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Mind Training in Buddhism

And Other Essays

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Natasha Jackson

"Man is only a reed, the feeblest in nature, but he is a thinking reed. The whole universe must not rise in arms to crush him. A vapour, a drop of water, suffices to kill him. But, if the entire universe were to crush him, man would still be more noble than that which slays him, because he knows that he is dying, and of the advantage which the universe possesses over him the universe knows nothing. Thus all our dignity consists in thought. It is that upon which we must take our stand, not upon space and duration. Let us, then, labour to think well; that is the principle of morals."

Pascal

"All that we are is the result of what we have thought:
it is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts.

If a man speaks or acts with an evil thought,
pain follows him,
as the wheel follows the foot of the ox that draws the carriage.
If a man speaks or acts with a pure thought,
happiness follows him,
like a shadow that never leaves him."

Dhammapada (trans. Max Muller)

Buddhism is a jewel of many facets, the lights of which attract all sorts and conditions of men and women, to each of whom it has its own special and particular appeal. This is certainly very pertinent to the West where no one finds himself a Buddhist as a matter of routine following the religion of his parents, but by deliberate choice.

Assuming that the interest is real and not a passing phase of romantic hankering for a taste of 'the mystic East', the attraction may lie in its rationality, its cogency as a system, its philosophy, its way of life, the character of the Buddha himself as guide and exemplar, or all of these factors combined. Nevertheless, for anyone who takes Buddhism at all seriously, it is essentially a system of mind training. To speak of 'taking Buddhism seriously' means making an earnest effort of trying to apply it by keeping its

precepts which are negative and by amplifying them through the Noble Eightfold Way which is dynamically positive.

Many people never get around to taking this step. They like to come, listen to a lecture, read a few books and have a talk about Buddhism—especially about the intriguing indeterminates, like the origins of everything and 'what is reborn'. That, for many, is as far as it goes. The interest often peters out when they learn that the Buddha was not concerned with trying to solve the baffling riddles of the universe, but confined himself strictly to life in the here-and-now, in which these questions are irrelevant. Reasoning and speculation not bound together by a common aim of all the arguments is foolish and a futile pastime, no matter how logical it may appear to be.

The question that directly concerns all of us here-and-now and throughout our whole lifetime is the consciousness of suffering and of happiness—how to avoid the one and to attain the other. All the great religions and all the great teachers of mankind have stated very definitely in various ways that a fundamental and abiding happiness is not to be achieved by seeking to possess, to hoard and not to share, to woo promotion and superiority by trampling down others; that the man who is prepared for his own petty welfare, or for the narrow sectional

interests of the group to which he happens to belong, to deprive other beings of greater happiness and even of life, deprives himself, in the long run, as much, if not more, as others. They all agree that the spirit in which life should be lived should be creative, rather than possessive; that the man who tries to give something, however little, who tries to make the world less cruel, less hard for others, has his own reward in his own inner joy that the vicissitudes of time and circumstance cannot take away from him.

Most people would agree, in principle at least, that honesty, kindness and unselfishness are highly desirable as counsels of perfection but would be dubious about the practicability of trying to attain such high standards in this wicked, wicked world. Others are convinced that these and most of the other virtues are theirs already but that their present unhappiness, boredom or frustration is due, not to their own inadequacies, but to the machinations of evil men, to the blindness of other people who do not appreciate their sterling qualities, or to other similar causes external to themselves.

In regard to this aspect, that shrewd old philosopher of our century, Bertrand Russell, with shattering insight observes that almost everybody suffers in a greater or lesser degree from elements of persecution mania which he declares to be always rooted in a too

exaggerated conception of our own merits.

