

CHAPTER FIVE

BUDDHIST MEDITATION

Buddhism is associated primarily with meditation, and the serene figure of Gautama the Buddha gaining enlightenment under the sacred pipal tree provides an example for Buddhists to follow. Meditation takes various forms, depending on the tradition, or the purpose. Some meditations are silent, others are noisy, others have an elaborate liturgy interspersed with periods of silence; some are guided by a meditation leader, while in others the participants sit and meditate in whatever style they have learned. In most types of meditation, meditators sit on the floor facing a buddha-image. As the eyes close, the image of the Buddha is the last thing one sees. Incense is burnt in front of the Buddha, and flowers and offerings of fruit are often present. Sometimes candles are lit.

A normal 'sitting' can be anything from 20 to 45 minutes, or even longer. The meditator is usually instructed to sit on a meditation cushion in a cross-legged position, with back upright and shoulders straight, and with the head forward. Slouching is forbidden, but muscles should not be tensed into position. Hands are placed on one's lap: some Buddhists will allow the thumb and index finger of each hand to touch, forming a circle (the 'symbol of knowledge pose'); other meditation teachers recommend resting hands on top of each other, palms upwards. Clapping the hands is discouraged, as clapping creates a degree of muscle tension.

Unwanted thoughts will probably arise, which take the mind away from the meditation. Meditators are recommended simply to notice that these thoughts arise and to realise that this is quite normal. They should not become upset that this is happening, but should gently bring the mind back to the meditation once more, having noted the thought which caused the distraction. By merely noting the thoughts that arise and letting them pass, the meditator develops non-attachment to them, and learns to focus the mind on whatever is the current object of attention.

Amongst the many varieties of Buddhist meditation, it is useful to select a number for special description. It is worth pointing out that what follows is intended merely as information about Buddhism, and not as an instruction manual for would-be meditators. A Buddhist will normally meditate only under the guidance of a suitably qualified teacher who will ensure that the student adopts an appropriate practice and receives suitable guidance about his or her progress.

(1) Mindfulness of Breathing.

Normally when we breathe we are unaware of what we are doing. Breathing is a 'semi-voluntary' activity: that is to say, left their own devices, the lungs will normally get on efficiently with their job. However, once we focus our attention on our breathing, we find that we can alter it by shortening, lengthening or holding breaths. In 'Mindfulness of Breathing', the meditator focusses attention on the tip of the nose, and attempts to become aware of the breath without altering it: it is not like a yoga breathing exercise. This may sound easy, but most people will find it hard to allow even a few breaths to pass without losing track of them. A frequent instruction is to focus on the point of entry and exit of the breath in the body — a very delicate sensation which can continually elude all but the most proficient meditator.

By gaining awareness of something of which one is not normally aware, the Buddhist is helped to acquire 'perfect mindfulness' — the seventh step of the Buddhist Eightfold Path.

(2) 'Metta Bhavana'.

Buddhist meditation is not always 'inward-looking'. In the meditation called 'Metta Bhavana' one is trying to cultivate good feelings towards other people. Bhavana means 'cultivation' and metta means 'loving-kindness'.

The meditation is in five stages. In the course of the meditation one focuses one's mind successively on: (1)oneself; (2)a close friend; (3)someone to whom one is indifferent; (4)someone to whom one feels hostile; (5)all four at once, in such a way as to cultivate an evenness of affection to each.

The important thing in this meditation is to develop feelings of affection towards the people one has selected, not to intellectualise by compiling a kind of 'shopping-list' of their good points. The meditator should envisage situations in which the various people had a sense of well-being, or some situation in which he or she has experienced good relationships with the friend, 'neutral person' or enemy. It is important to concentrate on the positive, good situations, and not the bad. The meditator is instructed to think the thought, 'May that person be happy; may he (or she) be well.'

In order to develop an evenness of affection in the final stage, one might think of a situation where these four people are all together. Perhaps one can imagine having a present and being unable to decide to whom one should give it. According to one Buddhist source, I should imagine a scene where robbers enter your house, demanding that I give up one person to be killed, and I genuinely cannot decide who to surrender. Normally we would consider that if there is any doubt in such situations, I should at least ensure that I give other people preferential treatment. This is discouraged by the meditation, since oneself is neither more nor less worthy of affection than another. Indeed, in order to be able to show kindness or compassion successfully, I have to become the right sort of person first.

