sitting with periods of sitting and walking around the Hondo chanting the Lotus Sutra and other important texts.

Neither walking nor sitting is the ultimate – meditation in every moment.

SHI

‘Shi’ 止 is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese word ‘chih’, which can mean ‘to calm’ or ‘to stop’, and is used as a translation of the Sanskrit word ‘Śamatha’ which can mean ‘to rest’, ‘to calm’ or ‘to pacify’. Śamatha is a form of ‘cultivation’ (bhāvanā) for calming the mind (citta) and its ‘formations’ (saṅkhāra), which is done by focusing the mind

on a specific task or phenomena, often described as ‘single pointed concentration’. The most common form of Śamatha is ānāpāna-smṛti (Skt. Pali; Ānāpānasati/Jpn; 安那般那念 An'na pan'na nen) which means ‘Mindfulness of the breath’, and is the main form of Śamatha in Tendai Buddhism, features prominently in Chih-i’s meditation texts with his ‘Six Gates to the Sublime’ being all about breathing.

To begin mindfulness of breath it is advised for the beginner to count the breath (susokukan 数息觀). This can be done a number of ways, the more traditional approach is to count each out or in breath up to 10 and then repeat this process. More on that later.

KAN

‘Kan’ 觀 is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese word ‘Kuan’, which can mean ‘to see’ and is the Chinese translation of the Sanskrit word Vipāśyanā, which can mean ‘insight’ or ‘clearly seeing’. By practicing Vipāśyanā one gains ‘insight’ into the true nature of reality, that is impermanent, that is dukkha (unsatisfactory) and that is not-self. In Tendai Śamatha is considered the prerequisite practice conducive for Vipāśyanā, as with a calm mind we are better able to penetrate the truth. This is why Tendai meditation is called ‘Shikan’ as our meditation is both Śamatha and Vipāśyanā in one single practice, rather than two separate practices. This is called ‘ichigyō zanmai’ 一行三昧 meaning ‘One round Samadhi’, or ‘Samadhi of One Practice’ (Ekavyūha Samādhi).

There are many methods for Vipāśyanā in which we utilise various contemplations and visualisations in order to bring about insight. A traditional form of Vipāśyanā is a

meditation on the true nature of the Five Aggregates. (In this text I will be drawing on the teachings of ‘The Six Gates to the Sublime’ with its focus on the breath.)

These two meditations, although one practice, are done in two sections. For a beginner it is suggested to spend some time getting used to mindfulness of breath before attempting insight meditation. Then, when you are ready, split your meditation in to two equal parts – for example; 20 minutes on Śamatha and then 20 minutes on Vipāśyanā. It is also best to practice these with a teacher, as these meditations have the tendency to bring about unusual feelings, sensations and formations, some which may be pleasant and some not so. In order that they not become a distraction or destructive it is advised to have a teacher with whom you can speak to about these things and who can guide you.

The following is a basic guide to Tendai Shikan based on Chih-i’s meditation manuals and my own experiences.

PREPARATION: *Making adjustments*

The preparation for meditation is just as important as the meditation itself and forms an important part in Chih-i’s meditation manuals. With right preparation one is able to better calm the mind. Our mind has a very close relationship with our environment and with the things that we do, so this aspect should not be overlooked. I often get people telling me that they can’t meditate at home, or that they meditate better at the temple than they do at home, but when I ask them about their preparation they usually don’t have any as they feel “silly” or feel it is pointless. It is not pointless.

Adjust food and sleep: The first thing to do is to adjust our daily habits, sleep habits, lifestyle and food. Eating heavy greasy food, or food that is too stimulating such as anything with a high sugar content or too much caffeine. Over eating or under eating also inhibits meditation and clouds the mind. Too much sleep or not enough has the same effect.

Adjust clothing: Wear clean loose clothing. Tight clothing will not help circulation nor your breathing.

Adjust the environment: Next is establishing a place to meditate. A quiet, airy room is best. The room should also be tidy as a cluttered room will clutter the mind. Light a candle and some lightly fragranced incense such as sandalwood or aloes wood, and nothing too smokey. The light should be ambient, neither too dim nor too bright. In Japanese forms of Buddhism, we use home altars called 'Butsudans' 仏壇.

