

FWBO Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year

Part 3: Exploring Buddhist Practice – Meditation

Week 4: Meditative States

Introduction

Last week we looked at the mental habits that can get in the way of meditation. This week we look at what lies beyond these habits – the states we can get access to in meditation – using another text from the same book.

Access Concentration and the First Four ‘Dhyānas’

(Text condensed from ‘Meditation’, by Kamalashila, chapter 4)

Dhyāna and psychological integration

Sometimes when we meditate we may find blissful feelings arising spontaneously. Such feelings can range from mild pleasure to an almost overwhelming ecstasy – the experience can sometimes be so beautiful that we shed tears. People often blush, find their hair standing on end, or feel ‘goose-pimples’. What is more, their ability to concentrate may enter a completely new dimension of lucidity and calmness. Whatever is happening? In psychological terms, they are directly experiencing what is known as the process of integration: somewhere, disparate parts of the psyche are combining into a whole.

In spiritual terms, we are beginning to enter a higher state of consciousness – the first of eight levels of ‘dhyāna’ enumerated by Buddhist tradition – which is experienced as a deep inner harmony. It is the transition to this harmony which is so blissful.

Before I explain the nature of dhyāna any further, it will be useful for us to understand how the process of integration takes place, to see the connection between dhyāna and our day-to-day states of mind – which may not always be filled with bliss and inner peace! More often our mind resembles a battleground of contradictory likes, dislikes, hopes, and fears.

Practising mindfulness is likely to reveal paradoxes and oppositions in our character. It’s almost as though we are not one person – as though we have a number of different ‘selves’. We may, for example, behave quite differently when we are at work, when we are at home, and when we are with particular sets of friends.

This is the case with everyone (to different degrees, and in different ways) and is perfectly natural. We probably even choose our activities and friends precisely because they allow us to express different sides of our personality. However, the

fact that we do so indicates something of an imbalance, though we may not immediately see things that way.

Imagine you are walking along with someone with a friend, and you meet a colleague from work. These two people have never met before; both know you quite well, but in a different context. The personality that your workmates see every weekday probably differs in certain respects from your ‘off-duty’ personality. Each friend may see you quite differently, and expect different behaviour of you. Such an encounter may feel rather odd, since you find it difficult to live up to both sets of expectations at once.

This example illustrates a way in which we may sometimes detect a hint of the hidden divisions within the mind. We do not usually notice such blind spots ourselves, unless they are pointed out to us. It is as though we have many different selves, or different ‘sub-personalities’, which influence the mind in different ways at different times. Sometimes it is as if we had a whole coach full of these different characters, and each of them wants to take over the driving! Inconsistencies and conflicts like these are at the root of much of the psychological tension that we experience in day-to-day living. They can be very strong – so when the tension bound up in conflict is released through meditation, it’s no wonder that blissful feelings and clarified concentration can arise.

However, these dhyāna-like feelings, enjoyable as they are, are not the aim of meditation. At this stage they usually last for only a few sessions at most, so it may be tempting to chase them – we’ll probably want to get them back! But such an approach is likely to stir up distracted meditations. The pleasurable feelings we experience in dhyāna are a by-product of the integration process – they are what we feel when inner conflicts come to a head and are resolved. It is only natural that for a while afterwards we no longer experience quite the same intensity of pleasure, as the leading edge of our practice once again gets to work on the less integrated departments of our mind. For the time being our meditation will be more or less ‘back to normal’. Yet the general tone of our practice, in terms of concentration and emotional engagement, will now be established at a new level. And, provided we keep practising, we should be able to maintain that new level.

‘Horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ integration

Integration is an interesting phenomenon. It’s as though our life used to go on in several different ‘compartments’ at once, and now the momentum of our practice has started to remove some of the separating walls. We have begun to harmonize the contrary aspects of our character, together with the thoughts and emotions that are associated with them.

