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<i>Module Code: SICH6010</i>	<i>Student number: 1903354</i>
<i>Module title: Traditional Chinese Moral and Ethical Education III</i>	
<i>For completion by marker:</i>	
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The Practice Method of earth-kasina

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Date: 16 December 2021

Word count: 2170

Venerable Shengmiao, Miss Deng, good morning. My name is Feng Yingran and I would like to share with you the topic on the practice method of earth-kasina.

The presentation will be divided into four parts. First, the article introduces the source of this practice method, and then describes the consideration of geographical environment and human factors before practice. After that, describes the basic method in detail, and finally draw a conclusion.

1. Introduction

‘*The Path of Purification* is the most detailed and complete book on Theravada Buddhist thought in Southern Buddhism, which is highly valued by buddhis’ researchers around the world.’¹ The book was written by Buddhaghosa, a prominent monk of the Southern Pali Buddhism. The book describes ten methods of meditation, and earth-kasina is the most basic one. If you can practice earth-kasina very skillfully, you can quickly master the essentials when you learn other methods. The initial practice is hard and can be difficult for many people to meditation in smoothly. Once

¹ Huang Xianian 黃夏年, ‘Buddhaghosa's *The Path of Purification* and his Zen method’, *South Asian studies*, 01 (1989), pp.26-36

you are successful, the later practice will be relatively quick and easy. The article takes the earth-kasina as an example. Finally, combined with the situation of modern society, put forward some suggestions to reduce the pressure of life for ordinary people.

2. Preparatory work

2.1 Choice of residence

Before starting the practice, you need to find a suitable place to meditate. A suitable living environment is a very important condition. Otherwise, we cannot focus on our practice. In ancient China, 'Mencius' mother moved three times to provide him with a good learning environment.'² Thus, the choice of living environment will largely affect whether a person could succeed in a special field of study. In *The Path of Purification*, 'there are eighteen kinds of vihara that are not suitable for practice.'³

The disadvantage of vihara can be broadly divided into two categories. One is the disadvantage of geographical environment; the other is the disadvantage of human factors. For example, for the former, neither a large nor a new vihara is suitable for practice. Because the vihara is large, many people are needed to maintain and take responsibility for management, which makes it difficult for practitioners to concentrate on their practice. The same is true of the new vihara. Living here requires the work of building the new vihara, which distracts the practitioners. Apart from being distracted by these necessary duties, there are other reasons that divert the practitioner's attention.

² Translated by myself, Dengqitong 鄧啟銅 annotation, *Sanzijing* 三字經 (Nanjing: Southeast University Press, 2014) , p1

³ Translated by myself, Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification* (Xinpei: Gengxin 耿欣 Printing Company , 2011) , p126

For instance, ‘the vihara with all kinds of flowers.’⁴ If you live in such a place, you may be distracted by the beautiful scenery and not focus on your spiritual practice. ‘In addition, living in the vihara where many vegetables grow or ports near water, people will come to pick vegetables or ask for some water to drink.’⁵ Such things frequent occurrence will also divert the attention of practitioners. For human factors, it means that there are not harmonious fellow practitioners or good practice partners around the vihara. These conditions will make it difficult for the practitioner to concentrate on his practice or to ask others for his questions in time, which is a great loss. To sum up, the choice of vihara is very important. Whether it is geography or human factors, if you do not take these into consideration before practicing, it is most likely to interfere with the practice. Therefore, in *The Path of Purification*, there are eighteen disadvantages, and ‘if a vihara has any of them, it is an inappropriate place to practice.’⁶

The above are unsuitable places for practicing. what is a suitable vihara? There are five factors of the resting place in the book. ‘The first was that the residence was neither near nor far from the village where begging was possible.’⁷ In ancient India, buddhis’ practitioners were begging for food to subdue their arrogance. Therefore, it is part of their practice. Of course, when Buddhism is introduced to different countries, their lifestyle will be adjusted according to the laws and regulations of the local government. ‘The second is that the surrounding area can be kept quiet during the day

⁴ Translated by myself, Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification* , p127

⁵ Translated by myself, Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification* , p128

⁶ Translated by myself, Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification* , p129

⁷ Translated by myself, Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification* , p129

and night. The third is that there are no insects or snakes in the house.’⁸ The fourth is to ensure basic living conditions, such as clothing or medicine. Fifth, there are good and wise advisors around the residence, to timely consult the problems encountered in the process of practice.