Spiritual aspiration does not consist of the desire to feel cosy and comfortable. Rather, its most notable characteristic is an earnest desire for self-improvement, which in turn means self-mastery. To make any headway in self-improvement one must first learn to know oneself. To see the mote in our brother's eye is very easy but extremely difficult to recognize the beam in our own. For this complicated project Buddhism offers mindfulness, the most original technique in the history of religions. Buddhism is the only religion that not only shows us that we suffer mainly from ourselves, but also provides a practical and down-to-earth method by which we can re-educate and remake ourselves into the type of being we would like to be. It is not sufficient to tell or advise people what they should do. Many of us want to lead the good life and make it even better, but how? The Buddhist way is the way of mindfulness. The Buddha maintained that the only way we can remake ourselves is by understanding ourselves, by self-observation and analysis, to see ourselves 'as we really are'. There is no other way to correct defects of character, for how can anyone correct a fault if he is unaware of its existence?

The practice of mindfulness involves becoming fully and constantly aware of four things:

(1) the body and its state, functions and activities;

(2) the feelings as pleasant, painful or neutral (not emotions);

(3) states of mind (these include the emotions and moods);

(4) contents of the mind (what we actually think about).

These should be undertaken and practised in that order. Mindfulness applied consistently and over a sufficient period of time enables the practitioner to learn exactly how his body works, and what is even more important, how his mind works. Using these techniques, the aspirant for self-mastery becomes increasingly aware of all that he thinks, says and does and of all that happens to him and within him.

What is vitally necessary is that we should be absolutely honest with ourselves. The slightest self-deception defeats the object. If this sounds simple, just try it. Actually, it is difficult though not impossible. It involves constant effort until it becomes habitual. The result is that gradually the mind learns how to control the body and the senses.

This is where our mind training should begin—not

directly with attempts at meditation in the formal manner. With the popularization of hatha yoga in the West, reinforced by an awakening of interest in the Eastern religions generally due to the resurgence of Asia in the international field of affairs, people are curious and intrigued with the subject of meditation.

However, it should be understood that meditation, which can be extremely beneficial, requires considerable preparation. Most important and vital is the question of motive in undertaking it. The motives should be right; the aspirant should be well established in morality (*sīla*) and should lead a life consistent with his aims. Drugs and alcohol do not go with meditation, nor is Enlightenment to be gained by LSD.

Unfortunately, there is, in some instances, a great deal of misrepresentation on the question of meditation. One writer starts off with:

> "Do you desire success in life? Will you take the means that infallibly secure it? Will you choose, and say to yourself, 'I will have wealth; I will have fame; I will have virtue; I will have power?' Let your imagination play upon the thought and watch the dim clouds of hope shape themselves into heavenly possibilities."
>
> *Concentration,* E. Wood

The motives inspiring this kind of advance publicity, blatantly calculated to get people in by appealing to their latent greed, are more than merely questionable —they are highly suspect. The author either knows no better—in which case he is not competent to write on meditation or on any other form of yoga—or if he does know better, then he is writing with his tongue in his cheek. The insinuation of the preposterous promises is obviously designed to catch the unwary. Unfortunately, there are still many people in the world who are gullible, a fact that makes the cynic say: "There's a mug born every minute."

Mind training in Buddhism should not be pursued with any object of personal aggrandisement or 'to win friends and influence people'. Meditation is not a gimmick for self-promotion and mindfulness is not a purely mechanistic exercise resembling those taught by specialized organisations. These have no pretensions at aiming at something spiritual or transcendental.

Undertaken with wrong motives, meditation can become dangerous, strengthening, not weakening, delusion. Meditation itself is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Its aim is to develop insight and wisdom and the desirable states of mind like universal love (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathy (*muditā*), and serenity (*upekkhā*). It is a technique for the cultivation

of non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion.

We should know not only why we meditate, its value and its objective, but we also require to know how to go about it, what to do. Ideally, it should be practised under the surveillance of a meditation master. However, competent meditation masters are very few indeed.

When we get down to meditation proper, it is amazing how uncritically people allow themselves to be swept up by a fashion or a cult. (Yes, there are fashions in everything—not only in clothes but in art, hobbies and religion). At long last, the West has discovered meditation! That is all to the good but what is less understandable is the unquestioned acceptance of the craze for instituted meditation centres sponsoring marathon sessions of practice of up to 18 or 20 hours a day and lasting for weeks!

