

Thoughtless meditation

In our daily lives, we are fully dependent on our physical senses to see, to hear, to smell, to taste, and to touch. These same sources of our world, and all that we can know, is also what limit us from really experiencing life to the fullest. The main reason for this is that we tend to convert all, or significantly much, of our experiences into words.

In other words, we rarely experience what is really before us. We merely convert them into words and talk to ourselves in our heads about what we see, hear, smell, taste or touch. We almost never see the beauty of things as they are, or enjoy the goodness of others as they are. We are often helplessly projecting our past experiences and ideas onto what is before us.

Even as you are reading this: notice the talk going on in your head. There is a lot we can learn about ourselves here, if we are courageous and honest enough to be true to ourselves. At this stage, we are but the voices in our heads.

Buddhism speaks of three kinds of knowledges. The first kind of knowledge is known as “hearing-based knowledge,” that is, what we learn from outside of ourselves, from others. It is not altogether useless, since this is how we communicate with others. However, as we well know, it is not a perfect means of communication. This might be called third-hand knowledge.

The second level of knowledge is called “thinking-based knowledge.” This is something we realize for ourselves by watching patterns of words, ideas and behaviour. We mostly think this out for ourselves. Hence, it is a more personal kind of knowledge, but it is at best “second-hand” knowledge. This is because we are still dependent on outside information, which we now examine more carefully for ourselves.

The third kind of knowledge, the highest kind, is of course “first-hand” knowledge. This is “meditation-based knowledge,” or better “cultivation-based knowledge.” This is an understanding of true reality that arises from self-realization, uncoloured by sense-experiences, and which the mind sees directly, seeing things as they really are.

To have a better idea of this kind of knowledge, we need to have some understanding of what happens in deep meditation, or what is known as dhyana (Pali *jhāna*). This is the state of the mind fully focussed upon itself, free from projections and limitations of the physical senses. It is a profoundly calm and clear mind that truly and joyfully feels itself. When such a mind emerges from this inner bliss, it is able to truly and joyfully see the world outside, too. Then the world is really beautiful, without even singing about it.

From a close study of the sutta passages on dhyana and from the teachings of those familiar with dhyana, we know that dhyana is a state free of any thought-process or word-based activity, a state so profoundly blissful that it would naturally preclude

even knowing (that is, the working of the senses). In other words, it is not an intellectual process, but an utterly *affective* state. In short, we cannot *know* dhyana; we can only *feel* it. This vital point is highlighted in **the (Ekā, dasaka) Cetanā'karaṇīya Sutta** (A 11.2).¹

Brahmavamso, a well known meditation teacher of the forest tradition, summarizes the characteristics or landmarks of all dhyanas as follows:

- (1) There is no possibility of thought.
- (2) No decision-making process is available.
- (3) There is no perception of time.
- (4) Consciousness is non-dual, making comprehension inaccessible.
- (5) Yet one is very, very aware, but only of bliss that doesn't move.
- (6) The five senses are fully shut off, and only the sixth sense, mind, is in operation. (*Mindfulness, Bliss and Beyond*, 2006:155)

From all these characteristics, it is clear that a dhyana is utterly *affective* in nature: we only *feel* it without knowing it, that is, without a thought or word. This is not difficult to imagine even if we have never tasted dhyana before. Recall a time when you were truly happy, such as winning a special prize, or an extraordinarily joyful event. If you were asked, "How do you feel?" you can only perhaps say, "I don't know... it's just wonderful!"

The Buddhist way of knowing is a truly joyful one. It is only when we are joyful we can really learn to be at peace with ourselves. Only with this profound joy and peace can we really accept others unconditionally to help and heal them. Better than this, we are able to teach others to be joyful like ourselves, so that they too can enjoy the same peace. This is Buddhist meditation.

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¹ See SD 33.3b: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/33.3b-Ekadasaka-Cetanakaraniya-a11.2-piya.pdf>