THE WAY OF BUDDHIST MEDITATION*

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This is the hard way, painstakingly documented and analysed for those wise men who already “well established in virtue” undertake the right effort of the further “enobling of consciousness and understanding” (SI 13):

“Just as a woman or a man, or a smart boy or girl, looking at the image of his own face in a clean and brilliant mirror or in a basin of clear water, if it had a mole on it, would know that it had, and if not, would know that it had not,—...so the bhikkhu in his mind—concentrated, purified, translucent, blameless, free of moral obstruction, supple, ready to act, firm and imperturbable—directs and bends down his mind to that knowledge which penetrates the heart...” (Sāmañña-phala-suttam, D 2)

“Clean—purified—free of moral obstruction”—consequently nothing for hippies and multipurpose technicians on shortcuts to Nibbāna.

Only a mind which by moral purification (sīlam) and mental concentration (samādhi) has reached the height of spiritual clarity and calm (samatho) in his progress along the noble (ariyo) eight-fold path of cultivation (bhāvanā) can attain that perfection of quiet water on whose surface the spontaneous and effortless reflection of existential qualities may appear undistorted, adequately, in their true being (yathā-bhūtani).

The warning of Jesus that “pearls should not be thrown to swine” corresponds in Buddha’s more polite and rationally discursive explanation to the requirement of selecting his disciples most carefully among

“those sons of noble families who having trust in me have gone forth from home into the homeless life. Have they not found contentment in their ascetic life? ... To escape into this homeless state they have not been persecuted either by the king, or by brigands, or for debts, or by fear, or for being deprived of a livelihood ...” (M 68)

—or, let us add, for trafficking in drugs, enslaved by the Mafia through addiction.

Ven. Kheminda Thera reminds us at the outset in clear terms of the essential statement that “there are two things that have to be developed in the course of Buddhist contemplation (bhāvanā): calm and serenity (samatha) and insight (vipassanā).” (P. XI)

The author undertakes to demonstrate on the ground of a precise, extensive and widely interconnected documentation—avoiding any doubt of superficial and tendentious fragmentation of “some sayings of the Buddha” from primary and secondary (commentarial) texts—the

inseparability of these two essential components, pointing out not only
the doctrinal and also psychological impossibility of their separation by
merely verbal analysis of artificially detached fragments, but also the
organic danger of any attempt of such dislodging by dissection. The essential
relation cannot be reduced either to an alternative or even to a dialectical
"model" or "pattern" of thinking. It remains organically interwoven
in a vitally essential sequence of a strictly determined structural develop-
ment.

"The fruition of samatha-bhāvanā is the attainment of samādhi,
concentration, a state of unification of mind...permeated by a
sense of clarity and inward tranquility."

Samādhi is the eight and the last attainment of Buddha's eightfold path
and the summit of the fourth and ultimate noble truth of the entire and
integral structure of his teaching. Its development "comes to fulfillment
in jhāna-samādhi". (P. XI)

"The second thing to be developed is insight"—vīpāsanā—
"known as pāññā or wisdom."—"Vipassanā, however, does not
arise in a void, but upon secure foundations in the absence of
which there can be no genuine insight..."

The author's thesis, underscored clearly already in the Preface is:

"The outcome, to state our conclusion in advance, will be an
insistence upon the importance, indeed the necessity, of sammā-, samādhi, Right Concentration, in the form in which it is defined
in the suttas—as the four jhānas for the successful completion of
the contemplative process ...And the indispensable foundation
for the development of insight, its proximate cause we will see, is
samma-samādhi..." (P. XII)—attainable only in the progressive
development of jhānas.

"The gradual progress in the Dhamma follows a certain order...This
sequence of stages..." is contained in "the most comprehensive
formulation...of the Three Aggregates (tayo khāndhā), also known
as the Threefold Training (tiyāḍha sikkhā): the aggregate of Virtue
(sīlakkhandhā), the aggregate of Concentration (samādhi-khandhā),
and the aggregate of wisdom (pāññākkhandhā). All the more
specific formulations of the path to deliverance—the Noble
Eightfold Path, the Seven Purifications, the Invariable Sequence—
are, as we shall see, included in these three groups..."

