

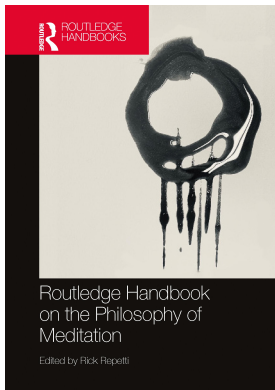
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6

DIFFERENCES AND INTERACTION BETWEEN MEDITATIVE CULTIVATION AND PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT/ INSIGHT IN EARLY AND THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM

Peter Harvey

1 Introduction

In this chapter I explain in detail the centrally transformative role meditation plays in the early and Theravāda Buddhist philosophical/soteriological traditions. I speak from within these traditions, which assume certain metaphysical frameworks I will not argue for here. The point, rather, is to demonstrate the extent to which meditation is intertwined with philosophy within these traditions of critical reflective analysis and mental cultivation.

Modern Western philosophy aims at cognitive clarity, though rarely uses the term ‘wisdom’ regarding itself, the way, e.g., ancient Greek philosophers did. That is not to deny modern philosophers may cultivate wisdom themselves. Within Buddhism, there is a long tradition of interaction and interplay between meditative cultivation of the mind and scholarly philosophical probing of what are seen as mistaken ideas and harmful cognitive orientations, overcoming both being aspects of wisdom.

The Pāli term generally translated as ‘wisdom’ is ‘*paññā*’,¹ though this can mean the understanding that matures into wisdom. It is of three kinds (D.III.219, Vism.XIV.14),² based on learning, reflection, and development: experiential understanding which comes from meditative ‘development’ or ‘cultivation’ (*bhāvanā*) of the heart/mind (*citta*). The third aspect is what becomes wisdom. Of this, according to the Buddha, it is said, “Here, monks, a noble disciple is wise (*paññavā*); he possesses *paññā* directed at arising and passing away, which is noble and penetrative, leading to the complete destruction of the painful (*dukkha*)” (S.V.197).

2 Buddhist meditation and philosophy working together

There are many forms of Buddhist meditation, but all aim to develop deep changes of attitude, and to address emotional and cognitive distortions, which are seen to feed each other. Meditations are forms of training that aim to cultivate greater clarity of thought/understanding, and produce a deep reorientation, challenging instincts and habitual reactions.

Meditation is a key part of the Buddhist project of attaining *bodhi*: enlightenment or awakening to the true nature of reality, and awakening from various limiting and harmful mental defilements. The path to this involves the cultivation of ethical discipline, meditative training, and wisdom. One way of expressing the requirements for awakening are: *samatha* (calm, peace, tranquility) and *vipassanā* (insight) (S.IV.360). Both are aspects of liberating knowledge: If *samatha* is cultivated, the heart/mind (*citta*) is developed, which leads to the abandonment of attachment/lusting after (*rāga*); if *vipassanā* is cultivated, wisdom (*paññā*) is developed, which leads to abandonment of spiritual ignorance (*avijjā*) (A.I.61; cf. A.II.93–5).

The Buddhist path involves work on both affective and cognitive aspects of the mind: attachment-rooted emotional reactions for/against things, and how one sees/understands them. These are inter-related, for emotional turbulence makes it difficult to see clearly, and confusion and misperception feed emotional turbulence. Working together, *samatha* and *vipassanā* bring about a state in which direct knowledge can arise in a calm, clear, peaceful mind.

3 The five hindrances

A key concept regarding meditative training is the ‘five hindrances’ (D.I.71–3): common human reactions that tend to hinder, obscure, and stultify the mind’s potential for developing sustained, well-focused application to any task, including meditation. They are expressions of the mind’s shifting, restless nature. They are limiting, restricting, ego-centered emotions which keep the mind/heart ‘small’, make it unworkable, brittle, hard to skillfully apply in a flowing way, and muffle mental lucidity. Hence, they are “makers of blindness, causing lack of vision, causing lack of knowledge, detrimental to wisdom, tending to vexation, leading away from Nibbāna” (S.V.97).³ They make it “is impossible for one to understand what is for the true welfare of oneself, others, or both” (A.III.63–4). When absent, the mind is like a calm, clear, undisturbed pool in which a person of good eyesight could “see the oysters and shells, the gravel and pebbles as they lie, or the shoals of fish as they dart about and are at rest” (A.I.9). Cf. a dirty or steamed-up car windshield preventing a driver from seeing clearly and driving safely.

The five hindrances are:

1. Desire for sense-pleasures, which pull the mind away from a probing focus on a calming object or on challenging an ingrained misperception.
2. Ill-will/aversion, which narrows one’s focus onto a disliked object, along with what may be an unrealistic ‘spin’ on how it is seen.
3. Dullness and lethargy, which keeps the mind in a passive, disengaged state, or draws it towards this.
4. Restlessness and guilty worry or unease: upswing and downswing forms of agitation that militate against a calm and undistorted basis for examining experience.
5. Vacillation: wavering doubt about one’s abilities or the worth of what one is doing, and on which states and actions are wholesome and unwholesome.

Various forms of meditation, such as mindfulness of breathing, on elemental processes within and/or outside the body, or contemplation of the inspiring qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma (Pāli; Sanskrit: Dharma – his teachings), and Saṅgha (community of advanced practitioners), are used to help the mind stand back from, and let go of, the hindrances. Then, when it is seen that the five hindrances are suspended:

gladness (*pāmujaṇṇ*) arises in one, from gladness comes joy (*pīti*), when the mind (*mana-*) is joyful, the body becomes tranquil (*kāyo passambhati*), when the body is tranquil one experiences (bodily and mental) pleasure (*sukhaṇṇ*) and with pleasure one's mind is concentrated (*cittaṇṇ samādhīyati*).

