

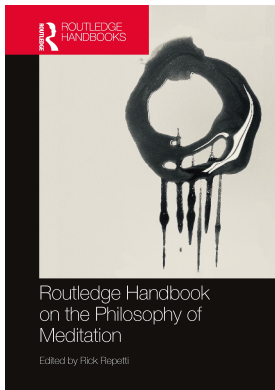
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MEDITATION AS CULTIVATING
KNOWLEDGE-HOW

Christopher W. Gowans

1 Introduction

Knowledge has tremendous importance in Buddhist thought and practice. It is often supposed that a primary purpose of Buddhist meditation is to provide experiential knowledge that there is no self.¹ This is typically taken to mean that some form of insight meditation (*vipassanā*),² such as mindfulness, is a source of knowledge of the absence of self. Though this interpretation has some plausibility, I argue that the two core meditation practices in the *Nikāyas* (early Buddhist discourses) – mindfulness and concentration – are better understood as enabling us how to live without craving and clinging, as the key step in overcoming suffering. Hence, their main epistemic purpose is, in Western terms, *knowing how* to live without suffering, rather than *knowing that* there is no self.³

I begin my account by explaining the attractions of what I describe as the *metaphysical understanding model* of meditation that emphasizes experience of no-self, and then suggesting reasons for seeking an alternative, what I call the *knowledge-how model* of meditation, that stresses learning how to stop craving and clinging. I then explain the knowledge-how model and the importance of habits and habituation in it. Finally, I show how this model relates to the concentration and mindfulness meditations in the *Nikāyas*. I end by briefly discussing the implications of this interpretation for understanding the significance of the no-self teaching.

2 The metaphysical understanding model of meditation

It is widely believed that, according to some important Buddhist traditions in India and elsewhere, a form of Buddhist meditation is essential, at least for most people, to achieve the conviction that there is no self, construed as the hallmark of Buddhist enlightenment. According to this view, for these Buddhist traditions, there are cogent philosophical arguments that there is no self, but the intellectual recognition that these arguments are sound is not sufficient to produce a wholehearted conviction that there is no self, and we need this conviction to achieve enlightenment and overcome suffering. The reason that cogent arguments are insufficient is that we are so fundamentally conditioned to live as if there is a self that intellectual considerations alone, though cogent, are insufficient to produce a genuine, deep conviction that there is no self and hence to motivate us to strive to live in accord with this conviction.

On the metaphysical understanding model, a form of meditation – usually some kind of insight meditation, such as mindfulness – is needed to generate the wholehearted conviction that there is no self. For example, Charles Goodman, addressing the question whether meditation leads to knowledge, suggests that meditation can provide a “direct experience of *being no one*” (2013, p. 569).

A comparison may help to explain this view and its plausibility. A person might be persuaded of the dangers of a high cholesterol diet by reading reports of medical research, but still not be sufficiently convinced to give up his or her high cholesterol diet. However, a more immediate personal experience, such as a visit to a friend dying of heart disease, might supplement the belief based on the medical reports, and this might be sufficient to generate the wholehearted conviction that a high cholesterol diet is unhealthy and should be given up. This conviction might provide the powerful motivation needed to make a serious effort to change these habits that reading the reports alone did not provide. For the metaphysical understanding model of meditation, intellectual knowledge of no-self similarly needs to be supplemented by a more immediate personal experience of no-self that meditation provides.

There are several reasons why this model appears compelling. First, both rational analysis and meditation are often presented as important in Buddhism. For example, in the *Nikāyas*, there appear to be arguments for the no-self thesis such as the claim that an analysis of the five aggregates shows that there is no self.⁴ Yet the Buddha also says that his teaching “is unattainable by mere reasoning” (*MN* 1.167), and both mindfulness and concentration forms of meditation are featured in the Eightfold Path. Moreover, many contemporary commentators agree with Goodman in attributing such a position to Buddhism.⁵ Finally, as the comparison with medical understanding shows, the model is intuitively plausible. We often think that intellectual understanding needs to be supplemented by some personal experience to be fully convinced of something.

There are, however, reasons to question the metaphysical understanding model, at least as an interpretation of the mindfulness and concentration meditations featured in the *Nikāyas*. My aim is to propose another way of thinking about these meditative practices that does not include the claim that Buddhist meditation provides us with knowledge that there is no self. Rather, it proposes that they provide us with knowledge of how to do something, namely, how to live without craving and clinging, so as not to suffer. On this view, the aim of these meditations is to develop a kind of knowing-how rather than knowing-that.⁶ Hence, I call this the “knowledge-how model of meditation”. At the end of the chapter, I will discuss the role of the no-self teaching on this interpretation.

