

Feeling meditation¹

One scholar who studied how ethnic Buddhists viewed and practised meditation claims that the current Buddhist and scholarly attitudes towards meditation are deeply influenced by "... certain twentieth-century Asian reform movements, notably those that urge a 'return' to zazen or vipassana meditation, and these reforms were profoundly influenced by religious developments in the West. ... Rather, such discourse turns out to function ideologically and performatively – wielded more often than not in the interests of legitimation and institutional authority."²

In simple terms, the scholar is saying that a lot of meditation methods today have been "invented" by those who teach them as a means of livelihood, whether they are professionals or monastics. The professional therapists and commercial management meditation gurus, for example, often give some kind of attractive name and pitched promises for their meditation methods. Even monastic meditation methods try to market themselves by promising "insight" or the ability to see deep into oneself, down into the very "atoms" of our being, as it were, and so on. The Buddha's purpose for teaching meditation is clear and simple: to know oneself, be free of views, and so be fully liberated – meditation is not about affiliation, but about liberation.³

Scholars often have good reasons and a professional inclination to carefully notice what we believers fail to see or merely take for granted. Where scholarly evaluation is correct, it benefits us tremendously to examine these issues and realities ourselves, and, better, to set them right, so that we do keep to the true path of the Buddha's teaching.

However, scholars tend to work within their avowed discipline, which, in important ways, limits them to seeing social realities and religious history through their own coloured lenses called "objectivity." However, if we carefully examine meditation in the early suttas and in the lives of today's monastics of the forest meditation tradition,⁴ we see a whole new reality that is a window, indeed, an open door, to early Buddhism in both theory and practice.

Those of us who are devoted practitioners of early Buddhist meditation, and also diligent students of the early suttas, know very well how the beauty and truth of their contemplative lives clearly reflect and are deeply rooted in the historical Buddha's teachings. The personal experience of calm and clarity of a Buddhist meditator is unmistakably identical, or at least intimately close, to those described in the early suttas.

Our modern scientists and mathematicians work with numbers and structures. They do so confident in the knowledge that their genius go back to ancient Greek thought. Historically, this new science arrived in Renaissance Europe by way of the Muslim wisdom of Arabia. But this fact in no way waters down the authenticity of the mathematics and science we have today.

¹ This reflection is inspired by "How do we know things while in dhyana?" in **Ways of attaining dhyana**, SD 49.5b (0.4).

² Robert H Sharf, "[Buddhist modernism and the rhetoric of meditative experience](#)," *Numen* 42 1995:228-283 (abstract).

³ See Reflection, "[Change please](#)," R247, 2012. See also Reflection, "[Be Buddhist, not a Buddhist](#)," R342, 2014.

⁴ The monastic forest meditation tradition, which tends to be insular and self-sufficient, are, as a rule, untouched by "religious developments in the West," and the like, as they diligently live and work to preserve a spiritual tradition that goes back to the Buddha's time and teaching.

Like mathematics and science, we can study, test and evaluate our meditation. We are even beginning to measure meditation, or at least, the external realities of the still mind for the benefit of psychology and the mind sciences today. However, even if Buddhist meditation is now more widely respected and accepted, even amongst other world religions, that meditation remains a sacred truth, self-defined and independent, with distinctly different goals from those of science.

Meditation, for its Buddhist practitioners, is a spiritual experience that is neither science nor religion. Its goal departs widely from those of science and of religion. If we truly meditate, it is for the sake of being in harmony with body and speech, and freeing the mind from the limitations of the body and of views, so that we are fully liberated in spirit.

The question we should ask now is: How do we know that we are meditating rightly? A very simple answer, from experience, is that with right meditation, we feel *truly blissful*. Such a simplified statement only draws us nearer to it in admiration or curiosity. But how do we know we are really *feeling* that bliss and freedom?

If we understand the question, then we have found the answer. Meditation bliss is one that we can only feel, but never really *know*. Recall a time when we are profoundly happy (such as winning a hard fought game, or gaining a great windfall), how we are simply at a loss for words: we simply *feel* happy. We are conscious of what is going on around us, for the most part, but that's about all we can know. This is the liberating bliss of the meditative moment, the rapture of the mind liberated from the body.

