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SHEN GONG  
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in DA XUAN

A MANUAL FOR WORKING WITH  
MIND, EMOTION, AND INTERNAL ENERGY

SINGING  
DRAGON 



# Achieving Happiness by Calming the Mind

This is the aspect of Shen Gong accessible to people practicing in daily life and the most interesting part for us to study. This is the aspect in which we can develop happiness, nourished by inner peace. Our mind becomes our tool again, rather than the other way round. When the mind is calm, thoughts begin and end, instead of lingering on endlessly. Emotions do not arise as easily, so we simply feel good.

This aspect comprises 18 smaller parts, but essentially we are looking for three things.

## **1. Calming the mind by knowing the mind**

First, we need to make the mind ours again. This means that it stops spinning on its own and stops commenting on everything. You cannot help or repair something if you do not know how it works.

Calming the mind is the aspect that you will find in most meditation manuals. Calming and soothing the mind means essentially knowing the mind. We want to know how the mind works in general, but particularly how our own mind works. We each have a way of functioning, which was determined by the age of three. Our perceptions will be interpreted and judged, qualified

and organized. This will determine the way we think. This specific way of thinking will evolve with developed vocabulary and knowledge and imagination, but it will pretty much remain the same as far as the process itself is concerned. And this process is what differs from one person to another.

*If you do not know the way you operate, there is no way you can correct it.*

This forms the first part of Shen Gong, with the idea of coming back to an available mind by calming it.

## **2. Occupying the mind**

The second step is occupying the mind. Once you see how your mind works and you become more intimate with its process, you can start to occupy it. This means keeping it busy with exercises that will dissolve a big portion of the useless stuff in the mind. Indeed, our mind is constantly preoccupied by things that it should not be! Here we just need to give the mind some basic exercises (counting, working on the senses, etc.) that have the sole purpose of occupying it, so that eventually only the important things will remain. By doing this we go even deeper into our self-knowledge. We have calmed our mind, and now by occupying it we access information that we could not access before. When applied to the mind, these techniques enable the relevant information—the real issues—to reveal themselves. They also allow the mind to focus without forcing it to resolve problems. Indeed, we are not ordering the mind to concentrate. We find tools to allow the mind to do that on its own. If you order a child who is acting up and throwing a tantrum to stop, it will not work, but if you distract the child with something he likes, the crisis ceases immediately! This is exactly how our mind works. If you try to stop it, the mind will backfire and make it even worse.

### **3. Being focused**

The third step is focusing. Imagine how much time you would save if your mind could really focus! Your relationships with other people will be much better because you will be 100 percent with them. You can work faster and you sense things more accurately. Everything benefits from being able to be focused.

There are three levels of focusing.

#### ***The first is concentration***

Concentration is a closed-down vision—as in a reverse cone. This is not really a fun process. You just stare at something, concentrating for a certain amount of time. It is the most unfulfilling and “dumb” aspect of the training: just being able to be there, without thinking, and look at an object. Nevertheless, we really need this to improve our concentration. Especially today, when our lives do not depend on our ability to concentrate. We are no longer in survival mode, so we let go of this ability.

What does being concentrated mean? It means being able to stay concentrated consciously and willingly on the same object without being distracted from it for at least 30 minutes. This may seem very easy, but once you actually try you realize how difficult this is.

Concentration means that you are so completely focused on one point that the rest of the universe no longer exists. The only thing that exists is the object you are concentrating on. This creates a lot of tension and consumes a lot of energy, but it is necessary to go through this educational process in order to practice experiences.

#### ***The second is focusing***

Focused attention is tunnel vision—when you are surprised by something that falls, for example, or are in a confrontation. When you are in a stressful or violent situation, you only see the person in question and the rest is a blur.

### ***The third is attention***

This is a relaxed focus. It is an open-cone vision. Instead of shutting down from the rest of the world to a specific point, here you go from you being the point outwards into the world. Attention means being conscious as much as possible of yourself and everything in your environment.

These three steps are the most important aspects of Shen Gong because they can lead you to happiness—the joy that comes from inside.

*Remember that all perceptions come from the inside. There are never external perceptions.*

If your mind is in a balanced, happy state, then everything you perceive is positive. It is the same when you hear great news and the rest of the day is shaped by your good mood. This is really what we are looking for, but in a constant way.

### **Calming the mind exercises**

There are many steps in this practice and most people stop after the first step, which is to look at your thoughts.

