

The Meditative Experience: Contemporary Expression of Fundamental Principles

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Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines to-day also.

Ralph Waldo Emerson¹

Introduction

The *Dharma* is a teaching to lead people to the first-hand experience of Enlightenment. Throughout the history of Buddhism, there has been a need to translate these teachings into different languages, different cultures, and different times. Therefore, the essential teachings leading to Enlightenment have frequently been re-formulated into contemporary metaphor and experience to remain vital and effective. Ideally, each of these different expressions of the *Dharma* flow from and towards the experience of Enlightenment itself. They are fingers pointing at the moon, a raft to cross to the other shore ... there is no sacred language or expression in Buddhism, just more or less effective teachings on the path to Enlightenment.

¹ R W Emerson, *Nature: an Essay; and Lectures on the Times*, London, 1844, 1.

In today's world the language of science predominates. Although some people will align science with the exploration of the material world, others will associate it with a process or method of exploration. This process of scientific exploration, this scientific methodology, will be open to everyone through their own personal experiences. It is a way of exploring our personal experiences ourselves, in the company of others, to discern what is shared and predictable in human existence. It is 'objective' not simply to the extent that it refers to matter, but to the fuller extent that intrapersonal experiences can be correlated through a common-denominator language in which provisional principles can be agreed to, testable hypotheses extrapolated, and the touchstone of further personal experiences appealed to. Matter just happens to be one arena of human experience susceptible to such formulation.²

Buddhism proposes a similar process of exploration to this scientific method, albeit one that is looking at the gradient of consciousness, speaks of going beyond self-other consciousness, and thereby points beyond the very tools it uses to communicate itself (that is the language of self and other). Although such introspective explorations are those that people need to do for themselves, and a journey many people do not care to make or lose interest in quickly, there are principles of form as in all the other fields of human experience. In this introspective exploration, Buddhism appeals to personal experience, attempting to elucidate the principles of this experience in a language built from the listener's and the speaker's personal experiences such that it can be heard and understood, with definitive practices, predictable results, and the promise of a more meaningful way to live.

² Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, 1970; and Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, New York, 1935 [1959].

The practice of meditation is a fundamental practice within Buddhism leading to a refinement of consciousness and thereby a sharpening of the introspective lens. Through Buddhist meditation, our introspective abilities remain personal and direct, even come more to life in this sense, while concurrently becoming less pejoratively 'subjective.' The resultant clarification of awareness and purification of the heart through meditation is the metaphorical equivalent of getting a better microscope, reducing the sample bias, and finding more effective controls in our experiments.³ In this way it informs theoretical discussion about personal experience, of the potential refinement of consciousness and a clearer perspective on its contents (just as laboratory work in physics, chemistry, or biology invests the theoretical presentations with lived experiences).

I would like to suggest that a voluntary meditation laboratory based on Buddhist meditation practices be offered to complement the formal religious study of Buddhism. The laboratory arena would be the student's personal meditation practice, an experience which will share common principles of composition across individuals. Students would need to commit to the practice of meditation for the duration of the course, show a willingness to articulate and be honest about their experience (if only to themselves), attempt to communicate in a language that resonates with the experiences of others, and be willing to move into a common-denominator language which can be shared in the lab. The goal, if you could call it that, of such an introspective meditation laboratory would be to provide conditions under which students are able to refine and explore their own experiences with greater clarity.

³ The other fundamental practice is ethics, which in Buddhism unfolds from a sense of love, kindness, and goodwill.

The Experience of Meditation

For most people, the word 'meditation' is neither well-defined nor easily articulated within their personal experiences. Their beliefs might range from meditation being a hypnotic state or one in which the 'mind goes blank,' to believing that it is simply a relaxing visualization or the act of being alone with one's own thoughts. Some people will think that meditation means to wilfully concentrate their attention, while others will take it to mean a complete relaxation of their efforts. Even more interesting, some people will have already had spontaneous 'meditative' experiences which they articulate through the arts, give a theistic embodiment, or, if not particularly artistic or theistic, keep to themselves.

This poor understanding of what meditation is, when coupled with its current popularity and attention, is a problem. In a consumer society, associating oneself with value-laden labels such as 'organic,' 'free-range,' 'Fair Trade,' or 'Made in Australia' creates market value. To the extent that the integrity of these designations is not upheld, or the designations themselves are ambiguous and vague, the market will include substandard products which do not truly fit their name. Without an appreciation of such a dilution process, the true value of the product may fall into question. For these reasons, it would be good to clarify what Buddhist meditation is.

