

Meditation and its purpose

An excerpt from **SD 15.1 Bhāvanā: mental cultivation, an introduction.**

1.1 THE PATH TO LIBERATION

1.1.1 Awakening the mind

Early Buddhism is all about awakening (*bodhi*), that is, realizing our highest wholesome potential. This means breaking away from negative tendencies, cultivating a wholesome life, and breaking through into some direct self-understanding, even self-awakening. An awakened being is not troubled by suffering: the body may feel pain, but the mind can go beyond it. Even when we only have a vision of awakening but not yet reached the goal, suffering does not trouble us in the manner that it oppresses the unawakened.

A simple way of putting this is that when the mind of asleep (ignorance) and dreaming (craving), then it is unable to help the body (action and speech), but is in fact often negatively affected by it. But when the mind is awakened—we are mindful—then we are in some real control of our bodily actions. The practice and habit of keeping awoken, or the effort towards awakening, is broadly called meditation.

1.1.2 The mind looking at itself

Meditation is, in fact, the ideal vehicle for the journey of self-awakening. Mindfulness exercises are the best tools for looking directly into the mind, or introspection, the stage of life's passing drama. Only by directly experiencing the mind can we clear away what clouds it up and train it so that it awakens to its true potential.

Ironically, only the mind can work on itself—this is clearly a very human ability. The path of awakening to liberation lies in the mind's ability to see directly into itself. The mind, after all, is the source of all our ignorance, delusion, and also our wisdom and liberation. **Analayo** makes an important observation here:

It is particularly intriguing that early Buddhism treats the mind just like the other sense organs. Thought, reasoning, memory, and reflection are dealt with in the same manner as the sense data of any other sense door. Thus the thinking activity of the mind shares the impersonal status of external phenomena perceived through the five senses.

Insight into this impersonal character of “one's own” thoughts can be gained even with the first few attempts at meditation, when one discovers how difficult it is to avoid getting lost in all kinds of reflections, daydreams, memories, and fantasies, despite being determined to focus on a particular object of meditation.

Just as it is impossible only to see, hear, smell, taste, and touch what is wished for, so too, with an untrained mind, it is not possible to have thoughts only when and how one would like to have them. For precisely this reason a central purpose of meditative training is to remedy this situation by gradually taming the thinking activity of the mind and bringing it more under conscious control.¹ (2003:217 f)

¹ This has found its expression in various passages such as M 1:122, where to develop mastery of the mind means to be able to think only what one wishes to think; or at M 1:214, which speaks of gaining control over the mind and thereby being no longer controlled by it; or Dh 326, which poetically compares controlling one's wandering mind to a mahout controlling a rutting elephant. (Analayo's fn)

1.1.3 Mental training

Meditation or mindfulness practice (or mind-training for short), unlike the commercial meditation methods, are not considered to be merely relaxation exercises or mood management techniques. Rather, they are, in terms of modern psychology, a form of *mental training* “to reduce cognitive vulnerability to reactive modes of mind that might otherwise heighten stress and emotional distress or that may otherwise perpetuate psychopathology.”² For Buddhists, mind training is the path to awakening or spiritual liberation itself.

1.2 THE 2 ASPECTS OF MIND-TRAINING

Early Buddhism meditation is the cultivation (*bhāvanā*) of the mind, training it in mindfulness (*sati*) to keep to a single wholesome mental object or keeping the mind wholesome so that concentration (*samādhi* or *samatha*) arises leading to mental clarity (*paññā* or *vipassanā*) conducive to spiritual insight that liberates us from suffering. In modern terms,³ we might describe meditation as keeping ourselves constantly in the present-moment mindfulness of whatever arises in our minds.