#### ***Exercise 1: Watching the mind***

Calming the mind begins by looking at your mind. This consists of four stages: simple attention, observing and accepting your mind, active attention, and stillness.

The process of looking at your mind is the most tedious aspect of the practice and requires some endurance. It is as if you have a 100-yard race to run in a car that doesn't work. The hardest part is starting the car. This corresponds to watching your mind. Most people will stop trying before they get the car started, even though what follows is more easily within their reach.

Starting the car may take a while, but once you have started it, the rest is quite simple. When you understand your mind, you see

more clearly the work needed. But most people get irritated and give up at this first step.

### *Simple attention*

Simple attention means looking at your thoughts. This requires nothing. You sit down and close your eyes in order to have the least stimulation possible. And you look at what is going on in your mind. At first what you see will be a distorted vision of your own mind because it will rebel against the exercise, just as if you tell someone in an empty room to behave naturally while staring at them. The person will need some time to get used to your presence and to gradually let go of the pressure and relax. At some point they will even forget that you are watching them. So during these first encounters the mind will go through a lot of different phases before it can settle down again. It is usually during this chaotic or uninteresting period that people give up, because there is no valuable information, nothing stimulating to encourage them to continue. And also because we have preconceived ideas of what meditation should be like and grand ideas about what our mind is. It is quite disappointing!

In fact, this step is crucial and each moment you spend watching your mind adds to the other moments and will be important and beneficial for the rest of Shen Gong. Once again, the worst Shen Gong ever—that is, what you consider to be terrible—will still be good for your practice. You just have to keep at it and not give up. Of course, the time you spend doing this will affect your evolution. Spending all day practicing will obviously bring you to more advanced stages faster than 15 minutes a day. But you will eventually reach certain stages even with your daily 15 minutes! You need to be able to adjust the time according to your goals and then stick to it.

What happens at first?

1. When you first start watching your mind you will have to deal with non-stop commenting: your mind commenting on your thoughts and commenting on the fact that you are watching your mind commenting. This vicious cycle can be endless.
2. Then the mind rebels with the idea that what you are doing is a waste of time and you would be better off doing something else. Often what also comes up is that we are either too good or not good enough for this practice.
3. Once this calms down, it will be the thoughts about your day that will rise, such as your shopping list, the things you must not forget to do, and so on. This takes time! Even if this comes back constantly in your practice, you will notice that the moments when you are commenting on these daily thoughts will go by faster and you will instantly resume just watching your mind. Then more interesting elements start to appear.
4. Then at some point, just like hunters who have killed one or two ducks, there will be a moment when nothing happens. The other ducks stay still and silent for a moment. This deceiving tranquility will last for a while and then stronger elements will arise, often linked to current emotions.

*This tests the seriousness of your commitment to the tradition. Typically, these are moments when doubt will arise as your mind tries to find all the flaws in the system.*

This is a difficult period because it is the commitment and true belief in the tradition that will become an anchor for you and help you to evolve through these steps. When you are clear about your choices, the mind will stop rebelling and will calm down, and this is when the more important information will come up. Often

the emotions linked to the thoughts are not really identifiable and are not linked to something you are presently living. You could say they come out of the blue, and then the emotions are clarified. When an emotion arises, you know where it is coming from. However, there is no need for analysis; the understanding is natural. The fact of knowing its origin enables you to resolve it as well. Once again, this is a natural process that does not require an intellectual examination.

This first stage of watching the mind with simple attention can take quite some time—just like a pot over a fire. If you practice a bit, and then stop and start again, and then take another few days off, it will be like trying to make water boil by constantly taking the pot off of the burner. It will never boil. If you practice daily but for a short period, it will be like a low flame heating the water. It will also take some time to boil. You need continuity. Then real messages will arise from deep inside.

This leads us to the second step of watching your mind, which is to observe and accept your mind.

### *Observing and accepting the mind*

This step can be done relatively quickly if you already have a practice in all aspects of the human being: body, mind, and vitality. Once what was deep inside of you emerges, you perceive much better the difference between who you are, who you pretend to be, and who you think you are. You are then able to have a lucid critical vision of your inner judge and commentator.

Once you are conscious of this inner jumble, you can accept it or not. As long as you do not accept who you are, including all these different facets, you will stay blocked in the same state. This is simply because you cannot be someone else and you will have to let go of prejudices, comparisons, expectations, fantasies about what you are, and your motivations.