'True penetration of knowledge occurs not abruptly'. (P. 1)

"A second formulation for the gradual training is the progression
called the Seven Purifications. "According to the Rathavinita-
suttam (M 24):

"...Purification of Virtue has for aim...Purification of Mind;
Purification of Mind has for aim...Purification of View; Purifi-
cation of View has for aim Purification of Transcending Doubt;
Purification of Transcending Doubt has for aim...Purification
of knowledge and Vision of what is the Path and what is not the Path. (This purification) has for aim Purification of Knowledge and Vision of Practice;...” (P. 14)

It was necessary for the author to underscore it in particular that “in the Saṅkhāra Sutta, too, provision is made for the abandonment of the five hindrances before the development of the four foundations of mindfulness”. (P. 37)

Returning to the critical ailment “so typical of this age of speed and restlessness” (P. XII), the elitist and aristocratic character of Buddha’s Noble Way of Liberation is singled out as an unavoidable prerequisite in such clear formulations by Buddha as e.g.:

(a) The transformation “from the state of the commoner (putthujjana) to that of the noble” character (ariya-puggala). This process of transition is described in several suttas, quoted by the author, as “disenchantment-dispassion” (nibbadā-virāge) (P. 21). With “the attainment in strong insight, with immediate condition for the path of stream-entrance attainment, the yogi is called a gotrabhū, a changer-of-lineage” (P. 28), or more adequately, we might designate it as a biological change of species in his animal genus. But already “the sufficing condition of tender insight (taruṇa vipassanā) is nothing less than jhāna” (P. 22).

In many attempts, direct and indirect, to reduce the entire teaching of Buddha to a putthujjano level and thus to avoid even the ascetic seriousness of his First Noble Truth, even statistical methods have been applied in calculations of “semantic differentials” in order to prove that the word sukham occurs in Pāli suttas in a higher percentage of “instances,” than the word dukkham.

But what does the positive attainment of that happiness or bliss mean in our serious contexts, and to what level of attainment is it essentially restricted?

“...we know from sutta passages and their commentaries that the expression ‘Abiding in happiness here and now’, is one of the descriptions in the four jhānas...’abidings in happiness’...is an ‘approximate synonym’ for the form plane jhānas. The contemplators who sit having attained those (jhānas) experience the untarnished happiness of renunciation in this very life. Therefore they are called ‘abiding in happiness here and now’ ” (M 6 quoted by Kheminda Thera on P. 43).

(b) To the question reminding us of the “modern” utilitarian concern with “the greatest possible happiness of the greatest possible number”: “Will the whole world, or a half of it, or a third of it realise Nibbāna?” (A V 194-95), the only adequate (pre-Mahāyānist!) answer is that “the Tathāgata is concerned only with how Nibbāna is realised, and not with the question of how many realise it”. (P. 34),—with the quality and not with the quantity of noble characters (ariya-puggala).

Since the appearance of the first and the best voluminous manual of Buddhist meditation, the Visuddhi-maggo by Buddhaghoso (5th. c., A.) until our days of universal spiritual decadence, the following essential
and basic condition has often been repeated, quoted here in the statement of a recent author of the same school on the same subject:\(^1\)

"Thus we see that Virtue, Concentration and Wisdom (sīla, samādhi and paññā) are not isolated qualities, but integral parts of the Noble Eightfold Path which is also the Path of Meditation already outlined."

In the actual crisis of psychiatric theories, confronted with the rapid spreading of narcomania, one of the best known representatives of the psychoanalyst trend, Erich Fromm, insisting on the central importance of such reintegration of the "total personality" (partly also under direct influence of Buddhist schools of meditation, both Zen and Theravāda trends) seems to have formulated our problem in still clearer Buddhist terms:

"In fact, happiness and unhappiness are expressions of the state of the entire organism, of the total personality."

