

INTRODUCTION

What follows is based upon my personal experience augmented by the experiences of others. The framework by which it is organized derives directly from traditional teachings of Buddhism, but is an amalgam of several of these traditions and so reflects no single one.

Most meditation practices follow a somewhat more disorganized course than what is described here because most meditators don't have a clear picture of where they need to go and how to get there. This is not because the necessary information doesn't exist, because it does, but because it is relatively inaccessible. The very, very scant information regarding meditation in the Suttas does not by itself make the process clear, and this is perhaps because the technology of meditation was common enough knowledge and available from so many other sources that the Buddha did not need to address such details in his teaching. Whatever the reasons might be that meditation was not more fully described by the Buddha, it is now the case that every different tradition in Buddhism has its own commentaries attempting to elucidate those missing practical details. The overwhelming volume of these commentaries, not to mention the doubt engendered by the implied assertions of each tradition that its own methods are the best and its own commentaries most accurate, can be discouraging. The writings of modern meditation teachers have done little to help.

I was a poor student myself in that I had little patience for studying these dense texts full of obscure terminology, texts that employed complex linguistic formations from another language, time and culture, and that had been subjected to the distortions of a multitude of translators who seemed to know very little about the subject they were translating. On the other hand, whenever I needed to make some sense out of my own meditation experiences and current interests at any given time, I immediately became an avid student of the relevant parts of those same texts, or of anything else for that matter that promised to help. In general I have tended to revert to 'scripture' – the Suttas and commentaries – either after something had occurred in my practice that I felt I needed an explanation for, or whenever I felt the need for some sort of specific guidance about where my practice should go next. As a result, my reading of the commentaries was always from the basis of actual experience rather than studying something that was primarily of theoretical interest. The most valuable texts for these purposes were the Vissudhimagga of Buddhaghosa and various translations and interpretations of the Stages of Meditation by Kamalasila.

What I consider to be of most importance about the commentarial literature, having learned through personal experience how the mental training naturally proceeds, is how precisely this path had been mapped out in the past, and yet how obscure it has become. I clearly remember my first encounter with Kamalasila's 'Stages of Meditation,' which this description is in part an adaptation of. I was simultaneously struck by two things: firstly, how very accurate and brilliant

Kamalasila's summary was of the actual process by which concentration is developed; and secondly, how misunderstood, confused and distorted was the presentation of it by a traditionally trained and supposedly authoritative lama. By way of analogy, it was as though, having lived in a city for many years, one finds oneself reading a description of that city written by someone who had obviously never been there, but who had perhaps heard about it from someone else who had. One immediately knows exactly what they are talking about, but recognizes that the writer doesn't really have a clue.

So, although the traditional teachings contribute to the underlying structure of this presentation by way of providing a most welcome and useful framework, in no way has experience been bent to conform to 'scripture'. I will describe the progress of mental cultivation through meditative practice in as plain an English as I can, so that others hopefully may more readily compare it to their own experiences without the confusion engendered by using terms that may be defined in a multitude of different ways. It is inevitably necessary to identify a specific meaning for certain English words as they are used in this specific context because the latitude of meaning and interpretation for so many common words is simply too great, especially when discussing something so subjective as the inner experiences of the mind. Thus, wherever I emphasize a word or phrase by bolding and italics, please regard it thereafter as a sort of 'technical term' with the specific meaning given to it in that context. But those technical meanings will still be couched in as simple and ordinary an English as I can manage. Many of you, as you read, will inevitably think "Ah, that is *vitakka* and *vicara* he is talking about", or "he means *sati* here", or "*piti*", or "*passadhi*", and so on. But I suggest you try as much as possible to leave those interpretations aside, at least until you have had the opportunity to complete the description as a whole, because otherwise your pre-existing interpretation and understanding of those terms may cause you to interject meanings other than what I have intended without your even realizing you are doing so.

THE PURPOSE OF MEDITATION

Meditation produces many kinds of effects and results, but the real purpose of meditation as I see it and as I will discuss it here is to

- develop the mental skills and faculties necessary to investigate and achieve genuine insight into the true nature of reality and our individual existence;
- and in the process of developing these skills, to discover something of the nature of the mind itself, and the role of mind and consciousness awareness in our experience of that reality.

Meditation will generate any number of therapeutic insights into our personalities, and our relationships with others and the world in general, and it will help to resolve many problematic views and conditions that make our lives difficult. But

these are what we might call incidental benefits of the practice, rather than the primary purpose of meditation as I shall set it forth here.

More significantly, meditation will produce a number of unique and wonderful mental states along the way that can provide great comfort, satisfaction and happiness, perhaps more than anything else we are likely to experience outside of using certain plant and pharmacologic agents, or certain ecstatic exercises or esoteric sexual practices. But these mental states are also not the purpose of meditation, although they can often be mistaken as such. It is for the same reason that drugs and these other practices mentioned above are not ultimately fulfilling that these meditative states are not satisfactory as the primary purpose of meditation. It is because they are conditioned states, and the conditions they are based upon are transitory, unreliable, vulnerable to the circumstances of the material world, to the inevitability of pain, sickness, the fading of our mental and physical powers and death.

