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Buddhist Meditation

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by

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Buddhist Meditation

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he mental exercise known as meditation is found in all religious systems. Prayer is a form of discursive meditation, and in Hinduism the reciting of slokas and mantras is employed to tranquillize the mind to a state of receptivity. In most of these systems the goal is identified with the particular psychic results that ensue, sometimes very quickly. The visions that come in the semi-trance state, or the sounds that are heard, are considered to be the end-result of the exercise. This is not the case in the forms of meditation practised in Buddhism.

There is still comparatively little known about the mind, its functions and its powers, and it is difficult for most people to distinguish between self-hypnosis, the development of mediumistic states, and the real process of mental clarification and direct perception which is the object of Buddhist mental concentration. The fact that mystics of every religion have induced in themselves states wherein they see visions and hear voices that are in accordance with their own religious beliefs indicates that their meditation has resulted only in bringing to the surface of the mind and objectifying the concepts already embedded in the

deepest strata of their subconscious minds. The Christian sees and converses with the saints whom he already knows; the Hindu visualises the gods of the Hindu pantheon, and so on. When Sri Rāmakrishna Paramahansa, the Bengali mystic, began to turn his thoughts towards Christianity, he saw visions of Jesus in his meditations, in place of his former eidetic images of the Hindu Avatars.

The practised hypnotic subject becomes more and more readily able to surrender himself to the suggestions made to him by the hypnotiser, and anyone who has studied this subject is bound to see a connection between the mental state of compliance he has reached and the facility with which the mystic can induce whatever kind of experiences he wills himself to undergo. There is still another possibility latent in the practice of meditation; the development of mediumistic faculties by which the subject can actually see and hear beings on different planes of existence, the Devalokas and the realm of the unhappy ghosts, for example. These worlds being nearest to our own are the more readily accessible, and this is the true explanation of the psychic phenomena of Western Spiritualism.

The object of Buddhist meditation, however, is none of these things. They arise as side-products, but not only are they not its goal, they are hindrances which

have to be overcome. The Christian who has seen Jesus, or the Hindu who has conversed with Bhagavan Krishna may be quite satisfied that he has fulfilled the purpose of his religious life, but the Buddhist who sees a vision of the Buddha knows by that very fact that he has only succeeded in objectifying a concept in his own mind, for the Buddha after his Parinibbāna is, in his own words, no longer visible to gods or men.

There is an essential difference, then, between Buddhist meditation and concentration and that practised in other systems. The Buddhist embarking on a course of meditation does well to recognise this difference and to establish in his own conscious mind a clear idea of what it is he is trying to do.

The root-cause of rebirth and suffering is *avijjā* (ignorance) conjoined with and reacting upon *taṇhā* (desire). These two causes form a vicious circle; on the one hand, concepts, the result of ignorance, and on the other hand, desire arising from concepts. The world of phenomena has no meaning beyond the meaning given to it by our own interpretation.

When that interpretation is conditioned by *avijjā*, we are subject to the state known as *vipallāsa*, or hallucination. *Saññāvipallāsa*, hallucination of perception, *citta-vipallāsa*, hallucination of consciousness, and *diṭṭhi-vipallāsa*, hallucination of

views, cause us to regard that which is impermanent (*anicca*) as permanent, that which is painful (*dukkha*) as a source of pleasure, and that which is unreal (*anattā*), or literally without any self existence, as being a real, self-existing entity. Consequently, we place a false interpretation on all the sensory experiences we gain through the six channels of cognition — that is, the eye, ear, nose, tongue, sense of touch and mind *cakkhu, sota, ghana, jivhā, kāya* and *mano (āyatana)*. Physics, by showing that the realm of phenomena we know through these channels of cognition does not really correspond to the physical world known to science, has confirmed this Buddhist truth. We are deluded by our own senses. Pursuing what we imagine to be desirable, an object of pleasure, we are in reality only following a shadow, trying to grasp a mirage. It is *anicca, dukkha, anattā* — impermanent, associated with suffering, and insubstantial. Being so, it can only be the cause of impermanence, suffering and insubstantiality, since like begets like; and we ourselves, who chase the illusion, are also impermanent, subject to suffering and without any persistent ego-principle. It is a case of a shadow pursuing a shadow.

The purpose of Buddhist meditation, therefore, is to gain more than an intellectual understanding of this truth, to liberate ourselves from the delusion and

thereby put an end to both ignorance and craving. If the meditation does not produce results tending to this consummation — results which are observable in the character and the whole attitude to life — it is clear that there is something wrong either with the system or with the method of employing it. It is not enough to see lights, to have visions or to experience ecstasy. These phenomena are too common to be impressive to the Buddhist who really understands the purpose of Buddhist meditation. There are actual dangers in them which are apparent to one who is also a student of psychopathology.

