

# Using meditation to gain knowledge of mental reality

Scholar and chief translator for His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Thupten Jinpa urges scientists who are studying Buddhist meditation to give respect to the voice of the tradition itself. He argues that, at least in the case of Buddhism, without taking seriously the tradition's own self-understanding of the role of meditation, this encounter between Buddhist meditation and science will not have the significant mutual enrichment it could otherwise potentially have.

**W**e tend to forget that “meditation” is actually an English term and that, when applying it to convey a core element of Eastern spiritual practice, such as that of Buddhism, an unrecognized conflation of meanings might be involved. In the classical Buddhist context, however, the term meditation is used to translate the Sanskrit term *bhavana* and its Tibetan equivalent *gom* (spelled *sgoms*). Etymologically, the Sanskrit term connotes the notion of “cultivation,” while its Tibetan equivalent *gom* carries the idea of developing “familiarity,” together implying the idea of some kind of repetitive process of cultivating a familiarity, whether it is with respect to a habit, a way of seeing, or a way of being. In its actual usage, however, the term *gom* is applied not only to the process of “cultivation” or “development of familiarity,” it is also applied to the resultant states achieved through such processes. So, in this sense, meditation can refer both to the practice of disciplined cultivation as well as the cultivated result of such a discipline.

Given this broad definition of meditation, we find mentions of different types of meditations in the classical Buddhist texts.

For example, there is the classic **mindfulness meditation**, wherein the individual learns to pay deep attention to the minute processes within the flow of his or her breath or mental processes, while remaining undistracted by other sensory or discursive thought processes.

Then there is the **meditation in the form of taking something as an object**, such as when the person takes the fundamental truths of one's condition like the utterly transient nature of one's life, for instance, as the object of deep contemplation.

Then there is the **meditation in the form of cultivation of positive mental qualities**, such as compassion and loving kindness. Here compassion and loving kindness are not so much the objects of meditation; rather, the person seeks to cultivate these qualities within his or her heart.

There is also the practice of **meditation as visualization or simulation**, such as where the person visualizes himself or herself as going through the various stages of the experience of dying.

In addition, there is the **meditation in the form of prayer** where, for example, the meditator aspires to attain the enlightened attributes of the Buddha for the sake of bringing about the welfare of countless sentient beings.

Given this diverse typology, often the Tibetan term *gom* requires such different English terms as “cultivation,” “visualization,” “aspiration,” “reflection,” “meditation” and so on in different contexts. Broadly speaking, Buddhist tradition subsumes the practice of meditation into two generic categories: absorptive meditation (*jog sgoms*) and discursive meditation (*dpnyad sgoms*), and the epitome of the two types of meditation are the “tranquil abiding of the mind” (*shamatha* or *zhi gnas*) and “insight” (*vipasyana* or *lhag mthong*).

Understanding this diversity of meditation practices and their associated states is crucial if we are to avoid the temptation of viewing meditation as constituting some kind of homogenous mental state, characterized primarily by absence of thought. Especially with respect to scientific study of meditation, the cognizance of this diverse typology could bring greater precision to their understanding of the subject of enquiry. Since the scientific study of meditation, at least the neurobiological approach, is premised upon the practice of correlating specific brain states and activity with specific cognitive activities, this sensitivity to the typology of meditation could help prevent the temptation of homogenizing the biochemical expressions of meditation to a

would argue that meditation also has an epistemic role, at least in the self-understanding of the Indo-Tibetan tradition, in gaining “knowledge” of the mental reality. In other words, I would argue that meditation plays both a negative role of dismantling our deep-seated notions of selfhood and interior subjectivity, as well as a constructive role of giving insights into the nature and functions of the mental world.

So how does the Indo-Tibetan tradition see the role of meditation within the project of seeking enlightenment? Here it may be helpful to look at some important classical formulations of the process of development that underlie the tradition’s understanding of the overall concept of spiritual transformation.