The results of Metta Bhavana are often unexpected: one might suppose that the meditator would find it most difficult to love the enemy; however, many practitioners find that the real problem lies with the 'neutral person', the one to whom they are indifferent and have no genuine feelings one way or the other.

(3)Walking, Standing and Lying

Not all meditation is done sitting on a cushion. The person who is 'aware' is not just aware of breathing, but of everything else that is occurring in his or her body. Few of us are aware of how we perform a simple task like walking. We normally find it confusing to stop and ask ourselves which foot we start with, for when it comes to activities in which we are well practised, our body functions on 'automatic pilot', virtually bypassing the mind. If we are to become 'aware', therefore, we must focus on every single movement that the body makes.

Meditation is intended to do this. There are four main postures which are adopted, at various times — sitting, walking, standing and lying down. In walking, the meditator picks a straight walking path, the extremities of which are between 15 and 25 paces apart. Hands are clasped, either in front or behind, and then the walk commences — walking, stopping, turning, being aware of every movement of the foot, as it lifts, advances and touches the ground. Walking meditation is often done extremely slowly, but some monks recommend that a normal walking pace is adopted, since we should be able to be mindful in the walking we daily have to do.

The idea of walking or standing with no particular aim may seem strange, but it enables the meditator to cut out thoughts which normally intrude when we stand or walk for a particular purpose. If I am walking to meet a friend, I may be thinking, 'Am I late?' or 'Is this the right evening?'; if I am standing, waiting for a bus, I may begin to feel impatient, wondering, 'When

will the bus come?' 'Just walking' or 'just standing' ensures that intrusive thoughts like these are not present and that the meditator can concentrate on what the body is doing.

(4)The Contemplation of the Body.

The 'Contemplation of the Body' includes a practice which is designed to create awareness of our conventional self and to demonstrate the unsatisfactoriness of human existence. As a prelude to this meditation, some orders of monks recite the following:

In this body are: hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone-marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, membranes, spleen, lungs, bowels, entrails, undigested food, excrement, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, spittle, mucus, oil of the joints, urine and brain.

The words are not meant to be pleasant. Although most monastic communities who have used this meditation have chanted it in the original Pali, one Buddhist group in Great Britain now makes a point of reciting it in English, so that its impact is not lost. Once the chanting is done, meditators take their attention through their bodies, starting at the top of the head, working their way down to the feet. They need not go through every item on the list. When a Theravadin monk is first ordained, he is often instructed to contemplate the first five items on the list, since hair (of the head and body), nails, teeth and skin have possibly been objects of vanity in his former secular life.

Meditators are expected to become aware of how unsatisfactory the body is. To realise that the body is impure is to ensure that they do not remain attached to this unsatisfactory physical world. Yet at the same time they should not focus only on what is unpleasant, for someone who is enlightened sees things as they really are. Human hair or skin can indeed sometimes be beautiful, and this should be recognised. However, because the world is impermanent and constantly changing, in another context, these bodily parts can be unpleasant — for example, if I am about to take a bath and discover that the previous (physically attractive) user has left strands of hair and pieces of dead skin which have formed into scum!

3The important point is to adopt 'perfect view' with regard to the body, neither rejecting it completely nor believing it to be wholly satisfactory. The Buddha himself, before he became enlightened, adopted these two extremes with regard to his body. In the royal palace he pampered his body with luxury; in the forest he made his body suffer with hunger and austerity, as if it were evil. Adopting the Middle Way involves understanding the body and creating a tranquil mind which can accept whatever happens to the body, whether it is pleasant or painful.

(5)'Recollection of Death'.

A Buddhist should not have 'perfect mindfulness' only about life. It is important to adopt the correct attitude towards death. Meditation can aid this too. It is sometimes said that Buddhism is a 'religion of death'. The Buddha's renunciation of the world was influenced by seeing the funeral procession; the Buddha taught that everything is constantly dying because it is impermanent; Buddhism teaches that death is not something final but a bridge between one existence and the next. It is understandable, then, that death should be a theme in meditation.