We are speaking of **dhyana** here. We can never “know” dhyana, only *feel* it – this needs to be properly understood. Dhyana is pure feeling, perhaps with some clear knowing (in a broad sense) – but we are not able to do anything about it. There is no “two minds” about it here. **The “two minds” explanation**, in fact, helps here. In our daily life, especially when we are caught up in the “flow” of the world, our “doing” mind (the doer) is taking charge and dictating us to act (or not) in response to the situation.

In a dhyana situation, the doer is put to full rest, or transformed into a “knowing mind” (**the knower**), which take over, in full charge of the situation. The knower, however, does not “act,” but simply “knows” what is going on, or rather *feels* it. The proper technical term is **paṭisaṃvedeti**, which includes both the cognitive and the affective aspects of knowing.⁵ During dhyana, we are only but fully conscious in an affective way.⁶ What does this mean?⁷

It is as if, in dhyana, we have suspended our cognitive consciousness, that is, the 5 physical senses fully cease to function. Only the affective aspects of mind, as it were, remains active. Free of its cognitive aspect, **the affective consciousness** experiences only the joy and clarity of the immediate dhyanic state.

The language here is predominantly conditional because we are only *theoretically* describing the dynamic present moment of dhyana. We have to experience this state ourself to really

⁵ On **paṭisaṃvedeti**, see [SD 17.3 \(1.2.2\)](#).

⁶ I'm not using “affective” here in any technically psychological sense, but as a helpful term for the early Buddhist notion of “feeling.”

⁷ On the doer and the knower in meditation, see [SD 15.1 \(1.5\)](#); **Saṅkhāra**, [SD 17.6 \(8.4\)](#).

understand the difficulty of describing it. However, such an experience is not only possible, but necessary, if we are to live fully.⁸ To live fully is to see deep into the present moment.

One of the best known records we have of such an experience is that of the Buddha himself, as recorded in **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16). Once, when the Buddha is staying in a threshing-house near Ātumā, there is a great thunderstorm with lightning flashing, when 2 brothers and 4 oxen were struck down. The Buddha, deep in dhyana, “being both conscious and awake, neither saw anything nor heard a sound!”⁹ Note the phrase, “being both conscious and awake” (*saññī samāno jāgaro*): this refers to the nature of the Buddha’s mind in the context of dhyana. This is clearly not being “conscious and awake” in the ordinary sense of the words.

The apophatic (or negative) language¹⁰ that attempts to describe the *experience* of nirvana (though not nirvana itself), is here spoken by the arhat Mahā Cunda to the dying Channa, as recorded in **the Chann’ovāda Sutta** (M 114) and echoed elsewhere, thus:

When there is no inclination, ¹¹	there is neither coming nor going.
When there is neither coming nor going,	there is neither dying nor arising.
When there is neither dying nor arising,	there is no here nor beyond nor in between.
—This is the end of suffering.”	(M 114,11 = S 35.87,11; U 81) ¹²

A Dharma-hearted meditator’s experience of dhyana, even just a moment’s glimpse of it, is a vision of nirvana. We could borrow Blakes’ immortal words, and say of it, that here we have seen a world in a grain of sand, and heaven in a wild flower; we have held infinity in the palm of our hand and eternity in an hour.¹³

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

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⁸ Those who live fully in this way—feeling and creating beauty and revealing truth—are called “Artists”: see Reflection, “The Artist,” R419, 2015.

⁹ D 16,4.32/2:132 ([SD 9](#)).

¹⁰ On apophasis in Buddhism, see [SD 40a.1 \(6.3\)](#).

¹¹ “Inclination,” *nati* (rare). This term usu refers to a negative state, but its sense is not restricted to that. It simply denotes “an inclination, a habit or bias”: see **Dvedhā Vitakka Sutta** (M 19/1:115,22), [SD 61.1](#); **Chann’ovāda Sutta** (M 144,11/3:266,7), [SD 11.12](#); **Cetanā Sutta 3** (S 12.40/2:67,4), [SD 7.6c](#); U:Be+Ce 81,7 (UA 398,18).

¹² M 144,11 = S 35.87 ([SD 11.12](#)); U 81 (SD 98.1); UA 398; Nett 65; cf S 12.40/2:67. On the nature of dhyana, see [SD 33.1b \(6.2.1\)](#).

¹³ From William Blake, “[To see a world...](#)” (from *Auguries of Innocence*, 1803?).