(D.I.73)

These are seen as a natural sequence of conditions (S.II.29–32). Once meditative concentration (*samādhī*) is attained, the emphasis may turn to:

- Equanimous, mindful observation of the changing processes of body and mind, to develop insight (*vipassanā*) into them as impermanent (*anicca*), in some way painful (*dukkha*), and not a permanent self or possession (*anattā*), or
- The *jhānas*, states of deeply concentrated mindful stillness before later developing *vipassanā*.

4 The radiant nature of mind

The mind affected by the hindrances is like unrefined gold, mixed with impurities, “neither malleable nor wieldy nor brightly shining, but brittle and not properly fit for working” (S.V.92). Meditation ‘refines’ the mind, separating it from the hindrances, to manifest a basic brightness in awareness:

Monks, this mind is brightly shining, but it is defiled by defilements which arrive. The uninstructed ordinary person does not understand this as it has come to be. So, I say, there is no meditative cultivation of the mind for the uninstructed ordinary person.

Monks, this mind is brightly shining, but it is free of defilements which arrive. The instructed disciple of the noble one understands this as has come to be. So, I say, there is meditative cultivation of the mind for the instructed disciple of the noble one.

(A.I.10)

This describes the basic nature of mind as ‘brightly shining’ (*pabhassara*), though often defiled by defilements which ‘visit’ and act like house-visitors who behave like they own the place.

In the Theravāda tradition, Buddhaghosa refers to radiant mind as the “naturally pure *bhavaṅga* mind”, the resting state of mind, as in dreamless sleep.⁴ When unobscured by defilements (which meditation facilitates), the brightly shining basic nature of mind can be a basis for the attainment of the liberating insight that leads to *Nibbāna*; otherwise, defilements return and rebirth follows, though maybe in heavenly realms where defilements are weak.⁵

5 Other mental defilements: Unwholesome, unskillful, harmful states

Amongst negative mental states the Buddhist path aims to overcome are ten ‘fettors’ (*saṃyojana*; e.g., S.V.61) binding one to suffering and rebirth. These are destroyed by the four levels of enlightenment:

The ‘Stream-enterer’⁶ ends the fetters of:

1. *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, ‘view on personality’, namely, taking any of the processes of body and mind – bodily form, feeling–tone, perception, volitional activities, or consciousness (the 5 *khandhas*) – as a permanent self, belonging to self, containing it, or being contained by it.
2. *vicikicchā*, vacillating doubt (fifth hindrance) about what mental states and actions are wholesome/unwholesome.
3. *sīla-bbata-parāmāsa*, clinging to certain forms of conduct and vows as sufficient for liberation (one of the four forms of grasping, along with grasping at sense–pleasures, views, and belief in an essential self-identity) (S.II.3).

The ‘Once-returned’ has reduced, but not yet entirely eliminated, the next two fetters:

4. *kāma-rāga*, attachment to sense–pleasures (equivalent to the first hindrance).
5. *vyāpāda*, ill-will (second hindrance).

The ‘Non-returned’ ends fetters 4 and 5, but still has these remaining five, which only the *Arahat* (enlightened being) ends:

6. *nīpa-rāga*, attachment to the pure ‘form’ level of the *jhānas* and corresponding heavenly rebirths.
7. *arīpa-rāga*, attachment to the extremely refined ‘formless’ meditative and heavenly levels.
8. *māna*, the deep-seated ‘conceit’ of “I am” (S.III.127–32), expressed in feelings of superiority, inferiority, or (complacent or competitive) equality (S.IV.88).
9. *uddhacca*, restlessness (an aspect of the fourth hindrance).
10. *avijjā*, spiritual ignorance, i.e., not seeing (or ignoring) *dukkha*, its cause, its ending, and the path to this (S.II.4).

While there is a basic radiance to the mind, these fetters are something all non-stream-enterers are born with as mental latencies. A baby does not have ideas of ‘personality’, ‘mental states’, ‘conduct’, ‘sensual pleasures’, or annoying ‘beings’, but has each of their underlying ‘latent tendency’ (*anusaya*) prior to developing them (M.I.432–3).

Elsewhere (S.V.60, D.III.254), there is a list of seven *anusayas*, in the form of tendencies to views (*cf.* fetter 1), vacillating doubt (fetter 2), attachment to sense–pleasures (fetter 4), *paṭigha* or aversion (*cf.* fetter 5), *bhava-rāga*, attachment to being (*cf.* fetters 6 and 7), conceit (fetter 8), and ignorance (fetter 10). One who ends these has ended fetters and rebirth-causing craving (A.IV.9). The tendency to attachment/lusting underlies most pleasant feeling, though not that occurring in the *jhānas*; the underlying tendency to aversion underlies most unpleasant feeling, unless it accompanies longing for liberation; and the underlying tendency to ignorance underlies most neutral feeling, though not that of the fourth *jhāna* (M.I.303–4; *cf.* M.I.285).

There is also a list of *āsavas*, with an *Arahat* often defined as one who has destroyed these. An *āsava* is something that ‘flows’ in a certain way, and ferments, so as to be akin to a festering sore, leeching off energy from the mind, and something which brings intoxication. Sometimes translated as ‘cankers’, ‘taints’, or ‘outflows’, they are best seen as ‘intoxicating inclinations’ – just as a leaning towards drinking alcohol leads to intoxication, when acted on. These tendencies flow or reach out towards certain things. They are the deep-seated inclinations to sensual pleasures (*kāma-*), to a way of being, an identity (*bhava-*), or ignorance (*avijjā-*), with fixed, dogmatic ‘views’ (*diṭṭhi-*) sometimes added as a fourth focus of them. They arise dependent on ignorance,

and ignorance arises dependent on them (M.I.54–5). They sustain ignorance, one of them is the inclination towards ignorance, and ignorance sustains the inclinations. The inclinations are deep-rooted, ingrained bad habits that need deep spiritual insight to illuminate and dispel the shadows in which they breed. When the mind's radiance is uncovered in meditation, there is an opportunity to use the bright clarity to examine things carefully.

