

## How Meditation Works

*An introductory overview of techniques for mental development within the Buddhist traditions of Theravada, Tantra and Zen and including reference to Christian contemplative practice*

The Buddhist world comprises three broad traditions. Much of Southeast Asia (Ceylon, Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia) preserves an early form of Indian Buddhism, the Theravada. A very late and highly evolved expression of Indian Buddhism, Vajrayana or Tantra, has dominated in Tibet, Mongolia and Nepal. In East Asia, we find Buddhism greatly transformed at the hands of the Chinese. It is this “Sinified” form of Buddhism which enters Korea, Japan and Vietnam. Zen is a product of East Asia.

Within each of these three spheres, numerous schools, traditions and individual approaches exist for the practice of meditation. Yet concerning basic principles, there is remarkable agreement among Buddhists as to what is involved in the meditative process.

This distinctive Buddhist orientation towards meditation can be summed up concisely. Meditation consists of two aspects or components. The first, called *shamatha* in Sanskrit, is the step by step development of mental and physical calmness. The second, *vipashyana*<sup>1</sup>, is the step by step heightening of awareness, sensitivity and observation. These two components complement each other and should be practiced simultaneously. Some techniques develop primarily calming, others primarily clarity, still others both equally. It is of utmost importance, however, that one component not be enhanced at the expense of the other. To do so is no longer meditation. Tranquility at the expense of awareness is dozing; awareness at the expense of calm is ‘tripping.’

Shamatha, if taken to an extreme, leads to special trance states; these may be of value, but they are not the ultimate goal of Buddhism. The practice of clear observation, on the other hand, if developed with sufficient intensity and consistency leads to a moment of insight into the nature of the self identification process. At that moment, awareness penetrates into the normally unconscious chain of mental events which gives us the rock-solid conviction “I am separate and limited.” This insight brings with it a radical and permanent change in perspective...a refreshing sense of freedom which is not dependent upon circumstances<sup>2</sup>. The attainment of this perspective and the full manifestation of its implications in daily life are the goals of Buddhist meditation.

What follows will amplify upon the above ideas and describe briefly a few specific practices drawn from the three Buddhist cultural spheres of East Asia, Southeast Asia, and Tibet.

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<sup>1</sup> The corresponding Pali terms are *shamatha* and *vipashyana*. In Tibetan *zhi gnas* (peaceful abiding) and *lhag thong* (penetrating vision) and in Chinese simply *chih* (stopping) and *kuan* (seeing).

<sup>2</sup> This is analogous to what Thomas Kuhn, in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press, 1962), calls a paradigm shift. As with the “Copernican revolution”, that which was thought to be the center is no longer seen as such, and suddenly everything makes a lot more sense.

## **Shamatha**

Shamatha is the practice of stilling the mind through letting go. In Buddhist usage, it is virtually synonymous with the term samadhi. This latter term is usually translated as “one-pointedness” or concentration. Unfortunately, the word concentration often carries the connotation of repressing the mind, forcing it not to wander from a certain object. Such a tug of war between the desire of the mind to hold an object and its desire to wander is exhausting and produces unconscious tensions. This is the very antithesis of the shamatha state.

The nature of concentration is detachment. Realizing this marks an important step along the path to the attainment of mental power. In real concentration, one simply rests the mind on the object at hand and then proceeds to let go of everything else in the universe. The mind then remains on that object until it is appropriate to shift attention. Thus, the ability to focus, to totally concentrate on one thing, is essentially equivalent to the ability to let go of everything. But, in order to do this, it is necessary to relax the body in a special way.

First one learns to keep the body upright and utterly motionless entirely through balance and relaxation, without using muscular effort. The ideal posture for this is the cross-legged lotus, although satisfactory results can be achieved with a variety of postures, including sitting in a chair<sup>3</sup>. The important thing is to align the vertebra, find a position of equilibrium, and simply let the body hang from the spine by its own weight. This feeling of letting go then extends to the breath and finally to the mind itself.

Since shamatha has the dual nature of letting go and one-pointedness, two approaches to the mind are possible. One is simply to allow the emotional and conceptual content of the mind to settle of its own weight. A way this may be achieved is through the elegant technique of “analogy.” One feels a part of the body, such as the arm, relaxing, then discovers the mental analog of that feeling, i.e., what it feels like to relax thought.

The second approach is to rest the attention on a specific object and gently return it there each time it wanders off. Eventually this wandering habit weakens, then disappears. The object may be physical or visualized, outside the body or within. The so-called “elephant taming pictures” of Tibet portray this process in detail<sup>4</sup>.

It is common in all Buddhist traditions to give beginners some form of meditation which brings the mind to rest on the breathing. In Zen this usually involves counting the breaths or following the breath in and out. In the Theravada approach, one typically cultivates awareness of the touch feeling of the breath at the nose tip or abdomen. Here no attempt whatsoever is made to control the breath. But in Vajrayana, elaborate channels for the breath are visualized in the body, and cycles of inhalation, retention and exhalation in fixed ratios are practiced as in Hatha yoga.

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<sup>3</sup> *Patanjali* defined a suitable meditation posture (asana) as “stable and comfortable.”