'Meditation,' however, is a single English word attempting to represent a rich and varied experience within the Buddhist tradition. Many terms associated with meditation experiences in Buddhism (for example *dhyana*, *samadhi*, *sati*, *samprajnana*, *metta*, *rupaloka*, and *arupaloka*) do not have simple Western equivalents. It is helpful to recognise the limitations of our own language in translating experiences it cannot easily articulate and contain. Along these lines, the placement of Buddhism within the category of a 'religion' is an act which one Buddhist scholar/practitioner described as 'easy, sloppy, and obscuring

the truth.⁴ As is evident from contemporary scientific research, the contributions of Buddhist meditation practices to the fields of clinical psychology and neuroscience demonstrate a possibility for clinical applicability and empirical testing that goes beyond what most of us would expect from a religion.

Buddhist Meditation: Concentration, Absorption, and Insight

In his 1980 essay, 'What Meditation Really Is,' Sangharakshita presents a contemporary expression of what meditation means within the Buddhist tradition.⁵ He notes that Buddhist meditation is concerned with the development of consciousness, from simple sense consciousness, to a self-consciousness where we know that we know, onto a transcendental consciousness which has personal contact with the Reality out there, and finally an absolute consciousness in which the grasper-grasped relationship is entirely dissolved.⁶ Also, consciousness can be developed by indirect or direct methods, the former including such things as being in an aesthetic environment, ethical activities, disciplined lifestyle, physical exercises such as *hatha* yoga, association with the spiritually wise, and even ritual and devotion. With respect to the direct methods of developing consciousness, this is where meditation comes in.

Sangharakshita suggests that the Buddhist practice of meditation could be divided up into three stages: Concentration, Absorption, and Insight.⁷ The stage of Concentration is two-fold in nature,

⁴ Allan B Wallace at the *Mind and Its Potential* conference, Sydney Masonic Centre, Sydney, Australia, 2-3 September 2005.

⁵ Sangharakshita, *Human Enlightenment*. Birmingham, 1980.

⁶ It is more accurate to speak of the grasper-grasped duality rather than the subject-object duality evaporating at Enlightenment. The subject-object duality is no longer reified and invested in, but it is still present it seems.

⁷ Sangharakshita, *Know Your Mind*, Birmingham, 1998, 6-7, suggests a complementary three-level classification of psychological, spiritual, and transcendental states of consciousness: corresponding to the everyday discriminating mind, the higher consciousness of *dhyana* which is still conditioned and impermanent, and the state of consciousness associated with

involving a 'horizontal' integration of the ordinary waking consciousness, in which the scattered parts of ourselves are re-collected into a unified 'self.' If we use a metaphor of being divided into a number of selves, with one part of us coming out around our parents and family, another when alone with our lover, a third with our friends, the fourth in private, horizontal integration implies that these sides of ourselves become unified and consistent through the practice of meditation. Vertical integration is the movement beyond the traditional five hindrances in our experience (these being sense desire, sloth/torpor, ill-will, restlessness/anxiety, and doubt), resulting in an upsurge of energies into consciousness from the greater depth of our being which Sangharakshita discusses the integration of the conscious and subconscious mind.⁸ It is in this stage of meditative concentration that one can talk about the various objects of concentration such as the breath, coloured discs, sound, a candle's flame and so on, through which the mind can become absorbed.

From the stage of Concentration, consciousness moves into the stage of Absorption, which corresponds to the four *dhyanas*. In this stage energies which are 'purely spiritual' begin to be tapped into. Unfortunately, the 'experience' of *dhyana* cannot be easily incorporated into the Western idea of the mind, since it describes a higher state of consciousness in which there may be no perception of external things, in which the senses are not active, and in which there is no mental activity in the usual sense. To make it more complex, the traditional Buddhist similes for the four *dhyanas* do not usually prove meaningful to Western students of meditation, describing as they do, experiences that most of us will have never had using images from another culture. New similes will need to come out of the meditative

Insight which is continuously positive and refined.

