



The Interplay Between Meditation Theory and Practice

by Bhikkhu Anālayo

The present article briefly surveys four developments in Buddhist meditation traditions from the viewpoint of an apparently ongoing interaction between theory and practice: a gradual reduction of the sixteen step of mindfulness of breathing to just focusing on the breath; an apparent fascination with light and fire imagery leading to investing the mind with intrinsic luminosity and purity; a tendency to grant increasing importance to absorption as indispensable for progress to awakening or even as intrinsically liberating; and a change of compassion meditation from a boundless radiation to directing this quality toward specific individuals and eventually just aiming it at oneself.

Introduction

In view of the range of different meditation practices and traditions available in the contemporary setting of Buddhism(s) in the West, a historical perspective on stages in the development of certain ideas can help to enable contextualization.

Such a perspective can accommodate different traditions within its purview as equally justified articulations of meditative cultivation of the mind, being the result of a dynamic interplay between actual practice and its the-

oretical, social, and cultural embedding. In other words, such an exploration invites applying the principles of conditionality and not self (in the sense of non-identification) to meditation teachings and lineages themselves, viewing them as the product of conditions, without appropriating them with clinging. In the end, any meditation technique or practice is best viewed as a raft, which has only an instrumental purpose in leading onward on the path to freedom.

In what follows I present brief summaries of findings explored in more detail and with ample referencing of the textual sources in my forthcoming book on *Developments in Buddhist Meditation Traditions*, to be published later this year by the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies (2021).

Mindfulness of Breathing

The early discourses describe a meditative progression of sixteen steps for the practice of mindfulness of breathing. An integration of mindfulness of breathing among the body contemplations surveyed in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its parallels appears to have resulted in presenting only the first tetrad of mindfulness of breathing as a stand-alone practice. Discourses in the *Ekottarika-āgama* present instructions that incorporate only the first three steps from the standard exposition of sixteen steps, combining these with additional tools like discerning the temperature of the breath.

A simile employed in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* to elucidate the first tetrad of mindfulness of breathing in actual fact only illustrates the first two steps, which feature in an Abhidharma work as a stand-alone practice. With later exegesis, another simile comes into use that conveys an all-out focus on the breath as such.

In this way, a survey of textual accounts shows a gradual reduction of the scheme of sixteen steps, whose

predominant modality requires mindful monitoring of the breath alongside remaining aware of a range of other aspects of the meditative experience. This appears to have gradually changed into becoming a concentration exercise by focusing on the breath to the exclusion of anything else.

The resultant challenge to remain with the breath without succumbing to distraction, rendered more difficult due to sidestepping the intentional cultivation of joy and happiness found in the full scheme of sixteen steps, would have stimulated the emergence of alternative supports for achieving the same aim, such as by way of counting the breaths.

Considered in conjunction, an intriguing trajectory emerges where a textual account of meditation practice changes in the course of textual developments and at times errors during oral transmission, thereby influencing meditation practice, which in turn yields new textual descriptions about how mindfulness of breathing should now be cultivated.

The Luminous Mind

Instead of taking off from a meditation instruction, my second case has as its starting point an apparent fascination with imagery related to fire and luminosity. Besides impacting descriptions of supernormal feats performed by the Buddha, the same fascination seems to have also had an impact on references to consciousness, of which at least one stands in a context related to awakening.

Other instances then show the application of the motif of luminosity to the mind or to meditative qualities and practices. Several such instances in Pāli discourses are without support in their parallels. In one such case, where luminosity is attributed to equanimity, closer inspection shows clear signs of a later expansion of a passage that originally did not involve luminosity.

The same appears to hold true for a well-known passage in the *Āṅguttara-nikāya* which attributes luminosity to the mind even when it is in a defiled condition. A quotation of this passage in an Abhidharma work then adds that such luminosity, or rather purity, is the intrinsic nature of the mind.

With this idea in place, a range of different influences appear to have led to emphasizing the resultant presentation. Besides doctrinal concerns related to the problems caused by the theory of momentariness, appropriations of the type of presentation evident in this passage or its derivatives have been an important factor in a process of substantially reconceptualizing the role of meditation practice in relation to awakening, such as the notion that the practitioner's mind is already intrinsically awakened. This in turn would have led to the idea that actual practice simply requires recognizing this already fully realized and luminous nature of the mind.