On the whole we can actually see the changes that are happening; they are all more or less at the surface of our mind, all on the same horizontal plane. But sometimes meditation can penetrate deeper than this. Sometimes we may go beyond the hindrances altogether and transcend the world of the senses and the ordinary mind. This is when we enter the state of absorption (dhyāna) in the fullest sense. When

we enter into absorption at this deeper level, some of the contents of our subconscious mind will come ‘up’ into our consciousness. This marks the beginning of a ‘vertical’ aspect to the process of integration.

This second aspect of integration is called ‘vertical’ because we are getting into contact with our heights and our depths – we are discovering our heavens and our hells. At this stage a completely new order of emotions, thoughts, and pictorial images may be released into our consciousness. They may be connected with significant past experiences: happy childhood memories, or perhaps painful experiences that have long been forgotten. They may well be vision-like: sometimes people see divinely beautiful or awe-inspiring forms such as gods, demons, Buddhas, or symbolic images. Such experiences have a very different character to the *samāpattis* (distortions of sense-perception) that can occur at the edges of deeper concentration. These are more like visionary experiences – universal images coming from the heights and depths in our mind, such as the archetypes described by Carl Jung. Images like these are commonly experienced in deep meditation. Clearly, there is much hidden energy and creativity in the depths, waiting to be activated through meditation.

‘Access’ concentration

When the five hindrances start to die away, we enter what is known as access concentration (Pāli *upacāra samādhi*): we now have ‘access’ to the *dhyānas*.

It is extremely useful if we can recognize whether we have reached this stage in our meditation. We will know that we are ‘in access’ when the concentration has become significantly easier. At this point our thoughts and emotions will start co-operating with our efforts to concentrate, instead of continually pulling us away from it. We will still experience some distractions, but these will not exert a strongly emotional pull, as do the five hindrances.

This new situation provides us with a significant opening. Since distracting thoughts now have less power over us, we have more free energy available. This allows us to notice distractions more quickly, before they have time to take hold; it is therefore easier to disengage from them. Reducing the level of distracted mental activity frees even more energy – which further sharpens our awareness. We are entering into an expansive, progressive phase; indeed, this is the beginning of meditation proper.

The term ‘access concentration’ doesn’t just mark a cross-over point between the ordinary mind and *dhyāna*. It describes quite a broad band of consciousness, ranging from the point at which we are concentrated but still frequently slipping back into distraction (i.e. almost in the hindrances) to a state in which concentration is extremely easy (almost in *dhyāna*).

This stage is within the reach of everyone who meditates regularly – it is not so very far away from our ordinary state of mind. If we know how to recognize access concentration, we can then learn how to encourage and dwell in it for as

long as possible. The longer we can sustain access concentration, the more we are likely to move on into full concentration – that is, into the first dhyāna.

The first level of dhyāna is, again, within fairly easy reach of anyone who meditates regularly. We are likely to experience at least a taste of it within the first few weeks of taking up meditation – particularly if we ‘treat’ our practice to some time on a retreat.

Just now we noted that it isn’t helpful to cling on to the pleasure of dhyānic experiences, should they arise. But that does not mean that dhyāna ought not to be deliberately cultivated. On the contrary, it is important that we do so. We should definitely aim to develop higher states of consciousness – the benefits, in terms of our growth in maturity and insight, will be considerable. We can cultivate dhyāna in the ways that have already been outlined – by concentrating mindfully on the object of meditation, by acknowledging the hindrances, and by working with them with faith and confidence. As with the hindrances and access concentration, recognition is an important key. It will be very useful if we can learn how to recognize different aspects of the dhyāna state, so that we can encourage them to arise.

Images for the first four dhyānas

So how can we recognize them? Perhaps it is easiest to communicate the experience through images, as the Buddha himself did (as in the first text of this part of the course).