Arahatship is also defined as the destruction of:

- Attachment (*rāga*), as in fetters 4, 6, and 7, but also roughly equivalent to greed, craving, grasping, and clinging to views.
- Hatred (*dosa*), as in fetter 5.
- Delusion (*moha*), equivalent to ignorance, the final fetter (S.IV.252).

Of these, it is said that:

Attachment is blamable to a small degree but its removal is slow; hatred is blamable to a great degree but its removal is quicker;⁷ delusion is blamable to a great degree and its removal is slow.

(A.I.200)

In the *Abhidhammatha-saṅgaha* (*The Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*), the Theravāda *Abhidhamma* (early Buddhist philosophical analysis) identifies *unwholesome* characteristics as:

- Those present in all unwholesome states: delusion, lack of self-respect (*a-hiri-ka*), disregard for the consequences of actions (*an-ottappa*), restlessness.
- Those that may be present: greed, view, conceit; hatred, jealousy, miserliness/meanness, guilty worry; dullness, drowsiness, vacillation (Bodhi 1992, pp. 79, 83–5).

6 Wholesome, skillful, beneficial states

While the above are negative, unwholesome/unskillful (*akusala*) states to understand, weaken, and bring an end to, there are many wholesome/skillful (*kusala*) states (Harvey 2010) to cultivate so as to overcome the former and their resultant harm.

The *suttas* (scriptural discourses) urge the cultivation of the four applications of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhānas*), the four right efforts, the four bases of success, the five faculties and five powers (trustful confidence, vigor, mindfulness (*sati*), concentration/mental unification (*samādhi*), and wisdom), the seven factors of awakening (*bojjhaṅgas*: mindfulness, investigation of states, vigor, joy, tranquility, concentration, equanimity), and the eight factors of the Noble Eightfold Path. Of the factors of awakening, it is said that, unlike the five hindrances, they “are makers of vision, makers of knowledge, promote the increase of wisdom, without vexation, and conducive to Nibbāna” (S.V.97).

The *Abhidhammatha-saṅgaha* identifies *wholesome* states as:

- Those characteristics present in all wholesome states: faith/confidence (*saddhā*), mindfulness, self-respect/sense of moral integrity (*hiri*), regard for consequences of actions (*ottappa*), non-greed (*alobha*, generosity and non-attachment), non-hate (lovingkindness, goodwill, friendliness), and equipoise; and six pairs of states pertaining to mind (*citta*) and the body (as experienced): stilling/tranquility, lightness, openness/flexibility, readiness, competence, and straightforwardness.

- Those which may be present: non-delusion (wisdom); (active impulses to) right speech, right action, right livelihood; compassion, appreciative/empathetic joy (Bodhi 1992, pp. 85–91).

As the Theravāda sees mindfulness as only occurring in wholesome states (though one Abhidhamma school, the Sarvāstivāda, sees an element of it in all mental states), mindfulness of a just-past moment of an unwholesome state undermines its recurrence, while mindfulness of a skillful state enhances it.

7 Attention training

To weaken and overcome unwholesome states and cultivate wholesome ones, one must become mindfully aware of each, and their harmful or beneficial effects. This is part of meditative practice, getting to know the field of one's mental states, as a set of interacting processes, and what conditions their arising. One should not take them personally, with self-blame or attachment to beneficial states, which goes beyond appreciation of their nature. One learns not to feed negative states, and to feed positive ones. Like muscles, they become stronger from use, and weaken from disuse. And one can think of them as related to brain pathways that become active/inactive from repeated activation/neglect.

Here, mindfulness is essential, though supported (A.V.113–16) by attention (*manasikāra*) which is wise and probing (*yoniso*), not unwise and superficial (*ayoniso*): where/how one places attention develops mental tendencies. What determines whether defilements 'visit' or stay in the mind is how the mental faculty (*mano*) is applied to objects, with attention being 'work-of-*mano*'. Hence, the need for heedfulness or alert, wise, attentiveness, to avoid mishandling the mind's relationships with its objects, hence inviting defilements.

Mind is the forerunner of all mental states.⁸ Mind is their chief; mind-made are they. If one speaks or acts with a sullied mind, because of that, suffering will follow one, even as the wheel follows the foot of the draught-ox.

Mind is the forerunner of all mental states. Mind is their chief; mind-made are they. If one speaks or acts with an unsullied mind, because of that, happiness follows, even as one's shadow that never leaves.

(*Dhp.* 1–2)

Monks, whatever states are unwholesome, have a part in unwholesomeness, are on the side of unwholesomeness: all these have mind as their forerunner. First arises mind, and those unwholesome states follow after.

Monks, whatever states are wholesome, have a part in wholesomeness, are on the side of wholesomeness: all these have mind as their forerunner. First arises mind, and those wholesome states follow after.

Monks, I do not see a single thing that so causes unwholesome states to arise and arisen wholesome states to decline as heedlessness (*pamādo*).