<sup>4</sup> See Janice Dean Willis, *The Diamond Light of the Eastern Dawn*, Torchstone Books, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1972. The Ch’an/Zen school of East Asia has a series of “ox taming pictures.” But the Chinese ox pictures portray the entire course of Buddhist training beginning with confusion and passing through the stages of study and meditation, initial breakthrough experience, the deepening and integrating of that experience and culminating in entering the marketplace offering gifts for all.” The Tibetan elephant pictures merely depict stages of settling the mind.

Chanting is also common to all traditions. When done with proper posture and intention, it can be very tranquilizing. In East Asia, chanting the Buddha Amitabha's name is especially popular. The Chinese call this practice Nien-Fo, the Japanese Nembutsu, the Koreans Yombul and the Vietnamese Niem-Phat. Many Tibetans incessantly chant mantras aloud or silently. Even in Theravada countries, the chanting of special scriptures, called pirit, represents a major event in the monastic year, often going on unbroken for many days and nights. The mind-stabilizing nature of chant and mantra recitation was also recognized in Christianity as witnessed by the "prayer of the heart" so popular in Eastern Orthodox spirituality. Chanting has a strong shamatha effect, but, as usually practiced, there is little of the vipashyana component; thus its power to bring liberating insight is weak.

## **Physical Effects**

As body, breath and mind settle, a distinctive slowing down of the overall metabolism begins to take effect. One needs to sleep less, eat less, breathe less. In fact, spontaneous slowing of breath is probably the most easily observed physical barometer of depth of samadhi. Normal adults at sea level breathe about fifteen times per minute. During seated meditation, at a middle level of shamatha, the breathing rate may drop to only two or three breaths a minute. Because shamatha practice produces such conspicuous changes in the body's function, there has recently been a good deal of physiological research on meditators. A few results of this research will be summarized here.

Meditators' brainwaves are usually highly synchronized; typically this takes the form of increase in the alpha rhythm whose frequency ranges from eight to twelve cycles per second. This enhanced alpha production in meditators continues even when their eyes are open. In non-meditators, opening of the eyes normally stops production of alpha waves. Electromyography reveals deep muscle relaxation in spite of the upright, unsupported posture. Skin conductivity (GSR) decreases, probably indicating less sweating and hence decreased sympathetic activity. This too implies relaxation.

Researchers at Tokyo University made an interesting discovery about brain wave behavior in Zen practitioners. A group of meditators and a group of non-meditators were asked to sit quietly with electrodes attached to monitor brainwaves. A click sound was repeatedly presented to both groups. At first, both groups showed momentary "blocking" of alpha. This was as expected, for such blocking is part of the normal orienting response to a new stimulus. After several clicks, the non-meditator group no longer showed this blocking. This also is normal. They had accommodated to the stimulus: it was no longer new and fresh. But the Zen practitioners continued to momentarily block alpha with every click as if each time they were hearing the click for the first time. This fits nicely with the Zen ideal of "living in the moment." In India, a similar click experiment was done with some yogis. They showed no alpha blocking. Apparently, withdrawn in trance, they did not hear the sound<sup>5</sup>.

Shamatha is a continuum of states of progressive settling of the mind associated with growth in detachment, concentration power and a distinctive set of physiological changes. At the deep end of this continuum, these phenomena become extreme, and states, called in Pali jhanas (Sanskrit

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<sup>5</sup> See Charles Tart (Ed.), *Altered States of Consciousness*, Anchor Books, Doubleday and Co., Garden City, New York, 1972, pg. 501- 518, "Tomio Hirai, Zen and the Mind, Japan Publications. Tokyo, 1978.

dhyana), are entered. In deep jhana, the drives to which everyone is normally subject are actually suspended, though not necessarily extinguished. This may last for a few hours or several days. One does not feel driven to move, eat, sleep or think. Indeed, the metabolism so slows that the breath seems nonexistent. The mind, which in its uncultivated state is like a torrential cataract, becomes a rippleless, limpid lake. The deepest jhana is a kind of trance, but by no means is every trance a jhana state. The characteristics of the jhanas are distinct and well-defined in a class of Buddhist literature called Abhidharma literature. In all, nine levels are distinguished.

## ***Development and Use of Shamatha***

Shamatha is best developed by a daily, sitting meditation practice. What are the typical experiences of a person who takes up such a practice? - How is it likely to affect his or her day-to-day life?

At first, the body strains to remain upright during sitting, the breath is rough, piston-like. and the mind wanders terribly. One may even feel more agitated than usual. Actually, one is just becoming aware for the first time of the appalling extent and intensity of the chaos within. This awareness is really the first stage of progress. Until the mind has had a chance to really experience the discomfort caused by its habitual drivenness and fixation, there will be no motivation to develop different habits. In the Tibetan tradition, this initial sobering experience is called “realizing the mind as a waterfall.”

As with any other art, however, time and regular practice bring skill at shamatha. Body learns to settle into the posture, breath becomes smooth and slow, and irrelevant thoughts no longer scream for attention but whisper and are more easily ignored. By the end of each half-hour or hour meditation period, one experiences a noticeable calm, lightness and openness. Then the task is to remember this calm state and to remain in it throughout the activities of the day!