3 Motivations for seeking an alternative model

In Buddhism, there are many forms of meditation and they have several functions. For example, Buddhaghosa’s meditations on divine abodes such as loving-kindness and compassion are reflections that are intended to develop our capacity to promote the happiness and reduce the suffering of all beings.⁷ These are obviously intended to help us learn how to do something, namely, how to act with greater love and compassion for others. They are clearly related to the development of a form of knowledge-how.

However, proponents of the metaphysical understanding model do not have such ethically oriented meditations in mind when they say that Buddhist meditation provides experiential knowledge of the absence of a self. At least with respect to early Buddhism, they are typically thinking of the mindfulness practices – often interpreted as forms of insight meditation – and, perhaps as a preliminary, the concentration practices also featured in the Eightfold Path.⁸ These

practices are central in the *Nikāyas*, and I focus on them here. I begin by noting some reasons why we might consider an alternative interpretation of these meditations.

First, there is nothing in the central texts in the *Nikāyas* describing these meditations to suggest that their purpose is to achieve experiential knowledge that there is no self. In these texts there is no direct reference to the no-self teaching whatsoever. They center on attaining various forms of awareness and, in the case of mindfulness, awareness of aspects of the person; but these modes of awareness are not, in any obvious way, portrayed as an awareness that there is no self.

Second, there are philosophical reasons for questioning the plausibility of the idea that we could know that there is no self through some form of meditative awareness. At first glance, a common way of thinking about this appears credible: We first calm the mind and purify it of obstructions through serenity meditations (*samatha*) such as concentration (*samādhi*), and then we can perceive the absence of the self through mindfulness meditations that focus on the body, mind, feelings, etc. By comparison, we first clean the dirty window that obstructs our vision and then we look carefully through the window to observe what is outside. The purification aspect of this approach is plausible: Concentration meditations might be regarded as removing obstacles to proper awareness. But how could mindfulness awareness reveal that there is no self?

As usually understood, the no-self teaching is that there is no self as something that has identity through time and is truly distinct from other things. With respect to identity, the idea that there is an unchanging 'me' present throughout my life, it is not obvious that awareness of ongoing physical and mental events could reveal the absence of this. Again, with respect to distinctness, the notion that there is an 'I' distinct from other things, it is not evident that awareness could establish that there is no such thing. It might be said that in mindfulness meditation no self with identity and distinctness is observed and that, from the standpoint of Buddhist empiricism, according to which all knowledge must be rooted ultimately in experience, there is no other basis for knowledge of the self.⁹ However, on the face of it, from an empiricist perspective, only extensive experience and analysis of the person extended through time and situated in the world could confirm that there is no self. Though mindfulness practices could contribute to this, it is not evident that they could provide direct awareness of no-self.¹⁰

Third, mindfulness meditation is a practice intended to be exercised repeatedly on a regular basis over a long period of time. It is suggested that the four mindfulness practices may be undertaken anywhere from seven days to seven years (*MN* 1.62–3), and a dominant theme in the *Nikāyas* is that enlightenment requires long, gradual progress (*MN* 1.479). If the purpose of meditation is to provide experiential knowledge of the absence of self, it is not clear why this extensive repetition is necessary. It would seem that, once the mind is purified and directly observes that there is no self, that would be sufficient to establish empirically that there is no self. An extended practice of mindfulness meditation would not be needed.

It might be said that it takes a long period of time to achieve experiential knowledge of the absence of self. With respect to the purification aspect of the process, this has some plausibility: It might take considerable time to remove the obstacles to correct perception, especially since our way of life is constantly perpetuating those obstacles. However, this would not be sufficient to explain the need for mindfulness meditation as a long-term insight practice. In many other contexts, a single, powerful personal experience can have an enormous impact on a person's life without any repetition at all.

Finally, it might be significant that the Buddha continued to meditate after his enlightenment. There may be various reasons for this. Perhaps he found it pleasant or was trying to be a role-model for his followers.¹¹ At any rate, it would seem that the purpose was not to achieve experiential awareness of no-self, since he was already enlightened. This raises the possibility that meditation might play an important role in being enlightened as well as attaining enlightenment.