2.2 The Lesser Impediments

In addition to the above, there are some lesser impediments need to remove. Such as maintaining personal hygiene, getting a haircut, or taking a shower. In addition, keep the clothes you wear clean. You can concentrate to practice until these obstacles are removed. There is a saying in *The Analects of Confucius*, ‘Gongyushanqishi Bixianliqi 工欲善其事必先利器,’⁹ This means that a craftsman must sharpen his tools before he do a job. This saying is used metaphorically to say that preparation is very important if you want to do something well.

3. Instructions for development

3.1 Qudixiang 取地相

The practitioner takes an artificial or natural ground surface area before practicing. The criterion for this choice is whether the practitioner has studied jhana in his or her previous life. If one has such experience, then he can practice in a natural place. If a person does not have such experience, then he should follow the teacher's instructions

⁸ Translated by myself, Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification* , p130

⁹ Translated by myself, Heyan 何晏 , Xingbing 邢昺, *Lunyu Zhushu 論語註疏* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2000) , p239

to make a kasina. ‘In artificial practices, do not take cyan, yellow, red, or white soil. He should take the very clean soil of the color of dawn by the river.’¹⁰ Whether or not you have practiced meditation in the past, the experience of first practice is always similar. Then we are going to introduce the steps of the first practice.

First the practitioner should remove the grass, stones, or sand grains from the soil, and then spread the soil evenly over the prepared ground. ‘Spreading the soil in a circle about the size of a sieve or saucer, which is finite rather than infinite.’¹¹ Up to this point, all the preparatory work has been done. Then comes the formal practice phase.

3.2 Uggaha-nimitta

The practitioner would clean up the prepared area and then go back to take a bath. When he came back, he sat down to observe. This required him not sit too close lest he suffer its negative effects. At the same time, he could not sit too far away, or he would not be able to see clearly. In addition to the suitable distance, the suitable height is also very important. ‘He cannot sit too high, which would make his neck sore, and he cannot sit too low, which would make his knees sore.’¹² If we want to practice successfully, we must first take good care of our own body. If we do not take good care of our body, then it will be damaged and difficult to support our subsequent practice.

After being seated in this manner, the practitioner will observe the faults of

¹⁰ Translated by myself, Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification* , p131

¹¹ Translated by myself, Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification* , p131

¹² Translated by myself, Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification* , p131

desire. Because of this thought, he yearns for detachment from his troubles. ‘At the same time, he will remember the virtues of Buddha, Dharma and monk and be happy.’¹³ Then he opened his eyes and began to practice the method of uggaha-nimitta. At this time, he does not open his eyes wide, which can make them tired. Of course, he will not open his eyes too small, so that he will inevitably feel drowsy, which is also bad for practice.

In addition to the above precautions, he should also be careful not to observe colors and qualities. ‘He should pay attention to the name of this circle, and often call it ‘di 地 di 地’.’¹⁴ Sometimes he opened his eyes to observe, sometimes he closed them. Even if he closes his eyes, this image is clearly reflected in his mind and is no difference of what he sees when he opens his eyes. If he can achieve this, it shows that he has succeeded in uggaha-nimitta. Then he did not have to sit here anymore. He could go back to his room and practice. During this process, ‘if the image in his mind disappears, he needs to go back and repeat the process until he can successfully get the image again.’¹⁵ This kind of practice varies from person to person. Some people may not need to practice too many times, and some people are not calm enough, then they need to practice thousands of times to ensure that the impression will not disappear.

