

CONCEPT OF MEDITATION AND NIBBAN IN BUDDHISM

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Abstract

The way to enlightenment and meditation is the Noble Eightfold Path, the fourth of the Four Noble Truths; the most important section of this Path is meditation. In the Abhidhammas, Buddhist writers have made a detailed analysis of meditation into its constituent parts. Genuine Buddhist meditation is called insight meditation, or vipassana. This investigation of Buddhist theory and philosophy in the light of personal experience is called the development of wisdom or prajna (Pali : panna); it is the fourth and last fundamental Buddhist meditation. There is the positive emotion of Buddhist compassion-an all-embracing love without desire which ultimately leads to nibble

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Introduction

The way to enlightenment and meditation is the Noble Eightfold Path, the fourth of the Four Noble Truths; the most important section of this Path is meditation.

Inevitably, over the last two and a half thousand years, *Buddhist meditation* has diversified as it has spread from one culture to another; it has become encrusted with ceremony and tradition.

Conceptual Framework and Discussion

In the Abhidhammas, Buddhist writers have made a detailed analysis of meditation into its constituent parts. It is an excellent analysis methodical and based upon direct experience of what is described. Modern science can take this as a basis, can add to it, and relate it to modern knowledge of the nervous system.

It is mentioned in the The first thing a novice meditator has to tackle is the posture. There are a great many of these, a number of them very painful, and some of them almost certainly bad for the legs. Different schools prescribe different postures and emphasize seemingly minor points such as the position of the hands.¹

The Buddhist meditator breathes naturally, using the breath, if at all, simply as something to concentrate on or be mindful of. The Japanese scientists have studied this aspect of Buddhist meditation becomes slower and less air is breathed in,² that breathing is done mainly from the abdomen;³ this is the normal sort of breathing if the body is pleasantly relaxed.

Since emotion plays an important part in giving rise to physical and mental activity, this non-reaction is largely a matter of avoiding emotional responses, The Abhidhamma writers speak of the meditator cultivating non-desire or non-attachment (*alobha*) and non-ill will (*adosa*; Sanskrit: *aduesa*) and equanimity (*upekkha*; Sanskrit: *upeksa*).

Habiting emotional responses⁴ is scientifically known as desensitization and is nowadays used in behavior therapy as a cure for phobias.

Here it is pertinent to know how this process works neurologically is not yet clear. There are various hypotheses which are in the process of being tested experimentally.⁵

In Buddhist meditation the objects are mostly left to arise of their own accord. It could be that they should be more deliberately picked as subjects for meditation. Also, these 'emotional objects' must be experienced at first in a mild form, and then, step by step, in stronger forms. Once again, in Buddhist meditation objects are left largely to chance. Once again, it could be that the next level be attempted. According to one theory at least, to move on too quickly and thereby lose

relaxation and succumb to an emotional response, serves to reinforce emotional responses, not inhibit them. This echoes the emphasis in Buddhist meditation on the importance of maintaining a relaxed and non-reacting state. It also shows that if non-reaction cannot be maintained, it is probably particularly important that meditation should stop at once. In many ways like this, work on desensitization therapy, both practical and theoretical, and provides important scientific information about Buddhist meditation, and helps to make it more efficient.

The third fundamental of all types of Buddhist meditation is *attention*. It is likely that this aspect of meditation is a fairly simple process of learning. It is training the attention faculty of the brain, just as one would train any other faculty of the body to gain a skill.

The Abhidhamma account is very clear. The meditator begins with the ordinary faculty of attention (*manasikara*; Sanskrit: *manaskara*). He deliberately applies it to the object of his meditation, whereupon it becomes applied attention (*uitakka*; Sanskrit: *uitarka*). With training, the meditator learns to sustain attention (*urticaria*) for long periods. Thus attention which is found in even the most advanced stages of meditation is none other than ordinary attention, trained to a high degree.

Attention meditation is of two main sorts, according to whether the object of meditation is *one* or *many*. This is the basic Buddhist division of meditation into *Samatha* and *Vipassana*.

Attention focused on one thing only is called in the Abhidhammas *one-pointed attention* or *ekaggata* (Sanskrit: *ekagrata*). It is said to be synonymous with *samadhi* or concentration, and also with right concentration. is the Eightfold Path. The Buddhist meditator may not always be aware that he is doing this sort of meditation. It crops up in Tibetan Buddhism as ‘visualizations’ and throughout the Mahayana schools, as meditations on *mantras*, such as the invocation to Amdia Buddha used in the pure Land school of Japan. In short, any meditation that focuses attention on one thing, to the exclusion of all others, is one-pointed meditation.

Besides, Abhidhammas make it very clear that this is only the tranquilizing of mental confusion, not a proper cure, which is probably the reason why it is called *samatha*, or tranquillity (i.e., tranquillization). So long as meditation lasts, unhealthy mental factors such as desire and anger are inhibited, but the moment it comes to an end, they all arise again. Modern science has also found that more disuse is not sufficient to eradicate emotional responses.⁶

On the other hand, one-pointed meditation is used in Buddhism simply as a technique for developing attention. As such, modern science should be able to

contribute to its efficiency in many ways. Research on attention could probably decide which objects are best to focus attention on-visual or auditory, simple or complex, and so on.