One straight-forward meditation on death is outlined as follows:

In 'the recollection of death', the word 'death' refers to the cutting off of the life-force which lasts for the length of one existence. Whoso wants to develop it, should in seclusion and solitude wisely set up attention with the words: 'Death will take place, the life-force will be cut off,' or (simply), 'Death, death.'

In some forms of ‘the recollection of death’, one is encouraged to look at death from various points of view, for example, as a murderer, as a sudden unexpected happening, by considering others who have died, and so on. Another practice consists of envisaging a corpse in various stages of decomposition, and in certain monasteries monks are even instructed to go to a cremation ground at night and perform ‘the recollection of death’ there.

To westerners, all this may seem gruesome and macabre, for death is really a taboo subject in the West. (The taboo subjects are not sex, politics and religion, as is sometimes said.) For the Buddhist, by contrast, it is important to see death — as well as everything else — as it really is. It is common to see the frequent use of skulls in Buddhist art and depicted in shrine-rooms, particularly in the Tibetan tradition. I once visited a Tibetan shrine in which life-size models of skeletons were hanging. This is a constant reminder that everything is impermanent (*anicca*), including the physical life that we are living. We should not start to think of death only when a doctor tells us that we have an incurable illness. In a sense, we are all terminally ill, because we are suffering from the disease of attachment to life, the cure for which can be found in the Buddhist path.

(6) Visualisation

The meditations described so far are practised within the Theravada tradition. Visualisation is used particularly in the Vajrayana (see Chapter Seven). This consists of taking a pictorial image of a buddha or a bodhisattva (called one’s *yidam*), and gazing at it. After some time, the meditator closes his or her eyes and attempts to reconstruct mentally the image which has been seen in all its detail.

This sounds easy enough until one actually tries it. Readers who have played party games which require participants to remember objects on a tray, or points of detail in a relatively simple picture will realise how unreliable the memory can be. In the case of images of buddhas and bodhisattvas, the detail involved is very complex indeed (see illustration 000), and sustained efforts at meditation are required before the *yidam* is absorbed. Even after gazing for half an hour, it is possible to wonder, once the eyes are closed, whether (say) Avalokiteshvara is holding his rosary on the right hand or the left, or whether the left leg crosses the right or vice versa.

Why meditate?

Having been given this account of Buddhist meditation, an external observer may fail to see the purpose of these meditative practices. Why should some Buddhists devote their lives to meditation when instead they could be designing sophisticated computer equipment or engaging in medical research, which would seem to benefit humanity in more obvious ways? Why endeavour to walk slowly when you can reach your destination much more quickly by walking fast, or by using our technological achievements such as cars, aircraft or satellites? And how can reconstructing a picture in the mind be anything more than a remarkable party trick?

It is important to answer these banal questions, else we miss the point of Buddhist practice. The Buddhist who practises walking meditation need not deny that it is sometimes necessary for us to be in a hurry, and to rely on modern technology for fast transport. One obvious answer is that computers, medicines, cars and aeroplanes all enhance humankind’s physical needs, but do little to further its spiritual ones. Although scientific achievements show what the human mind can achieve, they do not make us aware of what the mind is, and its thoughts, emotions and volitions which cause unsatisfactoriness. The healthy and the wealthy are not free from unsatisfactoriness, and neither modern technology nor medicine can eliminate *dukkha*. Asking

meditators to concentrate on something apparently trivial, such as walking or standing, helps them to let go of prejudices about what is important and what is not. It is important to become aware of things as they really are, and as the meditator becomes more able to expand insight to more and more aspects of life, 'perfect view' is being achieved.