1. The experience of the first dhyāna is compared to soap powder and water being mixed thoroughly together – mixed until the soap powder is entirely saturated by the water and the water is completely pervaded by the soap powder.
2. Being in the second dhyāna feels like a calm lake being fed by an upwelling underground spring.
3. The third dhyāna feels as though lotuses and water-lilies are growing in that lake, soaked and saturated by its water.
4. The fourth dhyāna is like the experience of taking a bath in that lake on a very hot afternoon, and afterwards resting on the bank wrapped in a perfectly clean white cloth.

Notice how water, a universal symbol for the unconscious mind, links the images together into a series. In the first dhyāna the water is perfectly mixed with its opposite element, dry powder. This image of opposites mingling perfectly together reflects the theme of integration; we have already seen how, in our consciousness, there are all kinds of oppositions in need of integration, which are now all beginning to co-exist in harmony.

Dhyāna is an experience of pure happiness, pure in the sense that it has not been caused by anything external but comes from within our own mind. While it lasts, it makes us feel truly ourselves. We may feel the effects of this ‘perfect mingling of opposites’ for some time – hours, even days or weeks – after the meditation.

Yet dhyāna may not necessarily arise as a result of applying a particular meditation technique. It is a state of mind that occurs naturally in anyone who is extremely happy. Under special conditions it may be possible to dwell in dhyāna outside meditation for sustained periods of time. As a general rule, higher states of consciousness will arise naturally in our meditation if we are quite happy and free from guilt feelings.

In the second dhyāna, our concentration is so pure that we experience no thought whatever. Thoughts did occur back in the first dhyāna, of course, but even there they were minimal, and they were mostly thoughts about the meditation object. So as we cross over from the first into the second dhyāna we find ourselves in a far more lucid absorption which – apart from a subtle recognition of the state we are in – is completely without thought.

Outside of meditation, it is unlikely that the second dhyāna will simply arise on its own, spontaneously – but it isn’t impossible. Apart from meditators, there could conceivably be great artists, composers, or philosophers in the world who dwell in this sort of state frequently, even without meditating formally at all. The second dhyāna is thus a very inspired state of mind – we are sustained by an inner flow of inspiration which wells up inside us, like the constant trickling of an underground spring beneath the calm surface of a lake.

In classical times, artists and poets in need of inspiration would call upon the Muses, goddesses who personified different aspects of this higher nourishment. At times, inspiration may be felt as a powerful unification with forces that are normally viewed as ‘outside’ our conscious personality. So this dhyāna level is also the mental state of the inspired prophet, who receives ‘messages’ from a deeper level of consciousness.

The third dhyāna is compared to lotuses growing in the waters of the lake, completely surrounded by and soaked in the medium of water. In our progress through the dhyānas we become more and more integrated with the higher element of inspiration (which in the second dhyāna is experienced as just trickling into our consciousness). By the time we reach the third dhyāna the stream has greatly expanded until it has become our whole environment. This is a very rich experience of ‘vertical’ integration. In this third dhyāna, we feel as though we are part of something much greater than our conscious self. It is a mystical state, in which we are completely surrounded, pervaded, and ‘at one with’ a higher element.

The fourth dhyāna is the perfection of human happiness – at least this side of Enlightenment. This attainment doesn’t endow us with any ultimate wisdom or compassion – we could still act unethically, even now, and fall back in our

progress. However, even though we don't possess the fullness of insight, we are in the best possible state of mental health. In the fourth dhyāna all the powerful energies that have been tamed and liberated through previous meditation co-exist in perfect harmonious peace. Notice how the Buddha changes his style of imagery at this point. An immaculate being appears, secure from harmful influences through being wrapped in the pure white cloth. It is as though the inspired state of consciousness, thoroughly purified through experience of the other dhyānas, is now ours to wear and to take with us, as both a protection and an outward influence upon the world. We are so happy that our positivity radiates outward, counteracting harmful influences – affecting others too, so that we become charismatic and even magical. This is why the fourth dhyāna is regarded as the basis for the development of 'magical' powers (walking on water, passing through walls, etc. attributed to practitioners of many religions) – and amazingly acute faculties of perception.

