

The Buddhist Concept of Meditation

Dr. W. Piyaratana

Lecturer, Graduate School, MCU
Thailand

There are two main meditation practices in Buddhism as follows; *Samatha* (Tranquility Meditation) and *Vipassanā* (Insight Meditation). Regarding these two practices, *samatha* existed even before the appearance of the Buddha. There were ascetics such as *Kāladevala*, *Rāmaputta Uddaka*, and *Ālārakālāma* who practiced this and attained some types of absorptions and supernormal knowledge. Also some were able to enter their minds into the fine-material sphere and into the immaterial sphere. These attainments are known as *aṭṭhasamāpatti* or ‘eight-attainments’. A developed mind with these attainments leads one to realize the five-supernormal knowledges. (*iddhividha* or magical power, *dibbasota* or divine ear, *dibbacakkhu* or divine eye, *paracittavijāna* or knowing others’ minds, and *pubbesaniāsānussati* or recollection of previous births). The above attainments can be considered as the limit of *samatha*.

In *Aṅguttaranikāya*, the Buddha mentioned the difference between *samatha* and *vipassanā*. According to it, by practicing *samatha* one can develop his mind and by practicing *vipassanā* one can develop his wisdom.¹

By practicing *samatha* one can overcome the five hindrances or *pañcanīvaraṇa*. After overcoming these hindrances his mind runs towards attaining absorptions. However these attainments of absorptions are impermanent. As a result of the appearing of one of those hindrances, the absorption would disappear. Even if someone passes away along with a mind in absorption, it is possible for him to return back to a lower status at any occasion. This is because his mind is not free from all of the ten fetters (*dasasmyojana*).

Vipassanā is the practice which was new to Buddhism and it can be found only in Buddhism. It was expounded by the Buddha. Seeing the five aggregates as *anicca* (impermanent), *dukkha* (un-satisfactoriness) and *anatta* (not-self) is called *vipassanā*. Therefore to overcome the *samsaric* process one could develop *vipassanā* meditation.

It can be seen in some *suttās* that the practice of *vipassanā* is necessary fact in order to attain *nibbāna*. *Sīlasutta*² of the *Aṅguttaranikāya* mentions the use of *vipassanā* as follows;

“If while walking, standing, sitting or reclining when awake, a sensual thought, a thought of ill-will, or a violent thought arises in a monk, and he does not tolerate it, but abandons it, dispels it, eliminates it and abolishes it, that monk who in such a manner ever and again shows earnest endeavor and moral shame is called energetic and resolute.”

Whether walking or standing

Whether sitting or lying down

One who overcomes these thoughts

Finds delight in stilling the mind

Such a monk may well attain

¹ Two things O monks, partake of supreme knowledge. What two? Tranquility and insight. If tranquility is developed, what benefit does it bring? The mind becomes developed. And what is the benefit of a developed mind? All lust is abandoned. If insight is developed, what benefit does it bring? Wisdom becomes developed. And what is the benefit of developed wisdom? All ignorance is abandoned. Nyanaponika Thera & Bhikkhu Bodhi, Numerical Discourses of the Buddha, An Anthology of Suttas from the Aṅguttaranikāya (New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 2001), p. 42

² AN. IV.II. *Caravagga*

Enlightenment, the supreme goal.³

The distance that we can go with *samatha* is limited to overcoming the hindrances, but in order to attain *nibbāna* we have to practice *vipassanā*. It is clear even in the *Satipaṭṭhānasutta*, which appears in *Dīghanikāya*, *Majjhimanikāya* and also in *Samyuttanikāya*.

“There are, monks, this one way for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and distress, for the disappearance of pain and sadness, for the gaining of the right path, for the realization of *nibbāna*”⁴

(*Ekāyano ayaṃ bhikkhave maggo, sattānaṃ visuddhiyā, dukkhadomanassānaṃ atthaṅgamāya, nāyassa adhiḡamāya, nibbānaṃ sacchikiriyāya*)⁵

Therefore, the Buddha was able to add an additional knowledge to the five-supernormal knowledges through *vipassanā* meditation - *āsavakkhayaṅga*, the extinction of all cankers. By practicing it, one can gradually untangle the ten fetters in each stage of attainment.