⁸ See Analayo, *Satipatthana: the direct path to realization*, Birmingham, 2003, 186.

experiences of Westerners themselves.⁹ In the meantime, it can be diagrammatically expressed as follows:

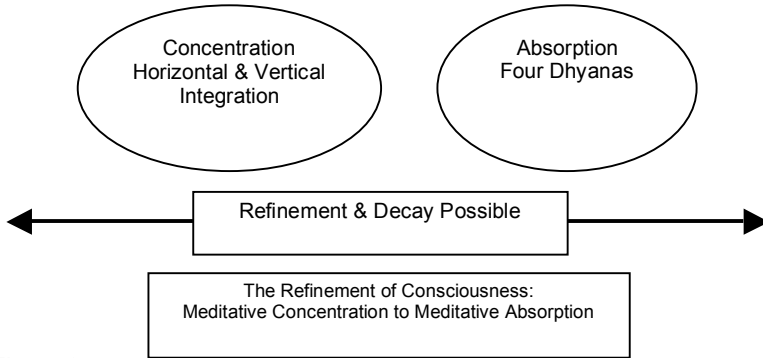


Figure 1

The last stage of meditation is Insight, in which consciousness has the direct perception of things ‘as they really are.’ This is traditionally spoken of as insight into conditioned existence as formulated in the three *lakshanas* (i.e. impermanence, insubstantiality, and unsatisfactoriness) and then expressed through the five wisdoms (wisdom of equality, discriminating wisdom, all-accomplishing wisdom, mirror-like wisdom, and the wisdom of the *dharmadhatu*). According to the Buddhist tradition, transcendental insight can become irreversible in the sense that one cannot ‘fall back’ from such insights, but will continue to move forward as if escaping from the gravitational pull of spiritual delusion after having come under the stronger gravitational influence of things ‘as they really are’ (a simile that Sangharakshita has offered us). In contrast to this, the variability of consciousness through the stages of meditative concentration and absorption remain conditioned, and hence impermanent and subject to refinement and decay. Traditionally, the point of irreversibility is associated with breaking the fetters of habit,

⁹ For myself, entering *dhyana* is like going above the tree line after hiking all day through mountain forests. All of a sudden, your perspective broadens in every direction with a clear joyful expansiveness.

... Through a Glass Darkly

superficiality, and means as ends in themselves, after which greed, hatred, and spiritual ignorance (further fetters) are lessened and then evaporated.

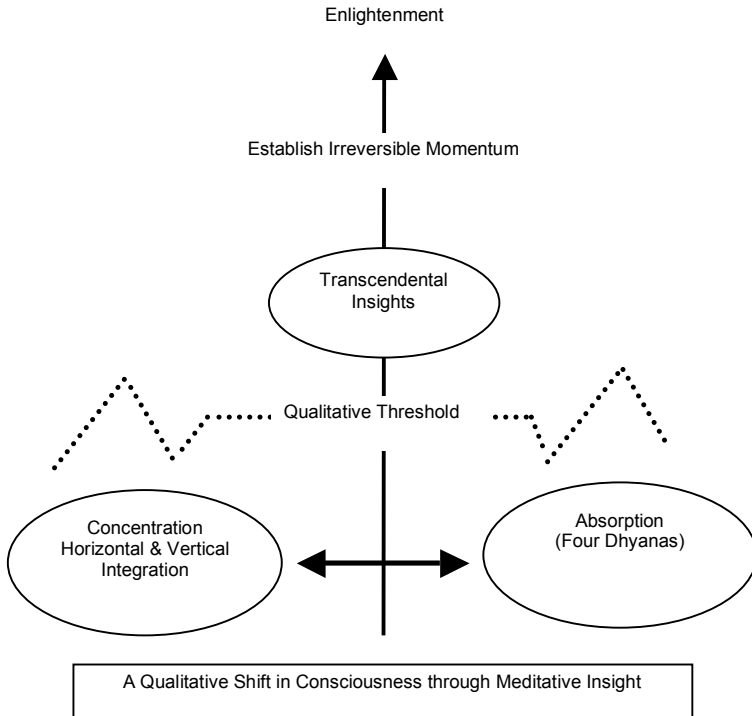


Figure 2

Figure 2 depicts a refined and aware consciousness that is very important to the practice of Buddhism, since it is the personal experience from which the possibility of Enlightenment unfolds. If consciousness is not variable, then the possibility of a qualitatively different experience of reality falls into questions.

Mindfulness of Breathing and Metta Bhavana Meditations

Two meditation practices within the Buddhist tradition which have received attention in the West are the Mindfulness of Breathing and the Metta Bhavana. The first involves the breath as the object of concentration in meditation, and the second the cultivation of loving-kindness (*metta*). Although there are other meditation practices available, these practices are easily accessible and offer ample room for growth. More advanced practices need to be given with greater consideration of the personal difficulties of the meditator (such as mental illness). For some people they may simply be ineffective in the absence of a strong base of concentration, but for others they could be psychologically harmful. It is recommended that beginning meditators stick to these two meditation practices, and seek out an experienced teacher if they wish to extend their meditation practice.

