

MEDITATION AND MINDFULNESS

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In this article I share some of my experiences of practising Korean Zen meditation and how, without ever mentioning the word 'mindfulness,' this practice helps us to become mindful. This leads me to suggest that the main ingredients of Buddhist meditation are samatha (which I will translate here as 'concentration') and vipassanā (which I will call 'experiential enquiry'). No matter which Buddhist tradition one follows, the practice of samatha and vipassanā will lead to the cultivation of mindfulness. I also intend to show how the traditional doctrine of the 'four great efforts' is very close to therapeutic methods advocated in MBCT. I will also propose that the Buddha's five methods of dealing with difficult thoughts as presented in the Vitakkhasaṅghāna Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya 20) are examples of an early Buddhist cognitive behavioural strategy.

Samatha and Vipassanā

I practised as a Zen nun for 10 years in Songgwang Sa Monastery in South Korea. Six months of each year I would practice Zen meditation for 10–12 hours a day. When meditating, I would repeatedly ask the question: 'What is this?' silently inside myself. I did not do this in order to arrive at an answer but rather to develop a sensation of questioning and then intensify that sensation. My teacher Kusan Sunim maintained that this 'mass of questioning' would build up until it would finally burst and an awakening would take place. Leaving aside 'awakening,' by doing this practice I very soon found myself becoming more aware of my thoughts, feelings, sensations and of my relationship with the world and others. Moreover, I started to be more in tune with impermanence, suffering and conditionality, which in turn seemed to have a positive effect in terms of helping me to manifest over time more wisdom and compassion towards myself and others.

These effects were simply the result of asking 'What is this?' while living in a Zen monastery. During my years in Korea, from time to time practitioners from the Theravada tradition would visit the monastery. When we discussed our methods of practising meditation, I realized that we seemed to be talking two different languages. I would talk about 'the sensation of questioning' while they would talk about 'awareness' or 'mindfulness.'

In 1985 I returned to Europe and joined a Buddhist community in Devon, England, where most members practised in the *vipassanā* tradition. I was thus in

continuous contact with teachers who taught mindfulness in the context of *vipassanā* meditation. I decided to try this method myself and participated in several retreats. I found that it was very effective.

In 1992, I did research for a book on women and Buddhism, first published as *Walking on Lotus Flowers* (Batchelor 1996). I met and interviewed around 40 women from widely varying Buddhist traditions, both Asians and Westerners, nuns and laywomen. After extensive discussions with them, I became convinced that, in producing results, the techniques of meditation they used did not matter as much as their dedicated sincerity as practitioners of the Dharma. All the women I spoke to appeared to have developed considerable mindfulness and manifested both wisdom and compassion in their lives.

This led me to ask more precisely what we were trying to do in meditation. I wanted to know what were the elements, common to most Buddhist meditation practices that produced such effects. My teacher Zen Master Kusan used to exhort us to cultivate equally *song song jok jok*. This literally means 'bright, bright, calm, calm.' (Nowadays I would translate it as 'aware, aware, calm, calm'). This, of course, was simply *samatha* and *vipassanā* as articulated in the Korean Zen school. In the end I came to believe that for any authentic Buddhist practice, you need to cultivate concentration and experiential enquiry together, while recognizing that they can be cultivated in various ways according to the different traditions.

Let me look first at the Korean Zen way of cultivating concentration and experiential enquiry together. You sit or walk in meditation and ask repeatedly 'What is this?' Concentration (*samatha*) is developed by coming back again and again to the question. You remember repeatedly your intention to ask the question and then return to the question; in order to keep returning, you need the intention but also the awareness that you have become distracted away from your intention. Thus you come back to the question again and again. Experiential enquiry (*vipassanā*) is developed by posing the question with your whole body and mind, which, over time, develops a deep sensation of questioning. You do not just repeat the question like a mantra, but you use it as a means to intensify your enquiry. After a while, I found that this led to a heightened awareness of the central Buddhist ideas of impermanence, suffering and conditionality. This, in turn, seemed to help develop a more creative awareness, or what one might call 'active wise mindfulness.'