This is the basic tenet of the whole anti-technical trend in the actual situation of psychological and psychiatrist theories.

Consequently, if a method of Buddhist meditation wishes to serve such therapeutic purposes, it is in the first place expected by psychiatrists of today not to vivisection any further its own primeval potentialities in dis-integrating itself into practical "multi-purpose" tools and mechanisms, or even advertising its own "anānā-panacea". Scientific psychology of today expects from us a help in fundamental prerequisites of quieting and mastering the "monkey-mind" and its endless attempts of trouble-shooting in superficial behavioural attitudes and shallowness of "models" standardised in dictionary "meanings of words", while we are confronted with deepest existential facts. The ideal of a "quiet mind" for which all their patients are groping, even when visiting quack gurus on their mass exodus to the East, is now more than ever expressible by the symbol of a clean mirror as the unique means of reflecting, without any stress and frustration, the world as it really is, yathā-bhūtāṁ. This symbol seems to have retained at least its sacred place until today in Zen and some Tibetan temples where the continuity of the oldest tradition of jhānām has been preserved better than in some too "modern" attempts to revive the pressure of acute mental ailments short-cut fragments of the originally integral "threefold training".

The corroboration of the integrity of the Noble Eightfold Path, culminating in samādhi, was never so evident as it is now in our "modern" world of dukkham where exactly due to discarding the ethos of knowledge a materialistic civilisation bereft of spiritual culture (—bhāvanā) has been brought to its own ruin.

Unfortunately, this valuable book of the Ven. Kheminda Thera, the same as a few others on an equivalent level (e.g. Forest Dhamma, A Selection of Talks on Buddhist Practice by Phra Mahā Boowa Nāṇasampanno, Bangkok 1973), has been published for free distribution only and thus excluded from the net of wider distribution by bookshops.

BOOK REVIEWS


This excellently printed and bound book contains twenty-four contributions by an international range of Buddhist scholars. In this review we shall look at only those essays which centre upon Pali Buddhism. For the others, though interesting, we have no room here.

Out of the twenty-four, nine are directly related to Pali studies and each of these will be briefly reviewed.

Kamaleswar Bhattacharya in an article entitled “Diṭṭham Sutam Mutam Vinñātām” (Seen, heard, sensed, known) quotes at first the Snake Simile Discourse of the Middling Collection on fields of view (diṭṭhatthāna) and the difference between the uninstructed ordinary person and the instructed Noble Disciple. No translation is given but an interested reader may consult Ven. Nyanaponika’s excellent rendering in “The Wheel” series. The author comments about this passage as follows: “The first five theories about the Atman/Attan, mentioned in this passage, concern an Atman belonging to this world, while the sixth theory concerns an other-worldly Atman which ignorant people aspire to attain after their death. All these theories are false because they make of the Atman an ‘object’, while Atman, the Absolute, the Being in itself, can never be an object. The wise people therefore reject them.” This is clever jugglery. The Buddha taught about not identifying anything anywhere at all with self-soul.

Now atman or attan in Sanskrit and Pali has the same sort of range of meanings as Self/self (plus soul) does in English. The Buddha is saying therefore that all views should be given up, and one of them is that there exists “Atman, the Absolute, the Being in itself”. Philosophers who cling to Atman or Self-soul theories never seem to have considered why the words atman and self which refer to attachment and self-identification, are also used metaphysically where their use is justified by saying that they are transcendental, or an aspect of God, and so on. They are still hanging on (upadāna) very firmly; this means that they are determined to get self, Self, SELF into the religious picture somewhere. Only the Buddha was forthright enough to show that however subtly conceived, the Atman, Self is still an extension of one’s very ordinary self. There is no way of transcending self like this, it is merely called refining self.