Absorption

A comparative survey of Pāli discourses defining right concentration by way of listing the four absorptions brings to light that these are not supported by parallels preserved in non-Theravāda reciter lineages. An alternative definition, however, which instead defines right concentration by way of its embeddedness in the context set by the other seven factors of the noble eightfold path, does receive confirmation by parallel versions.

This situation gives the impression that the idea of equating right concentration with the attainment of the four absorptions would be a somewhat later development. In fact, the examples of the Buddha's teacher Āḷāra Kālāma, who must have been highly proficient in concentrative abilities (the same probably also applies to Uddaka Rāmaputta), or of the various views based on absorption attain-

ment surveyed in the *Brahmajāla-sutta* and its parallels, makes it clear that strength of concentrative ability does not necessarily mean that the respective concentration is of the right type. Instead, the directional input of right view is required above all, together with endowment with the other path factors, as these are the crucial ingredients that turn concentration into the right type.

Yet, with the idea in place that attainment of the four absorptions equals right concentration, it is perhaps unsurprising that this perspective had an impact on conceptualizations of what it takes to progress to stream-entry (and higher levels of awakening).

As a way to face staunch opposition to the promotion of so-called dry insight, in the sense of insight meditation that dispenses with the intentional cultivation of mental tranquility, the idea of “insight-absorptions” arose. The original idea appears to have been just to point out that the progress of insight on its own takes care of the type of mental cultivation that the opponents believed to require the cultivation of absorption.

The invention of “insight-absorptions,” although originating from the identification of stages of insight as akin to absorption in some respect, appears to have in turn led to a redefinition of what absorption attainment entails. Such redefinitions at times propose easily accessible states of mental composure to correspond to the type of absorption described in the early discourses, set in contrast to the supposedly later development of conceiving absorption as profound states requiring much meditative mastery, associated with Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga*.

A related strand of development then interprets the absorptions as productive of liberating insight in and of themselves. The same agenda can take the form of proposing that *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation was originally just about absorption attainment, a concern of such practice with liberating insight being consequently considered a later development.

The agendas manifesting in this way have at times had effects quite contrary to their aims. The insistence on the need to master absorption prior to being able to gain liberating insight seems to have triggered a redefinition of what the term absorption stands for. The promotion of insight-absorption by the adherents of dry insight in turn appears to have fueled the arising of competitors in the field of meditation instructions to lay practitioners, who are able to gather a substantial following by promising an easy access to the prestigious *jhāna* attainment.

Attempts to authenticate such ‘attainments’ or to promote absorption as intrinsically liberating show the degree to which polemics have had a substantial influence on the development under discussion. This serves as a reminder that the proposed interplay between theory and practice does not take place in a vacuum, as it is situated in a particular historical, social, and cultural context. For this reason, it needs to be understood by taking a variety of additional potential influences into account.

Immeasurable/Boundless States

The meditative cultivation of the immeasurable or boundless states (*appamāṇa*), also known as divine abodes (*brahmavihāra*), described in the early discourses, takes the form of a radiation in all directions. The boundless nature of such a form of practice can be illustrated with the example of blowing a conch, whose sound similarly spreads in all directions.

As the result of apparent literalism, descriptions of a cultivation of the immeasurable or boundless states that employ a person in a particular condition as an example to illustrate the appropriate attitude seem to have been read as injunctions to take individual beings as the specific objects of the practice. The model of meditative cultivation apparently emerging from this literalism involves a series of

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individuals, graded according to their agreeable or disagreeable nature, which the practitioner calls up mentally one after the other.

Such a series of individuals does not yet explicitly bring in oneself. The idea to do so may have had its origin in a variant reading, describing the boundless radiation in all directions as pervading these “in every way,” which has been taken to mean instead “to all as to oneself.”

At the stage of development evident in the *Visud-dhimagga*, the idea of taking oneself as the object seems to have been fully and consistently applied only to *mettā*, and not yet to the treatment of compassion.

A further stage of development then appears to have taken place at the beginning of the 21st century, when Western psychologists developed approaches that serve to arouse self-compassion as a stand-alone practice, without being part of a similar cultivation of compassion toward others.

This thereby brings in a new perspective to the interplay between theory and practice already evident in the previous three cases, as it points to the steadily growing interactions between traditional forms of Buddhism and meditation-related research in psychology, which can safely be assumed to continue to have a considerable impact on the development of Buddhist meditation in theory and practice.