Contemporary Research on Buddhist Meditation Training

Buddhism has traditionally been relegated to a religion in the West, with all the associated limitations and perks inherent to such a classification. Since the late 1980's there have been regular meetings between scientists and the Dalai Lama to initiate dialogue on different topics. Not only is the Dalai Lama a prominent figure within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, but he is also interested in science, is well-trained in the Buddhist teachings, and is willing to contribute his time to such discussions. He believes that Buddhism and science are not conflicting perspectives on the world, but rather different approaches to the same end of seeking the truth.¹⁰ Not only does he hope for Buddhism to make a contribution to science, but he also wants Buddhism to conform with scientific evidence. If there

¹⁰ D Goleman, *Destructive Emotions: How Can we Overcome them: A Dialogue with the Dalai Lama*, New York, 2003, 37.

is scientific evidence that refutes Buddhist assertions, he believes that Buddhism should change accordingly.¹¹

Modern Buddhism's first dialogue with Western science was through fields such as quantum physics around the topic of the Nature of Reality (in popular fiction such as *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*, *The Tao of Physics*, or the recent film *What the Bleep Do We Know*). While intellectually fascinating and potentially life-changing for some people, these discussions remain in the realm of abstract theory for most people. Like studying the *Perfection of Wisdom* literature or a Zen *koan*, such contemplations only help us if they become emotionally real and embodied in our experiences.

At the beginning of the 1900's, William James suggested that there are three avenues of exploration for the new field of psychology. The first two, observing the brain and observing behaviour, are third-person techniques which have been widely developed over the last century. The last one, introspection, is a first-person contribution which could be labelled the 'blind spot' of scientific exploration. Although introspection has been largely dismissed in scientific research (perhaps due to personal differences in ability; the correlated difficulty of common description, and the obvious difficulty of third-person confirmation) the practice of meditation could be seen as a tool which helps to clarify introspection. In fact, experienced meditators could be seen as professionals in the art of introspection, since they refine their ability to explore the nature of their own minds and attempt to clarify and communicate these experiences.

For me, the collaboration of the sciences of mind with Buddhism is very interesting. Or, perhaps it is more accurate to say that it was when Buddhists, trained within the fields of psychology, medicine, cognitive therapy, neurobiology, and so on, started to

¹¹ *Ibid*, 41.

conduct empirical studies incorporating Buddhist insights and experiences. These studies are only beginning to come into professional acceptance, but they have created an interesting stir, produced effective and reproducible clinical methods, and are increasing in popularity.¹² They have empirically demonstrated the possibility that the mind can be trained to work directly on the mind to produce tangible physiological and psychological results for the better.¹³ They range from exploring the effects of simple meditation practices for people with particular psychological and medical disorders to advanced brain imaging analyses of the meditative experiences of advanced practitioners.¹⁴ Not only have these studies established the

¹² A currently emerging standard for such training programs seems to be the mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR) program first developed and empirically tested at Massachusetts General Hospital by Jon Kabat-Zinn. Jon Kabat-Zinn, 'An outpatient program in behavioural medicine for chronic pain patients based on the practice of mindfulness meditation: Theoretical considerations and preliminary results,' *General Hospital Psychiatry*, 4, 1982, 33-47. Another standard is mindfulness based cognitive therapy (MBCT) developed by Segal, Williams, and Teasdale to assist in the prevention of the relapse of depression. Z V Segal, J M G Williams and J D Teasdale, *Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for depression: A new approach to preventing relapse*, New York, 2002.

¹³ Baer reviews this body of literature within clinical psychology. She contrasts this emerging standard of mindfulness-based training against 'transcendental meditation' and other concentration-based approaches which train people to restrict their focus of attention to a single stimulus. She cites Delmonte and Smith as reviews of the clinical efficacy of concentration-based approaches such as transcendental meditation. R A Baer, 'Mindfulness Training as a Clinical Intervention: A Conceptual and Empirical Review,' *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, Summer 2003, Vol 10, No 2, 125-143; M M Delmonte, 'Meditation and anxiety reduction: A literature review,' in *Clinical Psychology Review*, 5, 1985, 91-102 and J Smith, 'Meditation and psychotherapy: A review of the literature,' in *Psychological Bulletin*, 32, 1975, 553-564.