At first, it may be possible to recapture this settling effect only during the simplest mechanical tasks such as walking, sweeping or gardening. The emphasis on manual labor in all forms of monasticism, East and West, is meant to provide situations wherein it is relatively easy to preserve inner silence while moving the body. After sufficient experience, the awareness of calm can be preserved throughout the day, though its depth may vary depending on circumstances. One can drive a car, make love, even have arguments and write books without leaving the shamatha state. One even dreams in it.

Even a person with no meditation experience can appreciate the advantage of a calm and concentrated mind in carrying out physical or mental tasks. With the deepening of shamatha, most activities of daily life are enhanced as one brings this ever more powerful, ever more stable mind to bear on them. In addition, the associated settling of the body produces an abundance of energy. Further, shamatha is a state of openness and acceptance, key factors in successful interpersonal relationships. Also, the detachment associated with shamatha makes it much easier to stick to one's principles and approach one's moral ideal.

For many shamatha practitioners, the events of the day are seen as a sequence of opportunities to deepen and apply skill at one-pointedness.

Peculiar inversions in values may take place. Normally unpleasant situations turn into gold.

Overwork and physical discomfort become “feedback devices”. Uncomfortable? Go deeper! Chaotic and fearful situations are accepted as challenges to one's meditative prowess. Wasting

time is no longer conceivable. Being unexpectedly kept waiting for an hour somewhere means an hour of “secret use, hidden enjoyment<sup>6</sup>.” The Sung dynasty Ch’an master Wu-Men summed it up when he said, “Most people are used twenty-four hours a day; the meditator uses twenty-four hours a day.”

The states along this “shamatha continuum” from superficial calming to total trance are known outside Buddhism. Indeed, they are central to the systematic cultivation of mystical experience in all religious traditions. For example, in the Roman Catholic Church, cover terms for such states are *oratio quies* (prayer of quiet) and recollection<sup>7</sup>. Sometimes these states are referred to as “nondiscursive prayer” as opposed to usual prayer which uses words and thoughts. There is copious literature on the subject in both the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions of Christianity. Different authors use different terminologies to distinguish benchmarks along the continuum<sup>8</sup>. The deepest trance level of prayer of quiet was sometimes called “infused contemplation” or simply “contemplation.” After the 16th century, the practice of nondiscursive prayer declined in the Western church for interesting historical reasons. This, however, is beyond the scope of the present discussion.

The classical Raja yoga of Patanjali, another non-Buddhist system, distinguishes three stages along the continuum of settling which are referred to as the ‘inner branches’ of yoga. The first is *dharana* (holding on) during which the yogi strives to hold the object of concentration, returning to it each time the mind wanders. When the second stage, *dhyana*, is reached, concentration upon the object is unbroken, like a “flowing stream of oil.” Finally, all mental fluctuations cease, trance is attained, and the yogi feels that mundane limitations have been transcended. Patanjali calls this last stage *samadhi*. Note that, while in Buddhism the word *samadhi* is usually used as a general term for any state of one-pointedness, here in classical yoga it refers only to the very deepest of such state<sup>9</sup>.

Nor is the experience of shamatha found only within the context of religious mysticism; it sometimes crops up in the arts, sports and other “secular” activities which require intense concentration and relaxation.

It is interesting to see how beliefs and attitudes influence people’s perceptions of the shamatha process. The musician, who sometimes experiences a light transient *samadhi* while performing, will likely associate this state only with the art and, being unaware of its broader potentials, will

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<sup>6</sup> A Chinese expression. The Japanese speak of “stealing moments” during the day.

<sup>7</sup> Meaning not “to remember” but to “collect back” or gather in the mind. From Latin *reconligere* “back together tying”. Compare Sanskrit *sam-a-dhi* “together-back-putting”.

<sup>8</sup> For general treatment of Roman Catholic Mysticism, see Auguste Poulain, *The Graces of Interior Prayer*, Celtic Cross Books, Windsor, Vermont 1978, J. V. - Bainvel, (Ed.). For the Eastern Orthodox tradition, see Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York. New York, 1976, and E. Kadloubovsky and E. M. Palmer, translators, and Timothy Ware, editor, *The Art of Prayer, An Orthodox Anthology*, Laber and Faber Limited, London, 1978.

<sup>9</sup> We see here the immense importance of context when dealing with spiritual vocabulary. In languages with long rich histories such as Sanskrit, Tibetan and Chinese, the same word in different traditions may mean something entirely different or something slightly but significantly different, even within the same tradition, teachers may use terms in different senses. In fact, in the realm of spiritual discourse, the same teacher may use the same term in different senses on different occasions. Developing a sensitivity to such usage is an important aspect of intellectual maturity for students of religious experience.

not strive to deepen and maintain it. In this case, the artist's daily life will never be engulfed and transformed by the experience.