Now let's consider the practice of cultivating awareness of the breath (*ānāpānasati*). First, one focuses on the sensations one experiences when one breathes, at the nostrils for example. Concentration is developed by coming back to the breath each time one is distracted, which is possible due to the intention one has to be aware and the awareness that one has become distracted. Likewise, experiential enquiry is developed by being aware, for example, that the air comes into the nostrils cooler and goes out slightly warmer, thus leading to an experiential sense of the changing nature of the breath. At the same time one becomes more aware that thoughts, sensations, feelings as well as background sounds are changing too. This method may give more explicit emphasis to

mindfulness than in Zen, but the effect, I feel, is much the same in both cases. This, I think, is due to having cultivated concentration and experiential inquiry together for a sustained period of time within an environment of Buddhist ideas and values.

My understanding of how this works is as follows. Let's imagine we are sitting in meditation. We start by focusing on the breath or a question, then we suddenly find ourselves caught up in planning or daydreaming. When we become aware that we are no longer focused, then we come back, as per the instructions we are following, to the breath or the question. Each time we come back, we do two things. First: we do not feed the planning or daydreaming by getting lost in them again; second: we dissolve the power of the habit to plan or daydream by coming back to focus on the breath or question, where we are no longer actively planning and daydreaming. In this way the disruptive effects of planning and daydreaming are overcome (without, of course, rejecting that both activities can serve useful functions, such as organizing and imagining, in appropriate contexts). It is in this way that meditation helps us dissolve the powers of mental, emotional and physical habits. At the same time, as soon as one is less involved in thinking repetitive thoughts, the mind will be less busy, and thus more calm and spacious.

By posing a question, as in Korean Zen, or being aware directly of impermanence, as in *vipassanā* meditation, we start to dissolve the tendency to fix and solidify experience, such as when we say: 'I am always like this. You always do that. This will never change.' The more we are experientially attuned to impermanence, the less we grasp and fixate, thus leading to our being less encumbered by mental confusion and obsession. It seems to me that it is by cultivating concentration and experiential inquiry together that we develop calmness and brightness of mind, which in turn 'coagulate,' as Kusan Sunim used to say, into a kind of creative awareness or wise active mindfulness.

The Four Great Efforts

And what, monks, is Right Effort? Here, monks, a monk rouses his will, makes an effort, stirs up energy, exerts his mind, and strives to prevent the arising of unarisen, evil, unwholesome mental states. He rouses his will . . . and strives to overcome evil unwholesome mental states that have arisen. He rouses his will . . . and strives to produce unarisen, wholesome mental states. He rouses his will, makes an effort, stirs up energy, exerts his mind, and strives to maintain wholesome mental states that have arisen, not to let them fade away, to bring them to greater growth, to the full perfection of development. This is called Right Effort. (Dīgha Nikāya 22)

Thus did the Buddha encourage his followers to cultivate what are sometimes called the 'four great efforts.' I would render them as follows:

1. To cultivate conditions so that negative states that have not arisen do not arise.
2. To let go of negative states once they have arisen.

3. To cultivate the conditions that enable positive states to arise.
4. To sustain positive states once they have arisen.

When I first read *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression: A New Approach* by John Teasdale, Mark Williams and Zindel Segal (2001), I was struck by the fact that the eight week course that had been developed by the three authors was in accordance with the four great efforts as taught by the Buddha. During this course the participants seemed to be taught various tools of mindfulness, enquiry and concentration, with particular emphasis on awareness of the body as a means to take the focus and energy away from negative mental ruminations, which, when combined with low moods, could trigger depressive states. People were encouraged to explore, accept and let go of their negative feelings and thoughts, and recognize and build on good feelings, such as their capacity for joy and the ability they have to accomplish something of value and meaning.

The first week of the course is focused on the cultivation of mindfulness. The intention is to make participants aware that they often live their lives on automatic pilot. The danger of living automatically like this is that one will also react automatically and thus be easily caught in destructive emotional and mental patterning. By practising mindfulness, participants become more aware of their experience in each moment and thus can really engage with it, thereby enabling them to start bypassing the grooves of their patterns. This is very similar to the Buddha's first great effort: *To cultivate conditions so that negative states that have not arisen do not arise.*

In the second week, the participants are encouraged to create a calendar of pleasant events. This is designed as an exercise in mindfulness that makes one more aware of what is and can be positive in one's life. It can act as a counterweight to the negative tendency to think that everything in one's life is difficult and unpleasant. This is akin to the third great effort: *To cultivate the conditions that enable positive states to arise.*

During the third week participants are told to focus on the breath as a tool to steady and ground oneself in daily life. This is where the exercise of the 'three-minute breathing space' is taught. I find this exercise interesting in the way it combines three different types of meditation: on questioning, on the breath, and on the body. It involves three steps: 'Awareness,' 'Gathering,' and 'Expanding.' One starts by asking oneself, 'Where I am?' or 'What's going on?' as a way of bringing oneself back to awareness of the present. This has striking similarities with Korean Zen questioning, which likewise brings an immediacy and awareness of one's experience in its multiplicity and helps one to be less caught in abstraction. The second step consists in 'bringing the attention to the breath,' and the third 'expanding attention to include a sense of the breath and the body as a whole.'