The 'components' of dhyāna

Images may help us recognize dhyāna from our own experience. But a check-list of its main 'component parts' – the mental states of which dhyāna consists – will also come in useful. Tradition enumerates five 'dhyāna factors', plus a sixth which only emerges in the fourth dhyāna. However, we should not think that dhyāna consists only of these factors, for we will experience many other positive qualities too.

Dhyāna is both a 'warm' state of positive emotion and a 'cool' state of increased concentration. The 'cool' portion includes one-pointedness, our ability to pay attention. It also includes what are traditionally called initial thought and applied thought, which are aspects of clear thinking.

In the 'warm' portion of the spectrum are the feelings of rapture and bliss that were spoken of earlier. Rapture is when we experience the process of integration as bodily pleasure. It is predominantly physical, though not entirely so – we feel both physically thrilled and wildly happy at the same time. Traditionally there are five degrees of intensity of rapture! We will probably recognize at least the first stage, which is the sensation of 'goose-pimples', when the hairs on our body stand on end.

Bliss is more subtle than rapture – but in its own 'quiet' way, actually more intense. Bliss marks a deeper stage of integration, in which our mind has begun to tame the somewhat wild, unrefined sensations of rapture. With experience one becomes less attached to these relatively coarse feelings, and begins to move into a deeper, stronger, and even happier, state of mind. As absorption takes a firmer hold, the deepening bliss gradually assimilates the bubbly, thrilling energy that is released in the experience of rapture. This is a particular feature of the third dhyāna, while the more physical sensations of rapture are features of the first and second dhyāna.

Encouraging the positive

We can encourage the dhyāna state to arise by developing those factors of dhyāna that are missing from our experience of meditation. By developing one of the positive features of dhyāna, we are simultaneously counteracting one of the five hindrances. As you work you may be able to find ‘intermediary’ factors – for example, trying to arouse interest in the practice, rather than in the objects of sense desire.

The actual experience

The traditional classification of dhyāna levels is useful for defining higher states of consciousness in the abstract, but it is essentially an artificial way of looking at our experience. What we actually experience are various positive mental states arising. These factors become stronger, and then as we enter deeper into meditation discursive thought is left behind. At this point we find ourselves in that state of lucid, concept-less concentration traditionally classified as the second dhyāna

From this stage onwards we experience ‘vertical’ integration increasingly strongly. In terms of the Buddha’s simile, an underground spring begins percolating up from the depths. The spring of inspiration expands and broadens until, in the third dhyāna, it becomes the entire medium in which we experience ourselves. By now all the wildness of rapture has been absorbed into bliss, so that the only dhyāna factors remaining are this peaceful bliss and one-pointedness. This process of purification continues into the fourth dhyāna, at which point bliss is transformed into equanimity. At this stage our mind goes beyond any possibility of conflict, and reaches a peak of emotional stability and purity. Our one-pointedness of mind becomes unshakeable, so that we can maintain the concentration undistractedly for as long as we wish.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. It’s almost as though we are not one person – as though we have a number of different ‘selves’.” Do you agree? Can you recognise and maybe give a name to some of your main ‘selves’?
2. Have you ever experienced anything like the ‘higher states’ described in the text – especially access concentration and the first dhyāna – either in or out of meditation?
3. If your answer to Q2 was “yes”, when did this happen, and what were the conditions that contributed to your experience?
4. If your answer to Q2 was “no”, do you accept that people can and do experience these states? If you compare your life to the life described by the Buddha in the first text of this part of the course, can you see any

factors in your lifestyle that might be stopping you entering states of deep concentration?

5. Go back and look at the way the Buddha describes the dhyānas – or jhānas – in the first text of this section. Can you relate the way the Buddha describes them to the descriptions in the text?
6. “By developing one of the positive features of dhyāna, we are simultaneously counteracting one of the five hindrances.” What qualities are the opposite of each of the five hindrances? What qualities do you think need to be present in a state of meditative awareness? Are they the same? Which positive factor tends to be most lacking in your experience of meditation, and how might you cultivate it?