¹⁴ Davidson, Kabat-Zin and Schumacher document the positive neurological and immunological effects of MBSR training program. Prior to this study, there had been no *in vivo* measures of the effects of meditation on immunological response. R Davidson, J Kabat-Zinn, J Schumacher et al, 'Alterations in Brain and Immune Function Produced by Mindfulness Meditation.' *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 65, 2003, 564-570. In addition, Carter and Pettigrew, and Sheppard and Pettigrew have used perceptual rivalry to document significant differences

efficacy of simple mindfulness practices for the restoration of 'normal' psychological and medical health for some people, but they have also challenged the definition of previously assumed 'normal' cognitive measurements. In a phrase, the plasticity of mind, its variability and potential, is being opened up for scientific exploration in new ways. Experienced meditators who are able to move at will along the meditative gradient of concentration to absorption offer an opportunity for the collection of a neurological profile corresponding to these more refined states of consciousness.¹⁵

Along these lines, it would seem that a laboratory which helps to improve someone's ability for introspection would be of interest to many fields of study. Not only are scientists of the mind in need of collaborating with experienced meditators, but such personal training would complement the study of philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology; in short, all of the humanities.

Meditation within Buddhism

Returning to the Studies in Religion curriculum, I personally would find it hard to separate meditation from Buddhism. It is like taking God out of Christianity. Not only is the practise of meditation listed as one of the three basic facets of the *Dharma* in one formulation (that is the Threefold Way) but it is also

in attention between experienced Buddhist meditators and thousands of controls. See O L Carter and J D Pettigrew, 'A Common Oscillator for Perceptual Rivalries?' in *Perception*, 2003, Vol 32, 295-305 and B M Sheppard and J D Pettigrew, 'Plaid Motion Rivalry: correlates with binocular rivalry and positive mood state' accessed on J Pettigrew's website www.uq.edu.au/nuq/jack/jack.html, accessed in December, 2005. More informal findings are discussed by Goleman, op cit.

¹⁵For neurological research concerning the four *Brahma Viharas* see A Lutz, L L Greischar, N B Rawlings, M Ricard and R Davidson, 'Long-term meditators self-induce high-amplitude gamma synchrony during mental practice,' *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, 2004, Vol 101, No 46, 16369-16373.

included within many other major formulations of the teachings (such as the five spiritual faculties, Noble Eightfold Path, and the Six Perfections). Why is meditation so important? Simply because Buddhism appeals to an individual's first-person experience to corroborate how others have described the Nature of Reality. Faith in Buddhism is different from what it is in other 'religions.' In Buddhism, it is faith to explore your experience from a different perspective, faith to question appearances, and faith in our potential to experience personally the Nature of Reality. In the *Tiratana Vandana* (a set of verses frequently chanted before meditation), the *Dharma* is said to be a 'personal invitation' to be 'understood individually' by 'the wise.'

According to Buddhism, what holds us back from the experience of Enlightenment, a 'knowledge and vision of things as they really are,' is our habitual tendency towards greed, hatred, and spiritual delusion. Although meditation *per se* does not take us beyond these three defilements, it can help us to decisively break their hold. It can be the basis on which we significantly loosen their hold and more honestly appraise the extent to which these defilements blur our vision and actions. For this reason, meditation is not necessarily 'religious' in the common sense of the term since it involves a clarification of awareness and the purification of our emotional response: the polishing and refinement of the introspective lens into our own experiences.

Of course, with this improvement in our introspective ability, the mind can turn its attention to objects which are more traditionally thought of as 'religious' such as archetypal images and contentions about the Nature of Reality (such as a contemplation of the three *laksanas*). The practice of meditation can thereby provide the basis on which one can see more clearly whether the basic teachings about the Nature of Reality correspond to our first-person experiences.

Meditation and Enlightenment: Caveat with Picking a Teacher

Although there is some truth in a description of meditation as not necessarily religious in content, our life is not composed of mutually exclusive boxes but is an organic whole. The practice of meditation, even if merely confined to deepening our awareness and cultivating a sense of loving-kindness, will change our lives. As we see more clearly and more broadly, as we experience our lives more directly and more fully, we will either pull back from this experience or start to question 'why?' If we believe that there must be some sense of meaning 'behind it all,' that there must be a path leading out, then we will begin to search for it ... and within Buddhism this search is within our own experience, within our own heart and mind.

