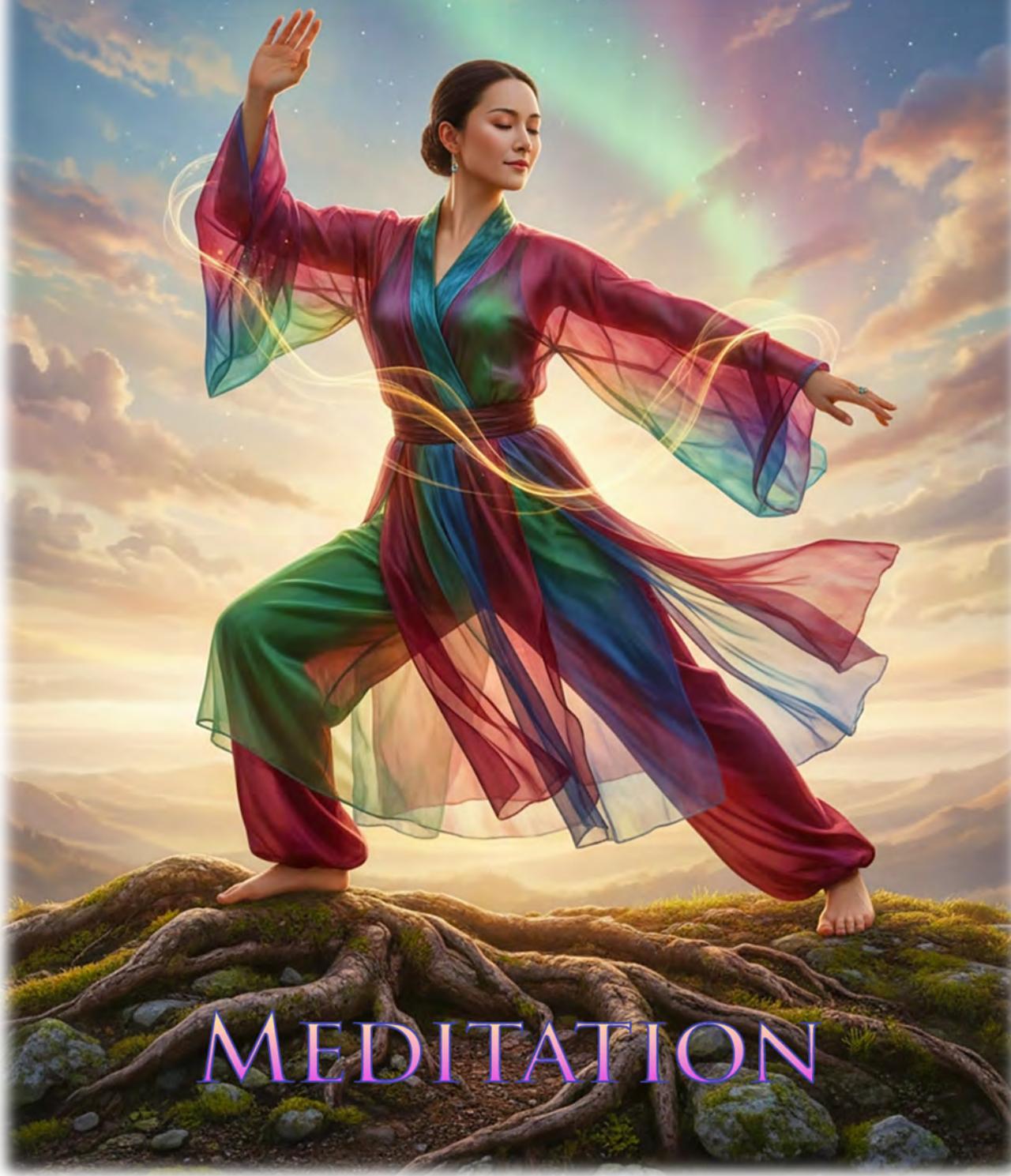


QIGONGDHARMA



MEDITATION

What Meditation Actually Is

Roshi Teja Fudo Myoo Bell

As we begin to take a deeper look at meditation, you might also find it helpful to read my companion article, “What Meditation Is Not.” As always, I offer my own view, drawn from decades of practice and observation, both of myself and of the many practitioners I have been privileged to work with over the years.

