

Two Styles of Insight Meditation

Today the practice of insight meditation has become popular all around the world, yet to achieve this popularity it has undergone a subtle metamorphosis. Perhaps the most powerful pressure that has shaped the contemporary style of teaching insight meditation has been the need to transplant the practice into a largely secular environment remote from its traditional matrix of Buddhist faith and doctrine. Rather than being presented as an integral part of the Buddhist path to deliverance from *saüsàra*, insight meditation is now taught as a self-contained discipline whose fruits pertain more to life within the world than to absolute release from the world. Many people who have taken up insight meditation eloquently testify to the tangible benefits they have gained, benefits that range from such relatively mundane goods as stress reduction and enhanced job performance to more spiritual ends like greater calm, deeper self-knowledge, and clearer awareness of the present.

While such benefits are certainly admirable in their own right, it must nevertheless be stressed that, taken by themselves, they do not constitute the final goal that the Buddha himself holds up as the end point of his training. That goal, in the terminology of the texts, is the attainment of *Nibbàna*, understood as the destruction of all defilements here and now and ultimate release from the beginningless round of rebirths. While the concrete results brought forth by the secularized practice of insight meditation will also permeate the experience of one who takes up the practice within a classical Buddhist framework, success in reaping these benefits is not necessarily an indication that one is drawing close to the final goal.

Given the sceptical climate of the present age and the stress on personal experience as a guide to truth, it is quite appropriate that newcomers to the Dhamma be invited to explore the potential inherent in the practice for themselves, without having the full agenda of Buddhist doctrine thrust upon them from the start as if it were another system of dogma. However, though we may initially take up the practice of meditation with an open and undogmatic attitude, at a certain point in our practice we inevitably arrive at a crossroads where we find ourselves faced with a choice. We can either continue with the meditation based upon the initial premises from which we started, generally a purely naturalistic worldview, or we can set off along a different track that leads to full actualization of the potential inherent in the practice. If we choose the first route, we might still deepen our meditation and reap more abundantly the same type of benefits we have obtained so far — deeper calm, more equanimity, greater openness to the present. Nevertheless, as worthwhile as these benefits might be in their own right, from the standpoint of the Dhamma they remain incomplete. For the practice of insight meditation to achieve its full potential as intended by the Buddha himself, it must be encompassed by several other qualities that rivet it to the framework of the teaching.

Foremost among such qualities are the complimentary pair of faith and right view. As a component of the Buddhist path, faith (*saddhà*) does not mean blind belief but a willingness to accept on trust certain propositions that we cannot, at our present stage of development, personally verify for ourselves. These propositions concern both the nature of reality and the higher reaches of the path. In the traditional map of the Buddhist path, faith is placed at the beginning of the training, as the prerequisite for the later stages comprised in the triad of virtue, concentration, and wisdom. The canonical texts do not seem to envisage the possibility that a person lacking faith in the

specifically Buddhist sense could take up the practice of insight meditation and reap positive results from it. Yet today such a phenomenon has become extremely widespread, as many present-day meditators make their initial contact with the Dhamma through intensive insight meditation and use their experience as a touchstone for deciding exactly how to incorporate the Dhamma into the pattern of their lives.

On the basis of this choice, we find that meditators divide into two broad camps. One consists of those who focus exclusively upon the immediately tangible benefits of the practice, suspending all concern with what lies beyond the horizons of their own experience. The other consists of those who recognize that the practice flows from a source of wisdom much deeper and broader than their own. In order to follow this wisdom in the direction to which it points, such meditators are ready to subordinate their own understanding of the world to the disclosures of the teaching and embrace the Dhamma as an organic whole. These are the ones who adopt Buddhism in its religious and doctrinal sense as the framework for their practice.

The fact that insight meditation can be earnestly practised even without the sustaining role of faith raises an interesting question never explicitly posed within the canon and commentaries. If insight meditation can be pursued solely for the sake of its immediately visible benefits, what role does faith play in the development of the path? Certainly faith, in the sense of a full acceptance of Buddhist doctrine, is not a necessary condition for the undertaking of the precepts or the practice of meditation. As we have seen, those who lack faith in the distinctively Buddhist tenets of the Dhamma might still accept the Buddhist precepts as guidelines to right conduct and practise meditation as a way to inner happiness and peace. Thus faith must play a different role than that of a simple spur to action.