In the Buddha's great discourse on the practice of mindfulness, the *Mahā-satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, both the object and the means of attaining it are clearly set forth. Attentiveness to the movements of the body, to the ever-changing states of the mind, is to be cultivated in order that their real nature should be known. Instead of identifying these physical and mental phenomena with the false concept of "self," we are to see them as they really are: movements of a physical body, an aggregate of the four elements (*mahābhūta*), subject to physical laws of causality on the one hand, and on the other, a flux of successive phases of consciousness arising and passing away in response to external stimuli. They are to be viewed objectively, as though they were processes not

associated with ourselves but belonging to another order of phenomena.

From what can selfishness and egotism proceed if not from the concept of “self” (*sakkāyadiṭṭhi*)? If the practice of any form of meditation leaves selfishness or egotism unabated, it has not been successful. A tree is judged by its fruits and a man by his actions; there is no other criterion. Particularly this is true in Buddhist psychology, because the man *is* his actions. In the truest sense they, or the continuity of kamma and *vipāka* (consequence) which they represent, are the only claim he can make to any persistent identity, not only through the different phases of this life but also from one life to another. Attentiveness with regard to body and mind serves to break down the illusion of self; and not only that, it also cuts off craving and attachment to external objects, so that ultimately there is neither the “self” that craves nor any object of craving. It is a long and arduous discipline, and one that can only be undertaken in retirement from the world and its cares.

Yet even a temporary retirement, a temporary course of this discipline, can bear good results in that it establishes an attitude of mind which can be applied to some degree in the ordinary situations of life. Detachment, objectivity, is an invaluable aid to clear thinking; it enables a man to sum up a given situation

without bias, personal or otherwise, and to act in that situation with courage and discretion. Another gift it bestows is that of concentration — the ability to focus the mind and keep it steadily fixed on a single point (*ekaggata*, or one-pointedness), and this is the great secret of success in any undertaking. The mind is hard to tame; it roams here and there restlessly as the wind, or like an untamed horse, but when it is fully under control, it is the most powerful instrument in the whole universe. He who has mastered his own mind is indeed master of the Three Worlds.

In the first place he is without fear. Fear arises because we associate mind and body (*rūpanāma-rūpa*) with “self”; consequently any harm to either is considered to be harm done to oneself. But he who has broken down this illusion, by realising that the five *khandha* process is merely the manifestation of cause and effect, does not fear death or misfortune. He remains equable alike in success and failure, unaffected by praise or blame. The only thing he fears is demeritorious action, because he knows that no thing or person in the world can harm him except himself, and as his detachment increases, he becomes less and less liable to demeritorious deeds. Unwholesome action comes of an unwholesome mind, and as the mind becomes purified, healed of its disorders, bad kamma ceases to accumulate. He comes

to have a horror of wrong action and to take greater and greater delight in those deeds that are rooted in *alobha*, *adosa*, and *amoha* — generosity, benevolence and wisdom.

Ānāpānasati

One of the most universally-applicable methods of cultivating mental concentration is *ānāpānasati*, attentiveness on the in-going and out-going breath. This, unlike the Yogic systems, does not call for any interference with the normal breathing, the breath being merely used as a point on which to fix the attention at the tip of the nostrils. The attention must not wander, even to follow the breath, but must be kept rigidly on the selected spot. In the initial stages it is advisable to mark the respiration by counting, but as soon as it is possible to keep the mind fixed without this artificial aid, it should be discontinued and only used when it is necessary to recall the attention.

As the state of mental quiescence (*samatha*) is approached, the breath appears to become fainter and fainter, until it is hardly discernible. It is at this stage that certain psychic phenomena appear, which may at

first be disconcerting. A stage is reached when the actual sensation of arising and passing away of the physical elements in the body is felt. This is experienced as a disturbance, but it must be remembered that it is an agitation that is always present in the body but we are unaware of it until the mind becomes stabilised. It is the first direct experience of the *dukkha* (suffering) which is inherent in all phenomena — the realisation within oneself of the first of the Four Noble Truths, The Noble Truth of Suffering *Dukkha Ariya Sacca*. When that is passed there follows the sensation of *pīti*, rapturous joy associated with the physical body. The teacher of *vipassanā*, however, is careful never to describe to his pupil beforehand what he is likely to experience, for if he does so, there is a strong possibility that the power of suggestion will produce a false reaction, particularly in those cases where the pupil is very suggestible and greatly under the influence of the teacher.