3.3 Patibhaga-nimitta

¹³ Translated by myself, Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification* , p132

¹⁴ Translated by myself, Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification* , p132

¹⁵ Translated by myself, Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification* , p132

After this stage, the practitioner returns to his residence to concentrate on his thoughts. He could observe the absence of the mental image, such as a few fingerprints. There is a lot of disadvantages of the mental image. When he focuses on practice repeatedly, patibhaga-nimitta occur. The process is like taking a bright mirror out of a box or getting a clean plate. 'Patibhaga-nimitta is very peace and quiet, better than the previous image more than a hundred times.'¹⁶ Patibhaga-nimitta has neither color nor shape, for both color and shape are observed by the human eye. When the practitioner succeeds in achieving the stage of patibhaga-nimitta, he can overcome the five hindrances. 'Five hindrances refer to desire, anger, lethargy, restlessness and regret for wrongdoing, and suspicion.'¹⁷ If the five hindrances cannot be removed, then jhana cannot arise. If a person's heart is full of desire, then he cannot give up the desire realm. If a person is disturbed by anger, there is no peace of mind. If one is drowsy, then one cannot practice. If a person often regrets what he has done in the past, it is unable for him to concentrate. If one has doubts in his heart, he cannot attain jhana. Only after five hindrances have been removed can the practitioner attain meditation. As can be seen from the above, 'it is a practical method of meditation described in *The Path of Purification*.'¹⁸

3.4 Two kinds of meditation

The two types of meditation are upacara-samadhi and appana-samadhi. The former

¹⁶ Translated by myself, Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification* , p133

¹⁷ Translated by myself, Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification* , p151

¹⁸ Li Tongya 李統亞, 'A Brief analysis the status of *The Path of Purification* in Southern Buddhism'. Heilongjiang Historical Records, 13 (2014), pp.207+210.

is the highest meditation in the desire realm. At this time five hindrances are abandoned and broken, and the five Jhanic factors will be arisen. ‘These five Jhanic factors are vitakka, vicara, pīti, sukha, ekaggata.’¹⁹ Vitakka is the practice of directing the mind to the environment of the condition. Vicara is to keep observing. There are subtle differences between the two. Vitakka is the first change of the turning mind, after the change is vicara. Pīti is joy and sukha is happiness. There is a difference between the two. ‘When someone gets what he likes, the satisfaction is called pīti. Happiness is the feeling when someone experiences it.’²⁰ If a person is joy, he must also be happiness. If a person is happiness, he does not necessarily feel joy. ekaggata is a kind of concentration, which enables the practitioner to concentrate completely on one thing.

When the practitioner reaches the upacara-samadhi, the five Jhanic factors are not strong enough, just like a toddler who cannot stand for long and always falling. ‘When he continues to practice until he reaches the appana-samadhi, the five Jhanic factors become strong, which enables him to stay in meditation for a long time.’²¹

4. Conclusion

What mentioned above is the method of earth-kasina for beginners. When the practitioner leaves meditation, he observes the five Jhanic factors appearing in his

¹⁹ Translated by myself, Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification* , p147

²⁰ Translated by myself, Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification* , p150

²¹ Translated by myself, Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification* , p133

mind, which proves that he has reached the stage of pathamam jhanam 初禪 in realm of material form. On this basis, the practitioner can make continuous progress to reach a higher level. The material phenomenon produced by realms with material form is infinitely stronger than the realm of desire in which we live. To reach such a level show that the practitioner has abandoned the five hindrances and many bad practices. ‘The soul of the practitioner transcends the body, and they seek a spirit of spirituality, and at last they find coolness and silence in their hearts.’²²

This method of practice is to help the practitioner to focus his mind continuously so that it can gather and exert great power. Our minds are usually scattered, it does not make a big difference. After knowing this way of practice, ordinary people can follow this way of focusing their minds even if they do not intend to practice. The pace of life in modern society is fast and people are under great pressure, and mostly everyone has a lot of worries. When we are disturbed by these worries, it is difficult for us to concentrate on one thing or doing things with these worries only makes us feel more distressed. Therefore, we can learn to focus our minds on what we need to do in the present without thinking about the worries of the past or future. In this way, we can focus our minds and not only do things better, but also not be disturbed by worries. After practicing this for a while, you may find that your worries are relieved, your whole body and mind are happy, and you will be able to meet life and challenges with a better mental outlook.

²² Zhao Jianjun 趙建軍, ‘Discuss the Chinese Wisdom of Zen’, Journal of China University of Political Science and Law, 05 (2021), pp.269-283

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