Perhaps an answer to our question will emerge if we ask, "What exactly does faith mean in the context of Buddhist practice?" It should be clear at once that faith cannot be adequately explained simply as reverence for the Buddha as a great spiritual teacher, or as some alloy of devotion, admiration, and gratitude. For while these qualities often exist alongside faith, they may all be present even when faith is absent. If we look at faith more closely, we would see that besides its emotional constituents, faith also involves an indispensable cognitive component. This component consists in a readiness to accept the Buddha as the unique discoverer and proclaimer of liberating truth. From this angle, faith is seen to involve a decision. As the word decision implies ("to decide" = to cut off), to place faith in something is to exercise an act of discrimination. Thus Buddhist faith entails, at least implicitly, a rejection of the claims of other spiritual teachers to be bearers of the liberating message on a par with the Buddha himself. As a decision, faith also entails acceptance, that is, a willingness to open oneself to the principles made known by the Enlightened One and accept them on trust as reliable presentations of the real nature of things and of the proper way of life.

It is this decision that marks the distinction between one who takes up the practice of insight meditation as a purely naturalistic discipline and one who takes it up within the framework of Buddhist faith. The former, by suspending any judgement about the picture of the human condition imparted by the Buddha, limits the fruits of the practice to those that are compatible with a purely naturalistic worldview. The latter, by accepting the Buddha's own picture of the human condition, gains access to the goal held up by the Buddha as the final fruit of the practice, complete deliverance of mind and the realization of Nibbàna.

The second pillar that supports the practice of insight meditation is the cognitive counterpart of faith, namely, right view (*sammà diññhi*). Though the word *Bright,ū* might suggest that the practitioner actually sees the principles considered to be *Bright,ū* at the outset of the training this is seldom the case. For all but a few exceptionally gifted disciples, *Bright view,ū* initially means right belief, the acceptance of principles and doctrines out of confidence in the enlightenment of the Buddha. Though Buddhist modernists often claim that the Buddha said that one should believe only what one can see and verify for oneself, no such statement is found in the Pali Canon. What the Buddha does say is that one should not accept his teachings blindly but should inquire into their meaning and attempt to realize their truth for oneself. There are, however, many principles taught by the Buddha as essential to right understanding that we cannot, at the outset of training, ascertain for ourselves. These are by no means unimportant, but define the entire framework of the Buddha's programme of deliverance. They delineate the deeper dimensions of the suffering from which we need release, point in the direction where true liberation lies, and prescribe with pinpoint precision the steps to be followed to arrive at the liberating wisdom.

These principles include the tenets of both *βmundane,ū* and *βtranscendent,ū* right view. Mundane right view is the type of correct understanding that leads to a fortunate destination within the round of rebirths. It involves an acceptance of the principles of kamma and its fruit; of the distinction between meritorious and evil actions; of the vast expanse and multiple domains of samsàra within which rebirth may occur. Transcendent right view is the view leading to liberation from saüsàra in its entirety. It entails understanding the Four Noble Truths in their deeper dimensions, as offering not merely a diagnosis of psychological distress but a description of saüsàric bondage and a programme for final release. It also involves understanding dependent origination as an account of the causal dynamism of saüsàra; recognizing the inadequacy in all conditioned modes of being; and accepting Nibbàna as the sphere that offers final deliverance from suffering.

While the actual *techniques* for practising insight meditation may be identical whether it be pursued as a purely naturalistic discipline or taken up as an integral part of the Buddha's path, the two styles of practice will nevertheless differ profoundly with respect to the *results* those techniques are capable of yielding. When practised conscientiously within the framework of a naturalistic understanding, insight meditation will bring greater calm, understanding, and equanimity. It will purify the mind of the coarser layers of defilements and can culminate in a tranquil acceptance of life's vicissitudes coupled with a capacity for compassionate action. Thus this style of practice should not be disparaged. However, practice in this style will still remain confined to the sphere of the conditioned; it will still be tied to the round of wholesome kamma and its fruit. It is only when insight meditation is buttressed from below by deep faith in the Buddha as the perfectly enlightened teacher, and illuminated from above by the wisdom of the Buddha's teachings, that it acquires the power to cut away all the fetters that have kept us in bondage through beginningless time. It then becomes the key to open the doors to the Deathless, to winning a freedom that can never be lost. With this, insight meditation transcends the limits of the conditioned, transcends even itself, and arrives at its proper goal: the unconditioned truth of Nibbàna, final release from all fetters and from the round of birth, aging, and death.