(*A.I.* 11)

It is said that:

For one engaged in unwise attention as regards (an object's) attractive aspect, unarisen attachment will arise and arisen attachment will increase and become strong

For one engaged in unwise attention as regards (an object's) irritating aspect, unarisen hatred will arise and arisen hatred will increase and become strong For one engaged in unwise attention, unarisen delusion will arise and arisen delusion will increase and become strong.

For one wisely attending to (an object's) unattractive aspect unarisen attachment will not arise and arisen attachment will be abandoned [counteract lust by thinking about e.g., ... human ear wax!] For one wisely attending to the liberation of mind by loving kindness, unarisen hatred will not arise and arisen hatred will be abandoned ... For one wisely attending, unarisen delusion will not arise and arisen delusion will be abandoned.

(A.I.200)

8 Everything as “empty of self and what pertains to self”

The practice of the four applications of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhānas*, M.I.55–63; Anālayo 2003; Gethin 2001, pp. 29–68) can be done through mindfulness of breathing within the *jhānas*, or kept on the point of ‘access’ to the first *jhāna* though not actually in *jhāna* (see p. 107). Its emphasis is on equanimously contemplating the changing flow of aspects of the body (e.g., breathing, movements, posture, parts of the body and its elements), feeling-tones, states of mind, and reality-patterns (*dhammas*), such as the five hindrances, the five *khandhas*, the seven factors of awakening, and the four true realities for the noble ones (usually called ‘noble truths’).

This practice attunes one to the impermanent and conditioned nature of bodily and mental phenomena, which in turn helps one see that they are *dukkha* (obviously or subtly painful to body or mind) and non-Self (not a permanent self or the possession of such a supposed thing). They are “empty of Self and what pertains to Self” (S.IV.54), hence impersonal processes. Thus, *vipassanā*, insight, arises, and ignorance/ignoring of these realities is challenged and undermined, overcoming cognitive distortions.

The non-Self (*anattā*) teaching is central to Buddhist philosophy, and yet its philosophical side is best seen as an implication of a very *practical* teaching. This is to carefully examine the things one identifies with as I/me/mine in a strong sense, thus as an autonomous, unchanging self-essence or ‘its’ possession, to see that they cannot be any such thing. This is to induce a deep letting go of attachment to them. When it is eventually recognized that everything is non-Self, “all *dhammas* are non-Self” (Dhp.279, A.I.286), then the clear implication is that there is no such thing as Self. But the focus of the practice is on letting go of attachment, not as such on a philosophical denial of Self (Harvey 1995, pp. 17–42; 2013, pp. 57–62).

If there was a truly unchanging Self, it could not know or do anything, as both of these involve subtle changes; and once something changes a little, it can end up changing a lot. In deep meditation, when the mind is very still, the mind can be seen to be a flow of changing processes. In this process-view, the ordinary empirical self, the mind, can be centered and strengthened by meditation, and as this is done, the stresses that go with the ‘I am’ conceit are increasingly seen as unnecessary, harmful baggage, to be dropped. So, a mindful process of self-development can lead to deepening insight into non-Self, and the sense of ‘I am’ increasingly evaporates.

These insights are in line with David Hume’s non-finding of a self, and Kant’s idea of self as unity of consciousness, except this is a shifting and mutable unity. Regarding Gilbert Ryle’s idea that the mind cannot observe itself, this assumes that the mind is one thing, rather than interacting processes. Although a specific instance of consciousness may be unable to observe itself, it can observe a just-past instance in short-term memory. Ryle’s argument (1949), that

introspection is impossible (because, e.g., observing rage diminishes it), is consistent with introspection, and illustrates our claim that mindfulness of an unskillful state diminishes it.

9 The four *jhānas*

Mindfulness works with the fine-grained nature of the mind, involving phenomenological observation that changes the flow of mental processes. These changes include altered states, e.g., *jhānas* (Cousins 1973; Harvey 2018a, 2019). Just because certain meditative states are ‘altered states’ does not mean they lack epistemic value. Deep scientific or philosophic reflection may involve altered states, in which one may not be attuned to ordinary reality.

The four *jhānas* allow the experience of increasingly deep inner silence. As things quieten, an alert person can notice more subtle ‘sounds’. The first *jhāna* can be entered once the five hindrances are suspended, with the gladness, joy, tranquility, pleasure, and concentration that come from recognizing this (see above):

Completely secluded from sense-pleasures, secluded from unskillful states, a monk enters and dwells in the first *jhāna*, joy and (easeful) pleasure (*pīti-sukhaṃ*) born of seclusion, accompanied by mental application and examining. He suffuses, fills, soaks, and drenches this very body with the joy and pleasure born of seclusion, so that there is no part of his whole body that is untouched by that joy and pleasure.

From the subsiding of mental application and examining, a monk enters and dwells in the second *jhāna*, joy and pleasure born of concentration (*samādhi*), without mental application and examining and with inner calm confidence and mental unification. He suffuses ... this very body with the joy and pleasure born of concentration

With the fading away also of joy, a monk dwells equanimously and, mindful and clearly comprehending, he experiences with the body the (mental) pleasure of which the noble ones speak, saying, “equanimous and mindful, he dwells happily”; he enters and dwells in the third *jhāna*. He suffuses ... this very body with a happiness distinct from joy ...

A monk, from the letting go of (all) pleasure and pain, as a result of the disappearance of previous happiness and unhappiness, enters and dwells in the fourth *jhāna*, neither painful nor pleasant, with purity of mindfulness by equanimity. A monk sits suffusing this very body with a mind (*cetasā*) that is thoroughly purified and cleansed.