4 The knowledge-how model of meditation

The aforementioned considerations are not decisive, but they are suggestive. If the purpose of mindfulness and concentration meditations is not to have direct experiential knowledge of the absence of self, then they must have another purpose. My proposal is that we focus on the practical nature of the Buddha's teaching. As an entrée, in the *Cūḷamālunkya Sutta* (sutra) the Buddha said that he did not give answers to Mālunkyāputta's philosophical questions because such answers would not enable him to overcome suffering. Instead, the Buddha said, he taught the Four Noble Truths (*MN* 1.426–32). In brief, these state that suffering is caused by craving (*taṇhā*) and that it is possible to overcome suffering through practices that eliminate craving. These are sometimes explained via a medical analogy in which suffering is the disease and the Eightfold Path is the medicine that cures the disease (*Vism.* 16.87). For the knowledge-how model, the primary purpose of mindfulness and concentration practices is to eliminate craving and overcome suffering. Just as medicine requires some understanding of biology, these practices require some understanding of psychology, but the primary emphasis is on the elimination of craving.

From this perspective, Buddhist practice is centrally about re-habituating: We find ourselves habitually craving, and we need to eliminate these habits and replace them with non-craving habits. That is, we need to learn how to live without craving and without clinging so as to live without suffering. The primary aim of Buddhist practice is to learn how to do something: to live a certain way. Though this requires some understanding of psychology, of how physical and mental states arise and vanish, the point of this understanding is knowing how to do something.

In the 12-fold formula of conditioning links that elaborates the Second Noble Truth, there is a conditioning sequence from contact to feeling, to craving, and to clinging that is central to the account of the origin of suffering (*MN* 1.261 and 3.63–4).¹² To eliminate suffering, we need to disrupt this sequence. As embodied creatures, contact and feeling are inevitable. As we move through the world, we regularly come into contact with things and this gives rise to feelings or sensations (*vedanā*) that are often pleasant or painful. What typically happens is that this gives rise to craving (for example, desires such as lust and greed as well as aversions such as hatred and anger), which in turn gives rise to the clinging (*upādāna*) that leads to suffering.

To overcome suffering, we need to disrupt the link from feeling to states such as craving and clinging (Nyanaponika 2000, p. 177). This is evident in a passage at the beginning of the *Cūḷataṇhāsankhaya Sutta* that depicts a monk's enlightenment:

Having fully understood everything, whatever feeling he feels, whether pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant, he abides contemplating impermanence in those feelings, contemplating fading away, contemplating cessation, contemplating relinquishment. Contemplating thus, he does not cling to anything in the world. When he does not cling, he is not agitated. When he is not agitated, he personally attains Nibbāna.¹³

(MN 1.251)

The central practical teaching of the Buddha is that we can learn how to interrupt the transition from feeling to craving and clinging (in this passage, effected by focusing on the impermanence of feelings). An *arahant* is said to have pleasure and pain, but not greed and hatred (Bodhi 2005, p. 366). The purpose of meditative practices is to teach us how to break the feeling-craving link: We habitually move from feeling to craving, but through these practices we eliminate these habits and replace them with habits that allow us to live without craving.

These re-habitation exercises require an understanding of the conditioning process, what the Buddha called ‘dependent arising’ (briefly, how everything arises dependent on other things). However, it also requires repetitive practice since that is the primary way in which we change habits.

There are many examples of ways in which we learn how to do something new through some habituation or training process. For instance, we may learn how to swim or speak another language. In some cases, when we learn how to do something, the knowledge-how usually stays with us even when we do not use it for a long time. For most people, learning how to swim or ride a bicycle has this enduring quality. Buddhist habituation is often understood in this way: Enlightenment is difficult to achieve, but once we learn how to live without craving, through meditation and other practices, nothing more is needed to maintain this state.

In some cases of learning, however, especially kinds of knowledge-how that involve exceptional abilities, practice is required both to gain the knowledge-how in the first place and to maintain it at a high level of performance. For instance, operatic singing and rock climbing require regular practice both to acquire the capability and to continue to exercise it well. We could think of Buddhist enlightenment this way: To continue living without craving we need to continue Buddhist practices such as meditation. On this view, as with a path in the forest, a frequent image for Buddhist practice, the repetition of meditation is required both to establish and to maintain a life free of craving and suffering.¹⁴

Since Buddhism purports to show how to escape the cycle of rebirth, it requires that enlightenment be an irreversible change. This may be why some accounts of *Nibbāna* speak of the transition from the conditioned to the unconditioned realm (Bodhi 2005, p. 366). However, insofar as we remain alive and hence part of the conditioned realm, it might be supposed that practice remains necessary to live without craving and suffering. Perhaps this is a reason why the Buddha continued to meditate.