Visualisation likewise is to enable the meditator to progress along the spiritual path. It is, first, an act of devotion to the buddha or bodhisattva who is visualised, and who provides the spiritual ideal to be attained. Second, and equally important, visualisation enables the meditator to internalise the buddha- or bodhisattva-nature. If the meditator lacks wisdom (and we all lack wisdom until we become enlightened), then visualising Manjushri — the Bodhisattva of Wisdom — helps to bestow that virtue. If we need to increase our compassion (and we all lack complete compassion as long as there are unenlightened living beings around), our compassion increases as we create Avalokiteshvara inside ourselves. Of course, the meditator does not decide by himself or herself what virtues are needed, or which yidam should be used: this is something for the teacher to prescribe.

(7) Vipassana Meditation.

Meditation also has a close relationship with Buddhist teachings. It is used not only to calm the mind but to enable the meditator to experience the truth of Buddhist doctrines. When meditation is done for this purpose it is called 'Vipassana' or 'insight' meditation.

We have seen that the three Marks of Existence are impermanence, the absence of 'self' or soul, and unsatisfactoriness. Turning the mind through meditation upon the breath or upon the body can enable the meditator to recognise how impermanent, insubstantial and unsatisfactory everything really is. To recognise the delicacy of the breath which keeps someone alive enables the Buddhist to experience how impermanent human life is; the meditator who contemplates the body and its experiences does not find any enduring soul inside, but discovers instead how unsatisfactory the human body is.

(8) Following the thought

There is a particular technique which some Buddhist teachers of meditation use for dealing with wandering thoughts. This consists of a meditation called 'Following the Thought'. The name encapsulates the practice: one is asked to do nothing at all, but simply to note the thoughts which arise in one's mind, and to watch them come and go like passing clouds in the sky. When a thought occurs which would normally be an unwelcome distraction in the other forms of meditation we have mentioned, the meditator holds on to that thought and looks at it with attention. Inevitably some other thought will intrude to distract the meditator away from the first one; this too is noted and held until a further thought ousts it.

All in all, the various meditative practices reveal how uncontrolled the mind is and how imperfect our 'mindfulness' really is. When one comes to realise the normal state of one's mind, bringing it under control is a formidable task. As the Buddha once said:

Though one may conquer a thousand times a thousand men in battle, yet he indeed is the noblest victor who conquers himself.

Self-conquest is far better than the conquest of others. Not even a god, an angel, Mara or Brahma² can turn into defeat the victory of such a person who is self-subdued and ever restrained in conduct.³

The Five Hindrances

Anyone who has practised meditation will realise that, although instructions for meditation can often seem simple, they are notoriously difficult to carry out successfully. For example, beginners at 'Mindfulness of Breathing' are sometimes instructed to count each breath up to ten and then begin at one again. The majority of meditators have to admit that even counting ten breaths is a very difficult task. They will quickly lose track of the count or find these unwanted thoughts crowding in. The buddha himself knew of such distractions: while he was meditating under the pipal tree at Bodh Gaya, it is said that Mara, the tempter of the Buddha, made various attempts to take Gautama's mind away from meditation. On one occasion, Mara enlisted the support of some young women who danced naked in front of him to provide a distraction from his spiritual quest.

Buddhism has formulated a list of five principal hindrances to meditation. These are: (1) desire; (2) ill-will; (3) 'sloth and torpor'; (4) excitement and worry; and (5) doubt. These are fairly self-explanatory. The meditator who is still clinging to material desires is still uncommitted to the spiritual benefits which meditation brings. Someone who feels ill-will is not in a position to combine compassion with wisdom, the two Buddhist ideals. One who is sluggish or sleepy cannot have 'perfect mindfulness', and a mind which is working overtime because of eager anticipation or apprehension cannot experience the inner peace which meditation brings.

Finally, there are many meditators who doubt or waver: particularly in the early stages, it is easy to doubt the value of meditative experiences and to question whether they are really bringing any true benefits; alternatively, an inexperienced meditator can feel that the form of meditation he or she has adopted is unproductive, and switch repeatedly from one alternative practice to another. Any proficient meditator will affirm, however, that the benefits of meditation are not experienced instantly, and no accredited teacher of meditation will allow a novice to make rapid changes between different methods: to do so would be like a patient changing medicines after only a day or two on the grounds that a cure had not been effected. For physical and spiritual disorders alike, cures take time, and it is important to apply the remedy faithfully and consistently.