

Meditation

Basic Principles of Buddhist Meditation

The following is a brief introduction to the subject of meditation and its role in the Buddhist spiritual path.

Curiously it is difficult to find a precise equivalent of the term 'meditation' in Buddhist technical terminology. The two principal candidates are *bhāvanā* and *yoga*.

The first of these, *bhāvanā*, is the older, specifically Buddhist term and means literally 'bringing into being'; it refers to mental or spiritual exercises aimed at developing and cultivating wholesome mental states that conduce to the realization of the Buddhist path. Such exercises may centre on sitting quietly in a cross-legged posture, but should not be reduced to that.

The second term, *yoga*, means approximately 'effort' or 'work' and relatively early in the history of Indian religion came to refer to specifically spiritual work and techniques. In this sense, the term is one of very varied application, there being many different approaches to yoga within Indian tradition from those such as *hatha-yoga* which focus on the practice of different bodily postures (*āsana*) to those such as Buddhist yoga which focus on contemplative techniques while sitting in some form of the cross-legged posture.

Buddhist tradition comes to consider meditation by way of two different but complementary aspects, namely calm (*śamatha/samatha*) and insight (*vipaśyanā/vipassanā*), which are geared to the cultivation of deep states of concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*prajñā/paññā*) respectively.

Some modern scholars have seen these two kinds of meditation as reflecting tensions and even disagreements within the earliest Buddhist tradition concerning the nature of the Buddhist path. But, whatever their early history and origins, it is clear that in developed Buddhist theory the two aspects of meditation, calm and insight, are seen as together forming the basis for the realization of the Buddhist goal: when calm and insight meditation are brought together (*yuga-naddha*), the unconditioned may be experienced.

According to a cardinal principle of Buddhist psychology, our minds are fundamentally clear and pure; they have become stained by the operation of adventitious defilements (*kleśa/kilesa*).

Radiant is the mind, monks, but sometimes it is defiled by defilements that come from without. The ordinary man without understanding does not know it as it truly is (*Anguttara Nikāya* i. 10).

The goal of Buddhist practice is to bring to an end the operation of these defilements. The basic method is to restore to the mind something of its fundamental state of clarity and stillness. This clarity of mind provides the opportunity for seeing into the operation of the defilements and the mind's true nature, for seeing things as they really are, for fully awakening.

The way of returning the mind to its state of clarity is by the use of the techniques of calm meditation, which can temporarily suppress or block the immediate defilements that disturb the mind; the way of seeing clearly into the nature of the mind is by the methods of insight meditation, which, in association with calm, can finally eradicate those defilements.

The way of Buddhist meditation is, then, to look deep into ourselves to see the very nature of our minds. The principal immediate mental defilements that constitute the obstacles to the path are known as the five 'hindrances' (*nīvarana*): sensual desire, ill-will, tiredness and sleepiness, excitement and depression, and doubt.

An ancient simile compares the mind that is continually prey to the five hindrances to a bowl of water disturbed or contaminated in five ways: mixed with red dye, steaming hot, full of moss and leaves, ruffled by the wind, muddied and in a dark place. If someone should look down into a bowl of water contaminated in any one of these five ways, then he would not be able to see a clear and true reflection of himself.

On the other hand, if one were to look down into a bowl of water that is free of such contaminations, one would see a clear and true reflection. Likewise, the mind that is disturbed by the hindrances will never succeed in coming to know its true nature.

This then is the basic theory of Buddhist meditation stated in the terms of the oldest texts. While later schools and traditions may change and adapt the terminology used, while they may elaborate the stages and techniques in a number of different ways, while they may give distinctive technical accounts of the content of the knowledge gained in insight meditation, the basic principle for the most part holds good: one stills and clears the mind and then turns it towards investigation and insight.

Source: Excerpted, with minor edits, from Gethin, R. (1998) *The foundations of Buddhism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Pages 174-176.)