Stream Enterer: In this stage the following fetters are abandoned accordingly; *sakkāyadiṭṭhi* (personality-belief), *vicikicchā* (skeptical doubt), *sīlabbataparāmāsa* (clinging to mere rules and rituals). He sees the reality within the five aggregates and realizes the significance of practice.

Once Returner: In this stage the following fetters are abandoned temporarily; *kāmarāga* (sensuous craving), *vyāpāda* (ill-will).

Non-Returner: In this stage the two above mentioned fetters are completely eradicated. Those who are in this stage they never return to existence in the ordinary world, but attains Nibbana directly from the Pure Abodes.

Arahanta: In this noble stage the rest of all the fetters are abandoned, namely; craving for fine-material existence (*rūparāga*), craving for immaterial existence (*arūparāga*), conceit (*māna*), restlessness (*uddhacca*), ignorance (*avijjā*).⁶

According to the above explanation, by practicing *vipassanā* one can completely abandon the ten fetters which are the factors of existence of beings. *Vipassanā* meditation plays a significant role in the Buddhist path of liberation as it is the practice which is used to attain the sixth *abhiññā*, *āsavakkhayaṅga* (the extinction of all cankers).

Objects for *Samatha*:

There are 40 objects for *samatha*:

1. Contemplation of Ten *Kasīnās*
2. Ten Loathsome or Ten Kinds of Human Corpses
3. Ten Recollections
4. Four Divine Abiding (*mettā, karuṇā, muditā, upekkhā*)
5. Four Formless Realms (*ākāsaṅcāyatana, viññānaṅcāyatana, ākiṅcaṅcāyatana, nevaṣaṅcāyatana*)
6. Perception of Loathsome Food (*āhāre paṭikkūlasaṅcāyatana*)
7. Analyzing of Four Elements (*catudhātu vavatthāna*)

Objects of *Vipassanā* meditation:

³ Bhikkhu Nyanaponika & Bhikkhu Bodhi. Op-cit, p.80

⁴ Ibid. p.335

⁵ D. II.290

⁶ MN. I. 140. *Alagaddūpamasutta*

1. Seven Purifications (*Sattavisuddhi*)
2. Three Universal Characteristics (*Tilakkhaṇa*)
3. Three Recollections (*Tividhānupassanā*)
4. Ten Kinds of Insight Knowledge (*Dasavidassanāñāṇa*)
5. Three Types of Liberation (*Tividhavimokkhā*)
6. Four Foundation of Mindfulness (*Cattāro Satipaṭṭhānā*)

Development of Mind

It has been explained in various *suttas* the gradual development of mind. Here, this may be discussed in accordance with *Sāmaññaphalasutta* of *Dīghanikāya*.⁷

Hearing the Dhamma:

Listening to the Dhamma is the basic need in the practice of Buddhism. The Dhamma has been expounded by the Buddha after realizing it through his own knowledge. Therefore he is called *sammāsambuddha*. The Buddha proclaims the Dhamma which is fully-perfected and leads to nibbāṇa. As the first step of following the Buddhist path, listening to such significant teaching is highly important.

The Arising of Confidence:

After listening to the Dhamma, there arises in the listener's mind the confidence that the Buddha is enlightened, the Dhamma is well-proclaimed and the Saṅgha is well-behaved. The listener gains faith in the Tathāgata.

Renunciation and Ordination:

Having confidence in the Triple Gem and having seen the obstacles of lay life, he renounces the householder life and enters into houseless life into the Order of practitioners.

Virtuousness:

Having abandoned bodily, verbal and mental unwholesome deeds, he practices virtuousness. He restrains from doing any type of bad deed, and prevents his senses engaging in any bad actions.