(D.I 73–5; M.I.276–7; M.III.92–4; A.III.25–7)

Here, the mind becomes absorbed in concentration, with a mental imprint (*nimitta*) of the flow of the in- and out-breath (for example) – seeing light (*obhāsa*) and forms (*rūpas*) (M.III.157–62; Vism.VIII.214–15), e.g., a glowing vortex of air. As the hindrances fall away, a sense of relief brings gladness and hence energizing, tingling, effervescent joy and more tranquil, easeful pleasure of body and mind, which both suffuse the body.

At first, mental application (*vitakka*) and examination (*vicāra*) are used to fully engage the mind with the object. But once a strong link is established, these are no longer needed, and joy (*pīti*) and pleasure become dominant in a very concentrated and calmly confident state. Then the joy falls away, along with the physical aspect of the pleasure (S.V.213–16), leaving a state strong in happiness, mindfulness, and equanimity. Then, happiness falls away, leaving a neutral feeling tone, great mindfulness, and equanimity, and a purity of mind that suffuses the whole of one’s body and being.

In Theravāda *Abhidhamma*, *vitakka*, *vicāra*, and joy (*pīti*) are not necessarily skillful, but can intensify skillful or unskillful states (Bodhi 1992, pp. 77–83). Their being accompanied by states such as mindfulness ensures they are part of a skillful state. Pleasure and concentration can also exist in any mental state, though here they are very strong.

At first, a *jhāna* may last only a few moments (A.I.38; Vism.IV.78; Cousins 1973, pp. 123–4), after which the mind reverts to a close-to-*jhāna* state. But with mastery, *jhānas* may last for hours. When fully in a *jhāna*, the mind has little or no spare ‘bandwidth’ to notice sense-input such as sounds, other than the joy, etc., felt within the body. As the mind moves towards the fourth *jhāna*, external sense-input falls away except when mind moves between *jhānas* (Harvey 2018a, pp. 19–24; 2019, pp. 35–40). The mind is very still, but highly alert and sensitive, very aware of what is happening in the mind and body. Cf. a person closely inspecting what is seen in a microscope, without noticing anything else.

10 The four formless states, and cessation

On the basis of the fourth *jhāna*, meditation can take some different routes. One is to deepen the inner calm, using the qualities of the fourth *jhāna* to focus on four formless (*arūpa*) spheres of experience (*āyatana*). These are the spheres of infinite space, infinite consciousness, no-thingness, and neither-perception-nor-non-perception (M.I.41, Harvey 2021, pp. 184–94). These involve attunement to subtle and automatic aspects of perception, and progressively switching these off to attune to more subtle ones. While the *jhānas* particularly work on feeling-tone (*vedanā*), leaving unpleasant feeling behind, developing pleasant feeling, then leave a balanced feeling neither pleasant nor unpleasant, the formless states particularly work on the quality of perception or ideation (*saññā*), first strengthening it to notice subtle background spatiality, then to being so attenuated that it is neither fully operative nor absent.

In the sphere of infinite space, all perception or idea of the forms of the objects of the five senses drops away, and mind is attuned only to the quality of spatiality within which sense-objects are normally logged and ‘located’. With no sense-objects registered, this spatial framework is experienced as unlimited. In the sphere of infinite consciousness, awareness of space falls away and the focus turns to the consciousness that has been aware of it, or of anything. The emphasis is on awareness of awareness itself, irrespective of its objects. This can be seen as akin to focusing on a mirror rather than on what it reflects. Without attention to any object of consciousness, consciousness is experienced as unlimited.

Given that human experience is an interplay between consciousness and ‘name and form’ (*nāma-rūpa*) (D.II.32, pp. 63–4), and form and consciousness have been let go of, attention turns to the naming-related aspects of mind (S.II.3: feeling-tone, perception, volition, contact, attention), especially perception, which labels/classifies things. In the sphere of no-thingness, the mind lets go of thought of any named ‘thing’ (*kiñcana*), issue, problem, or possession (D.III.217; M.I. 298; Sn. 645, 1098–9; Harvey 2021, pp. 190–91). Then, in the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, perception is so attenuated as to hardly exist. All it is aware of is the falling away of any perceived ‘things’.

The third and fourth formless states were experienced by Gotama prior to becoming a Buddha (M.I.163–7). He valued them but did not see them as going all the way to liberation, but only to extremely refined and long-lasting rebirths. After trying these body-*transcending* states, he tried harsh asceticism (M.I.240–46), to *forcefully master* the body and its desires. In time, he found this a spiritual dead-end, as well as life-threatening. But then he remembered having attained the first *jhāna* in his youth, and decided to explore the *jhānas*, their wholesome happiness, and *mindfulness* of the body, as a route to liberation.

Later, he integrated the four formless states into what he taught, with the implication that, if they were attained via the *jhānas*, in the way he taught them – with an emphasis on their joy, happiness, and equanimity – they would be experienced in a more beneficial way than how he was himself introduced to them (Anālayo 2020). He also added, beyond the fourth formless state, a further state: the cessation of perception and feeling (*saññā-vedayita-nirodha*, A.IV.454; M.I.301–2). This could only be attained by one with mastery of the *jhānas* and formless states, and great insight, by those *Arahats* and the near-*Arahat* Non-returners with this mastery (A.III.194; M.I.175; Vism.XXIII.18). In this state, the mind completely shuts down temporarily, though the body remains alive (M.I.296; Vism.XXIII.16–52). When the meditator emerges from this state, it is with great wisdom, and the cognitive shock of the re-start of mental states – empty, without perceptual impressions, aim-free (M.I.302) – may lead to liberation.