## ***The Value of Trance***

Mystics in traditions with dualistic philosophical outlooks tend to see trance as the pinnacle and ultimate goal of the mystic path. This makes perfect sense. If you believe in the dichotomy of spirit versus matter as did the Neoplatonists of Hellenistic Europe and the Sankhya theorists of ancient India, then your goal will be conceived of in terms of freeing spirit from the trammels of matter. The absence of drives and extreme withdrawal which characterize the deep end of the shamatha continuum will allow you to do this but, of course, only for limited periods of time. Eventually one must come out of trance, at which time there may or may not be a permanent transformation of consciousness. Patanjali's Raja yoga is, in fact, simply the practice associated with the Sankhya philosophy, a system which postulates a radical dichotomy between *purusha* (spirit) and *prakriti* (matter). Likewise, if you believe in a God who stands outside creation, then the way to meet God directly is to pull out of creation for a while. Furthermore, if you are theistically inclined, you will likely perceive these states of tranquility, particularly the deeper ones, as special graces conferred by God. In her "Interior Castle," the 16th century Spanish saint, Teresa of Avila, vividly describes the various levels of prayer of quiet culminating in what she calls perfect union, which roughly corresponds to the very deep jhana in Buddhism or "samadhi" in Patanjali's yoga.

For Buddhists, the attainment of samadhi at its various depths is more a skill than a supernatural grace. Like piano playing or golf, it is something that can be learned reasonably well by most people with sufficient motivation and regular practice. Of course, it is a special skill because of its great generality and power. Most other skills are enhanced by this one skill. More important, it is special because of the changes it brings to one's life.

However, shamatha, no matter how deep, is not the ultimate goal of the Buddhist. The intensity and enrichment which habitual one-pointedness brings to daily life are but pleasant byproducts of the meditative process. Even the jhanas, though purifying and refreshing, are conditioned, impermanent and ultimately unsatisfying. They may even become a hindrance to realizing the true Buddhist goal, Nirvana.<sup>10</sup> Shamatha is merely a tool which facilitates the attainment of Nirvana.

The word Nirvana literally means extinction. Not the extinction of self, but extinction of the *kleshas*, the "afflictions" which prevent happiness. The kleshas may be broadly grouped under three headings: *raga*, *dvesha* and *moha*. Raga (desire) is the drive to repeat pleasant sensations. Dvesha (aversion, hate or antipathy) is the rejection of unpleasant sensations. Moha is confusion and lack of clarity. Moha is responsible for our sense of limited identity and prevents us from noticing the subtle malaise and discomfort which underlie all experience.

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<sup>10</sup> When Freudians spoke of the "Nirvana Drive," meaning the drive to not exist, they were taking Nirvana in its commonly misunderstood sense of self-extinction. As a technical term in Buddhism, Nirvana means freedom from any sense of being driven. Buddhism explicitly states that the drive to not exist (*abhavatsna*) is as much a hindrance to Nirvana as the drive to exist is. Taken in that Buddhist sense, the term "Nirvana Drive" is an oxymoron, a self-contradictory expression, like saying wise fool.

Concerning raga and dvesha, there is an important point which is sometimes missed. Raga means hankering for mental and physical pleasure, not the pleasure itself. The serious Buddhist seeks to eliminate this hankering because it is a source of suffering. Pleasure of itself is most definitely not evil and need not be abjured. Likewise, dvesha is the reaction of rejecting, psychologically and physically. Fighting with pain causes suffering. Pain, if not frantically rejected, causes little suffering. One who has come to grips with raga and dvesha, then enjoys the pleasant without feeling frustrated when the pleasant cannot be had. Likewise, he or she naturally avoids hurt yet does not feel imposed upon when harm is unavoidable. Such a person no longer carries around that internal sword of Damocles under which the majority of humanity labors, i.e. the constant threat of hell within if we don't get what we want.

So Nirvana is what life feels like to a person for whom:

- No matter how assailed, anger need not arise.
- No matter what the pleasure, compulsive longing need not arise.
- No matter what the circumstances, a feeling of limitation need not arise.

Such a person is in a position to live exuberantly, to experience life fully, and also to fully experience death. The former is called "Nirvana with a remnant," the latter "Nirvana without a remnant."

There are two ways in which shamatha serves as a tool for attaining Nirvana. Firstly, it confers a sense of letting go which aids in the gradual renunciation of desire and aversion. Secondly, it gives the mental stability and one-pointedness necessary for effective vipashyana practice. Vipashyana destroys moha.

Moha means basically not knowing what is going on within oneself. According to Buddhism, it is the fundamental klesha, lying at the root of all our problems. The cure lies in extending clarity and awareness down into normally unconscious processes. This sounds like much of Western psychology. The difference lies in the fact that, in meditation, awareness is cultivated within the shamatha state, that distinctive profound settling of mind and body described above. This allows for an exposing of the unconscious which is far more direct, unrelenting and keener than that usually attained in psychotherapy. Not surprisingly, the results are different. Therapy, when successful, solves specific problems. Meditation, when successful, provides a general solution applicable to any problem, even "biggies" like guilt, loss of loved ones, failure, intractable disease, old age and death. Psychology tells us something about how a person's problems arise. Meditation reveals something about how the idea of "person" arises and, in doing so, frees one from the necessity to always identify with being a particular person. Within the context of such radical objectivity, personal problems can then be dealt with very efficiently.