Adjust body, mind and speech: Rinse your hands and your mouth with fresh water. This act, although popular in Japan is not uniquely Japanese and is incredibly symbolic. In Buddhism we commit transgressions through our body, our speech and our minds. By washing our hands and mouth we are acknowledging that we have committed these transgressions and the practice we are about to undertake is in order for us to overcome them and become better people.

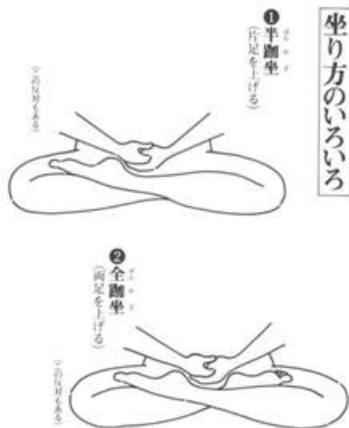
Chanting the Tendai liturgy is far more than just a religious act. We chant to change our mind, to change our habits and to gain enlightenment. We chant to remind ourselves of the teachings, to reaffirm our desire to save all sentient beings (hotsu bodaishin 發菩提心 – arouse the mind of

enlightenment) and to admit that we have made transgressions in the past but desire to overcome them, to become better people.

Adjust posture: Posture is extremely important in meditation. When I teach a room full of beginners I often start by saying “sit comfortably” and inevitably, people will sit hunched over, or leaning, or on one side etc. Such postures are not conducive to meditation as they will inhibit your breathing and cloud your mind.

Seated meditation can be done sat on the floor or sat on a chair. In Japan we have meditation cushions called zafu, which are firm round cushions filled with buckwheat or another similar stuffing. These can come in various sizes, so it’s good to try a few to find what is right for you. A large square cushion called a zabuton usually accompanies the zafu to take pressure off ankles and knees.

The Full Lotus posture (kekka fuza 結跏趺坐) [*image 2 below*] is considered the best for stability. This posture consists of sitting with the legs folded and feet on top of the opposing thighs. Three points touch the floor creating a stable tripod (knees and buttocks). It helps open and elevate the hips taking pressure off the spine and opening the rib cage for better breathing. However, not many people can bend that way, and without proper stretching and strengthening exercises, sitting in this posture for long periods can even damage the ankles and knees.

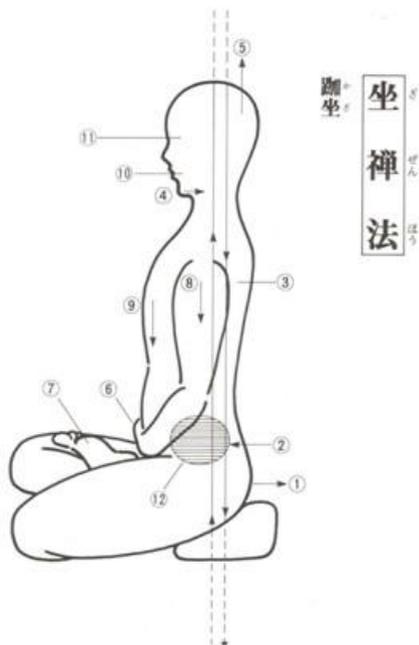


The second best posture is called Half Lotus (hanka fuza 半跏趺坐) [image 1 above]. Similar to Full Lotus except only one foot is on the opposing thigh, the other is underneath the opposing thigh. Again this forms a stable tripod formation, but takes some pressure off the ankles and knees.

The third is known as the Burmese posture. In this position, both legs rest on the floor, one slightly in front of the other. This is good for beginners or those who can't sit in the above postures for periods of time.

Another option is to use a meditation stool. In this posture, one sits in seiza (正座 kneeling posture) with the stool tucked under their buttocks, taking pressure off the knees and ankles. This and the Burmese posture are the best for those who can't sit in either of the Lotus postures, or for those with hip, knee and/or ankle problems.