If you've practiced meditation for years and feel unclear about what you've actually been cultivating, or if you're new and overwhelmed by conflicting approaches, this framework is meant to orient, not judge.

What we call “meditation” carries countless meanings, shaped by one's spiritual orientation and practice tradition. Even within a single lineage, a teacher may offer multiple levels and methods, sometimes requiring initiations before certain teachings become accessible. My purpose here is not to map every variation but to provide a clear overview of the contemplative landscape, a practical orientation for anyone seeking to understand what meditation actually involves.

The Problem of a Single Word

“Meditation” has become a catch-all term that obscures crucial distinctions. Under this single umbrella, we find relaxation techniques, hypnosis, attention training, concentration practices, inner observation, psychological inquiry, energy cultivation, mindful movement, and non-dual realization. Historically and practically, these are not the same practice, and they do not produce the same results.

The Buddhist term *Bhāvanā* offers a far more precise and fruitful lens. Literally meaning “bringing into being,” Bhāvanā points to cultivation, development, and the gradual realization of our deepest potentials. We are not looking at a technique to be performed but at a developmental process, one that involves sustained effort over time, repetition, evolution, and genuine integration into lived experience.

Consider the difference: rather than a performative act of contrived stillness aimed at ridding ourselves of unwanted mental states, Bhāvanā invites us into a living process of becoming. This is a far more worthwhile endeavor and, I would suggest, closer to what the contemplative traditions have always intended.

Seen in this light, meditation is not something we “do well” or “fail at” in any given session. *Bhāvanā* unfolds over time. So we practice with patience, skillful repetition, and a willingness to meet experience as it actually is, rather than as we wish it to be. Progress is rarely linear. Periods of clarity may be followed by confusion; calm may give way to restlessness; insight may emerge quietly rather than dramatically.

What matters is not the attainment of particular states but the gradual integration of awareness into the body, the heart, and the rhythms of daily life. This developmental understanding is essential. Without it, meditation easily becomes another performance, another self-improvement project, rather than a path of genuine transformation.

A Classical Framework

In Buddhism, **Bhāvanā** refers to the cultivation of mind, heart, and being. This cultivation is traditionally expressed through two primary dimensions:

Samatha Bhāvanā is the cultivation of calm, stability, and inner unification. Through this practice, the scattered mind gathers itself into a coherent, settled presence, a foundation upon which deeper work becomes possible.

Vipassanā Bhāvanā is the cultivation of insight, discernment, and liberating wisdom. Here, we turn our stabilized attention toward the nature of experience itself, investigating what is actually happening in each moment.

Yet even this classical pairing sits within a larger ecosystem of contemplative development. I have always loved the term “contemplation,” and I have come to call myself a contemplative mystic. Contemplation encompasses a broad field of spiritual development, though even this word carries different meanings across traditions.

Meditation, as I use the term here, refers to intentional, structured cultivation. Contemplation, by contrast, points to a way of being—a receptive orientation of heart and mind through which insight, meaning, and intimacy with reality naturally unfold.

In one sense, contemplation is a non-conceptual orientation of heart-mind-spirit toward the One, the Dao, God, or the Universal, depending on one’s spiritual bent. In another approach, we focus on a sacred text or teaching, holding it gently without effort, allowing deeper meaning to emerge and insight to inform awareness, action, and intention, as if from divine inspiration. Distinctive approaches to contemplation have developed within Greek philosophy, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Daoism, and Theosophy, each offering its own gifts.

QigongDharma's Integrative Approach

QigongDharma offers a unique integrative approach to contemplative practice, encompassing not only mental methods but also the somatic and energetic pathways of direct knowing and practical experience. This is not “meditation-light” but a comprehensive way to develop a profound understanding of ourselves and the Universe, which are ultimately one and the same.

In this approach, meditation is no longer confined to posture or technique. It extends to seated, standing, and lying-down practices; to moving and unmoving forms; to inner and outer awareness, held simultaneously; to the personal and the universal, recognized as inseparable. This pathway dissolves the inner/outer duality while integrating body, breath, mind, energy, and spirit.

Let us now turn to the foundational elements that underpin any genuine contemplative practice.