When the Buddha advocated the practice of meditation, he was speaking to his monks, who were leading a life entirely dedicated to the attainment of Nibbāna under his own matchless guidance and supervision. It is a very far cry from those conditions to the environment of a Western layman, living for the most part in one of the large cities and subject to all the distractions, worries and temptations of a householder's life. Under such circumstances,

meditation cannot be recommended indiscriminately to everyone, let alone crash meditation programs. If a layman can manage to devote half-an-hour to one-hour a day to meditation, he is doing as much as it is wise to attempt at this stage of our development. For those who are ready, and who set about it in a sane and rational way, it can indeed prove of great benefit. A verse in the Dhammapada says:

> Without knowledge there is no meditation;
> Without meditation there is no knowledge.
> He who practises knowledge and meditation
> Is near unto Nibbāna.

We can note that knowledge is mentioned first.

The follower of the Buddha has always to bear in mind that his prime duty is to work on himself. This work that he does on himself does not mean that he should not engage in any kind of collective welfare work for the common good by means of social and economic reform, in order to bring about a more equitable system of society. However, good legislation alone will not bring about the regeneration of the world. Society is composed of individuals and the question of regeneration inevitably reverts to the individual. If a sufficient number of individuals could jack themselves up to making the effort to overcome their spiritual ignorance, even if they succeeded in

achieving partial insight, reform of social and economic injustices and anomalies would come automatically, because there would not be any significant opposition, owing to that moral regeneration of individuals. Thus, whenever a man succeeds in overcoming a fault, a prejudice or a blemish within himself, he also changes the world to some extent, because after his victory over himself, even in his own small circle things will happen differently.

And because the Buddhist methods of mind training enable people to see their weaknesses and to overcome them, they are invaluable. Incidentally, the methods are very much in line with modern psychology which the Buddha anticipated over 2500 years ago.

Freedom of Mind

Natasha Jackson

> "So it is, monks, that the holy life is not lived for advantage in gains, honours, fame; it is not for advantage in moral habit; it is not for advantage in concentration; it is not for advantage in knowledge and vision.
>
> That, monks, which is unshakable freedom of the mind, this is the goal, monks, of holy life, this is the pith, this is the culmination."
>
> Greater Discourse on Simile of the Pith,
> Majjhima Nikāya 29

Throughout the march of time, man has won through to man'y freedoms: freedom to work, freedom to move about as he wishes, freedom of speech and assembly, freedom of worship … and to many other freedoms. However, the most important freedom—freedom of mind from all illusion—that he has still to achieve. It still eludes him. The blame is not entirely his own, because every culture has tried and still tries to impose on him its own dominant image as the ideal to be followed and perpetuated.

However, today the battle for freedom of the mind is at a much more subtle level than in the days of struggle against absolute rulers, oligarchies, theocracies, or any other form of naked power. The highly technical age of the present aims at the

standardisation of increasingly large masses of men and women within a rigidly mechanical framework, and conditions them without the use of direct force into becoming men who think alike, who feel alike, and who are amenable to conformity with the vast bureaucratic structures, content to be cogs in the ever expanding industrial machine of bureaucratic 'bumbledom'. But though the iron hand of authority is now encased within a velvet glove, and operates in the much more rarefied atmosphere of the mass media (especially TV and radio), the social pressures and coercion are still with us— perhaps even in greater force.

It can hardly be otherwise within a purely materialistic society, geared for maximum profit and one in which the emphasis is on man as a producer—and above all, as a consumer—of more and more goods. Within such a framework the image of the archetype which emerges is that of the tycoon, the man of extreme wealth as the model and pace-setter to be admired and emulated. But as most of the nations of the world are concerned in the scramble for wealth, and power, the conflicts are sharpened, wars are being fought, and the stockpiling of nuclear warheads continues.