On a broader beginner’s level, both mindfulness and concentration, at least in their incipient forms, have to be cultivated. On a basic level at least, we need to know when and how to apply a *concentration* technique, and when and how to apply an *insight* technique. Indeed, calm and insight are tools or aspects of meditation, not “types” of meditation in their own right.⁴

Even when we use such expressions as “calm meditation” or “insight meditation,” we are only referring to a *technique*, that is, for calming the mind or for noting impermanence. Both are needed like the two wings of a bird that is flying (Dh 372).⁵ It is with this understanding that the notions of “concentration meditation” (*samatha bhāvanā*) and “insight (or mindfulness) meditation” (*vipassanā bhāvanā*) that we should appreciate how Buddhist meditation has evolved in our times.⁶

In **concentration meditation** (sometimes, “stabilizing meditation”), the attention is silently focused on a single object, such as the breath, a thought (such as lovingkindness), or even a sound (such as *Buddho*). When the attention wanders or there is a distraction, the mind is redirected to that single object. No attention is given to the nature of the distraction. When this practice is happily sustained, it will lead to a deepening sense of joyful calm and focus, called samadhi, the basis for dhyana (*jhāna* or mental absorption). [8]

Insight (or mindfulness) meditation (sometimes, “analytical meditation”), on the other hand, involves the observation of constantly changing internal and external stimuli as they arise. When the mind wanders, that process is noted as it is, as “Wandering mind, wandering mind...” Whatever stimulus arises at any of the six sense-doors, it is noted as such, thus: “Seeing, seeing ... ,” “Sound, sound ... ,” “Smell, smell ... ,” “Tasting, tasting ... ,” “Feeling, feeling ... ,” or “Thinking, thinking ... ” This is only a basic list and there are other variations as

² Bishop et al 2004:231.

³ Modern terms given to these 2 meditations incl *samatha bhāvanā* = stabilizing or placement meditation; *vipassanā bhāvanā* = analytical or discerning meditation. Further see *Samatha and vipassanā*, SD 41.1 (3).

⁴ See *Samatha and vipassanā*, SD 41.1.

⁵ See SD 41.1 (1.4.2).

⁶ A modern psychological discussion of the differences in the goals and methods of these 2 types of meditation is found Naranjo & Ornstein 1971.

the need arises, especially with regards with the mind-door, where such noting may apply, eg, “Sleepy, sleepy ... ,” or “Doubting, doubting ... ,” or “Confused mind, confused mind ... ” and so on. The idea is to attend to the distraction in a non-evaluative manner by simply reflecting the reality of the situation.⁷

1.3 BENEFITS OF ATTENTION

Modern psychologists associate mindfulness practices with improvements in cognitive inhibition, especially at the level of stimulus selection. That is to say, a meditator can train himself to direct his attention away from unwholesome mental objects and distractions, and direct it back to the meditation object (such as the breath). This capacity for attention can be measured using tasks that require the inhibition of semantic processing (eg emotional Stroop).⁸

Attention encumbered by mental proliferation (elaborative thinking) limits the capacity for attention.⁹ When attention is free from mental proliferation, it has a greater capacity for processing information relating to current experience. This greater access to current experience increases one’s mindfulness, giving a broader perspective on the nature of experience. Instead of attending to experience through the filters of desires, biases, hopes and beliefs, mindfulness becomes a direct observation of experience as is for the first time, or what is often referred to as “a beginner’s mind.”

The “beginner’s mind” or open-minded mindfulness, because it does not harbour preconceptions and biases, is able to quickly detect mental states and objects as they arise. Such a mindfulness facilitates the identification of objects in unexpected situations because one would not be biased against what should or should not be present. Research scientists have been able to measure such tasks where successful performance depends on tasks of detecting stimuli in unexpected settings.¹⁰

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⁷ Research scientists have been able to show that mindfulness is associated with improvements in sustained attention and switching by objectively measuring them with standard vigilance tests (Klee & Garfinkel 1983; Rogers & Monsell 1995).

⁸ **A Stroop test** is a procedure developed by John Ridley Stroop for studying verbal processes, first noted in an article, *Studies of interference in serial verbal reactions* published in *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 1935. The **Stroop effect** is a demonstration of interference in the reaction time of a task. When a word, such as “blue,” “green,” or “red,” is printed in a colour differing from the color expressed by the word’s semantic meaning (eg the word “red” printed in blue ink), a delay occurs in the processing of the word’s color, leading to slower test reaction times and an increase in mistakes. See Williams, Mathews & MacLeod 1996.

⁹ See Schneider & Shiffrin 1977.

¹⁰ Henderson, Weeks & Hollingsworth 1999.