Bhikkhu Bodhi

From Other Publishers

The Mission Accomplished: A Study of the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta. Ven. Pategama Gnanarama. 239 pp. U.S. \$8.00; SL Rs. 325.

Piyadassi: The Wandering Monk. Kirthi Abeysekera. 200 pp. U.S. \$5.00; SL Rs. 150.

The Spectrum of Buddhism. Piyadassi Thera. 447 pp. U.S. \$15.00; SL Rs. 350.

A Pāli Primer. Lily De Silva. 152 pp. U.S. \$5.00; SL Rs. 175.

One Night's Shelter. Yogavacara Rahula. 462 pp. U.S. \$??.??; SL Rs. 275.

Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon. 154 pp. U.S. \$6.00; SL Rs. 180.

Humour in Pāli Literature. Walpola Rahula. 42 pp. U.S. \$??.??; SL Rs. 120.

Forest Recollections: Wandering Monks in 20th Century Thailand. 410 pp. U.S. \$??.??; SL Rs. 1500.

Notes and News

In Memoriam. On March 22 death snatched from our midst one of Sri Lanka's most popular and beloved Buddhist teachers, **Godwin Samararatne**. For almost twenty years, Godwin had been the resident meditation teacher at the Nilambe Meditation Centre near Kandy. He had also taught meditation within Kandy itself, at the Lewella and Visakha Meditation Centres (two affiliates of Nilambe), at the University of Peradeniya, at private homes, and at the Buddhist Publication Society. Thousands of people from many lands came to Nilambe to practise meditation under his guidance, and they also invited him to their own countries to conduct meditation courses and retreats. Thus over the past two decades Godwin, in his own quiet way, had become an international Buddhist celebrity, constantly in demand in countries ranging from Switzerland to South Africa, Hongkong, Singapore, and Taiwan. Godwin had been associated with the BPS from its very inception; our first annual general report (for 1958) mentions him as having volunteered his services in the office, and he continued to promote the BPS on his overseas journeys. Since 1988 he had been a member of the Board of Management. His calm, mindful presence was deeply appreciated by everyone connected with the BPS, and he will be sorely missed. May he attain the bliss of Nibbāna.

Bhikkhu Bodhi Speaks at UN. This year, for the first time ever, the UN accorded to Vesak—the day commemorating the birth, enlightenment, and passing away of the Buddha—status as an official UN holiday. To mark the occasion, a group of delegates, spearheaded by the Sri Lankan delegation, organized a Vesak celebration at the UN headquarters on May 15, attended by a great number of dignitaries. Our president and editor, Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi, was invited to deliver the keynote address, in which he explained the relevance of the Buddha's teaching, past, present, and future. We plan to bring out the text of his highly acclaimed lecture as a Bodhi Leaf early next year.

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Book Review

The Foundations of Buddhism. Rupert Gethin. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. 333 + xviii pages. 8.99.

Although many introductory books on Buddhism are already available on the market, this recent title stands out by reason of its careful scholarship, lucid style, and sensitive appreciation of subtle points relating to Buddhist doctrine. Rather than offer a general overview of the different historical forms of Buddhism, the approach usually taken in introductory surveys on the subject, the author focuses on the fundamental doctrines and practices that underlie the entire Buddhist tradition. By treating these as the kernel from which all Buddhist doctrines and practices have evolved, the author can show how later forms of Buddhism, such as the Abhidharma and the Mahayana, rest upon essentially the same groundplan as the more ancient structures. Thus, in the author's view, whatever innovations these later schools introduce can be seen as attempts to work out, under historical and doctrinal pressure, the implications of the basic principles at the heart of the common Buddhist heritage.

The book is divided into ten chapters as follows: (1) the Buddha; (2) the Buddhist scriptures and schools; (3) the Four Noble Truths; (4) the Buddhist community; (5) Buddhist cosmology; (6) the doctrine of non-self and dependent arising; (7) the Buddhist path; (8) the Abhidharma; (9) the Mahayana; (10) the evolving Buddhist traditions in southern, eastern, and northern Asia, and finally in the West. Throughout, Gethin neatly compresses a vast amount of information into the relatively concise dimensions of his book. But equally admirable is his skill in explicating the main pillars of Buddhist thought and practice and in lighting up obscure corners of this edifice with remarkably keen observations. In a brief review like this I can do little more than highlight some of the more noteworthy among Gethin's many perceptive comments and interpretations.