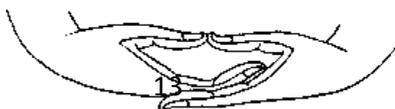
In Japan, they often sit in seiza without the use of a bench, but for those not used to this, they may feel their feet soon starts to hurt.



1. Keep the hips elevated on a higher plane than your knees. Elevating the hips rotates them slightly. This rotation will help give your spine the natural smooth “S” shape, rather than post-straight, and will take pressure off your lower spine. If you are sat on the floor, sit on enough cushions to elevate your hips. If you are kneeling, you might want to put a cushion between you buttocks and legs or even to have a rolled up cushion between your legs for your behind to rest on. If you are sat on a chair, move yourself forward so you are not against the back rest and keep both feet flat on the floor directly under your knees. If you are lying down, bend your legs so they

are at roughly 45degrees with the soles of your feet on the floor.

2. Find your centre of gravity.
Sway backwards and forwards, side to side. This will help you find your centre of balance. You should feel as if your whole upper body is being supported by your hips. The muscles in your core and upper back should be relaxed.
3. Keep your shoulders relaxed. Don't pull them back but don't hunch forward. Find the equilibrium between the two. Try rolling your shoulders and shrugging them until you are comfortable. The shoulders help open up your ribs, enabling you to breathe deeply. When we breathe deeply more oxygen is getting to our organs, limbs and most importantly our brain. This will help with our mental focus and with our circulation to help avoid our limbs going numb.
4. Tuck you chin back but not down. This will align your head with your spine and is such a slight movement it is almost unnoticeable. Again, don't overdo it.
5. Imagine your head is being pulled up by a string from the crown of your head. This will help keep your spine straight and aligned.
6. Place your hands on your lap in the dhyana mudra.
Use this as a guide; when the meditation is too strong your thumbs will press together. When you are too relaxed, your thumbs will fall apart.



7. Sit in a stable and comfortable posture
You should now feel stable and routed, not wobbly. Your centre of gravity should now be just below your navel.
8. Make sure your elbows are not pressed into your ribs but there is a nice gap sufficient for breathing properly.
9. Raise your chest ever so slightly, as if offering your heart. This will open up your rib cage to help you breathe deeper. And try to breathe from your diaphragm rather than your rib cage.
10. Close your mouth but not tightly. Your teeth should not touch. This will relax the muscles in your head. Gently place your tongue on the soft pallet behind your top front teeth. This will help keep your jaw relaxed and helps reduce salivation.
11. You can choose to close your eyes or keep them open. If you keep them open try to “gaze” at a spot roughly two feet in-front of you on the floor. Don’t focus on it and don’t look around the room.
12. Breathe in and out through the nose. If it’s not possible, through the mouth is fine. The nose is preferred because, if it’s a cold day, your nose will warm the air making it easier for your body to draw the oxygen out of the air. Breathing through the mouth will also give you a dry throat making you salivate or need to cough which might disturb both you and those around you.

Aches & Pains – You *will* experience some discomfort during meditation. When this happens, please move! Don't think that you have to sit completely still in order to meditate. Try not to fidget, because you will disturb your own mind and those around you, but if you need to move, make it count. If your leg falls asleep, straighten it out, don't sit and fidget hoping the ache will go away. If your back hurts, bend back and forth a bit to stretch it out. It is also fine, during the meditation to stand up. Remember to keep your back straight, your head up and your hands in dhyana mudra. Once you feel the blood come back, sit back down. You might feel the need to itch or scratch. This is your mind's way of keeping you entertained. There really is no physical need to itch unless you have a medical condition. So if you feel the need to itch, let it pass.

Most people will feel aches in their ankles, knees, hips, lower back and upper back when they first start meditating. There could be numerous reasons for this, but it mostly has to do with a poor posture in day to day life, and to tight limbs. It is important not to force yourself in to any posture you feel uncomfortable in. To be able to sit for long periods of time you will need to do some stretching. Pins and needles are also very common due to sitting still or pressure on the blood flow. Try to wiggle your toes from time to time to keep the blood flowing. As time goes on, you will find you are able to sit longer without pins and needles.