In the Pali Canon (*Majjhima Nikaya* 95) the Buddha talks about inconclusive bases for knowledge, such as resting on 'blind' faith, another's charisma, tradition, logical reasoning, or simply favouring what you like.¹⁶ If someone is speaking from one of these five bases, they are said to 'preserve' the truth when they openly declare that what they are saying is based on one of these five inconclusive bases for knowledge. For example, one might reason logically that there can be no all-loving creator God, since such a being would not create a world which includes suffering and pain, such as the one we live in. Or one might conclude that since I am a likeable chap, you will believe what I tell you. Both of these statements are not based on personal experience, but are extrapolations and speculation.

The Buddha goes on to say in Verse 173 that if you want to discover Truth, you must first find yourself a teacher who is free from greed, hatred, and delusion. This condition implies that the

¹⁶ I have been liberal in the presentation of these terms, perhaps to a fault, in attempting to provide contemporary equivalents that would not be too obtuse. The Pali terms are *saddha*, *ruci*, *anussava*, *akaraparivitakko*, and *ditthi-nijjhana-khanti* respectively. Another teaching of similar nature is the 'Kalama Sutta' in the *Anguttara Nikaya* (Chapter on the Threes).

teacher will not say that they know something personally when they do not and will not say they have seen something when they have not. It implies that the teacher is speaking from the basis of personal experience, in the absence of greed, hatred, and spiritual delusion, so that what they say will not be personally biased and will not 'urge others to act in a way that would lead to their harm and suffering.' Although such a point of personal contact is truly hard to find, is it so different from placing ourselves under someone who has learning within a particular field of external knowledge in the sciences? We attempt to learn from people that are well learned in their field of science, those that will teach us what is true, and those that will not mislead or misuse us through their own desires. It is easier to find such teachers in the sciences, and there is less at stake.

Such spiritual teachers may truly be hard to find in this contemporary world which idolises the achievements of greed and creates games of hatred for our children; perhaps such teachers were more abundant in the Buddha's days? What do we do in the meantime? Perhaps, as in science, we can make progress as a group, acknowledging responsibility as a whole and not abdicating responsibility individually? Introspection via the practice of meditation could help us be more honest about the five bases for inconclusive knowledge that were listed: faith, another's charisma, tradition, logical reasoning, or simply favouring what you like. Personal statements could be qualified on this basis, and our language for talking about our personal experiences clarified such that it preserves the truth. We are often only vaguely aware of the basis of our knowledge, and it sometimes requires other people to challenge our statements to clarify this for us.

A Fruitful Context for Introspective Dialogue

A sense of respect and positive regard for oneself and others would be an important element of an introspective laboratory. One way to encourage the cultivation of such an atmosphere is

to include the *metta bhavana* meditation practice within the laboratory.¹⁷ This practice aims to cultivate particular emotions: loving-kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekkha*).¹⁸ It is usually more difficult to teach than mindfulness training, but some people will notice a change in their personal relationships quite quickly. The *metta bhavana* meditation involves trying to understand things from another's perspective and having a more kindly attitude to your own experience. These qualities might help make group discussions more fruitful by consciously including elements of tolerance, inclusiveness, and sensitivity in an experiential manner. There is actually a stage in this meditation practice where you try to cultivate intentions of well-wishing for someone, that you are in disagreement with, someone you dislike or someone that dislikes you.

If a group of people were to start to explore their experience, in a shared dialogue through the use of introspective mindfulness training, one of the tricky things would be to establish a common language that everyone could hear and understand. Traditional formulations would need to be translated into contemporary metaphor and made relevant to those experiences of the people involved. For example, it would be possible to explore the Buddhist concept of the five *skandhas* as an exhaustive categorization of personal experience, but then ask people to propose their own divisions and then correlate these personal expressions with the more traditional one. People could articulate their experiences in a way that others could hear and understand, and a dialogue with others might also help them deepen these experiences and understand them more clearly and with greater warmth.

¹⁷ This practice can be found in Chapter IX of Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* and is based on the 'Karaniya Metta Sutta' from the *Sutta-Nipata* (1:8).

¹⁸ It was this meditation practice that the earlier mentioned neurological research into 'objectless meditation' was exploring; Lutz *et al*, *op cit*, 2004.

Buddhism has always been a teaching that has adapted itself to new circumstances. Its conceptual categorizations have always been provisional, a definitive statement to be tested against the touch-stone of your own experience and used as a means to an end rather than as ends in themselves. As a result, there can be different lists which are essentially the same. For example, the ethical precepts may be presented as a list of five, eight, ten, or over 200 in the full *Vinaya* for the monastic community. In addition, the *Nidana* chain can be presented with a different number of links. I have even heard it said that some of the emotional issues we face as Westerners (for example a difficulty with a self-esteem) is something that might not be as prominent in other cultures (for example the Tibetan community with self-esteem), in which case our experiences have different facets and manifestation of the basic expression of greed and hatred.

