

## Talking meditation

During the 40 or so years I have known and practised Buddhism, I have come across a wide range of meditation methods and teachers. They all say the *same* thing of the purpose of meditation but say *different* things about how to meditate. I am fortunate to have been able to learn directly from a few of these masters while they lived and from their immediate students. All this has made my study of the suttas more meaningful and fruitful for myself and the growing number of “lone Buddhists”<sup>1</sup> all over the world who are healingly and joyfully keeping in touch through the Dharma.

Occasionally, we have religious adventurers who would criss-cross the Buddhist world of meditation to learn from various living masters. One such meditation Ulysses was Jack Kornfield who recorded his Odyssey in a classic entitled *Living Buddhist Masters* (1977).<sup>2</sup> More recently, another religious Ulysses, Richard Shankman, has published an account of his own inner adventures in *The Experience of Samādhi: An In-depth Exploration of Buddhist Meditation* (2007). There is something nostalgic about this book, as it marks the passing of the old generation of meditation masters<sup>3</sup> featured in Kornfield’s books, as those interviewed in Shankman’s book are still living.

I’m moved to write this reflection after reading the second part of the book, which is a series of Shankman’s interviews of Jack Kornfield (now a living master himself!), Ajaan Thanissaro, Sharon Salzberg, Bhante Gunaratana, Christina Feldman, Leigh Brasington, Ajahn Brahmavamsa, and Pa Auk Sayadaw. All this makes fascinating reading, as there are in-depth questions we want to ask these famous teachers, and here we have Shankman doing us the honours.

Shankman began meditation practice in a Hindu-oriented yoga tradition, and spent several years living in an ashram engaged in concentration-based meditation practices. He transitioned to Buddhist practice in the late 1970’s and has been a Vipassana meditator ever since. Shankman, with his deep interest, knowledge and experience of meditation gives us an instructive set of interviews of the living meditation masters of our own times, yet he is flexible enough to non-judgementally adjust his questions to bring out the best of each teacher he interviews.

Two points struck me after reading the Shankman interviews: (1) the rise of Buddhist meditation is helped by the more non-judgemental western mind; (2) the living masters themselves often differ, even radically, from one another in their teachings and methods. And this is what I will address here as space permits. My purpose is to inspire us that despite all the differences, meditation is as easy as our breath, and to keep an open mind towards inner stillness so that we have happy and meaningful lives.

The first thing that strikes a familiar chord in me is when Jack Kornfield remarks that “Throughout Buddhist Asia, people are very opinionated about their views on jhāna and on vipassanā and what makes insight” (2007:108). This was in fact one of my great difficulties as a young monk in Malaysia when I could not reconcile the raging Vipassana fever there with sutta teachings.

This was decades before the diaspora of the more accomplished and open-minded students of Ajahn Chah. On the other side was the non-meditating merit-centred populist Sinhalese foreign mission, very much fund-raising oriented, and as such was not so supportive of local vocations. So I was practically alienated as a young sutta-oriented teacher.

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<sup>1</sup> See: [Lone Buddhists](#).

<sup>2</sup> Reissued as “[Modern Buddhist Masters](#),” Kandy: Buddhist Publication Soc, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> All masters featured in Kornfield’s book, except for Ajahn Jumnian, have passed on.

Meditation is a defining Buddhist teaching, and dhyana (rather, the mastery of dhyana), on a worldly level, attracts respect, power, status and wealth. As such, many of us (especially those who do not really meditate) are very opinionated about them. In a hot debate over dhyana in a blog a few years ago (which I did not join), someone quoted my paper on “The Buddha discovered dhyana,”<sup>4</sup> but his “adversary” retorted that my “wordplay” of an essay is without merit because “Piya Tan is a fan of Ajahn Brahm’s ‘ambulance jhāna’.”<sup>5</sup> My first thought on reading this was, “Yes, that’s a good figure of healing!” It’s good these people are debating on meditation. It shows their interest in a very difficult topic for discussion.

Shankman’s theme behind his questions for the living masters is that of samadhi, which of course includes dhyana. He generally begins his interview with why there is such a diversity of meditation teachings and methods amongst the masters themselves. Reading between the lines of the responses, we can say that the main divergence here is between those who take Vipassana as a “method” and those who don’t.<sup>6</sup>

Another key question is about whether thinking and deliberating occur during dhyana.<sup>7</sup> Again not all are in agreement. An encouraging trait in the over-all responses of these living masters is that they all show some level of openness that there is no “one right method.” Of course, we cannot be too judgemental (if at all) about this from a few pages of edited interviews, and without knowing these teachers themselves<sup>8</sup> and without having tried out their respective methods.