ENTERING

Now you are prepared for meditation in body, speech and mind, draw your attention to your breath and enter Śamatha.

Susoku 数息: Counting breaths

This form of Śamatha is best advised for beginners. First take three long breaths in and out through the nose (*expelling the turbid and inhaling the pure*), then start counting the breaths. You can count either the out-breath or in-breath. Count up to 10 and then start again. An alternative to this is to play a little game; every time a thought enters your mind you start back at one. This is a good way of noticing how busy our minds are, and also helps keep us focused on our breath.

Zuisoku 隨息: Noticing/following breaths

In this form of Śamatha, rather than count the breaths we simply 'notice' them. This is a form of awareness without any analysing, you are the observer of your breaths. This is a lot more subtle than counting the breaths so it is not recommended for beginners.

Shisoku 止息: Stopping the breath/Regulate the breath

When you have experience with counting or watching the breath, begin to regulate your breath. Chih-i describes four types of breathing; windy, uneven, ordinary and subtle. Windy breath is characterised as noisy 'big' breathing. Uneven breath is characterised irregular. Ordinary breath is shallow. Subtle breath is characterised as being faint and intangible, yet deep and profound, to the point where you feel as if you're not breathing. It is the subtle breath that one is aiming for. When this is achieved, one is able to abide in meditative absorption (Samadhi).

(There are further elements to 'entering' meditation which I won't go in to here, but they involve further adjustments to the mind and body.)

ABIDING

Now enter Vipassāna.

Kansoku 觀息: Seeing the breath

When the mind is calm and abiding in quiescence, begin to visualise the breath entering and exiting the body. See the breath as bright white light, at first entering through the nose and into the body, filling every cell. Then see the breath fill and enter *through* every cell of your body, and in turn, this white light being part of everything, thus realising the emptiness equality of everything. This is practiced for some time.

Kansoku 還息: Returning the breath

The mind is now attuned with the breath and all surroundings to the point where the duality of ‘breath’ and ‘surroundings’, of ‘self’ and ‘other’ now dissolve away, returning the mind to ‘true reality’. Thus, the mind and the breath are not two, the mind ebbs and flows like the breath. In understanding this, we realise that this ebbing and flowing has no beginning and no end. It is, and yet it isn’t, both at the same time. This is the truth of the middle (Chū 中) to which we are “returning”.

Jōsoku 淨息: Refining the breath

Now the mind is clear of thoughts, of discrimination and is still and subtle like the breath, clearly observing true reality.

(These six steps are outlined in Chih-i’s “Liù miào mén” (六妙門 Jp. Roku myōmon) ‘The Six Gates to the Sublime’)

EXITING

Just as important as all the above is 'exiting' meditation. Again, this is something often over looked and it shouldn't be. Exiting improperly will cause the mind to be cloudy and disturbed, the body to be sluggish and can also cause physical ailments such as headaches. Like waking from deep sleep, it should be done slowly and gently.

First bring the mind back to the breaths by opening the mouth and visualising the breath dispersing and the energy being spread out in all directions. Take three deep breaths to wake up.

Then begin to move the body very slowly and slightly, starting with the fingers, the toes, then the head, shoulders and neck. Rub your hands together to warm them and place them over your eyes. Gently rub your eyes as if waking from deep sleep and rub your head, neck and shoulders.

Next stretch the legs forward to release any stiffness, then begin to massage the legs and feet. Stand up and stretch the whole body. You are now ready to go as you please, having properly exited meditation.

SUMMARY

These steps of preparation, of regulating food, sleep, body, breath, and mind, and entering, abiding and exiting meditation are outlined in the T'ian T'ai meditation texts by Chih-i. I'd recommend any serious, or even curious,

meditator to read these texts as my simple explanations do not do them justice.

It is also important to seek the advice of a teacher when undertaking any serious meditation practices. These steps may seem easy to follow, but they should be done slowly over a long period of time. A teacher will be able to guide you and tell you when you are ready to take the next step.

When these steps are mastered they become one seamless meditation rather than sequential. Thus the practice becomes 'Perfect Sudden' and can be done in every moment ('neither sitting nor walking').