11 The *jhānas* and most formless states as “doors to the deathless”

The alert stillness of *jhāna* can also be used to see beyond *jhāna* towards *Nibbāna*. It is said that the immeasurable development of loving kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity, the 4 *jhānas*, and the first 3 formless states, in which perception is sufficiently active, are ‘doors to the deathless’ (M.I.350–53 and A.V.343–7), like 11 exits from a burning house. Here, attention is given to the limitations of any conditioned state, even sublime ones.

One may contemplate these as “conditioned and volitionally shaped (*abhisaiṅkhatam abhisaiṅcetaṅgam*) ... impermanent and subject to cessation (*nirodha-dhammam*)”, to open mind towards *Nibbāna*, and possibly become an *Arahat* or Non-returner. Similarly, one can review each *khandha* in any *jhāna* or the first three formless states, as impermanent, unsatisfactory, and non-Self, so mind turns away from these states towards the ‘deathless element’ as, “This is the peaceful, ... excellent, ... the stilling of all volitional activities (*sabba-saiṅkhāra-samatho*),⁹ the relinquishing of all acquisitions (*sabbūpadhi-ṭṭhinissago*), the destruction of craving, dispassion, stopping *Nibbāna*” (M.I.435–6).

In such contemplations, the mind must step slightly aside from the relevant *samādhi*, shifting focus from *samādhi*’s object to the *samādhi* itself, and then to the ‘deathless’, while retaining most of the qualities of concentration, calm, mindfulness, etc.

12 Higher knowledges

Once the mind is in the fourth *jhāna*, it is said:

When the mind is thus composed, purified, bright, without blemish, the defilements removed, malleable, wieldy, steady and attained to imperturbability, he directs and inclines the mind to knowing and seeing.

Eight insight-knowledges are then described:

1. Differentiating the impermanent gross physical body from consciousness, which is “supported by and bound up with it”.
2. Creating a mind-made body (*manomaya-kāya*), “having all the main and subsidiary parts” and drawing it out of the physical body like a sword from its sheath.
3. Developing supernormal powers (*iddhi*) such as multiplying one’s form, becoming invisible, moving through solid objects, diving into the earth, walking on water, and flying.

4. Acquiring the “divine ear” that can hear “both human and divine sounds, far and near”.
5. Knowing whether someone’s mind is with or without attachment, hatred or delusion, and distracted, concentrated, liberated or unliberated.¹⁰
6. Memory of past lives, from one to a hundred thousand, into past eons of the world, with knowledge of name, clan, appearance, food, pleasures and pains, and lifespan.
7. Using the “divine eye” to track how beings are reborn according to the nature of their karma.
8. Then “he directs and inclines the mind towards the destruction of the intoxicating inclinations”. He directly knows as it really is: “*This* is the painful (*dukkha*)”; “*this* is the origin of the painful”; “*this* is the cessation of the painful”; “*this* is the way leading to the cessation of the painful”.

He directly knows as it really is: “These are the intoxicating inclinations”; “this is the origin of the intoxicating inclinations”; “this is the cessation of the intoxicating inclinations”; “this is the way leading to the cessation of the intoxicating inclinations”.

When he knows and sees thus, his mind is liberated from the intoxicating inclination to sensual desire, from the intoxicating inclination to a way of being, and from the intoxicating inclination to ignorance.

When it was liberated, there comes the knowledge: “It is liberated”, and he directly knows: “Birth is destroyed,¹¹ the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, and there is nothing more to be done hereafter”.

(D.I.76–84)

Here, 3–8 are often called the six *abhiññās*, ‘higher knowledges’, and 6–8 are known as the *tevijjās*, ‘threefold knowledge’, that the Buddha attained on the night of his awakening (M.I.246–9).

The first knowledge involves making a clear differentiation between the physical body and mental states. The second, developing a ‘mind-made body’, seems an extension of this: the pure mind that pervaded the experienced body on the fourth *jhāna* seems to be used to ‘carry’ a full sense of the experienced body beyond the physical frame. The supernormal powers of the third knowledge seem typically exercised with this mind-body, though the Buddha could exercise them with his mind-made body or his physical body (S.V.283). The mind-made body is said to feed on joy (D.I.17), not solid nutriment (D.I.195), and to be invisible to the normal eye (Patis. II.209). It occupies space but does not impinge on matter (A.III.122). In one sense, it could be seen as a vividly imagined body. To meditatively visualize/sense one’s body walking through walls, etc., has an interesting effect, loosening one’s attachment to one’s ordinary body. In this sense, it could be seen to open mind and prepare for subsequent knowledges.

Some *Arahats* attain these knowledges, and are ‘both ways liberated’, but some do not, as they are only ‘liberated by wisdom’, though they may have attained some *jhānas* (S.II.121–3; M.I.477). In the *suttas*, people often attain Stream-entry by listening to the Buddha teach, until their hindrances are suspended, then receiving a teaching on the four true realities for the noble ones (*ariya-saccas*), on *dukkha*, etc. (S.V.423; M.I.379–80). Likewise, the Buddha’s first disciples went on to attain Arahatship by focusing on the Buddha’s teaching on non-Self (Vin.I.13–14; S.III.66–8). While deep states of mindfully alert, calm concentration aid insight, insight can be attained from lesser levels of such states.

13 Cognition in a stilled mind

So, meditation can certainly dampen down aspects of our cognitive and conative processing, but these may be aspects of human functioning that generate obscuring ‘noise’ that make it difficult

to perceive certain things and introduce distortions. The usual functioning of the cognitive apparatus may miss or downplay much. As with physical instruments, the mind can be re-tuned and/or used in novel ways.

Some see a tension between the minimizing/stopping of thought in meditation and the cognitive processing employed in the kinds of mental analysis needed in academic philosophy and the cultivation of Buddhist reflective insights. Yet while deep meditation goes beyond certain kinds of mental events, others continue. And when the ‘fog’ of thoughts clears, it can be easier to see certain things.