Devices in Meditation

In *kammaṭṭhāna* (mediation exercises), it is permissible

to use certain devices, such as an earth or colour *kaṣiṇa* (disc), as focal points for the attention. A candle flame, a hole in the wall, or some metal object can also be used, and the method of using them is found in the Pali texts and the *Visuddhi-magga*. In the texts themselves it is to be noted that the Buddha gave objects of meditation to disciples in accordance with their individual characteristics, and his unerring knowledge of the right technique for each one came from his insight into their previous births. Similarly with recursive meditation, a subject would be given which was easily comprehensible to the pupil, or which served to counteract some strong, unwholesome tendency in his nature. Thus, to one attracted by sensual indulgence, the Buddha would recommend meditation on the impurity of the body, or the “cemetery meditation.” Here the aim is to counterbalance attraction by repulsion, but it is only a “skilful means” to reach the final state, in which both attraction and repulsion cease to exist. In the arahat, there is neither liking nor disliking: he regards all things with perfect equanimity, as did Thera Mahā Moggallāna when he accepted a handful of rice from a leper.

Beads

The use of the rosary in Buddhism is often misunderstood. If it is used for the mechanical repetition of a set formula—the repeating of so many phrases as an act of piety as in other religions—its value is negligible. When it is used as means of holding the attention and purifying the mind, however, it can be a great help. One of the best ways of employing it, because it calls for undivided attention, is to repeat the Pali formula of the qualities of Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, beginning “*Iti pi so Bhagavā*” with the first bead, starting again with the second and adding the next quality: “*Iti pi so Bhagavā, Arahan*” and so on until with the last bead the entire formula is repeated from beginning to end. This cannot be carried out successfully unless the mind is entirely concentrated on what is being done. At the same time, the recalling of the noble qualities of Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha lifts the mind to a lofty plane, since the words carry with them a meaning that impresses itself on the pattern of the thought-moments as they arise and pass away. The value of this in terms of Abhidhamma psychology lies in the wholesome nature of the *cittakkhana*, or “consciousness-moment” in its *uppāda* (arising), *ṭhiti* (static) and *bhaṅga* (disappearing) phases. Each of these wholesome *cittakkhaṇa* contributes to the improvement of the *saṅkhāra* or aggregate of tendencies; in other words, it

directs the subsequent thought-moments into a higher realm and tends to establish the character on that level.

Samatha bhāvanā

Samatha bhāvanā, the development of mental tranquillity with concentration, is accompanied by three benefits: happiness in the present life, a favourable rebirth, and the freedom from mental defilements that is a prerequisite for attainment of insight. The mind becomes like a still, clear pool completely free from disturbance and agitation, and ready to mirror on its surface the nature of things as they really are, an aspect which is hidden from ordinary knowledge by the restlessness of craving. It is the peace and fulfilment which is depicted on the features of the Buddha, investing his images with a significance that impresses even those who have no knowledge of what it means. Such an image of the Buddha can itself be a very suitable object of meditation, and is, in fact, the one that most Buddhists instinctively use. The very sight of the tranquil image can calm and pacify a mind distraught with worldly

hopes and fears. It is the certain and visible assurance of Nibbāna.

Vipassanā Bhāvanā

Vipassanā bhāvanā is realisation of the three signs of being— *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*— by direct insight. These three characteristics, impermanence, suffering and non-self, can be grasped intellectually, as scientific and philosophical truth, but this is not in itself sufficient to rid the mind of egoism and craving. The final objective lies on a higher level of awareness, the direct “intuitional” plane, where it is actually experienced as psychological fact. Until this personal confirmation is obtained, the sphere of sense perception and sensory-responses remains stronger than the intellectual conviction; the two function side by side on different levels of consciousness, but it is usually the sphere dominated by *avijjā* which continues to determine the course of life by volitional action. The philosopher who fails to live according to his philosophy is the most familiar example of this incompatibility between theory and practice. When the direct perception is obtained, however, what was

at its highest intellectual level still merely a theory becomes actual knowledge, in precisely the same way that we “know” when we are hot or cold hungry or thirsty. The mind that has attained this knowledge is established in the Dhamma, and *paññā*, wisdom, has taken the place of delusion.