The lay teachers interviewed even sound self-effacing in stating to the effect that they are not teaching deep dhyana, as these are better done by qualified monastics and in monastic life or extended-retreats.<sup>9</sup> What these lay masters are teaching are day-to-day “hand’s on” methods of mindfulness so that the practitioners’ lives are more than just happy, that they are meaningful; hence, liberating.

Meditation becomes a problem for us when we think in terms of “teacher”<sup>10</sup> rather than “teaching.” It gets worse when we do not ourselves practise the wholesome teachings of those masters we champion. Every teacher, whether of suttas or meditation, when they teach and are mentally focussed in it, is no more a person. He is no more “teacher,” but only “teaching.” If we can catch this precious moment, we cannot help being uplifted into some level of inner joy, stillness and wisdom.

Meditation is not about being an “expert” in it; it is about being naturally mindful and naturally meditative. Thinking of being an expert meditator is trying to justify our livelihood or to attract funds for our retreat centres or life-style. It’s like marketing our products in a competitive religious market.

Mindfulness and meditation comprise the second of the three Buddhist trainings in moral virtue, mental stillness and insight wisdom. We meditate so that we know ourselves, tame ourselves, and free ourselves. Meditation is true renunciation<sup>11</sup> for all to take up, whether monastic or lay. It is the

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<sup>4</sup> In this paper, I essentially defended Ajahn Brahmavamsa’s teaching that dhyana is a full awareness that is beyond words and thoughts.

<sup>5</sup> In this essay, amongst other things, I am actually presenting Ajahn Brahm with various sutta passages that dhyana was practised even before the Buddha’s time, and that the dhyana that he “discovered” is the one “with right view” [SD 33.1b (4.4)]. Brahmavamsa, I am told recently, has accepted this conclusion.

<sup>6</sup> See **Samatha and vipassana**, SD 41.1.

<sup>7</sup> See **The Buddha discovered dhyana**, SD 33.1b esp (6) Scholarship, practice, and dhyana: [link](#).

<sup>8</sup> On this, it is helpful to see **Ṭhāna Sutta** (A 4.192/1:187-190), SD 14.12: [link](#).

<sup>9</sup> Dhyana meditation is technically a prerequisite for the attaining of non-return and arhatood.

<sup>10</sup> Zen “meditation” masters, esp in the US, are better known for their scandals than their spirituality: [link](#). Further see **Bad friendship**, SD 64,17.

<sup>11</sup> See **Bhāvanā** @ SD 15.1 (14.7) Meditation is progressive renunciation: [link](#).

gradual and true letting go of negative emotions, cultivating positive ones, and joyfully living the moment. The spiritual benefit is our awakening in this life itself.<sup>12</sup>

Those who don't meditate, talk a lot; those who talk a lot, don't meditate (notice I did not say "can't"). This goes for writing, too, unless there is a driving joy to paint that joy onto this empty visual space. This has been written hopefully that we do not have to read it ever again. We would then simply smile with our inner joy.

"These, bhikshus, are the foot of trees; these are empty places. Meditate, bhikshus! Be not heedless! Regret not later! This is our instruction to you."<sup>13</sup>

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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<sup>12</sup> See **Entering the stream**, SD 3.3: [link](#).

<sup>13</sup> "Bhikshus" here means "monks" but also includes meditators. The Buddha's exhortation: **Sallekha Sutta** (M 44.18/1:45); **Dvedhā, vitakka Sutta** (M 19.27/1:118); (**Nava Purāṇa**) **Kamma Sutta** (S 4:133) = SD 4.12; **Kāya Sutta** (S 43.1/4:359) = SD 12.21.1, & all suttas in the same **Asaṅkhata Saṃyutta** (S 43.2-44/4:360-373); **Yodh'ājīva Sutta 1** (A 5.73.7/3:87), **Yodh'ājīva Sutta 2** (A 5.74.7/89), **Vinaya, dhara Sutta** (A 7.70.4/4:139), **Devatā Sutta** (A 9.19.4/4:392); cf **Mahā Palobhana Jātaka** (J 507).