

Introductory talk: The System of Meditation Revisited

by Kulaprabha

Cittapala deserves a vote of thanks for producing the booklet '*The System of Meditation Revisited*', in which he has drawn on much of what Bhante has said about meditation, put it into a structure, and added some of his own comments. It's a very good read, though not exactly an easy one. At the very least I recommend that you read the sections in the booklet covering each of the following talks, because that will give you a better context in which to understand what is said in each talk.

Which system of meditation is being revisited?

When Dayanandi told me that we would be studying the system of meditation on the Convention, at first what I thought she meant was Bhante's description of the system of meditation as the five basic meditation practices, which he describes in a very traditional way, categorising them as either samatha or vipassana. But, as I discovered, the Convention programme is actually based on the subsequent system outlined in Cittapala's booklet, which describes meditation in terms of four aspects: integration, positive emotion, spiritual death and spiritual rebirth. So in this introduction I want to make three remarks about these four aspects, which makes me sound a bit like the Pali Canon (not that there is anything wrong with that). They are just three trains of thought that emerged partly from my e-mail communication with Dayanandi and partly from reading bits of what Chittapala had sent me of his booklet.

First remark: Pay attention to the four elements of meditation

These four aspects of meditation (integration, positive emotion, spiritual death and spiritual rebirth) strike me as being very general. They are like facets of meditation, even principal elements of a meditation practice, like signposts in the mental landscape, or even compass bearings; they are directions which we need to bear in mind if we are going to attempt to meditate in order to change ourselves, especially to loosen our sense of self during meditation practice. In effect, what Bhante is saying to us is, pay attention: pay attention to the element of integration, the element of positive emotion, of spiritual death, and of spiritual rebirth. If you want to build an effective, or a real, meditation practice, pay attention to these four elements. And then he goes on to suggest how particular meditation practices can be linked to each of these four elements or signposts.

I think that this way of teaching is what makes Bhante such a good Dharma teacher. He gives a principal structure, in this case about meditation, and some more specific suggestions, but he leaves us to work out what will particularly suit the conditions we live in and especially our own particular mind. He provides us with a guiding perspective or foundation and then the freedom to build up our own detailed practice on that foundation. That was

the first thing that struck me about this whole system of meditation.

Second remark: Verifying the system

The second remark follows on from the first. If these four aspects of meditation are a system, we will need to verify for ourselves how that system operates. How do these four elements interact, how do they interconnect, how do they influence one another, how does this system work? I've noticed that people have different responses to the word 'system'. When I hear it, I think 'Oh good, a system! Now I can find out how it works and what it relates to.' But I've noticed that other people are not so empathetic towards systems. However, if we are really going to look at this system of meditation we have to try and see it as a whole, and that does mean trying to see how it works as a system. If you're like me, you're going to enjoy doing that, but if you aren't so empathetic towards systems, you may have to work at it a bit, to try and see this particular system as a whole.

This brings to mind that story from the Pali Canon about the blind men and the elephant: one man touches the tusk and thinks the elephant is a plough-share; another touches the leg and thinks it is a tree; another touches the tail and thinks it is a brush. If we do the equivalent of that with this meditation system, if we just look at the bits we like and don't bother about the bits we don't like, or don't put some effort into seeing how it works as a whole, then we're going to be in a somewhat similar position. So don't let yourself be blind to this system of meditation; it just needs some effort. In his booklet Chittapala talks about this from the point of view of looking at different models for this system. Of course, if you like systems, you like models too. There are various models that can be applied to these four aspects of meditation. Chittapala says quite a lot about that, and I am going to say something as well.

Applying a linear/spiral model to the system

First of all you could think of the four elements as being linked in a linear way, so that from the first element you move through into the second one, then the third, then the fourth. Bhante describes such systems as being progressive and cumulative, which implies time and a course of events. It's a temporal model and you can develop that basic model into a spiral one, the kind of model we use for all sorts of Dharmic lists. In this system of meditation, it's rather like a chain of elements; we go through the cycle once, and then the fruits of that effort feed back into the first of the elements again. For instance, if integration was where you started, integration is reinforced and strengthened, informed by your previous practice of the first turn of the cycle. It doesn't all happen quite in an ABCD-like manner, but you can certainly apply that spiral model to this system, to see if it works like that. Both linear and temporal models are developmental.

It is important to understand that moving through those four elements, whether in a line or in a spiral, doesn't necessarily imply that you progress through four separate types of meditation practice. You can do that, and Bhante has given suggestions about connecting mindfulness of breathing with integration, the brahma viharas with positive emotion and so on. But in his booklet Cittapala makes the point quite strongly that although you can do it that way, it's not necessarily the only way to do it. You could just choose one practice, or perhaps two, and deliberately cultivate all four elements of the system within that one practice or those two practices. If you were to do that, you would need to reflect on and probably rework the practice or practices you've chosen. It is possible to do that with the basic mindfulness of breathing practice, and I think probably with the brahma viharas, but we don't teach those practices in that way. So if we in the Order are going to use one type of practice and bring all four elements of meditation into it, we're going to have to think through very carefully how to do that for ourselves, and in a sense rework the practice for our own needs.

Applying a spatial model to the system

These four elements of meditation can also be considered as a spatial model. You can think of the four elements as being four mutually supportive conditioning factors, paccayas. Paccaya means support or conditioning factor. In the Pali Canon the Buddha talks about particular links in the nidana chain as being mutually supportive and he likens it, I think, to sheaves of reeds or corn. The sheaves stand up because they're leaning against one another, they mutually support one another. That would work with just two sheaves of corn, but you could have as many as you like, and I think we can look at this system as being like four mutually supportive sheaves of corn, sheaves of meditation, all present together.