Mindfulness of Senses:

Having seen the senses as happy, joyful, he concentrates his mind. As a result of this concentration, he experiences an extra happiness, which is beyond others. Also he has enough understanding of the senses and their functions. Once a person is safe-guarded in the senses, his mind clearly observes whatever he does. He has clear understanding of each moment of the senses.

Happiness:

Once his mind is sustained he feels just like a bird in the sky that holds only its wings; the monk experiences happiness without attaching to anything. He is happy with just one robe and meals which are enough to fulfill his stomach. So he spends his time practicing meditation.

⁷ D. I. 63-85

Association in Dwelling Places:

The person who has the above mentioned qualities spends time at such appropriate places for practicing meditation on certain objects of meditation with mindfulness.

Abandoning the Five Hindrances: He is able to purify his mind from the five hindrances, which are: ill-will, sensual desire, sloth-and-torpor, worry-and-flurry, and doubt. His concern is on the welfare of all living beings.

Arising of Delight and Joy:

Once the above mentioned five hindrances are abandoned, gladness arises in him. With gladness gradually develops delight, tranquility, joy, and concentration. This concentration leads him to attain the absorptions.

Mind Concentration:

Once mind is free from those five hindrances gladness arises in him. This can be considered as one of the main achievements of the practitioner. It is explained in the suttas as follows; “And when he knows that these five hindrances have left him, gladness arises in him, from gladness comes delight, from the delight in his mind, his body is tranquillised, with a tranquil body he feels joy, and with joy his mind is concentrated. Being thus detached from sense desires, detached from unwholesome states, he enters and remains in the first jhāna, which is with thinking and pondering, born of detachment, filled with delight and joy. And with this delight and joy born of detachment, he so suffuses, drenches, fills and irradiates his body that there is no spot in his entire body that is untouched by this delight and joy born of detachment.”⁸

Appearance of the Absorption Mind:

In the mind which is concentrated, as it is free from the five hindrances, the four absorptions will appear. With these four absorptions, he is able to eradicate the fetters related to sensual existence.

Leading Mind towards Knowing and Seeing:

In this stage he realizes the nature of the material body as ‘it is material, made up from the four great elements, born of mother and father, fed on rice and gruel, impermanent, liable to be injured and abraded, broken and destroyed, and this is my consciousness which bound to it and depends on it.’⁹ This can be seen as a great movement of internal development of the person who practices the Buddhist path.

Creating the Mind-Made Body:

As his mind is concentrated and able to realize the nature of the body, he can create a mind-made body, which is out of this body.

Supernormal Powers:

The mind which can produce a mind-made body is able to lead his mind towards supernormal powers. The most important knowledge or supernormal power is ‘āsavakkhayañāna’. With this knowledge he is able to understand the origin and decay of the samsaric process. It is stated in the suttas as follows:

⁸ Maurice Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*. Op-cit. 102

⁹ *Ibid.* p.103

“This is the origin of suffering”, he knows as it really is: “This is the cessation of suffering”, he knows as it really is: “This is the path leading to the cessation of suffering.” And he knows as it really is: “These are the corruptions”, “This is the origin of the corruptions”, “This is the cessation of the corruptions”, “This is the path leading to the cessation of the corruptions.” And through his knowing and seeing, his mind is delivered from the corruption of sense desire, from the corruption of becoming, from the corruption of ignorance, and the knowledge arises in him: “This is deliverance!”, and he knows: “Birth is finished, the holy life has been led, done is what had to be done, there is nothing further here.”¹⁰

This is the realization of nibbāna in Buddhism. From the above explanation it is clear how far meditation is needed in order to reach the final goal of Buddhism.