An Introspection Meditation Laboratory

The following are some notes for a meditation lab to complement courses in Buddhism. As mentioned earlier, this course might also be of interest to students in psychology and philosophy, perhaps other fields in the humanities as well.

The Meditation Process

Starting with someone's actual experiences, it is possible to do a short body awareness exercise followed by bringing awareness onto the breath. Leading students into this experience, they can be left with no more instruction than to bring their awareness onto the sensation of the breath. After three to five minutes, they discuss the process of meditation using through their own experience. Invariably they talk about trying to keep their attention on the breath, only to find themselves wandering into other thoughts or feelings. If they realise that their attention has wandered, they might try to bring themselves back to the breath and then the experience of distraction will usually repeat itself. Based on this experience, the following diagram can be used to

talk about the practice of meditation as a process rather than a goal.

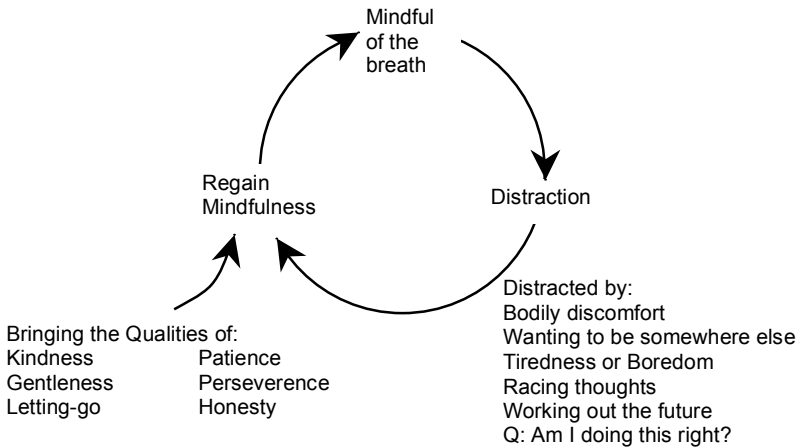


Figure 9

The primary benefit of this diagram is that it provides a way of talking non-judgementally about the natural process of getting distracted and emphasises regaining mindfulness rather than the achievement of some particular meditative 'state'.¹⁹ People are told that it is quite natural to become distracted in meditation, a discussion which seems to give them permission to be with their actual experience rather than force it to be something other than it is.

The process of coming back to the object of our meditation (for example the breath) is more important than a focus on achieving

¹⁹ This diagram can be found in Bodhipaksa, *Wildmind: A Step-by-Step Guide to Meditation*, Birmingham, 2003, 78-79.

something: it cultivates integrity in our experience. Even if we try to stay mindful of some particular distraction that is taking us away from our chosen meditation object, we will find that it is impossible to stay with this distraction. Instead, we are distracted from our distraction by distractions. They flow and change, with the only question being how long we are able to stay within the different links of the chain.²⁰ It is not a question of one object of awareness being right and another one wrong, but simply that we lack the integration to stay with any chosen object through time. We are not truly free to choose where our attention goes, nor does our mind stay where we ask it to. One could say that the practice of meditation is the cultivation of the basis for true free will.

The Importance of Modelling the Process

When teaching meditation, it is important to participate personally in the material and to speak in the first person. It is not as effective to teach someone about the meditation experience from pure theory, without personal experience. If teaching from theory, it is best to say so. Authenticity in such situations seems to speak more articulately than any theoretical understanding could, however well-versed. This has also been the finding within the empirical research.²¹

Basic Course Structure

I usually divide my meditation classes into two parts; the first part is dedicated to periods of meditation practice, and the second to the introduction of new principles and practices.

²⁰ Although not recommended for beginning meditators, after one has developed a meditative concentration this focus can be turned towards the flowing nature of reality. In essence, this is the shift from *samatha* to *vipassana* meditation practices, under which insight can arise. My tradition does not recommend such practices for beginners.

²¹ Segal *et al*, op cit, 56.