Furthermore, your motivations—the reasons you come to meditate—are never good. Now that you are starting to know



yourself better and you see this, you have to let it all go. If you are ready, this happens automatically—you just accept it naturally. Otherwise, it will still create tension and friction, and this can last a while.

This is a very Yin notion. We accept the concept of what we are through our incarnation. This is a difficult process because, all of a sudden, who you are—good and bad—becomes real.

What is interesting is that emotions are experienced through frustration and rising thoughts. Accepting who you are is not linked to emotions, however; when you experience an emotion, you are in confrontation with reality. On the contrary, in accepting who you are, you will feel soothed. This is the state in which the emotions also let go and you relax. This peacefulness is the feeling of neutrality in going back to the center.

### *Active attention*

When you watch your mind with simple attention, a spontaneous emergence of thoughts comes to you. In active attention, we go from our deeper self towards our thoughts, and we await them. And then once we see them, we destroy them. This means watching the rising thought emerge and making it go away.

This is a simple mental process. Along with the rising thought comes a multitude of comments. You just have to stop this and return to the “white screen.” This idea will be described below.

### ***Exercise 2: Thought hunting***

This “thought hunt” brings inner and outer tension, but it also triggers the thoughts to stop. Just as animals stay hidden when hunters are around, the thoughts do not come out. This phenomenon is only held by concentration. As soon as you relax a little, a multitude of thoughts will emerge again. Once again, you resume the process of “thought hunting” in the same way.

In this exercise we are trying to consciously find the mental process that enables us to muffle, suppress, destroy, or move a

thought. Everyone can find a way to dissolve thoughts. Some will find this through a geographical point of focus in their mind; some will create a tension with a specific positioning of the eyes behind closed eyelids.

Part of the exercise is trying to understand exactly how you go about dissolving a thought rather than keeping a vague impression of it. Sometimes even facial muscles can tense up in the attempt to quieten a thought. It is important to notice all the details.

Eliminating thoughts is a relatively physiological process; you just have to find out how to go about it. As this creates tension, obviously, as soon as you begin to relax, all the hidden thoughts burst out. The only way to avoid this is to gradually find a way to eliminate the thoughts with the least possible tension so that the exercise can last longer.

### ***Exercise 3: The shelter thought***

Once you know how to physiologically make the thought/thoughts disappear, you want to keep one of them as your “shelter thought” and eliminate all the others. This means that as soon as another thought emerges, you can go back to your “shelter thought.” This unique thought can be a concept, an idea, a word, an image, or an object. It is a bit like holding a lid over the multitude of thoughts while looking at one of them that came out. If others are able to slip from beneath the lid, by focusing on your first “shelter thought” the one that escaped will go back under the lid.

When you are able to do this you can move on to the fourth step—stillness, the white screen—below.

### ***Exercise 4: Eliminating all thoughts, even the shelter thought***

This creates a void, yet there is still tension during the exercise due to the active attention focused on eliminating every thought. It is not at all liberating and it requires some energy, just like holding a lid down for some time. This is why it creates tension.

This technique is very important and you have to experience this in order to become the one in charge again, using your mind as a tool, and not the other way around. By this direct experience you come to know that you are the boss. As long as this is not done, you have no way to realize that thoughts are there to serve you and should be used as tools. This is in fact a real battle with the ego, which little by little is crushed down to a more reasonable size! When you repeat this technique, over time there will be less tension or effort invested and it will become easier.

The first sign of having a calmed mind is that you no longer have inner comments when people talk to you. You are available to really listen.

When you reach the second part of Shen Gong realization (which we have not yet described in detail), there is no internal comment when you speak either. This process happens naturally.

### *Stillness, the white screen*

When you hold down the thoughts for some time, it will eventually become almost effortless and something very interesting will appear: a blank will materialize, often white, in front of your closed eyes. This is comparable to “white noise.” Nothing is happening. Stillness is the next step, bringing silence. This is described by the term “white screen.” Some will describe it as if going through a warm shower or a cool shower, with the feeling of something letting go and a sense of tingling up and down the body. The beginning of mental silence comes at the end of the process of calming your mind. This can be an extremely long process if you have no guidance. With these guidelines, however, you can reach this state in just a few months if you practice every day. Once again, the guidelines are looking at your mind and learning how to hold your thoughts. Within this process you reach mental silence; the mind is calm except when we need to use it deliberately.