In the *Ānāpāna-satī Sutta* (M.III.82–8), on mindfulness of breathing, a person remains mindful of breathing in/out while noticing breathing being long or short, aware of the whole body of breath, and calming it; then being sensitive to joy and pleasure (as in *jhānas* 1–3), and to the feeling and perception which condition the mind (M.I.301) and calming these; then sensitive to the mind (*citta*; mentioned in the fourth *jhāna*, termed *cetasa*), and satisfying, concentrating, and releasing it; then contemplating impermanence, fading away, cessation, and letting go. This practice, used to attain the *jhānas* and then insight, clearly combines a concentrated mind-state with mindful awareness of a range of phenomena.

Various knowledges and insights can be attained from the fourth *jhāna* because the mind is so mindful, sensitive, focused, and undistracted. The mind, in this state, ‘steps sideways’, to focus on key aspects of experience to investigate. The crucial, liberating knowledge is no. 8. Here, attention is given to the limited, conditioned, impermanent, and subtly painful, unsatisfactory (*dukkha*) nature of even a very refined and subtle meditative state. There is a direct seeing, rather than a thought: “This is the painful (*dukkha*)”, just as the *Sacca-samyutta* (S.V.414–77) repeatedly says one should think, reflect, and directly see that “this is *dukkha*”, “This is the origin of *dukkha*”, “This is the cessation of *dukkha*”, “This is the way leading to the cessation of *dukkha*” (Harvey 2009, p. 197). The meditator sees *dukkha*, then sees craving, demanding, ever-moving desire as what drives this. Then how painfulness stops when craving stops, then recognizing the path that has led to seeing this. The *dukkha* aspect of existence as a whole is reinforced by knowledges 6–7, which remember repeated past existences and their pains, and see how beings are driven life-to-life by craving-fueled actions (karma). Memory of past lives is one use of mindfulness, for one definition of this is the ability to remember long-past things (S.V.197–8).

Knowledges 1–5, if attained, come from mindful attunement to the interconnected network of processes that beings and the world as a whole are.

Eviatar Shulman (2014)¹² rightly argues that in early Buddhist texts, liberation combines the deep calm of *jhāna* and philosophical insights, but with the latter not as a theoretical, conceptual understanding (that would be in tension with that calm absorption), but as direct perceptions. Hence, key early Buddhist doctrines “are the theoretical ramifications of one set of meditative perceptions, which focuses on the conditioned and ephemeral nature of all elements of experience as these are observed in a quieted mind” (*id.*, p. 187). The fourth *jhāna* is beyond *vitakka*, *vicāra*, and conceptuality (p. 6), but Shulman sees that this does not preclude philosophically relevant direct perceptions. In a key passage, he states:

In the Buddhist context, the content of “knowledge” or “insight” may not necessarily be verbal during the experience, but it may nevertheless be expressed in words following the experience, or possibly even during the experience itself, given that the verbal content is minimal or that it is internalised after continuous engagement; in this sense we may think of a noting that is not fully verbal but that nevertheless corresponds with the verbal definition that is formulized after the meditation and contemplated before it.

(p. 13)

Shulman does not see this as ‘mystical’, but parallel to how tasting an orange can be described, though never fully or uniquely. Deep meditative experience can contain insights with content that may be *hard* to put into words, but they are not wholly ‘ineffable’. And their richness can be expressed in a variety of inter-related ways.

The fourth *jhāna* includes strong mindfulness, with perception (*saññā*) still active. However, Shulman sees knowledge of one’s past lives and of how specific beings are reborn according to karma, as described in a more verbal, conceptual way, with ‘poetic license’, compared to how they may have occurred in meditation (p. 26). The final knowledge, concerning real-time responses to the flow of experience, is on seeing “*this* is suffering”, “*this* is the path that leads to the cessation of suffering”, and similarly with the *āsavas* in place of suffering/*dukkha*. As he rightly argues, this is not about elaborated conceptualization and philosophizing, and can arise in a state of deep concentration and calm, without disrupting it. This is possible once a certain perspective on experience and way of analyzing it has become ingrained in the mind and can be called on with no effort (pp. 31–2). Certain kinds of sustained study can already affect how one sees and experiences the world (p. 47), and this effect can increase in deep meditation.

14 The interaction of concepts and experience in Buddhist meditative states

Meditation-based insights, though they provide detailed information about oneself and others, are not aimed at generating knowledge new to the world; rather, they are person-transforming, direct confirmations of the Buddha’s insights. But they may well give a cognitive shock to those that experience them, as well as generating concepts new to non-Buddhists.

Key ideas validated by meditation in Buddhism include impermanence, including momentariness; *dukkha*, the subtle or gross pervasive painfulness/unsatisfactoriness of experience – this is partly descriptive, partly evaluative; and the physical and mental worlds as a dance of radically inter-conditioning processes, challenging our self-conceptions. The concepts emphasized in early Buddhism, including non-Self, were used as tools of a transformative *practice*, rather than abstract philosophical ideas, albeit with philosophical implications.

Buddhist concepts guide meditation, but the effects and insights from meditation are not a projection of Buddhist conceptual pre-programming, but build on previous such insights of oneself and others. Shulman argues that in early Buddhism, mindfulness was a tool for reprogramming how one perceives (2014, pp. 7–21). Systematic reflection was drawn on in mindful examination of experience to undo previous conditioning and replace it with more liberating conditioning. He emphasizes that reality is “always experienced through subjective cognitive structures” (p. 107) and,

mental attitude forges the very structure of experience. As much as this principle constrains, so it offers opportunities to manipulate conditioning in a manner that accords with one’s values. Early Buddhism was aware of this principle and made active use of it.
(pp. 108–9)

As I would put it, Buddhist practice aims at *re*-conditioning the mind before opening to its *de*-conditioning and knowing the unconditioned. Such ‘structuring’ is about the concepts one uses, but also what one values/disvalues, so as to be attuned to noticing the ‘three marks’ (impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, non-Self), or the harmful/beneficial effects of certain mental states.