## ***Liberating Insight***

The term *vipashyana* is derived from three Sanskrit morphemes, vi-pash-yana. -yana is suffix used to form nouns denoting actions or processes (technically it is the "iotacized" or "y-" form of the common *nomen actionis* suffix -ana). Note the short 'a' in yana. It should not be confused with yana meaning vehicle. Vi- is a prefix connoting both separation and penetration just as its Greek counterpart dia- does (dia-critic "serving to *separate*," dia-thermy "passing heat *through*." Both vi- and dia- are ultimately derived from the Indo European \*dwi- believed to be related to \*dwo- meaning "two." Pash is a shortened form of spash, which is ultimately

connected both to the Latin stem *spec-* (as in *spectacle*) and the English word *spy*. It means simply to see. So *vi-pash-yana* means both to “see with separation,” i.e. to discern clearly the components of one’s experience, and to “see through,” i.e. gain penetrating understanding into the nature of experience. Thus *vipashyana* connotes both the practice of investigation (mindfulness) and the wisdom that arises as the result of the investigation (insight). In the most general sense, *vipashyana* refers to the clarifying side of the meditation coin while *shamatha* refers to the calming side. In this general sense, all forms of meditation, Buddhist and otherwise, can be analyzed in terms of *shamatha* and *vipashyana* effects. But the term *vipashyana* (or its Pali equivalent *Vipassana*) is also used as a proper noun (hence the capital ‘V’ here). In this sense, it refers to a specific style (or more accurately, a group of related styles) of meditation practiced in the Theravada countries of South East Asia, South East Thailand and Burma. This style emphasizes systematic observation of the sense gates...infusing ordinary experience with precision and equanimity.

Sustained *vipashyana* leads to a moment of liberating insight when a huge mass of *moha* falls away like a chunk of concrete revealing a vista of freedom. In scholastic Buddhism, this is called “entering the stream of nobles.” The Rinzai school speaks of *kensho* (seeing one’s nature) or *satori* (“catching on”). Sometimes in English it is referred to as initial enlightenment or breakthrough. At that moment, the wisdom eye opens, but wider for some than for others. In any case, it never closes again. This is no “peak experience” which later fades. It is a permanent change in perspective, a revolution in the basis of the mind.

A breakthrough of insight into oneness sometimes occurs spontaneously to people who have never practiced meditation and may not even be particularly “spiritually” inclined. However, without some background in clarity, it is difficult to hold on to and integrate such an insight and the experience usually fades into a pleasant memory after a few moments, hours or days. Occasionally, such an unsought experience does work a permanent transformation, but, even then, without systematic practice it is difficult to realize its full implications in daily life.

Late in life, Saint Teresa de Avila came to an experience of God which was permanent and independent of trance. She called it spiritual marriage and says it was occasioned by an “intellectual vision.” From her description, it seems similar to the initial breakthrough in Buddhism, though conceived of entirely in Christian terms, of course. Concerning this experience, she makes the remarkable statement, “There is a self-forgetfulness which is so complete that it really seems as though the soul no longer existed...”<sup>11</sup> For another classical Christian source which clearly distinguishes “trance mysticism” and “insight mysticism”, see “*The Cloud of Unknowing*” particularly chapter LXXI, which describes the fact “that some may feel the perfection of this work only in a time of ecstasy while others may feel it whenever they wish, in the common state of man’s soul”.

According to Buddhist concepts, at this first breakthrough, one realizes “no-self”. But this expression, no-self, which Buddhists are so fond of, can be very misleading. At first blush, the idea seems un-inviting if not positively absurd. It sounds like a negation of individuality, a frightening loss of controlling center, or a kind of deluded regression. But what is meant by no-self is becoming *free* from the perspective of “self as thing” (*satkayadrishti*). Conceptually this is not quite the same as losing self nor does it imply the *absence* of a “personality of self.”

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<sup>11</sup> See chapter seven of Teresa de Avila, *Interior Castle*, E. Allison Peers (Tr.), Image Books, 1961.

What is meant by “becoming free from a concept?” One is free from a particular thought or concept if that thought always arises without the slightest unconscious tension, repression or break in awareness of the thought as thought. Then one is experiencing the thought so fully that there is not time for the mind to tense and solidify the thought. And so the thought ceases to be in one’s way. In other words, a thought, concept, mental image or memory has no hold over us if we always experience it totally (vipashyana) and yet remain relaxed (shamatha). This is no easy matter in any case. Initial enlightenment comes when we discover that it is possible to allow our deepest moment to moment image of “me and mine” to arise in this full, empty way. From then on, the distinction between self and other (or between enlightenment and non-enlightenment) loses its hold. This, of course, is but one of many ways of interpreting the experience.

Later tradition dilates upon the great merit and karmic resources necessary to achieve this. However, it should be strongly emphasized that, with skillful guidance, a person may well come to such an experience within a few years of highly motivated practice.

Most people, even after such a breakthrough, still find themselves becoming confused, doing wrong things, feeling bad, giving in to unwholesome habits, etc., though they are no longer constrained to identify with these negativities. So they continue to practice, even more assiduously than before, working to eliminate raga and dvesha, rooting out subtle remaining moha, eradicating the stubborn sway of old bad habits.

Along the way, as one moves closer and closer to complete Nirvana, there may come a point where priorities shift from “wisdom” to “compassion,” i.e., from meditation to action.<sup>12</sup>

If you really feel oneness with everything, it is only natural to take responsibility for all your parts. Helpful words and actions begin to flow forth spontaneously.