The “white screen” could almost be considered a moment “in between”—a space in which we linger between the thought we

just suppressed and the next one coming. This time period will stretch and we can remain longer in this space where nothing is happening.

This is called the “small realization of Kan and Li” (the balance between Water and Fire), the balance and the contact point between the mind and the body. It is also said to be the center of the mind and the alignment on the world’s Chong Mai, the spiritual axis. Many terms are used to explain this, but they all come from individual experiences, so the most important thing is to search for it personally.

The more you practice, the less frightening this experience will become. This will lead you to gradually stay longer in the state of “white screen,” which will then also lead to very interesting physical and physiological sensations. The body’s circulation tends to increase, the heartbeat slows down, and the breath is lengthened; all of these elements combine to convey a genuine feeling of wellbeing.

Of course, before achieving this you go through many moments of withdrawal, especially when you first start to experience this stage. You gradually stay longer. It is as if the fear of falling is transformed progressively into the desire to be in freefall, feeling yourself floating in the air. Many traditions compare this moment to mental levitation. It is a moment of absence.

*Note: When we say that it is important to know yourself, this does not mean that at some point in the practice you are able to use more refined tools to analyze your mind. Analysis does not exist in Shen Gong practice. Once you practice, you will know at some point who you are just because you are. When you look at your hand, examining it does not make it more your hand. You know that it is your hand because it is your hand. You do not have to find ways to understand this. It is the same for who you really are.*

This brings us back once again to the name of our school—Da Xuan: the Great Secret. The great secret is not hidden. It is right in front of you, but you are in the dark and cannot see it. Once you put the right amount of light in that area, however, you can see it clearly. It is obvious and needs no analyzing.

Therefore, the first step in Shen Gong is accepting who we are. This is very hard if you have to force yourself to accept who you are!

We are naturally in rebellion against who we truly are. This is due to everything we have constructed, our own projection of who we are, our comparisons with others, our expectations, our fantasies linked to our belief system. All these aspects form a barrier. This barrier will dissolve little by little with the repetition of the practice. Even if you are aware of this barrier, you cannot confront it directly. You will never succeed using confrontation because this will create more tension. With gradual and constant repetition of this practice, however, the barrier of beliefs will slowly and naturally be replaced by other beliefs emanating from our true nature. It is the same idea with habits. It is extremely hard to get rid of a bad habit; when you try to do so, it creates a lot of tension and you think about it all the time. The only way is to replace it with another habit.

This difficulty in watching your mind can keep you from going further, so it is crucial not to give up. When you regularly connect yourself to the white screen, you come to a state of silence. In order to attain this, you must get past the obstacles set by your ego to prevent you from watching your mind and containing your thoughts. Unfortunately, these are the only ways to calm the mind.

What matters here is perseverance with no expectations. Do not look for results, sensations, or gratification. The positive aspect in Shen Gong is simply repeated practice. It is often the lack of results that turns people away from Shen Gong, when in fact it is the accumulation and time spent practicing that will lead you to a peaceful mind. Investing in loss is worth it because this effort,

which is not in itself rewarding, will give you the ability to stop looking for results and to practice for the practice. This is the only possible evolution in Shen Gong.

It is not like physical training which can be rewarding with concrete results. In meditation, evolution will happen naturally, but there will not be immediate gratification. Nevertheless, there is something to look forward to, and this is the joy that it can bring which seeps into your daily life and into your interaction with other people. This joy comes from having an available mind—the consequence of a peaceful, calm mind. This is a natural process that you cannot force but comes with a daily practice. Signs of joy, enthusiasm, and desire are true signs of evolution in the practice of Shen Gong.

Shen Gong is purely mental and spiritual work. Its purpose is not simply to be relaxed. Yet it does have an effect on emotions. This is because our mind is not in accordance with our body. This creates friction—and thus emotions—so, in this sense, Shen Gong is indirectly physiological. However, real mind work is not material. The training is relaxing at first because it calms emotions, but this is not its main purpose. It is made to work on a spiritual level. It is a work on the immaterial and non-incarnated world. This is why after the first part of calming the mind comes the second part of self-realization, perfectly accomplishing our celestial destiny, and then comes the third part, going beyond and correcting what goes past our own destiny.

*True happiness comes from within, with the desire and enthusiasm for life, directly linked to the Shen, the mind.*