It is hardly surprising that today, in such an atmosphere dominated by greed, fear, and hatred, an

increasing number of people should feel estranged, disorientated, unable to see any meaning in life, helpless in coping with its tensions and to serve as their own monitors. The general malaise within our society is reflected in the wave of protest movements and demonstrations throughout the world (hardly an unnatural development under the circumstances), in the loss of moral standards, in the disintegration of family life, the decay and impotence of organized religion, the prevalence of drug-addiction and delinquency, in the intrusion of numerous psychotic cults in art, music and fashion.

It is in the present situation, perhaps more than at any other time, that Buddhism, were it to become widely known and appreciated, could have much to offer.

The Buddha's conclusion that life is *dukkha*(suffering) is not original per se, seeing that it is shared to some extent by other religions and freely admitted by all thinking people. What is strikingly original is his solution of the problem of suffering which he made his chief concern. The Buddha analysed suffering as arising, not by reason of man looking for welfare and happiness (a built-in aspiration of the human organism), but by seeking welfare and happiness in the wrong places, and by using wrong methods to attain these; by wanting the

wrong things; by pursuing goals that do not lead to any abiding welfare and happiness but only to further misery; by pandering to an illusory ego and giving way to greed and hatred in the course of its promotion, thus paving the way for other manifestations of suffering: disappointment, frustration, dejection, apathy, despair; by yielding to the pleasure principle in sensuality, lust, gluttony, drunkenness, which inevitably culminate in guilt, worry, self-hatred, restlessness, and doubt. He taught that people suffer until they learn the true reason for their behaviour and that they must stop doing things —even good things—for the wrong reasons.

Thus, the crucial point of the Buddha's message is the question of motive. It is quite possible to keep the Five Precepts (or, for that matter, the Ten Commandments), be a generous dispenser of largesse to various charities, all with the purpose of gaining social approval and prestige, obtaining civic honours, or assuring for oneself a place in heaven, or at least a favourable rebirth—all of which, strictly from a Buddhist point of view are wrong motives, all being more or less subtle forms of self-seeking. The Buddha did not aim at a partial repair of a disordered personality. His objective was a radical cure.

The Buddha did not speak of the subconscious mind as such (that clarification had to wait 2500 years to be

revealed by the genius of Freud) though the methods and techniques of his system of mind-training bear witness that he fully recognised the existence of vast subterranean forces within the deep layers of the human consciousness. He also penetrated to the compulsive nature of the dark underground which he called *avijjā*(ignorance). What Freud called the 'id', the Buddha called *taṇhā*, best translated as thirst or craving. The equation is: A + T = CB, or: *avijjā* (ignorance) plus *taṇhā* (craving) equals Compulsive Behaviour. Like Freud, he, too, maintained that once the negative, unhealthy motives are exposed to the light and seen clearly for what they are, they cannot flourish or persist to grow. The whole of the Buddhist discipline, the Noble Eightfold Way and more particularly the section directly covering mental training (Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Meditation), is calculated to illumine the darkness of ignorance, and so to liberate man from the tyranny of his unconscious compulsive drives, and make him master in his own house.

That too, is ostensibly the objective of modern psychiatry, which, like everything else on this planet, can be used and abused. The present trend in America is for everybody who is anybody, to have a psychiatrist in tow, not only for the usual therapeutic interviews, but also on-call for consultation on every

conceivable subject demanding a decision. Apparently, the psychiatrist is to the well-to-do American of today what the court astrologer was to the Eastern potentate of the Middle Ages. It would be difficult indeed, to think up a more imaginative procedure to ensure a rich harvest of psychological cripples.

The Buddha, on the other hand, insisted that a man should do his own striving and experimentation.

Naturally, such an ambitious and important project requires a considerable measure of preparation. Experience has taught us the inadvisability of taking raw recruits and introducing them prematurely to the practice of meditation. It is necessary, first of all, to gain some knowledge of fundamental Buddhist teachings— which, though admittedly is surface knowledge, is nevertheless vital.