Discursive meditation

Discursive meditation, such as that practised in Christian devotion, is entirely on the mental level, and can be undertaken by anyone at any time. It calls for no special preparation or conditions. For the more advanced exercises of *samatha* and *vipassanā*, however, the strictest observance of *sīla*, the basic moral rules, becomes necessary. These techniques are best followed in seclusion, away from the impurities of worldly life and under the guidance of an accomplished master. Many people have done themselves psychic harm by embarking on them without due care in this respect. It is not advisable for anyone to experiment on his own; those who are unable to place themselves under a trustworthy teacher will do best to confine themselves to

discursive meditation. It cannot take them to enlightenment but will benefit them morally and prepare them for the next stage, *mettā bhāvanā*.

The Practice of Metta Bhāvanā

Metta bhāvanā is the most universally beneficial form of discursive meditation, and can be practised in any conditions. Thoughts of universal, indiscriminating benevolence, like radio waves reaching out in all directions, sublimate the creative energy of the mind. With steady perseverance in *mettā bhāvanā*, a point can be reached at which it becomes impossible even to harbour a thought of ill will. True peace can only come to the world through minds that are at peace, If people everywhere in the world could be persuaded to devote half an hour daily to the practice of *mettā bhāvanā*, we should see more real advance towards world peace and security than international agreements will ever bring us. It would be a good thing if, in this new era of the Buddha Sāsana, people of all creeds could be invited to take part in a worldwide movement for the practice of *mettā bhāvanā* and

pledge themselves to live in accordance with the highest tenets of their own religion, whatever it may be. In so doing they would be paying homage to the Supreme Buddha and to their own particular religious teacher as well, for on this level all the great religions of the world unite. If there is a common denominator to be found among them, it is surely here, in the teaching of universal loving kindness which transcends doctrinal differences and draws all beings together by the power of a timeless and all-embracing truth.

The classic formulation of *mettā* as an attitude of mind to be developed by meditation is found in the *Karaṇīyametta Sutta* [see Appendix]. It is recommended that this sutta be recited before beginning meditation, and again at its close, a practice which is invariably followed in the Buddhist countries. The verses of the sutta embody the highest concept to which the thought of loving kindness can reach, and it serves both as a means of self-protection against unwholesome mental states and as a subject of contemplation (*kammaṭṭhāna*).

It is taught in Buddhism that the cultivation of benevolence must begin with oneself. There is a profound psychological truth in this, for no one who hates or despises himself consciously or unconsciously can feel true loving kindness for others. To each of us

the self is the nearest object; if one's attitude towards oneself is not a wholesome one, the spring of love is poisoned at its source. This does not mean that we should build up an idealised picture of ourselves as an object of admiration, but that, while being fully aware of our faults and deficiencies, we should not condemn but resolve to improve ourselves and cherish confidence in our ability to do so.

Metta bhāvanā, therefore, begins with the thought: "May I be free from enmity; may I be free from ill will; may I be rid of suffering; may I be happy."

This thought having been developed, the next stage is to apply it in exactly the same form and to the same degree, to someone for whom one has naturally a feeling of friendship.

In so doing, two points must be observed: the object should be a living person, and should not be one of the opposite sex. The second prohibition is to guard against the feeling of *mettā* turning into its near enemy," sensuality. Those whose sensual leanings have a different orientation must vary the rule to suit their own needs.

When the thought of *mettā* has been developed towards a friend, the next object should be someone towards whom one has no marked feelings of like or dislike. Lastly, the thought of *mettā* is to be turned

towards someone who is hostile. It is here that difficulties arise. They are to be expected, and the meditator must be prepared to meet and wrestle with them. To this end, several techniques are described in the *Visuddhimagga* and elsewhere. The first is to think of the hostile personality in terms of *anattā* — impersonality. The meditator is advised to analyse the hostile personality into its impersonal components — the body, the feelings, the perceptions, the volitional formations and the consciousness. The body, to begin with, consists of purely material items: hair of the head, hair of the body, skin, nails, teeth and so on. There can be no basis for enmity against these. The feelings, perceptions, volitional formations and consciousness are all transitory phenomena, interdependent, conditioned and bound up with suffering. They are *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*, impermanent, fraught with suffering and void of selfhood. There is no more individual personality in them than there is in the physical body itself. So towards them, likewise, there can be no real ground for enmity.

If this approach should prove to be not altogether effective, there are others in which emotionally counteractive states of mind are brought into play, as for example regarding the hostile person with compassion. The meditator should reflect: “As he (or

she) is, so am I. As I am, so is he. We are both bound to the inexorable Wheel of Life by ignorance and craving. Both of us are subject to the law of cause and effect, and whatever evil we do, for that we must suffer. Why then should I blame or call anyone my enemy? Rather should I purify my mind and wish that he may do the same, so that both of us may be freed from suffering.”