In his chapter on the Buddha, Gethin does not drive a sharp wedge between the historical facts of the Buddha's life and the Buddha legend, as historically oriented scholars are prone to do. He holds rather that the Buddha legend is actually the story of the Buddhist path, a story that shows the way to a profound religious truth (p. 16). He also gives attention to the nature and cosmological role of the Buddha, showing how ideas that became prominent in later Buddhist thought, such as the three bodies of the Buddha, are already prefigured in the ancient sources. Such texts hardly countenance the modernist notion, prevalent among certain contemporary Buddhist writers, that the Buddha was nothing but an exceptionally wise human being.

In his survey of the Buddhist scriptures, Gethin stresses that all the early Buddhist schools had a Vinaya and Sutra collection that were substantially the same across the sectarian divide, differing in little more than expression and arrangement. This corpus of material constituted the common heritage of all Buddhist thought, known to all the early Buddhist schools as well as to the masters of the Mahayana. In this chapter he also sketches the division of the ancient Buddhist Sangha into the early Buddhist schools and the origins of the Mahayana.

When dealing with the Buddhist community, Gethin underscores the interdependence of the monastic and lay branches of the Buddhist social order, citing the Buddhist view that monks and nuns bring positive benefits to everyone in society. He discusses the Vinaya rules binding on the monks and nuns, their different lifestyles, their relationship to the lay community, and the main forms of lay Buddhist practice.

(One correction to this chapter should be noted: Gethin asserts (pp. 87–88) that full ordination requires the presence of five bhikkhus of ten years' standing; actually, only one of the five bhikkhus, the preceptor, must have ten years' standing.)

Gethin's treatment of Buddhist cosmology is unusually insightful. He points out that while the vision of the universe the Buddhist texts depict may strike moderns as outlandish, the scheme becomes intelligible when we recognize that it rests upon the principle of the equivalence of cosmology and psychology (p. 119). That is, the realms of existence parallel states of mind in such a way that the cosmic hierarchy reflects the diversity of mind, while the latter becomes manifest in the diversified planes of the cosmos. This awareness of doctrinal underpinnings continues in his chapter on the self, where he shows how the teachings of non-self and dependent arising conjointly define the parameters of Buddhist philosophy, revealing reality to be made up not [of] static building blocks, but [of] dynamic processes (p. 155). He also stresses the essentially practical bearings of both doctrines: their aim is not so much to establish a systematic body of thought as to expose the mistaken conceptions that must be eliminated to win liberation from suffering.

The chapter on the Buddhist path accentuates the integral unity of Buddhist practice, which extends from simple expressions of devotion to the higher stages of meditation and insight. In dealing with the interrelationship of calm and insight meditation (*samatha* and *vipassanā*), Gethin again shows eminently good sense. Eschewing the hard stances common among meditators today, he points out that in the classical meditation texts calm and insight do not constitute a sharp dichotomy but represent two contrasting qualities to be balanced in different degrees at different stages of the path, depending on the practitioner's temperament.

For Gethin, too, the Abhidharma is not a dry scholastic enterprise (the view of some Buddhist scholars), but a legitimate project designed to systematize the early teachings and thereby draw a clear theoretical map for understanding the inner transformations and experiences effected by meditation. He gives an excellent overview of the philosophical premises of the Abhidharma and a compact summary of the Theravāda system, with side glances at the rival system of the Sarvāstivāda. His chapter on the Mahāyāna, too, is motivated by the same urge to highlight continuities and consistencies rather than to accentuate differences. While he takes note of the novel features of Mahāyāna thought and practice, he traces these innovations to their roots in the older teachings. Thus he contends that even the sophisticated and abstruse philosophies of the Madhyamika and Yogācāra schools operate within the framework of the Four Noble Truths: they are not exercises in speculative thought but means of uprooting the subtler kinds of clinging that underlie existential suffering.