Although in Mahayana, compassion (really love) is conceived of on a par with wisdom, in practice priority is usually initially placed on gaining liberation. Its just more efficient that way. Clearing away some moha first makes it less likely that one’s efforts to help others will be misguided. Eliminating raga and dvesha makes it less likely that one’s zeal will lead to aggressiveness and the sacrificing of principles for an end. Further, after one is free from the concepts of helper, helped and helping, there is less feeling of chagrin or loss of enthusiasm when ones efforts to help fail.

The specific direction which such activities take depends upon the culture, circumstances, abilities and personality of the individual. They range from wizardry to political activism.

To summarize what has been said so far, shamatha and vipashyana then are tools for attaining “enlightenment,” insight into the nature of the sense of separate self. That perspective is a tool which, facilitates the achievement of complete Nirvana.

According to some Mahayana conceptualizations, Nirvana itself is a kind of tool, a tool which allows a person to effortlessly and efficaciously exert a beneficial influence on others. If you are

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<sup>12</sup> The notion that Theravadans as “Hinayanists” are only interested in individual liberation and not in helping others is quickly dispelled by examining the lives of highly attained representatives of that tradition. It is just that the “Mahayanist” tradition of East Asia and Tibet has a highly developed systematic philosophy and symbolism placing compassion on a par with wisdom and elucidating the inextricable interrelationship between the two. In Mahayana, one is oriented from the very beginning to seek liberation for the sake of oneself and others. Such an orientation is technically called bodhicitta in Sanskrit. A person who meditates with this orientation is a bodhisattva.

completely free and if your influence is such that it helps a great many people to also become free (as did that of Sakyamuni), you are called a Buddha.

The following are a few specific techniques for developing the liberating awareness described above.

## ***Mindfulness Meditation***

A common approach used in the Theravada tradition is to flood the consciousness with more and more complete and precise information about mental and physical events. Typically, one first learns to experience this intense “vipashyana mode” of observation for a single simple event. Once learned, this can be generalized and applied to any aspect of experience. With practice, a habitual suppleness is developed which allows one to perceive each event in the stream of daily life in this totally aware way without having to work at it.

Take, for example, the act of walking. Most people do it unconsciously. There’s nothing wrong with that, but suppose you would like to enhance awareness of this event “walking.” You could start by mentally noting which foot is swinging at any particular time. This gives you a tiny bit more information about the reality of walking than doing it unconsciously. Next, with regard to each foot, try to note the very instant when the foot begins to rise and the instant when it again touches the ground.<sup>13</sup> Left up, left swing, left down, right up, right swing, right... For still more detailed observation, it is useful at the beginning to walk much more slowly than normal and perhaps to pause between each component of the walking. Now, note the instant the left heel rises, note the sweep of tactile sensation as the sole lifts away from the ground. Note the moment the toes leave the ground, the beginning of the forward swing, the swing itself, the end point of the swing, the beginning of lowering the foot, the lowering, the instant the foot touches ground, again the sweep of tactile sensation and the instant when the foot has completely returned to the ground. Now pause. Note when the will to move the right foot arises. Now begin to move the right foot, observing each component as before.

Such an exercise builds much samadhi, but this is a byproduct. The important thing is increased clarity about the process. After more practice, it is possible to apply an even finer analysis. Within each component of the motion (lifting, swinging, lowering, etc.) can be distinguished numerous subcomponents, tiny jerks each with distinct beginning and end points and each preceded by a separate will to move.

If this keen observation is sustained, alterations in perception begin to occur. The event seems to slow down, a subjective sensation independent of any actual physical slowness. Each component of the event seems to contain vast expanses of time and space within which to perceive information in an unhurried way.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> In attempting to fully experience any event, it is of utmost importance that the event’s beginning and ending points be clearly noted. A line segment which includes its first and last point is mathematically very different from one which does not.

<sup>14</sup> John Brodie, former quarterback of the San Francisco 49ers, recalled such experiences in an interview published in the January 1973 issue of *Intellectual Digest* (pp 19-20):

“At times, and with increasing frequency now, I experience a kind of clarity that I’ve never seen adequately described in a football story. Sometimes, for example, time seems to slow way down, in an uncanny way, as if everyone were moving in slow motion. It seems as if I have all the time in the world to watch the receivers run their

But wait. As your information about the foot gets fuller and fuller, the foot seems to be less and less there! It expands, contracts, becomes light and hollow, merges with things, disappears and reappears. Without being seduced or frightened, just keep on noting the simple reality of the foot's moment-to-moment motion.

This “vipashyana mode” of awareness can be applied to every type of experience. One can gently move the eye over an object, drinking in information about it so rapidly and fully that the consciousness has no time to solidify and limit the object. Likewise with other senses, touch, taste, smell, hearing, etc. This is the fundamental paradox of meditation: see something fully and it is transparent, hear fully and there is silence. The feeling of solidity and separateness of objects, which most people take for granted, turns out to be merely an unnecessary and toxic byproduct of the process of perception. It clogs the flowing stream of life. One can function quite well without it.

Applying this total mode of awareness to emotions, concepts and mental images is the most difficult but most productive exercise of all. The stream of a person's thoughts and feelings is so unpredictable and gripping ... not at all like raising and lowering a foot! Yet with the detachment and one-pointedness of shamatha, one can catch a thought at its very onset and note each minute permutation until the very end in that same slowed down, complete, unsolidified mode of awareness. A person who can unrelentingly apply this mode to his or her deepest images of self will enter a refreshing new world.

