



# Serene and clear: an introduction to Buddhist meditation

by Patrick Kearney

## Week one: Sitting in stillness

### Why is meditation?

Why is meditation central to Buddhism? The Buddha's teaching is concerned with the nature of the human condition, with who we are and how we live out our lives. At the centre of the human condition is our capacity for self awareness, or reflexive awareness. Have you ever had the experience of eating in company when the food is particularly good, gobbling it down oblivious to your surroundings? Suddenly you freeze, realising that everyone can see you. You are momentarily paralysed by "self consciousness." What happens during that experience? At first we are eating, aware of ourselves, our food, and of how good the food is. Lost in the activity of eating, we lose awareness of our surroundings and forget everything except the food. Then suddenly we become aware that there are others in the room, and that they can see us. More than that, we become aware of how we appear to these others - we become self conscious. This is an example of reflexive awareness. As humans, we not only know, we know that we know. We not only know our eating, but we know that we know our eating. Have you seen a dog eat? A dog knows his food, and knows he is eating, but seems to have no awareness of how he eats; he seems not to know that he knows he is eating. He lacks self consciousness. He apparently lacks that reflexive ability to turn his awareness around 180 degrees to himself, his actions, and his state of mind. Normally when we talk about self consciousness, we are referring to self awareness or reflexive awareness accompanied by some degree of paranoia. "Everyone can see me! What do they think?" But reflexive awareness by itself is self consciousness without the paranoia. And our capacity to meditate depends on that ability to turn awareness around 180 degrees so that we not only know something, but know that we know. As human beings we are aware, and we are aware of our awareness. We experience, and we experience our experiencing.

In meditation, we turn our attention to the human condition. We attend to what we experience, and how we experience. So meditation assumes a first person perspective on the nature of human experience. We have been educated to think objectively and scientifically, and have learnt to see things from a third person perspective. We see things as "out there," existing independently of us. The world is something "out there," and it is there regardless of whether we are "in here" to see it or not. But Buddhism assumes a first person perspective. The Buddha's teaching is about how things are from the perspective of our experience of them; how things appear to us. For the Buddha, the world is our-experience-of-the-world. In the Sabba Sutta (Discourse on Everything) the Buddha says:

I will teach you everything (*sabbam*) ...

And what is everything? The eye and forms; ear and sounds; nose and scents; tongue and tastes; body and tangible things; mind and phenomena.

Whoever would say, "Rejecting this everything, I teach another everything," the basis for that would be mere words, and if asked he could not sustain it. Furthermore, he would become distressed.

Why? Because it is beyond experience. (S 4.15)

What is "everything" or "the all" (*sabbam*)? "Everything" consists of the totality of our sense experience. We have six senses: the five physical senses of eye, ear, nose, tongue and body, and the non-physical sense of mind. For the Buddha, the mind is a sense organ. When we dream, for example, we "see" events unfold, but this seeing is not being done by the eyes, but by the mind. Even when we see with the eyes, all the eye actually sees are patterns of colour and light. Interpreting these patterns to "see" that right now I am sitting in a hall with a number of other people is the work of the mind. For each sense organ there is a specific sense object: forms, sounds, scents, tastes, tangible sensations and the phenomena sensed by the mind. The aggregate of a sense organ, its corresponding sense object, and the knowing of that object by the sense organ, constitutes a sense field, a field of experience.

Can we assert the existence of anything or anyone beyond the totality of our sense experience? Can we assert the existence of a God or immortal soul or metaphysical principle or ontological reality that exists beyond or beneath our sense experience? We can, of course, but for the Buddha the basis for any such assertion would be "mere words," and it is clear from this discourse that "mere words" do not constitute a reliable basis for belief. What does constitute a reliable basis for belief? Experience - and all experience is contained in the six sense fields.

This understanding of the centrality of experience involves both a radical acceptance of the boundaries of the human condition, and a determination to understand everything that lies within those boundaries. The Buddha is concerned with "everything," and for this reason refuses to get involved with debates about anything which is beyond the range of experience. But he is concerned with whatever *is* experienced, not matter how trivial or deep or subtle. Nothing within the realm of experience can be ignored.