Shulman says that, in *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation, “the meditator is intently engaged in the observations of current mental events while being aided by a complex conceptual map to guide this observation” (p. 124). Relevantly, in science, observations are also conducted in the context of a complex conceptual map. This gets refined when aspects of experience do not fit, but in

Buddhist meditation, a person's individual understanding can be challenged and amended by further practice.

15 Conclusion

Buddhist meditations aim to develop deep changes of attitude, and to address both emotional and cognitive distortions, as these feed each other. Meditations are forms of training whose aim is to change a person by understanding and challenging some of one's instincts and habitual reactions: forms of educating attention and perception as regards significant aspects of oneself and the world that one habitually overlooks. Hence a kind of mental re-programming, which also involves de-programming. This is as much psychology as philosophy, though it has philosophical implications.

It works with the fine-grained nature of the mind, involving phenomenological observation that changes the flow of mental processes. These changes include the attainment of altered states of consciousness, *jhānas*, which allow the experience of deep inner silence. As things quieten, an alert person can metaphorically notice more subtle 'sounds'. Then there are the four formless states, which involve attuning to subtle and automatic aspects of perception, and progressively switching these off, to attune to more subtle ones.

Some see a tension between the minimizing/stopping of thought in meditation and the cognitive processing needed for the kinds of mental analysis needed in the cultivation of Buddhist reflective insights. Yet while meditation goes beyond certain mental events, others continue. And when the 'fog' of thoughts clears, it can be easier to see certain things. This can bring a cognitive shock, even to Buddhists familiar with the relevant ideas on the mind as a complex dance of ownerless interacting processes.

I have detailed the early and Theravāda Buddhist philosophical frameworks in which meditation is presented as the primary practice for developing deep and wise transformative understanding of the nature of reality and of oneself, working alongside, and in interplay with, probing analytic discussions of an often philosophical nature. The incisive clarity, awareness, and mental refinement of deep meditative states clearly have philosophical implications and include philosophical realizations, though related philosophical *discussion* would typically be done in a state closer to everyday consciousness. While non-Buddhists may resist the supramundane metaphysical assumptions of Buddhism, the point remains: Meditation is a vehicle for philosophical insights and cutting away delusive ideas and concepts.

Abbreviations

- A. *Aṅguttara-nikāya*
D. *Dīgha-nikāya*
Dhp. *Dhammapada*
M. *Majjhima-nikāya*
Patis. *Paṭisambhidāmagga*
S. *Saṃyutta-nikāya*
Sn. *Sutta-nipāta*
Vin. *Vinaya*
Vism. *Visuddhimagga*

References are to Pali Text Society editions of the Pāli texts, by volume and page number, though by chapter and section for Vism., and verse number for Dhp. and Sn.

Notes

- 1 All translated foreign terms in the text are from the Pāli, the original language of early Buddhist texts, unless otherwise noted.
- 2 In Buddhist scholarship, there are standard styles of abbreviating canonical texts, as just illustrated in the text, similar to the Western philosophical tradition, which uses, e.g., 'NE', to abbreviate Aristotle's classic, *Nicomachean Ethics*. These are followed by numerals to refer either to verse numbers or to volume and page number of modern editions of the original texts, as opposed to page numbers of contemporary translations. Please see the 'Abbreviations' list.
- 3 'Nibbāna' is Pāli (the language of the early Buddhist canon) for 'Nirvāṇa' (Sanskrit), i.e., nirvana.
- 4 *Aṅguttara-nikāya* commentary, I.61.
- 5 Western philosophers may object to the implicit metaphysical assumptions here at least on certain matters; e.g., Legum (this *Handbook*, Chapter 1) develops a critique from Nozick about meditation to the effect that it lacks any cognitive value independently of these sorts of supramundane metaphysical assumptions. I write from within the Buddhist tradition, so I do not argue for these assumptions here. Cf. the chapters in this *Handbook* by Thapliyal (Chapter 7), Terry (Chapter 25), and Persico (Chapter 26), for examples of similar approaches from within Hinduism, Christianity, and Judaism.
- 6 The Stream-enterer is one who has entered the stream of the Noble Eight-factored Path (S.V.347–8), which leads to *Nibbāna* within seven lives; they cannot be reborn at less than a human level. The Once-returner's future rebirths can include only one at the level of a human or lower god; the Non-returner to these levels will attain *Nibbāna* in a higher heaven. The *Arahat* has fully attained *Nibbāna*, and cannot be reborn.
- 7 It is ended at an earlier stage of the spiritual path than attachment or delusion.
- 8 'Mind' (*mano*) refers to the awareness applied in attention, while 'mental states' (*dhammas*) are all other mental qualities, which follow its lead as regards their object and ethical tone.
- 9 'Saṅkhāra' could here mean either volitional activities or conditioned things.
- 10 It appears that the Buddha used this kind of power when giving sermons, as he often responded to the unspoken thoughts of people in his audience. The list of mind-states detectable in others is similar to those known in oneself in mindfulness of mental states (M.I.59).
- 11 Implicitly, rebirth, and the whole future process of the birth and death of impermanent, conditioned states.
- 12 See also Harvey (2018b).

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