### ***The Rinzai Zen Koan***

The meditator attempts to establish direct contact with deep processes. One approach is to pose a question which can be readily answered by the deep spontaneous mind but is utterly intractable for the discursive surface. This approach was developed within certain schools of the Chan-Zen tradition, that important East Asian expression of Buddhism. Nowadays, it is particularly associated with Rinzai-shu, one of the two major schools of Japanese Zen. Such a conundrum is called a koan in Japanese; “What is the sound of one hand?” and “Mu” are two famous ones. The koan question is mercilessly pressed to deeper and deeper levels, and, in the process, great samadhi power is developed. When an answer wells up, it carries with it a valuable insight. In this way, by answering many such koans, the wisdom faculty is gradually exercised. However, if the question is pressed deeply enough, the insight accompanying its solution will be sufficient to crack moha and bring kensho (initial enlightenment). It is important to remember, however, that there are many kinds of koans for specific purposes and that individual teachers use koans in different ways.

### ***The Tantric Tradition***

Meditation is sometimes described as a journey, a journey from the surface mind to the Source Mind, a journey made by progressively extending calmness and awareness to subtler and subtler levels, eliminating layer after layer of unconsciousness in great sheets. But along this journey one may experience various phenomena which have significance, though are not in themselves the goal. The meditator may experience warm blissful energy flowing in parts of the body, see

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patterns, and yet I know the defensive line is coming at me just as fast as ever. I know perfectly well how hard and fast those guys are coming and yet the whole thing seems like a movie or a dance in slow motion. It's beautiful.”

dazzling light, hear symphonies of internal sound, seem to float out of the body, etc. Or one may encounter what appear to be archetypal entities: gods, demons, sages and spirits. In most traditions of Buddhism, such experiences are denigrated as stray paths and impediments along the “main line” to liberation. Zen teachers usually dismiss them as *makyo* (obstructive hallucination) and recommend simply ignoring them. This phenomenon was well known to Christian contemplatives who referred to it as *phantasmata*.

The Tantric tradition takes a different tack. The Tantrics systematically explored and cultivated these byways. But, and this is really the point, they interpreted these experiences in Buddhist terms and skillfully harnessed them towards the realization of the twin ideals of Mahayana Buddhism, wisdom and compassion. Herein lies the distinctive and powerful contribution of Buddhist Tantra. It successfully incorporates experiences from the subtle “realms of power” in a way which is both philosophically and practically consonant with the goals of Buddhism. This is part of what is meant by “skillful means” of which the Tibetans so often speak.

Tibetan tradition has preserved and developed a rich repertoire of contemplative techniques. Here we will discuss just one, that of “visualization” which perhaps could be more accurately described as mental creation.

We have pointed out how Buddhist meditation seeks to understand the process of identification with a particular self. One way to get such understanding is to, step by step, build another self from scratch! One visualizes body parts, imputes mental states, speech and personality until one can see this artificial being in front of oneself as vividly as anything in the natural world. This, of course, is no easy task, but it is made possible through the great mental stability which *shamatha* confers. Then the practitioner learns to fully identify with the created being for a specific period of time. Here we are talking about something very different from shamanism and possession phenomena. This is a learning process which, when done properly, is perfectly controlled, lucid and contrived to bring insight into the arbitrary nature of self-identification. But it confers even more, because the alternate self which is created and identified with is an archetype, an ideal image: a Buddha, Bodhisattva or Guardian. Not only is concentration power and liberating insight developed by this practice, but one begins to take on the virtues and positive attributes of that ideal, quickly eliminating the subtle remaining *klesha* blocks to Nirvana. In this way, visualization is a skillful means for rapid progress toward complete liberation. It is, however, also relevant to the compassion aspect of Buddhism. This is because habitually perceiving oneself as a spiritual archetype has a subtle and pervasive influence on other people, drawing them in and fostering their own spiritual growth.

Liberating insight achieves the “*dharmakaya*,” or body of the absolute, which is formless. Within, there is constant identification with an ideal image. This is called technically “*sambhogakaya*,” or body of glory.” Outwardly the visualizer appears to others as a normal human being, the *nirmanakaya* - normal but somehow special, magic in a way that people can't quite put their finger on.

### ***The Paradox of Meditation: Soto Zen***

So far we have spoken of meditation in terms of growth, development, rewards and attainments. In Japan, there is a school which approaches meditation in an utterly different way, refusing to speak of any “attainment” such as *samadhi*, enlightenment or Nirvana. According to Soto Zen, meditation is most emphatically not a tool, not a means to an end. Rather it is an expression of

the fact that the means and the end are not separate. Soto Zen advocates something called “just sitting.” To appreciate this, we must consider for a moment another “fundamental paradox” of the meditation process.

At the end of “Little Gidding,” T. S. Eliot says,

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

If meditation is a journey, it is a journey to where one is. The distance separating starting point and goal is zero. The mystic’s freedom is none other than noticing that the bonds don’t exist to begin with. In ultimate terms, to create in people’s minds a solidified concept of enlightenment as a future goal is already to mislead them in some way. Soto Zen refuses to speak in any but ultimate terms. This is the perspective of the so-called “original enlightenment” school of thought which Dogen, the founder of Japanese Soto Zen, had studied as a youth under Tendai masters.