Secondly, there should be some semblance of order established in the life pattern of the individual through the practice of morality (*sīla*), or Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. To plunge headlong into meditation, all practices without attaining a reasonably moral life is to court disaster. The reason is simple. How, for example, can a man, drinking heavily, or one who is mainly preoccupied with planning acts of seduction, or recovering from

such forays, venture to delve into the deep layers of his mind without setting up further inner conflicts? Indeed, it would not be safe for him to attempt meditation. However, such is the perverseness of human nature that we have had people interested in meditation which they were prepared to practise, hoping it would cure them of alcoholism (or of some other equally devastating character defect), not realizing that if they did not have the will-power to halt the defect even temporarily, meditation for them was out of the question. A person with a groundwork in the fundamental teachings of the Buddha would know that meditation is not something in the nature of a magic wand, but only one step (though a very important one) of the Buddhist training and discipline, The Noble Eightfold Way. All eight steps are interrelated and should be practised concurrently.

Moreover, experience has also taught us that the safest and surest way of beginning is by way of mindfulness. Just noticing what happens to us, in us, and around us (that is, 'bare attention') can be practised by everyone, irrespective of whatever imperfections of character may exist. The Four Stations of Mindfulness include mindfulness of the body, of the feelings (as pleasant, painful or neutral), of the thoughts and ideas, and of the mental contents (the nature of what we think about).

Formal meditation begins by exercises in concentration on a single object to achieve one-pointedness of mind, commencing with observation of the breath (*ānāpānasati*), and progressing onwards towards realizing the four Noble Truths.

Such is a very brief and cursory survey of the Buddha's system of mind-training. Needless to say, it is inadequate and needs a great deal more amplification and study. Its range and scope establishes the Buddha among the greatest liberators of mankind. As one modern writer has summarized the value of the Buddha's method:

> "In his insight on *taṇhā*, the Buddha won his greatest penetration into his major problem, the problem of suffering. It is particularly unfortunate for the understanding of this penetration that his observations have been obscured by the mistaken notion that the annihilation of the individual was his objective, rather than the release of the person from unconscious controls ….
>
> In its unenlightened state, human behaviour is driven and rigidly constrained by unconscious motives, not just among psychoneurotics, but among us all, and this is the central diagnosis of our predicament. The

mentally disturbed represent only extreme and sharply defined cases of the obsessions that afflict us all. In the sense we use it here, as applying to all people, behaviour is compulsive so long as it is motivated, i.e. aroused, driven and controlled, by forces of whose identity a person is unaware ….

Buddhism may restore to Western people the rich qualities of inner experience which, in the last resort, are the individual's only defence against tides that seem to be sweeping him weakly, if not helplessly, along. .. .

Man can purify and free himself from all evil propensities without going to a psychiatrist. This is the message of Buddhism to modern man."

Buddhism, the Religion of Analysis,
by Nolan Pliny Jacobson

The Unguarded Mind

Hilda M. Edwards.

The mind, which is the essence of man, is probably the least understood although the most important feature in the whole complicated mechanism of the human being. As everything we think, say or do is coloured by the mind, it is far better to understand how the wrong states of mind arise, than to try and curb them once they are in operation, without knowing the reasons for their existence.

The first stage is contact, which is physical—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, and organic sensations—and arising out of these basic elements and dependent on them are emotions, desires, concepts, and volitions. It is at this stage that our future conduct is determined, and by a variety of wrong thoughts we are prone to fall into error, even at times by lack of thought, that is, the following of thought patterns formed originally by the acceptance of wrong concepts to which we keep returning.

The Buddha himself said, "I know not of any other single thing so intractable as the untamed mind," and it seems that this intractability of mind is more prevalent at the present time than one would imagine, despite the opportunities for education and constructive thought. But although education is no

longer the monopoly of a fortunate few, we must not fall into the assumption that it has necessarily helped man to think more clearly, or to understand himself, as most education tends to present facts and help people to memorise them.