Knowledge of the true nature of reality is the only genuinely satisfactory objective of the spiritual path because it is only this knowledge that can irreversibly alter our perceptions in a way that permanently liberates us from the suffering and dissatisfactoriness, the existential neurosis that is the human condition. By analogy, no matter how much you may comfort and reassure a child, the mental state of trust and confidence that you create is conditioned and susceptible to fading. It is not until the child knows and understands for themselves that there are no monsters in the closet, nor can monsters come to be in the closet, that fear will disappear and not return. In other words, a special kind of Knowledge is the ultimate objective, and so the purpose of meditation is to cultivate the mind that is capable of attaining to that Knowledge.

To place what follows in the larger context of the multitude of meditation practices we are exposed to, what will be described here is the practice for the development of perfect concentration and full-minded awareness. But it will stop short, at least in this presentation, of describing the practices of absorptive concentration (Apana Samadhi and Jhana), the noting of arising and passing away (Mahasi-style Vipassana), the union of calm abiding and wisdom (Vipasyana of the Mahayana schools), the observation of the natural state of the mind (Mahamudra and Dzogchen), and the investigation of the aggregates of clinging (Satipatthana). These 5 practices are *applications* of the skills and faculties developed in the practice described here.

This description will take us through 10 stages and culminate in the final stage as the Upacara Samadhi and Passadhi described in Part II of the Visuddhimagga, which is the precursor to Apana Samadhi and Jhana; and which also corresponds to the 10 Corruptions of Insight and the Knowledge of What Is and Is Not the Path in Part III of the Visuddhimagga (and the Mahasi-style Vipassana method), and which also marks the true beginning of Vipassana practice. This 10th stage also is the Calm Abiding with Mental and Physical Pliancy of the Vipasyana

practice of Union of Calm Abiding and Wisdom, and of the Mahamudra. Therefore I regard the progression of practice described here as the indispensable common ground and common point of beginning for all of these other practices.

If I may be permitted to beat a dead horse just a little bit more, the point of this practice is not to achieve the Jhanic absorptions, but once mastered it can be used for that if one wishes. This practice is not an alternative or adjunct to some different kind of practice that is called Vipassana or Insight Meditation, but is rather a rapid, easy and reliable method for achieving the prerequisite level of concentration and awareness that is the very basis of and indispensable for success in Vipassana/Insight practice.

THE OBJECTIVES OF MEDITATIVE TRAINING: CONCENTRATION AND...

Now, if we can begin by taking as a matter of faith that such liberating knowledge as I have referred to is in fact attainable, and further that investigation is a path that can lead to that knowledge, then we should be able to predict the skills and faculties that will need to be cultivated for success in that investigation.

The first thing that is required for successful investigation of anything is that we have the *concentration skills* necessary to apply our attention effectively to the object of our investigations. Mathematicians, scientists, philosophers, engineers and scholars are familiar exemplars of people with highly developed concentration abilities. What is being concentrated is, of course, *attention*. *Concentration* has two aspects to it – the ability to *intentionally direct* and to *continuously sustain the attention* on the object of investigation without being distracted, and the ability to *focus the attention exclusively (single-pointedly)* on that object.

In our normal waking lives, that is to say whenever we are conscious, there is a continuous stream of objects that we are consciously aware of. These objects are either known through one or more of the five physical senses, or they are thoughts and ideas, memories, mental images, or emotions known directly to the mind. We can say that conscious awareness ‘moves’ from object to object, or we could say that over time different objects ‘enter’ and leave the field of conscious awareness. At times the first description seems to be more appropriate, and at other times the second description seems to fit better.

For example, when we are bored or restless we *move* the attention from one thing to another, through the various sensory fields or through the contents of the mind looking for something of interest. Likewise, when engaged in some particular task or in the ordinary maintenance activities of life and work, we *move* the attention from one object to another as necessary to fulfill our needs and responsibilities. On the other hand, very frequently a sound, something someone says, a visual event or some other sensation, a thought, or a memory will suddenly *enter* into and be present in conscious awareness.

Since in the meditative training in concentration our objective is to cultivate the ability to sustain the attention on the meditation object without interruption, it should be obvious that an understanding, or at least an awareness of these two qualitatively different ways that objects of awareness change will be relevant and helpful.

In addition to the fact that our days are normally filled by a continuous sequence of changing objects of conscious awareness, another thing we can notice about the ordinary workings of the mind is that we often seem to be aware of several things at once. We think nothing of holding a variety of objects and processes in conscious awareness at the same time, but the more fully we are engaged with some things, the less we are aware of others.