This model raises other questions. Would any one element be sufficient unto itself? Could one element be pre-eminent; could there be a specific emphasis on one element? If you think of them as being mutually supportive, would it work if one element was pre-eminent amongst the four? I don't know the answer to this, because it depends on one's own mind and one's own approach, but it's definitely a useful question to bear in mind. Another question is, what would happen if one element isn't there? If positive emotion ceases, hopefully temporarily, what happens to that element of our meditation practice? So all these kinds of question are raised by a mutually supportive model. What happens if one element is not there, or is weak? What happens if one element is pre-eminent - how does that reverberate around the other aspects of the model? And how does each element support the other three?

Also, as it's a spatial model, is there something around which these four elements are constellated, something that isn't the four elements themselves around which they orbit or circulate? And if there is such a centre of gravity in the middle, does it give a particular shape to these four elements, perhaps

pulling them together or bringing them into alignment in a particular way? This might be something that emerges in our actual experience. You would think that if it was the case, we would become aware of it, as we put the system of meditation into practice. So that was the second remark, a long remark.

Third remark: Is the system working for us?

The third and last remark follows on from the previous one. I started to wonder if there is any way of working out for ourselves whether this system is working for us, because that's what we have to find out. There have been questions thrown up about it; some of us have more questions than others, but all of us have to be satisfied that this system is working for us - then we'll happily proceed to apply it. If we are not satisfied, we have to know in what way it doesn't work, or if it is lacking something. Starting off with a spatial model, you are trying to get the four elements into existence in some preliminary way, just trying to get them present. But what happens when those four elements are together? What do we think is going to happen? Is something new going to come into being?

If they begin to come into alignment, then maybe it will become more obvious what might arise anew from this alignment. That would be the mystery of it, I think, although in some ways it's not a mystery at all, because the tradition makes clear what will happen. We could say we will enter the stream, insight will arise, the Bodhicitta will arise. From a Yogacarin approach, there will be a turning about in the deepest seat of our consciousness; something will happen that will make an impact on us. If you are more of a Madhyamikan bent, you're not going to say anything about what happened except what it isn't.

Some helpful criteria

It's all very well, obviously, if we become stream entrants; we can look back and say, 'Yes, it worked for me.' But I wanted to try to get hold of something a bit more helpful in the interim; and I think I've found something that does go some way towards helping us to figure out whether the system is working for us. Well, I say I found it, but actually I was fortunate enough to be on retreat a month ago with Padmavajri, who was re-reading 'The Meaning of Buddhism and the Value of Art', and she found this story in it. Bhante is talking about the meaning of Buddhism and he refers to two possible movements in consciousness: an expanding movement and a contracting movement. He goes on to say that Buddhism, as a way of life, as a practicable scheme of spiritual development, is based on a movement of expansion of consciousness. Then he tells the old Indian story about the well frog and the ocean frog. The ocean frog comes and sits beside the well frog, who says, 'Where are you from?' The ocean frog replies that he is from the ocean, and the well frog immediately wants to know what the ocean is like. Is it, for example, as big as his well? And to demonstrate the dimensions he is talking about, he leaps across the well and back. The ocean frog says that it would be

ridiculous to compare the size of the ocean with the size of the well; but, unimpressed, the well frog says, 'Nothing can be bigger than my well. You're either mad or a liar. Go away.'

How does this story connect with the expansion of consciousness? This meditation system, and Buddhism more widely, aims at lifting us out of the well and plunging us into the ocean of our mind; that's what it's trying to do. Bhante goes on to say that, ethically speaking, this expansive movement in consciousness consists in a continual renunciation of self, a constant progression from egoism to selflessness. So that's a bit more of an interim guideline. With regard to our meditation practice, we can ask ourselves, never mind a continual progression from egoism to selflessness, do we notice a movement, a little bit every now and again, from egoism to selflessness? If that isn't happening, the system of meditation isn't working for us: either because it's not a very good system, or because we are not using it properly. Bhante also goes on to say that in the course of twenty five centuries lots of meditation practices have evolved, and their validity should be tested with this criterion. So, the criterion of a continual renunciation of self is the basic criterion for any meditation technique. If it leads to an expansion of consciousness, an illumination of mind, a purification of heart, a higher degree of spiritual sharp-sightedness and an emancipation from the fetters of egoism, then it may be considered as a teaching of the Master himself.

So those are good questions to keep alive in our own meditation practice: do we experience, to some extent at least, expansion of consciousness, illumination of mind, purification of heart, a higher degree of spiritual sharp-sightedness, and emancipation from the fetters of egoism? Bhante refers to the expansion of consciousness as being two-fold: on the one hand, an increase of our understanding, a deepening of our experience; on the other hand, a constant multiplication of our points of contact with the external world, a ceaseless enlargement of that delicate network of sympathy and affection by which we are connected in a thousand ways with every other form of life. Again, these two particular aspects of the expansion of consciousness are just questions to be thrown in, or to be continually present, when we're reviewing our own meditation practice. I'm sure that the four talks we are going to have will help us go further with all of this. We are trying to get a sense of this system of meditation as a whole, in our mind and in our heart, because we meditate from our heart, really.

To conclude, I am going to read a verse which I think encapsulates what I have just quoted from Bhante. It encapsulates what Bhante is laying out for us, what could become our experience, our heart's response, through this way of meditating. The verse is by Kenneth White, from 'Walking the Coast'.

Knowing now
that the life at which I aim
is a circumference
continually expanding

through sympathy and
understanding
rather than an exclusive centre
of pure self - feeling
the whole I seek
is centre plus circumference
and now the struggle at the centre is over
the circumference
beckons from everywhere.