While the Greek philosophers diagnosed the weakness of will to be the problem of why knowledge does not immediately translate into action, Buddhism would argue that the problem is the failure to integrate such knowledge into the person’s being. In other words, it is meditation that is seen as serving the link between an intellectual knowledge and the desired change in one’s attitude and behavior.

narrow type, such as higher than normal level activity of gamma frequency or a greater activity in the left prefrontal cortex area. These may be brain-level expressions of certain types of meditation practice; however, given the range of diversity in the types of meditation, one would expect different biochemical expressions for different meditational states.

Mark Siderits<sup>1</sup> has argued that “the Buddhist enlightenment project is aimed at helping us overcome existential suffering by dissolving false assumption underlying such suffering – that there is an ‘I’ whose life can have meaning and value,” and that the role of meditation is to bring home to the practitioner “in a concrete and an immediate way the fact that there is no one home.” He has also suggested that the role of meditation in the enlightenment project represents an instance of the general Buddhist epistemological stance that perception, because of its perceived directness of contact with the fact being cognized, is the foremost means of knowledge.

Although I agree with Siderits’ broad characterization of meditation’s role in the Buddhist enlightenment project, I

From very early sources we find references to the concept of the “three levels of understanding” that convey the tradition’s understanding of the progressively deepening stages of insight into the truth of human existence. They are referred to as “understanding derived through hearing (or learning)” (*srutamayiprajna*), “understanding derived through reflection” (*cintamayiprajna*) and “understanding derived through meditation” (*bhavanamayiprajna*). An individual practitioner may first develop a certain understanding of, for example, the Buddha’s teaching on no-self (*anatman*) based either on listening to a teacher’s exposition of the doctrine or on the basis of reading. Here the understanding remains somewhat superficial and tied closely to understanding the meaning of the words. From the epistemological point of view, at this point the individual’s understanding remains only an informed assumption. However, as he or she then reflects deeply upon the meaning of no-self based on the application of discursive analysis as well as relating the doctrine to one’s own existence, eventually a deep sense of conviction arises of the truth of no-self. At this point, to use an epistemologist’s language, the person can be seen to have gained a true knowledge of no-self, albeit at the level of the intellect. The fourth-century Yogacara master Asanga explains this process of reflection in

<sup>1</sup> Mark Siderits, Professor of Philosophy at Illinois State University, is author of the book *Empty Persons*.

terms of deep contemplation on the individual and general characteristics of the given fact or an event.<sup>2</sup> As part of this process he speaks of analyzing the concerned phenomena within the framework of what are known as the “four principles” – the principle of nature, of dependence, function, and evidence.<sup>3</sup> However, in order for this knowledge to have a radical impact on the individual’s psyche and behavior, that knowledge of no-self needs to be totally integrated into one’s very being such that it is incorporated into the habit of the person’s mindset. This third level of understanding is thought to arise only as a result of prolonged internalization of the insight into no-self through a repetitive process of disciplined inner reflection, i.e. meditation. This level of understanding is characterized as being “experiential,” “spontaneous,” and “effortless.” A good analogy here is the process of acquiring a skill, such as swimming or riding a bicycle, where the key factor is actual practice.

In the Indo-Tibetan tradition this process of progressively deepening levels of perfection is applied not only to paradigmatically cognitive contexts like cultivating insight into the truth of no-self, it is thought to apply equally to cultivation and enhancement of ethical qualities, what in traditional Buddhist parlance is referred to as the “method aspects of the

path.” The ninth-century Indian author Kamalasila applies this process beautifully to the cultivation of universal compassion and loving kindness.<sup>4</sup> A well-known Mahayana scripture draws a memorable parallel between the experience of tasting the sweetness of eating the bark of a sugar cane and its core.<sup>5</sup> The first levels – of learning and reflection – are compared to eating the bark, while the meditative derived level is likened to eating the inside of the sugar cane.

The seventh-century Indian Buddhist epistemologist Dharmakirti presents a schema according to which he explains how an initial intellectual understanding, through prolonged habituation, could eventually culminate in an experiential understanding that is characterized with immediacy, spontaneity, and effortlessness. The example Dharmakirti cites is the naturalness and immediacy of our basic emotions, such as attachment. So, viewed in this way, Siderits is right when he suggests that the role of meditation represents part of the general Buddhist epistemological stance that accords great primacy to direct experience as opposed to inference and testimony.