The examples of training for high levels of achievement in performance arts and athletic endeavors may teach us something else about Buddhist practices such as meditation. The initiate who undertakes training in opera or climbing usually begins with some notion that these activities are worthwhile. However, the training involves more than learning how to perform them well. It also educates the initiate into the value of the activity: With progress through the training, one comes to understand better why it is an esteemed form of human activity. Likewise, perhaps, Buddhist meditation shows how to live without craving, but it also shows the value of living this way. The practitioner learns to live without craving and thereby better understands, what may have only been glimpsed at the outset, that this is a life free of suffering, a much better way to live than before.

5 Habits and habituation

Since the knowledge-how model emphasizes habits and their transformation, it will be helpful to reflect on these phenomena and how Buddhist teaching relates to them. In Western philosophy, habits have sometimes been criticized as mindless activities not fully expressive of rationality or autonomy (Carlisle 2014, pp. 2–4). However, some Western philosophers, such as Aristotle, Hume, and the Pragmatists, have stressed the importance of habits in human life. Though some habits are problematic, others may be informed by a rational outlook. Moreover, some habits are essential to developing our capacity for focused awareness, required for high levels of performance in many endeavors (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). For example, the habits developed through lifelong training in jazz make possible the high level of attentive awareness of and responsiveness to the ongoing interactive performance of other musicians in jazz improvisation. Likewise,

ethical training might produce habits that enable us to be immediately attentive and responsive to those features of a situation that are ethically salient.¹⁵

For our purpose, four features of habits are important.¹⁶ First, habits are dispositions to perceive, feel, think, or act in particular ways. These dispositions are typically activated by some event we experience. For example, I walk into the bedroom at night and turn on the light switch. Second, habits are usually acquired through repetition of the relevant mental or behavioral characteristic. Sometimes the repetition occurs without conscious awareness, as when a habit of overeating develops by repeatedly eating more than necessary without thinking about it. However, the repetition may result from conscious effort, as in the training programs in performing arts and athletic endeavors just discussed. Third, once acquired, habits are sometimes exercised in ways that do not require conscious attention and are effortless. In the language of dual process theories in contemporary psychology, habits may be non-conscious, automatic, and fast,¹⁷ though, as just noted, they may require practice to maintain at high levels of performance and may make possible other forms of awareness. Finally, habits are, as William James said, 'plastic', meaning that, once acquired, they are fairly stable and difficult to change, though they can be changed through conscious effort (1950, vol. 1, ch. 4). Habituation programs that aim to change our habits may, in some cases, be understood by reference to the neuroplasticity discussed in contemporary neuroscience (ways in which the brain and nervous system can be changed through repetitive activities) (Costandi 2016).

Central to Buddhist analysis is the claim that we habitually crave and then suffer on account of this. As I have presented it, contact produces feelings that often involve pleasure and pain, and we habitually crave as a result. That is, we have a disposition to form powerful desires and aversions in response to feelings of pleasure and pain. Though craving is sometimes presented as a fact of life, the broader Buddhist account explains this in terms of karma: Our particular ways of craving are the product of our past actions in this and previous lifetimes (karma theory is in part an account of habit formation). Buddhist thought clearly supposes that craving is a powerful habit: Desires and aversions form more or less automatically and without conscious attention. Hence, craving is a difficult habit to break. However, the story of the Eightfold Path is that it is possible to break it, and meditation plays a key role in this.

Commonly recognized features of successful re-habituation programs (replacing bad habits with good habits) are key features of traditional Buddhist practice. First, it is important to be committed to the program, something acknowledged in the Right Intention and Right Effort features of the Eightfold Path. Second, context makes a significant contribution to re-habituation: Proper guidance, social support, and the absence of distractions and temptations play a crucial role. This is recognized in various features of Buddhist monastic life. Third, appropriate forms of repetition are central to changing our habits. Much of Buddhist practice, especially meditation, understands the importance of repetition. Finally, successful re-habituation depends on reward: Perception of a benefit motivates continuation of the practice. In Buddhism, the benefit is overcoming suffering: As craving decreases, the absence of suffering increases (at least on a gradual model of practice).¹⁸