In the fourth week, the participant addresses the 'comparing mind' and the 'mind that clings or avoids.' Mindfulness of sounds and thoughts is introduced. One is given a questionnaire that helps one reflect on and note the automatic thoughts that occur repeatedly over the week and colour one's view of reality. This

trains one to address the issues in one's life in advance so that one is less likely to be caught in habitual patterns of behaviour. Again this is similar both to the first and third of the great efforts, which I have already discussed. In other words, it is a form of active prevention.

The fifth week focuses on acceptance and on cultivating a different relationship to experience. During a 40 minute meditation session participants are encouraged to let difficulty issues arise in the mind, and then apply instructions to help them become aware of the unpleasant effects that occur in the body and then 'let go of the aversion.' This is very similar to the second great effort: *To let go of negative states once they have arisen.*

By the seventh week, participants start to prepare for what they will do after the eight-week course ends. Now they need to focus on what is positive in their life and what uplifts their moods. In order to do this, they have to become aware of the connection between what they do and how they feel. They are encouraged to write a list of what brings them joy and what shows them that they are good at something. This reminds one of both the third and the fourth of the great efforts. They are also asked to recognize the warning signals of a future relapse: 'irritability, decreasing social participation, change in sleeping or eating habits,' etc. It is then essential for them to map out clearly the actions they can take to prevent the recurrence of a depressive state, which, again, is very much like the first great effort.

Five ways of dealing with disturbing thoughts

Now I would like to look at a *sutta*, that is a Pali discourse attributed to the historical Buddha, which seems to illustrate an early Buddhist cognitive behavioural strategy. This is the *Vitakkasanthāna Sutta* or *Discourse on the Forms of Thought*, the twentieth of the *Middle Length Discourses* in the Pali Canon, in which the Buddha discusses five ways to help one to deal with disturbing thoughts.

The first suggestion the Buddha makes is that *'if some unskilled thoughts associated with desire, aversion or confusion arise and disturb the mind, you should attend instead to another characteristic, which is associated with what is skilled'. He compares this to 'a skilled carpenter who can knock out a large peg with a small peg'.* The Buddha seems to be saying that in order to dissipate a negative thought you only have to bring up in the mind something positive as a counter-medicine or antidote to it. For example a compassionate thought could replace a hateful one. Instead of thinking that someone you know has done something hurtful, then to aggravate this by telling yourself that this person *always* does bad things, you could deliberately recall occasions where the person has been kind to you and others.

Or if you suddenly have a strong desire to buy something very expensive that you cannot afford, could you instead buy a small object for somebody else and thereby replace greed by generosity? Or if you are waiting for a friend who is

late, instead of immediately thinking that the friend has no respect or love for you or she would be on time, you could consider more reflectively that there is probably a perfectly good reason for your friend's delay.

The second method the Buddha gives in the *sutta* is *'to scrutinise the peril of these unskilled thoughts by thinking: "these are unskilled thoughts, these are thoughts that have errors, indeed these are thoughts that are of painful results."* Here the suggestion is to consider carefully the consequences of our thoughts, and realize that certain types of thoughts are indeed liable to produce painful results. For example, on reflecting on a dispute with a friend, one might say to oneself: 'I am going to tell it like it is. This is unfair. I am right, she is wrong.' By continually repeating this, we come to believe more and more that it is true, thus working ourselves up so that by the time we meet the person concerned we are very angry. But as soon as we attack someone verbally, even if we are in the right, the other person will tend to be offended and defensive. Thus not only do we hurt ourselves by working ourselves up in this way, we are likely to hurt others as well. By clearly seeing the pain we are going to cause, we are more likely to let go of such thoughts. The Buddha offers a macabre example. He says it is like *'a woman or a man, young and fond of adornment, who if the carcass of a snake or a dog were hanging around their neck would be revolted and disgusted and throw it away immediately as soon as they notice it.'*

