

Roots of meditation and its modern vicissitudes

Excerpt from *Handbook of Meditation in Society 6:*

Sutta Discovery 60.1f: A psychopathology of mindfulness © Piya Tan 2023c (forthcoming).

3.1.1 Body, mind and others

3.1.1.1 Traditional Buddhist training—especially in early Buddhism (the teachings of the historical Buddha)—comprises 3 interdependent aspects: *the training in moral virtue, in concentration and in wisdom*; hence, they are collectively known as **the 3 trainings** (*sikkhat, taya*). Moral training refers to the “purification” of bodily actions and speech, that is, the activities of the 5 physical senses. The purpose of moral training is to “calm” the body down and have a “stress-free” living with others and the environment, so that our physical being conduces to mental cultivation, the second training; that is, the body does not become a source of distraction to mental development.

Concentration training is about mental development through mindfulness and meditation (which includes concentration). Mindfulness (*sati*) refers to conditioning the mind to focus on some mind-object so that it is able to free itself from the hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*) rooted in the 5 sense-activities (seeing, hearing, etc) that result in distracting thoughts. Mental training includes a growing awareness of how our mind is not merely brain-based or self-centred, but is essentially extended through *how* we see visible objects, hear sounds, smell, taste and touch the world: *we are literally the world*, it is our “**extended minds**” [4.4.8.2]. When we harm others or the world, we are harming ourself, too.¹

With a moral life and healthy body supporting a calm, clear and open mind, we begin to see ever more truly that all lives evolve and all things change in an endless interdependent cycle. When we fail to see this or when we exist selfishly, we are going against nature; hence, we suffer. There is no I but only *we*; there is no me, but only *us*; there is no mine but only *ours*. The true reality is that there is no self. This is true wisdom.

Wisdom refers to both the purpose and the result of proper morally-rooted meditation, especially the attaining of concentration (*samādhi*) or mental focus, leading on to various levels of full concentration or dhyana (*jhāna*). Ideally, we should go on to master at least the 1st dhyana. This is called “calmness” (*samatha*) or calmness meditation. In due course, having emerged from such a dhyana, we direct the profoundly calm and clear mind towards seeing into the true nature of reality or phenomena. This is traditionally called “insight” (*vipassanā*).

3.1.1.2 A close study of the suttas, especially the early Buddhist texts related to mindfulness and meditation, provides us with a theoretical background and the vocabulary to better understand and express our meditative experiences. With a sutta background, it is easier for the meditator to identify and appreciate the profound states that arise in meditation resulting from some kind of breakthrough, even if momentarily, into true reality.

We have earlier noted how about a century or so after the Buddha’s passing, Patañjali used the Buddha’s eightfold path as the Eight Limbs of Yoga and structured the Patañjali Yoga Sūtras upon the Buddha’s yogic practices [1.2.3]. In our own times, Mahesh then plagiarized both the Buddha’s breath meditation and Patañjali’s Yoga Sutras for his Transcendental Meditation (TM) and Yogic Flying [2.3.2].

¹ On “the extended minds,” see SD 60.1e (12.7).

3.1.2 “Non-religious” mindfulness

Modern psychotherapy uses aspects of both mindfulness and meditation but opted to use the term **mindfulness**, probably to avoid the notion that it is religious or even “Buddhist.” It is a “non-religious” mindfulness.² Meditation, however, is an ancient Buddhist practice, and only in recent times (within the last generation or so, that is, the late 21st and early 22nd centuries) has it been plucked out of its spiritual framework, and applied to therapy for the enhancement of personal well-being.

Hence, Alberto Perez-de-Albeniz and Jeremy Holmes (2000), in their survey of the modern psychotherapeutic use of meditation, offer this caveat:

Although we have limited ourselves to reviewing studies that refer only to meditation as a technique, there is abundant literature that relates meditation to a religious-philosophical framework. It could be argued that in extracting the technique from its theoretical and belief context, the meaning and effect of meditation is deprived of its essence—just as an interpretation, cognitive challenge, or a paradoxical injunction would not have the same impact/outcome when removed from its therapeutic context.

(2000:54 f)

Clinical meditation of whatever name, without its early Buddhist grounding, is at best psychological mumbo-jumbo. Most psychotherapists can only intellectualize their meditation procedure and results, and where they had difficulties or fail often have no real idea why, except for the technical rationalizations. Even then, these rationalizations can be useful to study: they help us understand how the psychiatrists themselves think, which would guide future generations of mind-scientists.

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

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² See eg Kabat-Zinn’s claim that he was “not a Buddhist” despite using *Buddhist* mindfulness to his great profit: SD 60.1e (1.1.3).