Foundations: Settle, Open, Ground, and Center

My own journey into meditation began with martial arts. While it is certainly not necessary to learn or practice martial arts, working through the shared preparatory stages found across many traditions helps establish a solid foundation for any contemplative practice we undertake.

Settle

To settle the body is to begin to arrive and be present. Without this felt sense of arrival in the body, the mind and spirit cannot center into being. Settling is always accompanied by adjustments in posture and the regulation of breath into natural rhythms, fostering a calm presence that helps establish safety and ease.

From a contemporary perspective, settling serves to down-regulate nervous system activation. It is a way of becoming more fully present in the present moment, not through force or effort but through a gentle, embodied return to what is here and now.

Open

Opening is an act of courage and trust, a willingness to step toward the uncertain, the unknown, and the unpredictable. This opening does not require us to abandon discernment or safety; rather, it is an intentional turn toward potential and an honest embrace of the unfamiliar, with the possibility of positive transformation.

Openness nurtures growth, brings vitality, and allows the heart to expand and the mind to soften. It invites new perspectives that enrich our understanding and capacity to love.

Ground

To ground is to recognize, feel, and deepen your connection with what is here and now, in your settled, centered alignment. Grounding is a way to connect with reality through felt, embodied awareness, honoring both your internal landscape and the resources available in your external environment.

Grounding invites us to unite with the supportive forces within and around us. This unity becomes a source of strength and resilience as we navigate life's currents. We often speak of grounding as settling into the earth and aligning with gravity, but it is also about receiving the nourishment and resources of the unseen, the deep Yin aspect of creation.

Center

To center is to arrive more fully in the present moment and to be at home in your body. Centering invites a conscious awareness and felt sense of your personal essence, intention, and alignment. Becoming more centered honors body-mind and spirit, dramatically shaping how you engage with the world.

Centering is not about achieving a static state; it is about attuning to the fluid, responsive nature of who you are and all that surrounds you. Through receptive listening, we honor the organic, shifting nature of change even as we connect with the deeper, unchanging nature.

The Integration

In establishing the experience of settling, opening, grounding, and centering, we engage in a natural metamorphosis, moving from one state of being to another with increasing inclusivity and integration. This is not a rejection of past forms but a weaving of them into a larger tapestry of wholeness.

Each stage builds on the last, laying a foundation for new possibilities, expanded awareness, and direct experience. We honor the journey that has shaped us while embracing our potential for continued transformation into greater fullness and unity. This framework serves as a guide for cultivating a life of deeper presence, resilience, openness, and transformation, embodying the principles of QigongDharma in every moment.

Gathering Attention

Once we have established the preparatory regulation of settling, opening, grounding, and centering, our next step is to gently gather mental awareness from its scattered, discursive tendencies into a stable, relaxed attentional field.

Many traditions call this access concentration, a stable focus that opens the pathway to deeper meditative practice. Stabilization is the ability to sustain focused, relaxed attention without struggle. With this skill comes greater mental clarity and considerably less reactivity.

The traditional terms for these progressive stages come from Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. ***Dhāraṇā*** refers to focused attention, the initial gathering and directing of the mind. This concentration, while valuable, is not yet what the traditions call Samādhi.

Dhyāna represents pure meditative awareness, the experience and realization of a mind that is non-opinionated, imperturbable, effortless, and compassionate. In Dhyāna-level practice, we look out from and directly into who we are beyond our senses, thoughts, feelings, and the idea of a separate self. This practice opens a deeper knowing of ourselves beyond thinking, feeling, and sensing.

Samādhi is a form of meditative absorption, a non-dual bridge in which subject and object become one. Here, the ordinary sense of separation dissolves, and awareness rests in unified presence.

It is important to understand that **Samādhi** is a *state*, not awakening itself. Without insight, states, however profound, do not necessarily liberate. We can visit extraordinary realms of consciousness and still return unchanged in any fundamental way. This is why insight practices are essential.

Insight: The Liberating Turn

Insight practices align with the Vipassanā-oriented traditions, which draw on early Buddhist teachings such as the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the discourse on the four foundations of mindfulness. These teachings investigate what Buddhism calls the Three Characteristics of all conditioned phenomena: impermanence (*anicca*), unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattā*).