It might be objected that, though Buddhist practice involves the elimination of bad habits such as craving, it does not strive to replace these with good habits. In fact, it is sometimes said that the aim of Buddhist practice is the elimination of habits.¹⁹ On this view, Buddhist practice is de-habituation, but it is not re-habituation. In response, there is a sense in which this is correct. According to karma doctrine, our craving-driven actions create dispositions that keep us within the cycle of rebirth, and liberation from this cycle means that these dispositions are no longer created. Hence, an *arahant* who is still alive is free from habitual craving and any habit that perpetuates the cycle of rebirth. Liberation is freedom from habits in this sense. However, it

still might be said that habits in another sense are present in an *arahant* during this lifetime. For example, an *arahant* may be said to have habits to maintain equilibrium in the face of pleasure and pain and to be attentive to promoting the happiness of others and preventing their suffering. These are the new habits that Buddhist practice creates. As long as they do not involve craving and clinging, they are compatible with Buddhist enlightenment.²⁰

6 Concentration: The four *jhānas*

Let us now see how the two forms of meditation featured in the Eightfold Path – mindfulness and concentration – may be understood from the perspective of the knowledge-how model of meditation. My central claim is that these may be interpreted as re-habitation practices that aim at the elimination of habitual craving and the development of ways of living without craving. There are numerous debates about these two forms of meditation, and the related categories of insight (*vipassanā*) and calm (*samatha*), concerning their origin, nature, purpose, relationship, etc.²¹ It is beyond the scope of this paper to address all these issues.

In the tradition and in contemporary scholarship, mindfulness is often thought to be more important than concentration. However, in my view, both are important and deserve consideration as re-habitation practices. Among other reasons, they are both featured in the Eightfold Path and, on the comparative point, the Buddha attained the four *jhānas* (meditative absorptions) of concentration prior to his enlightenment experience when he discovered the Four Noble Truths (*MN* 1.21–3). I will begin with the four *jhānas*. There are more than four in some accounts (*MN* 1.174–5), but for my purpose the first four are most important, so I restrict attention to these.

In standard presentations, the meditator first finds a secluded place, sits with legs folded and body erect, establishes mindfulness, and abandons the five hindrances (covetousness, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and doubt) (*MN* 3.3). According to tradition, at least initially, the focus is on a single object (*Vism.* chs. 4–5). In the first *jhāna*, the practitioner is free of “sensual pleasures” and “unwholesome states”, and has “applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion”. In the second, applied and sustained thought are stilled, and the practitioner has “self-confidence and singleness of mind” along with “rapture and pleasure born of concentration”. In the third, rapture is superseded, and the practitioner feels “pleasure with the body” but “has equanimity and is mindful”. Finally, in the fourth *jhāna*, with the abandonment of “pleasure and pain” and the “disappearance of joy and grief”, the practitioner “has neither-pain-nor-pleasure and purity of mindfulness due to equanimity” (*MN* 3.4 and 3.252).²²

The main progression in the four *jhānas* is away from thought and pleasure and towards equanimity and mindfulness. In ordinary experience, we come into contact with objects, and this generates sensations, usually involving pleasure or pain, and thoughts about the nature of these objects (*saññās*). The aim of the four *jhānas* is to develop a special state of awareness of objects without these features of ordinary experience. This requires confidence and focus, recognized in the second *jhāna*, but the final aim is awareness that has pure equanimity and mindfulness.

What is the purpose of this practice? There is no suggestion that any of the *jhānas* are direct apprehensions of the absence of self. Concentration is often seen as a form of serenity meditation (*samatha*) intended to purify the mind of obstructions. On this account, concentration makes possible the understanding that comes from mindfulness and other forms of insight meditation. There is no reason to deny that concentration has this function, though there are different accounts of the order of serenity and insight meditations (*AN* 2.157).²³ In any case, concentration may accomplish more than purification as preparation for subsequent understanding. Awareness without pleasure and pain allows us to grasp something without the evaluations that

give rise to the desires and aversions of craving (and without categorizing it as such). This is a special state of mind that can be attained only temporarily. However, it has two practical benefits.

First, the practitioner learns in an experiential way that things are not essentially pleasant or painful and so are not essentially sources of craving. Though in ordinary experience they are typically felt in this way, this is on account of the problematic way in which the mind works, and there are other ways in which it can work. Development of a tacit understanding of this, that can persist in ordinary experience, is an important part of learning not to crave.

Second, the practitioner comes to grasp the value of this state of mind. Through concentration meditation, one begins to realize in a direct, experiential way that equilibrium is a better state of mind than one permeated with craving, clinging, and suffering. This is an important part of learning not to crave. Through the habituation practices of moving from the first to the fourth *jhāna*, the customary link between contact and craving begins to break down. By analogy, consider someone with a fear of going to the neighborhood park even though the park is as safe as the rest of the neighborhood in which the person regularly travels. In some cases, with guidance and care over time, such a person might start going to the park and gradually realize it is not necessarily fear-inducing (this is sometimes called exposure therapy). In time, the person might even learn to enjoy the park. Similarly, attaining the fourth *jhāna* may teach a person that objects are not inherently sources of pleasure and pain, and that mental equilibrium in which craving cannot arise is a valuable state.