For example, we might be preparing a meal, following a conversation between our guests, and making plans for after dinner entertainment all at the same time, all of which involves a combination of seeing, hearing, feeling, and thinking. But we can only do this for so long as none of these objects of our attention requires a high level of focused awareness. If the topic of conversation turns to something requiring the focused analytical capacities of our mind, we will halt our motion, chopping knife in the air, to address the subject, and of course, all thoughts of after dinner will be gone for the time being. Or if a pot boils over, all awareness of the conversation will disappear immediately. If we are in the middle of some delicate process when someone asks a question, we will likely experience a moment of irritation because any lapse in conscious awareness can cause us to make a mistake.

What is clear from all of this, is that to be able to penetrate something as elusive as the ultimate nature of reality or the inner workings of our own minds, we must be able to overcome the tendency of the mind to try to attend to several things at once so that we can focus the full power of our awareness upon the immediate object of investigation.

As an analogy, it is as though we are looking for something of great importance in a very dark place, and the light we are using is constantly shifting and moving, and sometimes the beam is very focused but at others it is very diffuse. Comparing conscious awareness to a mag-light with a rotating lens for focusing the beam, we see that we must have control over where it is directed, we must be able to keep it directed towards the same place long enough to see what is there, and we also need to be able to focus the beam well enough to clearly illuminate whatever it is we are investigating. Or comparing conscious awareness to a telescope with a zoom lens, we need to be able to stabilize the instrument, to set the level of the zoom, and to adjust the focus properly in order to use it effectively.

This, then, is the kind of *concentration* we need to develop in meditation.

...FULL-MINDED AWARENESS – THE OTHER OBJECTIVE OF MEDITATIVE TRAINING

All of us experience varying levels of *acuity of awareness* and perception at different times. For example, as either the potential danger or the potential for reward increases in a given situation, the more acutely aware we are of the small details and of the continuous unfolding of the events before us. An extreme example of this is an experience many of us have had at one time or another, typically in a life-threatening situation, where there is the experience of being somehow ‘outside’ of events as a very highly conscious but uninvolved observer. Time seems to slow down as one becomes acutely aware of every minute detail as it unfolds before us, and every color, shape, sound and sensation stands out with an unusual vividness. (Television and movie directors are fond of re-creating this experience through slow motion and zoom special effects.) This clearly shows us the level of acuity of awareness that the human mind is capable of!

The opposite of this is a kind of dimness or vagueness of perception that can cause us to completely miss many of the details of what is happening around us. And with this vagueness of perception, even the things we are aware of may be misinterpreted and misunderstood. The extremes of this sort of *dullness of awareness* occur with severe fatigue, or with the artificially induced dullness of alcohol and certain other drugs. But if we compare our normal level of awareness with the potential identified in the preceding paragraph, we realize that *most of our ordinary experience is actually characterized by dullness* rather than the *full-minded awareness* we are obviously capable of.

If we want to be able to fully investigate any phenomenon, we must be able not only to hold it in the focus of our attention, but we must also be able apply the full power of our awareness to its investigation. This *full-minded awareness* has two distinct qualities to it

- the *intensity* or *vividness* with which we observe whatever it is that we observe, which is to say that we don’t miss any of the details;
- and the *clarity* with which we are able to perceive it, which means that we don’t ‘jump to conclusions’, or otherwise misinterpret or misunderstand what we observe through pre-conceived notions or expectations.

To continue with our previous analogies, if concentration is the ability to direct the light where we wish, hold it steadily in place, and focus the beam on the specific object of interest, then full-minded awareness has to do with the intensity of the light and the absence of intervening obscurations that will cast shadows that make things appear differently than they are. With the telescope analogy, it is the light gathering power, resolution, and magnification of the instrument - with the added feature of a camera that can record and play back in slow motion.

There are also two very distinct aspects of full-minded awareness, depending upon whether the object of conscious awareness is either

1. a physical form or mental formation that is known by means of one or more of the physical senses or directly to the mind sense, something which we can refer to when necessary as *object awareness*; or
2. the actual activity and state of the mind itself in the present moment, both perceptual and intentional, which we can refer to as *introspective awareness*.

In general, whenever we say *full-minded awareness*, we will be referring to the *object awareness* aspect, although it is a term that *includes both object awareness and introspective awareness*. When we use the term *introspective awareness*, it will refer very specifically to *full-minded awareness as applied to the mind itself in the present moment*, potentially including the mental state and predisposing conditions, objects of perception currently under observation, and active intentions arising as a result of mental state and perceptions.

So, in summary we can say that the purpose of our meditation practice is to develop

- concentration; and
- full-minded awareness, including object awareness and introspective awareness.

These can then be applied to the ultimate objective of our practice, which is the investigation of experiential phenomena culminating in knowledge of the true nature of reality.