If everything is already perfect, then what should we do? Soto Zen says, every day, for a period of time, place the body in meditation posture and just sit. Let go of everything but the reality of sitting. Don’t daydream; don’t seek Buddhahood. In a sense, Soto Zen is a form of vipashyana practice in which one is simply totally aware from moment to moment of the fact of sitting. But it is much more, because this is done within the context of the Mahayana philosophy of original enlightenment and, moreover, with the deepest faith that such sitting is the perfect expression of that inherent perfection. This last element, faith, characterized the ethos of the Kamakura period during which Dogen lived and during which pietistic sects like Pureland and Nichiren-Shu flourished.

## ***Misconceptions***

Finally, a few words about misconceptions and misapplications of meditation. To begin with, it is common for people to fool themselves into thinking they meditate when in fact they don’t. One often hears statements like “I meditate with kung-fu” or “Life is my meditation.” This is possible. It is also extremely rare. By Buddhist criteria, only a practice which palpably and relentlessly destroys the grip of desire, aversion and confusion is worthy of the name meditation.

Glorifying the guru is another aberration, in my opinion. True, one needs guidance and encouragement, but people who are searching for the perfect guru often fail to make solid progress. The Buddha Sakyamuni urged self-reliance and downplayed the role of authority in spiritual life.

Some people meditate for one-upmanship and special powers. They think meditation will give them an edge on the other guy. Actually, the purpose of meditation is to learn to embrace failure as effortlessly as success. As for special powers, Buddhism (particularly Tantric Buddhism) says it is legitimate to explore those realms in order to help others. However, in general, it is best to do this after liberation has been glimpsed. Only then do special powers cease to be seductive, frightening or at all impressive.

Everyone who develops habitual shamatha will sometimes misuse it. If one does something wrong, it will be done wrong very one-pointedly! There is even a technical term for this. It’s

called miccha samadhi. Also, it is easy to use the withdrawal of shamatha to avoid facing unpleasant realities. In particular, one can silence the internal voice of conscience with it. This is why cultivating sila (wholesome character, morality) is a prerequisite to cultivating samadhi. It is also another reason why vipashyana awareness should accompany shamatha detachment.

If some is good, more is better is not necessarily true of sitting meditation. Some people who sit all day and night for years have amazingly little to show for their suffering.

One of the most insidious traps on the meditative path is getting stuck in a good place. By this is meant achieving some good results and becoming complacent, not moving on to the incomparably better results which lie around the corner. In Zen, a person who gets a taste of enlightenment and does not move forward is referred to as “a worm in the mud”.

Deep contemplative attainment does not make a person perfect; it confers mind power, a sense of happiness which is not dependent on circumstances, and a basically loving orientation toward one’s environment. It does not, however, automatically guarantee immunity from stupidity, poor judgement or cultural myopia.

Furthermore, each meditative system has its characteristic weaknesses. Theravada “Vipashyana” meditation could make one humorless and depersonalized if not balanced with “loving kindness meditation.” Tantric practice can easily degenerate into manipulateness, sterile ritual and obscurantism. Belief in original enlightenment and just sitting could get in the way of rapid growth. In Japan, Zen training, particularly Rinzai training, can be brutal and imbue a tendency towards authoritarianism. In fact, Zen suffered a temporary eclipse in Japan following World War II precisely because it had been widely used as an underpinning for militarism. The practice of meditation to get tough and the cultivation of detached repose so that one may kill and be killed without fear or compunction represents a tragic perversion.

Finally, it is a mistake to identify meditation with a particular life style. Obviously, if one’s daily life is seamy and chaotic, it will be difficult to attain a settled mind, but it is ludicrous to think that a person must be a vegetarian or enter a monastery to make headway in meditation. Such externals can help. They can also distract. The path to freedom is systematic and open to all. You don’t need to be a Buddhist to profit from Buddhist meditation.

That these aberrations and misdirections exist should not in the least surprise, dismay or discourage us. Every tool can be misapplied. The fact is that each of the above approaches to meditation, if skillfully and persistently cultivated, produces a well-balanced, fulfilled individual whose very presence benefits his or her fellows. As such, they represent significant and powerful contributions to human culture.

## **To Sum It Up**

*“There are many paths for entering the reality of Nirvana, but in essence they are all contained with two practices: stopping and seeing.*

*Stopping is the primary gate for overcoming the bonds of compulsiveness. Seeing is the essential requisite for ending confusion.*

*Stopping is the wholesome resource that nurtures the mind. Seeing is the marvelous art which fosters intuitive understanding.*

*Stopping is the effective cause of attaining concentrative repose. Seeing is the very basis of enlightened wisdom.*

*A person who attains both concentration and wisdom has all the requisites for self-help and for helping others... It should be known, then, that these two techniques are like the two wheels of a chariot, the two wings of a bird. If their practice is lopsided, you will fall from the path. Therefore, the sutra says: To one-sidedly cultivate the merits of concentrative repose without practicing understanding is called dullness. To one-sidedly cultivate knowledge without practicing repose is called being crazed. Dullness and craziness, although they are somewhat different, are the same in that they both perpetuate an unwholesome perspective."*

From the *Hsiao Chih-Kuan* by Master Tien-T'ai, 6th Century China