A three-part sequence at the end of the *Mahātaṇhāsankhaya Sutta* suggests that the four *jhānas* may be understood in this way (*MN* 1.266–70). In the first phase, a person sees, lusts after what is pleasing, and then clings and suffers. In the second phase, a person hears the teaching of the Buddha, lives an ethical and restrained life, and attains the four *jhānas* culminating in the absence of pleasure and pain. In the final phase, a person sees but does not lust after what is pleasing and no longer clings and suffers. The suggestion is that, in conjunction with ethical practices, the four *jhānas* help a person to overcome suffering by breaking the link between feeling and craving.

7 Mindfulness: The four foundations

The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* is the primary account of mindfulness meditation (*MN* 1.55–63).²⁴ It depicts the four foundations of mindfulness as “the direct path” for overcoming sorrow, lamentation, pain, and grief, and for attaining “the realization of Nibbāna” (*MN* 1.55–6). The four foundations concern the body, feelings, mind, and *dhammas* (mind-objects). Regarding the first, the introduction says “a bhikkhu [monk] abides contemplating the body as a body, ardent, fully aware, and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world” (*MN* 1.56). The same thing is said about feelings, mind, and *dhammas*. The emphasis is clearly on awareness and mindfulness, but these meditations may be understood as re-habituation exercises that aim to eliminate craving and clinging.

The text has great importance in the tradition and is a primary source of much contemporary discussion of mindfulness. However, the contemporary emphasis on mindfulness as non-judgmental awareness of the present moment is rather different than the understanding of mindfulness in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (Dreyfus 2011; Gethin 2011). The text focuses on our experience of various aspects of persons, first in the categories of body, feeling, and mind, and then organized through several standard lists of Buddhist teaching, such as the Four Noble Truths (the *Dhamma*: the Dharma). The term translated as ‘mindfulness’, ‘*sati*’, connotes both attention and memory. The latter has been interpreted in different ways.²⁵ From the knowledge-how perspective, it might be taken as suggesting habituation, since habit is a form of memory

(a retention of ways of proceeding) and many of the contemplations focus on experiences or activities that are parts of habitual patterns, often with a view to changing them.

There are six contemplations concerning the body, but only one each for feeling and mind. However, feeling and mind highlight what I have argued is central to Buddhist re-habituation. Feeling begins by directing attention to pleasant and painful feelings, while mind begins by directing attention to lust and hate (*MN* 1.59). Though many of the contemplations of the body have a neutral tone (for example, the four postures: walking, standing, sitting, and lying down), two of them are more pointed: The contemplations on the foulness of body parts and the decaying corpses seem intended to repulse us from attachment to the body. Moreover, many of the *Dhammas* (the Buddhist teachings) pertain to transformative practices. For instance, there is a contemplation on the arising, abandoning, and future non-arising of the hindrance of sensual desire, and there is another on the arising and development of the enlightenment factor of equilibrium.

However, most important for the knowledge-how analysis is the refrain that comes at the end of each of the 13 contemplations in substantially the same form. For example, the refrain at the end of the contemplation on feeling says the practitioner contemplates feelings internally and externally. It then says, “he abides contemplating in feelings their arising factors, or he abides contemplating in feelings their vanishing factors, or he abides contemplating in feelings both their arising and vanishing factors”. After noting that he has “bare knowledge and mindfulness”, it says, “he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world” (*MN* 1.59).

Throughout the text there is an emphasis on the movement of what is observed. Contemplations of phenomena arising and vanishing may provide experiential evidence of impermanence and presumably also of dependent arising, the ways change is conditioned. To this extent, mindfulness meditation provides confirmation of Buddhist claims about the impermanent and dependent nature of what we experience. However, there is no suggestion that this confirms that there is no self. There is no reference to the self at all. Even in the *dhammas* section on “the five aggregates affected by clinging”, there is a reference to their origin and disappearance, but no indication that this is evidence for the absence of a self (*MN* 1.60–61).