Once developed, attention can then be used in meditation proper.⁷ Genuine Buddhist meditation is called insight meditation, or *vipassana*. According to the Abhidhamms, uipassana begins with the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (*satipatthana*; Sanskrit: *smrti-upasthana*). Mindfulness (*sati*; Sanskrit: *smrti*) is yet another term for attention and it is applied, in the first foundation, to the body, in the second to pain and pleasure, in the third to states of mind and in the fourth, to the contents of mind. Taken together, the Four Foundations cover almost everything that could possibly arise in experience. Thus in uipassana, attention is applied, not to just one thing, but to everything. Attention is broadened on until it becomes what Trungpa calls ‘panoramic awareness’.⁸

This sort of meditation is no longer merely a subject for scientific examination. Instead, *it* is the scientific examination itself! The meditator is training himself to observe fully and accurately in a detached and unemotional way, just as a scientist strives to do. Again, like a scientist, he observes direct experience, and does so without assumptions, without interference, and strictly in the present. What the meditator doesn’t do is to conceptualize his observation, because he is observing the experience as a whole. Consequently concepts, ideas, and theories are all on the same footing as sense perceptions; they also are just material for detached observation.

There is a second stage of mindfulness, however, which is called ‘clear comprehension, (*sampajanna*)⁹ and which moves on from bare attention to an active investigation of the object of meditation. The meditator now observes the object of meditation. The meditator now observes objects of experience in the light of Buddhist doctrines. In the first Foundation of Mindfulness, for example, the body is viewed as ever-changing, without any enduring essence or soul, and as the cause of present suffering. This process is repeated in the remaining three foundations, and also in the third, fourth and sixth ‘Purities’ (*Visuddhi*). The sixth *Visuddhi* is divided up into nine kinds of insight (*upas-sana-nana*) which is meditation on the arising, passing away and disappearance of things, and the futility of trying to cling to them.

It is easy to misunderstand this kind of meditation as a sort of self-imposed brain-washing, an auto-indoctrination in a set of religious dogmas in an attempt to eradicate doubt.

In Buddhism, the meditator is actually using a form of experimental method. Which means adopting Buddhist doctrines and is testing them against experience.

Observing the contents of experience with attention and detachment, he discovers for himself that they are indeed changing all the time. Try as he may, he cannot find any evidence of an everlasting core or soul in himself or in any other object or process. In the *vipassana-nanas*, the meditator comes to see that what he took to be his body and mind are simply a stream of experiences in which perceptions and ideas continually arise, fade, and disappear. Since things do fade and disappear, it is clearly dangerous, vain and an utter waste of time to cling to them. He comes to know by direct experience that the only way to escape from this life of clinging to insubstantial things is to give up emotional desires and aversions and maintain, instead, equanimity towards all things. Each new meditator, in the process of meditation, can repeat the Buddha's own observations and test for himself the Buddha's doctrines. This investigation of Buddhist theory and philosophy in the light of personal experience is called the development of wisdom or *prajna* (Pali : *panna*); which is the fourth and last fundamental Buddhist meditation. In Buddhism, there are two definitions of wisdom which, on closer examination, turn out to be merely two stages.

In the Abhidhammas of the early schools descriptions of *Panna* make clear that it means scientific knowledge. In more recent Theravadin Commentaries, it is specifically compared to the sort of knowledge possessed by a chemist, who knows the chemical properties and constituents of everything he sees. In the same way, while observing the contents of his mind, the meditator considers the physical constituents of his body and the causes of mental events.

Indeed, some aspects of Abhidhamma analysis can now be replaced by more modern scientific information. For example, meditation on the constituents of the body (*eka or dhatuoauatthana*.) which is found in both *samatha* and *vipassana*, in fact, the Mahayana school has classed all Buddhist doctrines as part of relative truth and has given wisdom (*prajna*), a more profound meaning. It has defined wisdom as seeing the ultimate basis of all knowledge. It means seeing that everything is experience, and seeing experience *just as it is, in its true suchness*, without the intervention of any conceptualization, however profound or subtle it may be. Intellectually, this is the Buddhist Philosophy of science. Experienced directly, it is total liberation from the darkness of ignorance.

The early Buddhist and Mahayana views indeed describe two stages on the path of wisdom. The early schools such as the Theravada stress the way to ultimate

wisdom which is still within the world of relative truth, while the Mahayana stresses the ultimate wisdom itself. In fact, by combining and comparing the Abhidhamma analysis with modern scientific research, we have been able to pick out four 'pillars' of Buddhist meditation. They are muscular relaxation, non-reaction, attention, and wisdom. There it seems, are the 'active ingredients' of meditation and can serve as a touchstone by which to judge the nature and value of the meditation practices of any particular Buddhist tradition.

Significance

The significance of the meditation, it seems, is the fullest possible development of these four. In meditation are no longer deliberately applied; they operate naturally and, at every moment of day and night. The nervous system is both relaxed and ready to spring into action whenever it is required. The emotional responses of desire, aversion, and fear no longer arise or, if they do, they are instantly noted by the ever-alert attention and checked. In place of these old emotions, there is the positive emotion there is a positive emotion of Buddhist compassion-an all-embracing love without desire which ultimately leads to *nibbana* (emancipation).

Conclusion

These aspects of *nibbana* are still within the realm of relative truth and so are open to scientific investigation. But *nibbana* is not just a state of mental health, a particular state of the brain. The fourth fundamental of wisdom transforms *nibbana* from a psychological state into complete transcendence.¹⁰ By wisdom the enlightened person *sees* that the whole material world, with all its laws, is just a theoretical model; theories are words and figures, and words and figures are just sights and sounds, and sights and sounds are actual experiences. Since *actual* experience contains all theories, it is itself beyond all theorizing and all investigation. This is why the enlightened person is no longer subject to re-birth, having shattered the chain of causation. And this is how the meditation ribbon family transcends psychology the brain, and the whole of science, and the whole universe to its farthest end.

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