<sup>2</sup> *Sravakabhumi*, (*Nyan thos kyi sa*, Tengyur, Tibetan Critical Edition) I, p.72.

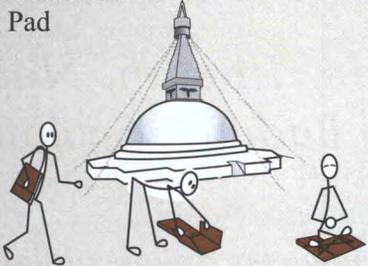
<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.73.

<sup>4</sup> *Bhavanakrama*, II.

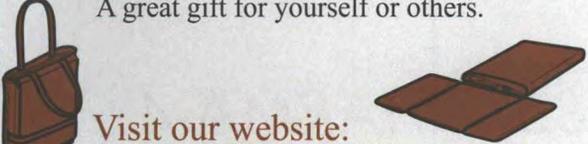
<sup>5</sup> *Adhyasayascandanasutra* (*bLhag pa'i bsam pa bskul ba'i mdo*). Cited in Tsongkhapa's *Clear Elucidation of the Intent* (Sarnath: Geluk Student's Committee), p. 16.

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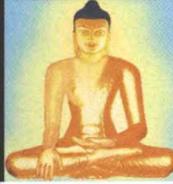


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In the Tibetan tradition this framework of the three levels of understanding is subsumed further into a larger framework of the trinity of “view, meditation, and action” (*lta gom spyod gsum*). On this model, the first two levels of understanding are part of the view, or one’s basic outlook on reality, while the understanding derived from meditation belongs to the second element. The third element, namely action, refers to the manifestation of one’s outlook and meditatively derived insight into actual action or behavior. The interesting thing about this scheme is that it makes explicit what remains salient in the model of the three levels of understanding. This is the relation between knowledge and action. While the Greek philosophers diagnosed the weakness of will to be the problem of why knowledge does not immediately translate into action, Buddhism would argue that the problem is the failure to integrate such knowledge into the person’s being. In other words, it is meditation that is seen as serving the link between an intellectual knowledge and the desired change in one’s attitude and behavior.

Finally, this framework of the trinity of view, meditation, and action is further subsumed into a larger framework that embraces the entire Buddhist enlightenment project. Here I am referring to the Tibetan tradition’s popular

category of ground, path, and result (*gzhi lam bras gsum*). The ground in this context refers to the understanding of the basic nature of reality, while path refers to both the meditation and ethical action based on the insights of meditation, and the result to the attainment of full awakening of Buddhahood. ❁

[Excerpted from the paper “Is meditation a means of knowing our mental world?” presented by Thupten Jinpa at the Mind & Reality Conference at Columbia University in February 2006.]



*Thupten Jinpa (Ph.D., Cambridge University) was trained as a monk at the Shartse College of Ganden Monastic University, South India, where he received the Geshe Lharam degree. In addition, Jinpa holds B.A. Honors in philosophy and a Ph.D. in religious studies, both from Cambridge University. He taught for five years at Ganden and worked also as a research fellow in Eastern religions at Girton College, Cambridge University.*

*Jinpa has been a principal English translator to H.H. the Dalai Lama for nearly two decades and has translated and edited numerous books by the Dalai Lama including Ethics for the New Millennium, Transforming the Mind, and The World of Tibetan Buddhism. His own publications include works in both Tibetan and English, the most recent book being Self, Reality and Reason in Tibetan Philosophy.*

*Jinpa teaches as an adjunct professor at the Faculty of Religious Studies at McGill University, Montreal. He is currently the president of the Institute of Tibetan Classics and heads its project of critical editing, translation, and publication of key classical Tibetan texts aimed at creating a definitive reference series entitled The Library of Tibetan Classics.*

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