It could be argued, of course, that the implicit message is that the meditator is expected to recall teachings in which the Buddha notes about each aggregate that it is impermanent and suffering, and then says of it, “This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self” (*MN* 1.138–9), and thereby experience the absence of self. However, in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the aggregates are not related to any notion of the self and the central emphasis in the refrain of each section is simply the arising and vanishing of whatever we contemplate. The central point of contemplating the arising and vanishing of phenomena is not to experience some metaphysical implications of these, but as the text says to abide “independent, not clinging to anything in the world”. Paying close attention to the way bodily and mental features regularly arise and vanish helps us to stop craving and clinging. On this interpretation, awareness has considerable power. Observing how these states come and go helps transform how we respond to these changes.²⁶ This is not an unfamiliar idea. For example, if I am easily distracted, close attention to the sequence of events that results in distraction can help me overcome the bad habit (Anālayo 2003, pp. 175–6).

For the Buddha, states often arise with feelings of pleasure and pain, and this commonly gives rise to craving and clinging. Carefully observing the process (and factors which both encourage and discourage it) can teach us how it works and can enable us to overcome these problematic reactions. Mindfulness meditation cannot achieve this on its own: It is one aspect of the Eightfold Path. However, in conjunction with the other practices (moral, intellectual, and meditative), it can lead to *Nibbāna*. According to Bhikkhu Anālayo, writing about the refrain, “not clinging to anything in the world” is “the gist of the whole practice” (2018, p. 44).

By repeatedly directing our attention to the various ways in which physical and psychological phenomena come and go, we can learn how to live without clinging and hence without suffering.²⁷

8 No-self

It may be wondered what the knowledge-how model implies about the role the Buddhist teaching concerning the self plays in attaining enlightenment. At one level, it is compatible with different interpretations. A minority interpretation denies that the Buddha had a no-self teaching. Though this interpretation is compatible with the knowledge-how model, I am not endorsing this reading. The more common interpretation is that realization that there is no self is the most central part of Buddhist enlightenment. Since meditative practices could have different purposes, the claim that the core meditative practices are re-habitation exercises meant to end craving is compatible with the claim that they are also cognitive exercises designed to generate awareness of no-self. However, since I have cast doubt on this second claim, it might be supposed that the no-self doctrine, though part of the Buddha's teaching, is less important for overcoming suffering than is often supposed. This is a possible implication of the knowledge-how approach worth exploring.

In the *Sabbāsaṅga Sutta*, the Buddha describes six “speculative” views concerning the self as a “fetter” that does not enable a person to overcome suffering. One of these is the view that “no self exists for me”. What does enable a person to overcome suffering, the text says, is to “attend wisely” to the Four Noble Truths (*MN* 1.8–9). A traditional interpretation of this passage is that this is compatible with the Buddha's no-self teaching because the denial of a self that is a fetter is the denial of continuity of the person after death (what is called annihilationism). Though this might be so, the passage might be interpreted to mean that it is more important to focus on craving as the cause of suffering than to worry about issues concerning the self.

Competing approaches suggested in the *Upaniṣads* and early manifestations of Sāṃkhya (one of the six orthodox Vedic schools in a traditional classification) maintained that knowledge of the true self (*ātman* or *puruṣa*) is crucial to overcoming suffering. By contrast, the Buddha claimed that what is most important for overcoming suffering is the fact that our experience of the world is always dependently arisen and impermanent. From this perspective, attending to this feature of experience, particularly to how feeling typically gives rise to craving and hence suffering, is what really matters. With suitable assumptions, the dependent arising and impermanence of the aggregates imply that there is no self that is distinct from other things and that has identity through time. The Buddha's teaching is that there is no self in this sense. However, carefully examining the conditioned and changing nature of our physical and mental processes, in order to end craving, is the way to end suffering. This might explain why the central meditative practices in the *Nikāyas* focus on this rather than the absence of self.

9 Conclusion

I have distinguished two competing models for understanding the role of meditation in early Buddhism – the knowledge-how and metaphysical understanding models – and argued for the knowledge-how model. Specifically, I have argued that the two core meditative techniques in Buddhism, concentration and mindfulness, are not intended to enable discovery of the metaphysics of the self. Rather, they are better understood as re-habitation processes intended to eliminate craving and hence suffering – the practical goal that constitutes Buddhist enlightenment.

For both models, meditation plays a crucial role in Buddhism understood as a self-cultivation philosophy (Gowans 2021, ch. 4). However, in the metaphysical understanding model meditation provides awareness of the absence of self while in the knowledge-how model it enables us to change our habits. In self-cultivation philosophies, both knowledge-that and knowledge-how are important. My claim is that the classic forms of Buddhist meditation are better understood as establishing knowledge-how rather than knowledge-that.