How many people, for example, are content to accept the persuasive propaganda that is included in the mass media of radio, TV, and the press? It is possible, indeed probable, that public opinion is quite often influenced by partial truths and distortions, particularly in times of wars and conflicts when appeals to the emotions are more likely to be accepted than those based on objective reasoning.

> "Emotion has nothing whatsoever to do with the attainment of truth. That which we prize under the name of 'emotion' is an elaborate activity of the brain, which consists of like and dislike, motions of assent and dissent, impulses of desire and aversion. It may be influenced by the most diverse parts of the organism—by the craving of the senses, the muscles, the stomach, etc. The interests of truth are far from being promoted by these conditions and vacillations of emotions; on the contrary, such circumstances often disturb that reason which is adapted to the pursuit of truth, and frequently mar its perceptive power. No

problem is ever solved or even advanced by the cerebral function we call emotion."

The Riddle of the Universe, by Ernst Haeckel

There is also the something-for-nothing school of thought—or perhaps we should say 'substitute for thought'—which seems to be a feature of the age. Otherwise how can one explain the prevalence of lotteries, poker-machines, and betting on sporting events, to mention only a few of the popular forms of gambling, the existence of which is founded upon human credulity and optimism and greed, carried to absurdity.

The modern layman has many more distractions to confuse his mind than had his earlier counterpart. Not the least of these is noise, which pervades all sections of city life and includes an over-abundance of the spoken word. From the immense surface of the globe at this and every moment there arises a great clamour of words in hundreds of languages. In any one moment of the day or night, millions of words are whispered, spoken aloud, shouted, muttered or otherwise uttered, and most of these serve absolutely no purpose whatsoever. It may be, of course, that to some people quietness is a vacuum that must be filled with sound, even if it is only the cacophony that often

goes under the name of popular music. Speech as a means of communication and music as a form of relaxation and inspiration are both a necessary part of life, but used to excess they become like a drug that stupefies the mind.

Man is a gregarious creature, but in so many ways of life he carries 'togetherness' to extremes, so that it becomes a form of escapism. When part of the crowd, he does not have time to think about his problems; they can be postponed while he passes the time. But time does not pass. It stays with us, and we live the present and the past together. If we have not yet learnt this then we are indeed backward scholars.

Love of power has always been a part of man and is stronger and more corrupting than any material or economic motive. At the present time the widespread conflicts can only be described as struggles for power in most cases. U Thant, the former Secretary General of UN, believes that the root cause of the troubles is moral, and in a recent interview he said, "International morals have degenerated in the last few years, if I may say so, and like other human emotions it is contagious. If morals are debased in one region, then it catches on. Moral development has not kept pace with the scientific and material development of many nations. I am thinking of general morals like good behaviour and live-and-let-live. As far as those things are

concerned, we are still in the Middle Ages."

There are those who profit from wars, both nations and individuals; others who are pawns in the game of kill or be killed, and in a country participating in the conflict, everyone is involved, willy-nilly, if only by taxation, direct or indirect, a part of which is allocated for 'defence'. But although this cannot be avoided, it is no reason why we should tacitly approve of the futility and waste of life.

In a computerised age when things are presented to us ready-made or 'instant', it is more that ever necessary to be alert, self-reliant, and to question everything. "Man is a reed", said Pascal, "but a thinking reed", and as the reed is swayed by every wind, so man is swayed by desires, emotions, and illusions, and instead of being master of his mind he is enslaved by it.

There are some misconceptions which are quite as real today as they were when Cicero drew up his list in the first century BC:

- The delusion that individual advancement is made by crushing others.
- The tendency to worry about things that cannot be altered.
- Insisting that a thing is impossible because we

cannot personally accomplish it.

- Neglecting refinement and development of the mind.
- Attempting to compel persons to believe and live as we do.

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