This introduction brings to its task not only careful scholarship and wide knowledge of Buddhist thought, but also a warm sympathetic appreciation of Buddhism evident throughout its pages. It is no doubt this sympathy that allows Gethin to penetrate beneath the outer crust of formal doctrine and discern the deep connections between currents of Buddhist thought that might superficially appear incongruous. Through Gethin's eyes we are given not only a clear and accurate picture of the doctrinal foundations of Buddhism, but also the keys to understand the integral unity that underlies the outward diversity in much of the Buddhist tradition.

Bhikkhu Bodhi

Guidelines to Sutta Study

Review. The last installment explained the four nutriments of life, which in the sutta itself are merely enumerated by the Buddha.

The Buddha has introduced the four nutriments to show that the entire life-process, comprised in the five aggregates of clinging, originates and continues with the support of conditions. This reinforces the point made earlier in the sutta, namely, that consciousness arises through conditions, but the mode of treatment extends the scope of conditionality beyond consciousness itself to sentient existence in its entirety. Now in the next passage, the Buddha shows the process of conditionality in a still wider light by inquiring into the source and origin of the four nutriments. While the four nutriments are the primary supports for sentient existence, they themselves also arise from causes and thus can be integrated into the chain of conditionality. The Buddha himself provides the answer to his question with the words, ßThese four nutriments have craving as their source, craving as their origin; they are born and produced from craving.ù

Normally, we think we crave because there is food; we regard food as the cause giving rise to craving. But the Buddha says that craving is actually the cause and origin of the four kinds of nutriment. How this is so can be understood in two ways, at a common-sense level and at a deeper level made explicit in the Abhidhamma.

At the commonsense level, we can understand that craving is the source of the four nutriments because it is craving that turns these four supports of life into fuel for sustaining the forward movement of saüsàra. Even arahants, who have eradicated craving, continue to live in dependence on the four nutriments, but for the arahants these nutriments no longer nurture renewed existence (*punabbhava*). For ordinary people, however, craving turns these four requisites of survival into tributaries sustaining the onward flow of the *saüsàric* process. Backed up by craving, the four nutriments nourish the continuum of becoming as it moves forward from one existence to the next.

When there is craving, physical food becomes transformed from an essential condition for sustaining life into an object of desire and longing. Again, on account of craving, the nutriment of contact becomes an object of seeking. Through craving, we strive to establish contact with diverse objects through the six sense faculties, experiencing joy when we succeed in making pleasant contacts, anger and frustration when we meet with painful contacts. Craving gives rise to mental volitions, as we formulate plans, embark on projects, and engage in activities that build up wholesome and unwholesome kamma. Finally, craving latches on to consciousness, the fourth nutriment, and uses it as a vehicle for seeking out experiences that promise pleasure and delight.

According to the Abhidhamma system, craving is the cause of the four nutriments because it is the craving in the previous life that generates rebirth. Thus, by bringing into being the sentient organism, craving also brings into being the four nutriments that sustain the sentient organism. Already at the moment of rebirth, there exists nutritive essence (*ojà*) produced within the arisen body; this is the kammically acquired physical food originating from prior craving. The contact and volition

associated with the rebirth-consciousness, and that rebirth-consciousness itself, are respectively the kammically acquired nutriments of contact, mental volition, and consciousness originating from prior craving. Thus at rebirth the nutriments have their source in prior craving. And as at rebirth, so those produced throughout the entire course of existence should be similarly understood.

Having established that craving is the cause of the four nutriments, the Buddha next inquires what is the cause of craving. With his answer to this question, he grafts the teaching on the four nutriments on to his wider and better known teaching on conditionality, namely, dependent origination (*pañicca-samuppāda*). The condition for craving is feeling, and this in turn has contact as condition, which in turn arises from the six sense bases. The latter arises from name-and-form; this from consciousness; this from volitional formations; and this from ignorance. Thus, at this point in the sutta, the Buddha has shown how *Bhissū* (*bhātaū*) — the being consisting of the five aggregates — originates from the four nutriments, which are sustained by the series of eight links in the standard twelvefold formula of dependent origination, from craving back to ignorance.

Having picked up the series two-thirds of the way down and taken it back to ignorance, the Buddha next runs through the entire series in forward order, beginning with ignorance. This time he follows the standard sequence, which proceeds from ignorance to craving, then from craving to clinging, and thence to existence, birth, and finally aging-and-death. Thus here all twelve factors are incorporated. Yet again, by questioning the monks, he traces the series backwards from the end to the beginning. It is this backwards series that we will use as the basis for our own exposition.

(to be continued)