Meditation and Daily Life

The meaning of meditation is development of mind or cultivation of mind. It guides us to avoid unwholesome mental factors and makes our mind calm and concentrated. Usually our mind is shaking. It is unable to be brought to one point as by its nature it is wandering here and there to various objects. It is hard to stop this situation of the mind. One should not try to stop it by force. If one’s mind works on an agenda, that person should see with vision and try to concentrate on that agenda. Bringing one’s mind to one place is developing concentration. The more one’s mind is calm it will help to concentrate on things clearly. The main purpose of Buddhism is to provide the knowledge to calm one’s mind. Once the mind is cleared of the happenings around it, that person can feel healthier than usual. This status is called *cittasamādhī* (concentration of mind). As far as our mind is in this *samādhī*, it steps towards absorptions and supernormal powers. Without stopping at this point, if the practitioner develops his mind further, it may lead him to attain nibbāna, the final aim of Buddhism.

It serves no purpose to strain one’s mind to extremes to achieve this. One should try to concentrate the mind on meditation according to the day’s needs and in a simple way which will not strain the mind to extremes. When the Buddha saw the effort taken by Ven. Soṇa Thero who was a former violin player to concentrate his mind, he explained to the Thero that if he tries to push the strings of the violin too hard or too soft he will not get the expected tune from it. Trying too hard to concentrate or too lightly will not bring any expected results. It must be done according to the capacity of the mind and the person should be clear regarding his mental strength.¹¹ When one practices with unusual effort, it leads him to have a restless mind, and when once practices meditation with less effort, it leads him to have lazy mind.¹² A balanced mind can gain the fruits of meditation.

New Findings of the Helpfulness of Meditation

Meditation is not a new word for Asia although it is relatively new to the West. But as time passed when the Western world came to know more about Buddhism and Hinduism, they started to take more interest in meditation.

¹⁰ Maurice Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, Op-cit. 107

¹¹ AN. IV. Soṇasutta

¹² *Accāraddhaṃ viriyaṃ uddhaccāya saṃvattati. Atilīnaṃ viriyaṃ kosajjāya saṃvattati. Tasmātiha tvaṃ soṇa viriyasamaṭaṃ adhiṭṭhaha.* Ibid

Especially they too accepted meditation as a simple answer to most of the mental disorders most people have. With the development of modern technology people began to become more stressed, life became more complicated, which deteriorated the mental conditions of many people, and hence they started to look towards meditation as a simple way to remove stress in their minds and make them calmer to accept the changing conditions in life.

According to discussions on mental problems, mental disorders of a person are divided into two sections. One is called psychoses and the other neuroses. The person who suffers from psychoses meditation doesn't support much as the mental condition is a result of the disorder of the nerves in ones brain which cannot be cured with meditation. However, mindfulness meditation has been found to be somewhat successful in treating people with psychoses such as borderline personality disorder and schizophrenia, at least with some symptoms. Meditation has also been shown to have real affects on the structure of the brain, the thickening of the cortex, etc.

A neurosis is not a serious mental disorder. This can be cured with proper treatment. The most important aspect is the relaxation of the mind for such a sickness and meditation could help such persons to get over this situation.

The symptoms of neuroses include gastritis, high blood pressure, and certain skin diseases, which are some of the sicknesses developed through mental agony. If ones makes the body and mind lighter and takes the necessary medicines, it could be cured without much difficulty. This is one reason that the West has now turned to the Buddhist Meditation system to release stress from the mind and body.

Certain bodily sicknesses are developed through frustration of the body. Frustration occurs through the effort the body makes to satisfy the body but because of certain barriers the body cannot get the satisfaction required, which results in frustration. The anxiety surrounds receiving something or doing something and when that person fails to appease the anxiety, frustration takes over the body. Under such circumstances the modern world is now looking to the practice of Buddhist Meditation to overcome these problems and to have a clear and light mind. According to the Buddha, there is no comparable happiness the same as the happiness of mind.¹³

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¹³ *Nāhaṃ bhikkhave aññaṃ ekadhammaṃ pi samanupassāmi yaṃ evaṃ bhāvitaṃ, bahulīkataṃ sulhāvahaṃ hoti, yathayidaṃ cittaṃ.* AN.I. Sukhabhācittasutta