Through careful observation, we come to see directly, not merely to believe, that all experiences arise and pass away, that clinging to what is inherently unstable cannot bring lasting satisfaction, and that what we take to be a solid, separate self is actually a flowing process rather than a fixed entity.

Mindfulness (*sati*) in this context is non-reactive awareness of experience that sees sensations, feelings, and thoughts as processes. It is a form of clear knowing that discerns the nature of experience, perceives causal patterns, and gradually disentangles identification and clinging. These practices aim not at absorption but at liberating understanding, a seeing that transforms how we relate to everything that arises.

Where concentration practices unify the mind, insight practices illuminate it. Both are needed. Calm without clarity can become a pleasant refuge from life rather than a doorway into it. Clarity without calm can become agitation masquerading as wisdom. Together, they support genuine transformation.

Cultivating the Heart

Cultivating heart-based practices is essential to any genuine contemplative system. Often overlooked or misclassified as “secondary” or merely “devotional,” these are in fact core *Bhāvanā* practices. In the Buddhist tradition, they are called the *Brahmavihāras*, the “divine abodes” or “boundless qualities.”

Mettā (loving-kindness) is the sincere wish for the happiness and well-being of all beings, including oneself. It is not mere sentiment but an active orientation of the heart that can be cultivated through deliberate practice.

Karunā (compassion) is the heart's response to suffering, the wish that beings be free from pain and its causes. Compassion moves us from passive observation to engaged care.

Muditā (appreciative joy) is the capacity to delight in the happiness and success of others. This practice directly counteracts envy and the tendency to compare ourselves unfavorably with others.

Upekkhā (equanimity) is the balanced, spacious quality of mind that can hold all experience without being overwhelmed. It is not indifference but a wise stability that allows love and compassion to remain steady in the face of life's inevitable changes.

The importance of these practices cannot be overstated. They cultivate emotional regulation, relational wisdom, and the ethical embodiment of insight. Perhaps most significantly, they reshape character, not just mental states. Over time, these qualities become less something we practice and more who we are.

Embodied and Energetic Practices

Not all contemplative systems include energetic understanding and specific exercises to enhance it. This is where QigongDharma's contribution becomes essential.

Stillness-based embodied practice, whether seated, standing, or lying down, places attention on body, breath, and energetic field to cultivate internal coherence and presence. The body becomes not merely a platform for the mind but a full participant in the contemplative process.

Movement-based embodied practice, such as Qigong, Neigong, and Dao Yin, dissolves the false split between "meditation" and "movement." These practices cultivate *Qi* (vital energy), *Li* (organic pattern), and *Shen* (spirit) simultaneously. They work directly with fascia, breath, the nervous system, and intention.

Here, Bhāvanā becomes energetic cultivation, understood and embodied, offering a structural re-education of our organism and serving as the foundation for genuine embodied awakening.

As stillness moves, movement becomes stillness.

Toward Integration

What emerges from this exploration is that meditation is not one thing. There are many valid and related contemplative forms, each cultivating distinct dimensions of our human capacity. Stabilizing practices cultivate calm and concentration. Insight practices cultivate wisdom and liberation. Heart practices cultivate love and ethical presence. Embodied practices cultivate energetic coherence and somatic awakening.

In QigongDharma, we seek to honor all these dimensions, recognizing that genuine transformation requires attention to the body, heart, mind, energy, and spirit. Meditation becomes not a discrete activity but a way of inhabiting reality.

A refined working definition might be this:

Meditation is any intentional contemplative practice that cultivates awareness, presence, integration, and wisdom across body, heart, mind, energy, and spirit.

Understood as Bhāvanā, meditation reminds us that practice is developmental, results unfold over time, and integration matters more than peak experiences. We are not seeking a single transformative moment but the gradual cultivation of a transformed life.

This is what meditation actually is: not an escape from life but a deepening into it; not a technique to be mastered but a way of being to be realized; not a rejection of our humanity but its fullest flowering.

You might consider how this understanding of meditation is already alive in your practice, inviting itself into your own life in the simple, ordinary moments where awareness, presence, and care can quietly take root.

No path and no arrival
only this breath
finding its home in the body.

Stillness learns to move,
movement remembers stillness.
Life, at last,
meditates itself.