Abbreviations

- AN Bodhi, B., trans., 2012. *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya*. Boston, MA: Wisdom.
- DN Walshe, M., trans., 1987. *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya*. Boston, MA: Wisdom.
- MN Ñāṇamoli, B., and Bodhi, B., trans. and eds., 1995. *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*. Boston, MA: Wisdom.
- SN Bodhi, B., trans., 2000. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*. 2 volumes. Boston, MA: Wisdom.
- Vism. Buddhaghosa, B., 1999. *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*. Translated by B. Ñāṇamoli. Seattle, WA: Buddhist Publication Society Pariyatta Editions.

Notes

- 1 See, Goodman (2013).
- 2 All foreign terms here are in Pāli, the language in which the early Buddhist canon was first recorded (the Pāli Canon), unless otherwise noted; some terms are identical in Sanskrit, e.g., *vipassanā*.
- 3 See Kachru (this *Handbook*, Chapter 5) and Vervaeke (this *Handbook*, Chapter 12), for additional arguments in favor of the claim that meditation, in general, is more about *knowledge-how* than about *knowledge-that*.
- 4 See MN 1.137–9. “MN” is an abbreviation for the *Majjhima Nikāya*, akin to “NE” (*Nichomachean Ethics*). See the Abbreviations section for all such abbreviations of canonical Buddhist texts, together with their full bibliographical references.
- 5 For example, see Bommarito (2020), pp. 194–5; Dreyfus (1995), p. 45; Marinoff (this *Handbook*, Chapter 14), and Siderits (2007), pp. 24–5. Cf. Tillemans (2013).
- 6 The distinction was first noted by Gilbert Ryle and is common in philosophy, but there are many debates about it (Kremer 2021). Here I rely on the intuitive difference between, for example, knowing how to swim and knowing that the pool opens at noon.
- 7 See *Vism.*, ch. 9.
- 8 See Carlisle (2006), pp. 80–81, and Gethin (1998), pp. 187–8.
- 9 On the Buddha’s empiricism, see Holder (2013), pp. 224–5.
- 10 For a deeper exploration of this line of reasoning about whether the absence of self can be discerned in meditative experience, see Kachru (this *Handbook*, Chapter 5) and Struhl (this *Handbook*, Chapter 16).
- 11 The Buddha and *arahants* (enlightened beings) engaged in the “concentration by mindfulness of breathing”. The *arahants* found this to be a “pleasant dwelling” (SN 5.325–6; see also 3.169).
- 12 The formula raises multiple interpretive questions. My point here is to draw attention to the four sections in the middle that enable us to focus on the purpose of meditation.
- 13 ‘*Nibbāna*’ is Pāli for ‘nirvana’.
- 14 On a path as an image for habit, see Carlisle (2014), pp. 23–7.
- 15 Cf. Garfield (2017), pp. 217–18.
- 16 For philosophical discussions of habit, see Carlisle (2014), Matthews (2017), Pollard (2010), and Sparrow and Hutchinson (2013). Research in psychology on the transformation of habits is summarized in Wood (2019).
- 17 The best-known dual process theory is in Kahneman (2011). For an overview of some dual-process theories, see Evans (2018). Habits are related to dual-process models in Wood et al. (2014).

- 18 Wood (2019) argues that contemporary research on habit change supports the last three of these features, but not the first.
- 19 See Varela (1999), p. 72. Cf. Carlisle (2006), pp. 80–83.
- 20 At least for *arahants* who are still alive. Cf. Nyanaponika (2000), pp. 107–12. This view may seem closer to constructivist accounts of enlightenment that stress the acquisition of positive characteristics than to innateist accounts that emphasize the discovery of these characteristics; see MacKenzie (2021), pp. 61–2. However, even the latter could allow that an *arahant* has good habits.
- 21 For overviews, see Gethin (1998), pp. 198–201, and Shulman (2014), pp. 40–50.
- 22 See also *MN* 1.276–78, and *DN* 1.73–6.
- 23 For an analysis, see Gethin (1998), pp. 174–87.
- 24 For a longer version, see *DN* 2.290–315.
- 25 See Anālayo (2003), pp. 46–9; Gethin (2001), pp. 36–44; and Shulman (2014), pp. 113–26.
- 26 Hence, there is an element of knowing-that in knowing-how, as is often the case in training programs. Cf. Holder (2013), pp. 236–9.
- 27 See also Davis (2017), p. 226, and Garfield (2017), pp. 209–12, who emphasizes the ethical implications of this.

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