Classes begin with a session of meditation, which connects the students with their practice from the start of the class and provides a fresh basis from which discussions and questions can arise. This period of practice would initially include a significant body-awareness element, which serves as a gentle introduction to the practice of meditation and a forum in which some basic elements of meditation can be explored (such as the use of systemic frameworks for developing mindfulness and the value of being gentle in one's approach). I prefer to start with short periods of meditation and guided explorations, separated by short group discussions. From the second class onwards, the actual period of meditation increases, separated by small group discussions and discussions as a full group. After a few weeks, these sessions would smoothly move to a single, longer period of sustained meditation, about 30-40 minutes in length. These sessions are largely unaided by instructive leading after the students have a sense of the general practices.

The second part of the class is used to present new material. For example, this time would be used to introduce the formal structure of the Mindfulness of Breathing and the *Metta Bhavana* meditation, or be dedicated to the exploration of balanced effort, the importance of curiosity, the use of imagination, tips on setting up a daily practice, or an exploration of the traditional five hindrances and their antidotes. I attempt to explore such topics experientially through either actual meditation sessions or particular exercises.

Voluntary Enrolment

Since meditation is an individual practice, it is necessary that such a lab is voluntary. Although the first few classes could provide a good taste of what meditation can offer, students would need to find a personal motivation to stay with the laboratory, even if simply as an experimentation. There is also a value to staying with meditation practice for a little while, through the

doldrums and doubt that you might not be 'getting anywhere' or are not able to 'do it right.' Along these lines, it would seem a good idea to give people one or two classes to decide whether or not they wish to commit to the full course. If they decide to continue with the exploration, they could be asked to commit themselves to a regular practice of meditation (at least 30 minutes per day for 6 days per week) for the duration of the lab. Meditation is a practice, and it will not be possible to get a sense of what this practice is like, nor what it can offer, if you do not put the time in.

Provision of Supportive Material

People can find it hard to get a meditation practice started without a little support. Although the weekly class is very helpful along these lines, they may also need help in establishing their daily meditation practice at home. Led meditation CDs, which provide a sort of crutch in the beginning, can be very helpful along these lines. Ideally, such recordings could change over the course to follow the material presented and people's deepening practice. For example, initially there would be more bodily awareness and general instruction but later recordings might only have bells to mark the time.

Another factor which will be important is the provision of meditation cushions or benches. While it is possible to meditate in chairs, the more stable posture available in sitting on the floor is preferred. Although it would not make sense to invest in such things institutionally, it would be good to allow students an easy option to purchase such gear if they decide to stay with the course. Sorting out a comfortable and easy meditation posture can make a large difference to someone's practice. This is easy to underestimate, but well worth consideration. It would be easy to source meditation benches or meditation cushions for students if they want them.

Lastly, the provision of weekly meditation handouts and diaries is a useful source of input, which allows a more formal exploration of the principles of meditation through their daily practice. In addition, it means that the class time can be spent in discussion and actual practice rather than in the presentation of material. The material from the diaries can be used to seed the initial class discussions in the following week.

Everyday Mindfulness and Cultivating Enjoyment

I also like to include other activities in my meditation courses, to help people explore mindfulness or *metta* in their everyday lives. One of the exercises that can be offered involves the practice of mindfulness with some activity that happens two to three times a day (like brushing their teeth, starting the car, washing the dishes, taking out the garbage, and so forth). Every time they do this activity we ask them to make the extra effort to become more mindful of this activity. After they have done this for a week, they can review the experience in class. The reason behind picking something that happens only occasionally during their day is two-fold. First, we don't want to exhaust ourselves with a task that is too frequent, being aware can be tiring, particularly in the beginning. Second, the gaps between occurrences allow our mind time to reset itself to its normal degree of mindfulness. This last point means that the depth and continuity of our awareness can be experienced more fully.

In Pursuit of Truth

Such exercises inform the general exploration of meditation and awareness. There is also an element of discovery for most people with these exercises. They realise how unaware they actually are, how much they miss seeing in their lives, but also how rich and rewarding simple everyday mindfulness can be. A spontaneous and naturally curious awareness is more enjoyable and feels different. It is said that the Buddha was trained in concentrative-based meditations early on in his spiritual life,

mastering them quickly, but chose to keep searching. Later in his life, one of his spiritual turning points was his recollection of a spontaneous meditation experience he had of sitting under a rose-apple tree as a child. I have always interpreted this story as pointing to the significance of the quality of the effort from which his meditative absorption arose in that moment, flavoured with spontaneity and natural joy, which seemingly gave the Buddha some of the last pieces of the transcendental puzzle. Forceful manipulation of the mind is only effective up to a point.