If this thought is dwelt upon and fully comprehended, feelings of hostility will be cast out. When the thought of loving kindness is exactly the same, in quality and degree, for all these four objects — oneself, one’s friend, the person toward whom one is neutral, and the enemy — the meditation has been successful.

The next stage is to widen and extend it. This process is a threefold one: suffusing *mettā* without limitation, suffusing it with limitation, and suffusing it in all of the ten directions, east, west, north, south, the intermediate points, above and below.

In suffusing *mettā* without limitation (*anodhisopparāṇa*), the meditator thinks of the objects of loving kindness under five headings: all sentient beings; all things that have life; all beings that have come into existence; all that have personality; all that have assumed individual being. For each of these groups separately he formulates the thought: “May they be

free from enmity; may they be free from ill will; may they be rid of suffering; may they be happy. For example, he will specify the particular group which he is suffusing with *mettā* as: “May all sentient beings be free from enmity, etc... May all things that have life be free from enmity, etc.” This meditation embraces all without particular reference to locality, and so is called “suffusing without limitation.”

In suffusing *mettā* with limitation (*odhiso-pharaṇa*), there are seven groups which form the objects of the meditation. They are: all females; all males; all Noble Ones (those who have attained any one of the states of Sainthood); all imperfect ones; all Devas; all human beings; all beings in states of woe. Each of the groups should be meditated upon as described above: “May all females be free from enmity, etc.” This method is called “suffusing *mettā* with limitation” because it defines the groups according to their nature and condition.

Suffusing with *mettā* all beings in the ten directions is carried out in the same way. Directing his mind towards the east, the meditator concentrates on the thought: “May all beings in the east be free from enmity; may they be free from ill will; may they be rid of suffering; may they be happy!” And so with the beings in the west, the north, the south, the north-east, south-west, north-west, south-east, above and below.

Lastly, each of the twelve groups belonging to the unlimited and limited suffusions of *mettā* can be dealt with separately for each of the ten directions, using the appropriate formulas.

It is taught that each of these twenty-two modes of practising *mettā bhāvanā* is capable of being developed up to the stage of *appanā-samādhi*, that is, the concentration which leads to a *jhāna*, or mental absorption. For this reason it is described as the method for attaining release of the mind through *mettā* (*mettā cetovimutti*). It is the first of the Four Brahmavihāras, the sublime states of which the Buddha says in the Karaṇīyametta Sutta: “*Brahmaṃ etaṃ vihāram idhamāhu*” — “This is Divine Abiding here, they say.”

Metta, karuṇā, mudita, upekkhā — loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and detachment — these four states of mind represent the highest levels of mundane consciousness [see Nyanaponika Thera, *The Four Sublime States*, Wheel No. 6]. One who has attained to them and dwells in them is impervious to the ills of life. Like a god he moves and acts in undisturbed serenity, armoured against the blows of fate and the uncertainty of worldly conditions. And the first of them to be cultivated is *mettā*, because it is through boundless love that the mind gains its first taste of liberation.

Appendix

Loving kindness as a Contemplation

Karaṇīyametta Sutta

From the Suttanipāta, verses 143–52

[1]

(Spoken by the Buddha)

What should be done by one skilful in good
So as to gain the State of Peace is this:
Let him be able, and upright, and straight,
Easy to speak to, gentle, and not proud,
Contented, too, supported easily,
With few tasks, and living very lightly;

His faculties serene, prudent, and modest,
Unswayed by the emotions of the clans;
And let him never do the slightest thing
That other wise men might hold blameable. (And
let him think:) "In safety and in bliss
May creatures all be of a blissful heart.
Whatever breathing beings there may be,
No matter whether they are frail or firm,
With none excepted, be they long or big
Or middle sized, or be they short or small
Or thick, as well as those seen or unseen,
Or whether they are dwelling far or near,
Existing or yet seeking to exist,
May creatures all be of a blissful heart.
Let no one work another one's undoing
Or even slight him at all anywhere;
And never let them wish each other ill
Through provocation or resentful thought."

And just as might a mother with her life
Protect the son that was her only child,
So let him then for every living thing
Maintain unbounded consciousness in being;
And let him too with love for all the world
Maintain unbounded consciousness in being
Above, below, and all round in between,
Untroubled, with no enemy or foe.

And while he stands or walks or while he sits
Or while he lies down, free from drowsiness,
Let him resolve upon this mindfulness:
This is Divine Abiding here, they say.
But when he has no trafficking with views,
Is virtuous, and has perfected seeing,
And purges greed for sensual desires.
He surely comes no more to any womb.

Notes

1. Translated from the Pali by Ñāṇamoli Thera.
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