The third suggestion is to *'bring about forgetfulness and lack of attention to those thoughts.'* The Buddha compares this to *'a man who not wanting to see the material shapes that come within his range of vision would close his eyes or look another way.'* At first glance, this method would seem to go against the general teaching of the Buddha to be aware and mindful of whatever arises. But the Buddha was pragmatic and understood the human mind well. When certain thoughts are simply too strong or disturbing to deal with directly, the best way to dissipate them may be simply to think of something else. If one is compulsively ruminating or indulging in unrealistic fantasies, a healthy distraction might be the most skilful thing to do at that time—going for a walk in nature, talking to a friend, reading an absorbing novel or an inspiring book. Doing something different can help one's mind to get out of its rut and thus dissipate the energy and obsessive power of the negative thoughts.

I used to have a tendency to fabricate. A single sentence or image would often be enough to send me into a spiral of negative fabricating thoughts. When I saw what I was doing, I started using the second and the third methods taught in this *sutta*. Either I reflected that these compulsive thoughts would lead to painful results, or, if that failed to work, I would distract myself from them by reading a novel, for example, in order for them to lose their hold over me. The end result was that these kinds of thoughts soon stopped arising. This made me realize that if you do not feed the flames of negativity, the fire will die out by itself. These methods not only help one deal with the situation at hand, over time they help diminish and sometimes dissolve the arising of certain disturbing patterns of thoughts.

The fourth method is to ‘attend to the thought function and form of these thoughts.’ To illustrate this, the Buddha says: ‘it might occur to a man who is walking quickly: “Now, why do I walk quickly? Suppose I were to walk slowly.” It might occur to him as he was walking slowly: “Now, why do I walk slowly? Suppose I were to lie down.”’ In this way, ‘the man, having abandoned the hardest posture, might take to the easiest posture.’ By looking into the root of the thought, we are encouraged to question the form of the thought itself. Why are we thinking what we are thinking? Could we be thinking something else? These questions open up other possibilities. We could enquire even further into what caused us to think what we are thinking. This is not psychoanalytical (looking for explanations in traumatic childhood events, for example) but experiential questioning: what just happened that led me to think in this way?

The Buddha’s fifth and final suggestion in this sutta is ‘by the mind to subdue, restrain and dominate the mind.’ The comparison is made with a ‘strong man, who having taken hold of a weaker man by the head or the shoulders, might subdue, restrain and dominate him.’ This might appear antithetical to certain psychological doctrines that insist that one should never repress anything or forcibly restrain oneself. I like the pragmatism of the Buddha; if everything else fails and you continue to have disturbing and destructive thoughts, then stop them by sheer force of will. Remember that this is just one of five methods, which is only to be applied when necessary. It also points out that one’s mind is stronger than any one thought that may preoccupy it. Although we may have the tendency to believe that our thoughts are stronger than us, this is not true. We should not reduce ourselves to just one thought; we are far greater and more resourceful than that.

In the Korean Zen tradition, the *Vitakkasaṅṭhāna Sutta* is neither taught nor even mentioned. When I first heard a *vipassanā* teacher explain this *sutta*, I was particularly struck because it was an exact description of what I had found myself doing after practising Zen meditation for 10 years. This confirmed my impression that Buddhist meditation helps us to develop a creative awareness or an active wise mindfulness that enables us to recognize and deal more effectively with our mental patterns. Then one day, after giving a talk about how meditation can be used to deal with mental patterns, someone in the audience told me that what I was saying sounded just like behavioural cognitive therapy. So I read some books on the subject and indeed found a number of similarities in its approach. Since then I keep on discovering that there are many common points between Buddhist practice and cognitive therapy. They deal and are concerned with the same material: human suffering and ways to relieve suffering. They also share a pragmatic, self-reliant approach to life that recognizes the great value of acceptance and compassion.

Conclusion

Samatha (concentration) stabilizes our attention, while *vipassanā* (experiential inquiry) helps us to see things more clearly. The cultivation of the two

together enables us to develop a mindfulness that is characterized by calmness and clarity. As we continue with the meditation, it grants the mindfulness two powerful aspects: acceptance and transformation. For we can only accept something that we can see clearly without rejection or desire. And when we can see both inner states of mind and outer situations with clarity and acceptance, then we may find the strength and capacity to transform them. Whether one is practising Buddhist meditation, mindfulness based stress reduction, or mindfulness based cognitive therapy for depression, it seems that it is such a process that serves as the foundation for effective change.

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