If experience is all there is, it would seem a good idea to investigate our experience in order to understand its real nature. If our experience is painful and unsatisfactory, for example, then we need to know and understand how this unsatisfactory situation has come about, so that we can change it into something more satisfactory. Meditation is designed to reveal the real nature of our experience, and to create a space within which we can relate to it more skilfully. It is, for example, inherent to human experience that we are always in the midst of some given situation - *this* situation right here and now. The givenness of this situation is inescapable. Whether we like it or not, we are here and now, and we have no choice other than to be here and now. However, while we find ourselves inescapably in this situation here and now, we are free to respond to this situation in any number of ways. This situation here and now is workable. Meditation is one of the ways in which we work with our situation. It is designed to clarify the nature of our condition, and then create the space within which we can respond to it in a way which promotes the welfare and happiness of ourselves and others. But first we must clarify our situation, we must *know* it, thoroughly. To do this we must pay attention to it, in a systematic and methodical way.

### **What is meditation?**

Meditation is the systematic training of attention. Attention is the deliberate placing of awareness on its object. And awareness is the knowing of the object.

For example, let us consider the act of seeing: Facing you, I am aware of the wall at the back of this room. You are aware of the wall at the front of this room. This awareness is a fundamental *knowing*. That which we see is the *object* of knowing. We have different objects of visual awareness, different things we know. But because I am short-sighted, without my glasses the back of the room is a blur; for you, the front of the room may be clear. So not only are the objects of knowing different for you and I, but also the *quality* of knowing is different. We may be looking at the same thing - so the object of our knowing is the same - but each of us may experience a different quality of knowing. There is a wide range of qualities of knowing, from complete not-knowing - closing your eyes, you don't know the front of the room at all - to weak knowing - you are vaguely aware of it - to strong knowing - you know it like "the back of your hand." The process of systematically training attention is that of cultivating ever longer periods of clearer, or stronger, awareness.

Attention is the deliberate placing of awareness on its object. Normal, everyday awareness is something that happens to us; meditative awareness is something that we do. For example, we might notice a painting on the wall, and even admire it briefly. But if we knew that after thirty minutes we would have to answer questions on it in order to compete for a prize of a million dollars, then I suspect that we would be putting a lot of energy into looking carefully at that painting and distinguishing what exactly is in it, its real nature. It is that quality of *effort* or *energy* that distinguishes normal awareness from meditative awareness. Normal, everyday awareness is something that happens to us; meditative awareness is something that we *deliberately* do. Effort always implies *choice* or *intention*. We choose to place our awareness on a particular object - the painting - rather than another - our daydreams, or the view out the window, or checking out the other people in the room. Attention chooses a specific object to know, and then chooses to focus on it. And so, attention is the deliberate placing of awareness on its object.

## Two wings of the bird

Meditation is the systematic training of attention, and the process of developing attention can be compared to a journey where we travel from confusion to clarity, from the gross to the subtle. This journey is like the flight of a bird, and in order to fly the bird needs two wings. Just one wing, no matter how strong, is not enough. These two wings are serenity (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*).

*Samatha* means "serenity" or "calm," and *samatha* meditation is meditation for the purpose of cultivating serenity or calm. *Vipassanā* means "insight" or "clarity," and *vipassanā* meditation is meditation for the purpose of cultivating insight or clarity. All Buddhist meditation methods can be regarded as falling into one of these two categories. Of these two, *vipassanā* is considered by the tradition as the most important because it alone leads to awakening (*bodhi*) and *nirvāṇa*. However, although they are often presented as separate and independent "techniques," *samatha* and *vipassanā* are the two ends of a single continuum. All serenity meditation has an insight aspect; all insight meditation has a serenity aspect. So serenity can also mean the calming aspect of any meditation technique; and insight can mean the clarifying aspect of any meditation technique. Often the tradition talks about meditation in terms of the single activity of *samatha-vipassanā* (serenity-insight), because both aspects must be cultivated in a balanced way. **How** they are cultivated and balanced determines whether we can classify a particular method as either serenity meditation or insight meditation.

## Posture

Meditation is both a physical and a mental activity. We meditate with our bodies, and we need to train our bodies in order to sustain a meditation practice. The Buddha spoke of four postures of the body: walking, standing, sitting and lying down. Meditation can be practised in any of these. Usually when we think of meditation we associate it with the sitting posture. The sitting posture enables us to combine stillness with alertness, and so learning to sit is an essential aspect of meditation training.

“Here a meditator sits down, crosses his legs and straightens his back.” This is the only record we have of the Buddha’s instruction on the sitting posture. The great commentator Buddhaghosa, who wrote in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, explains this as follows:

[The Buddha] said *sits down*, indicating a posture that is peaceful and tending neither to laziness nor to restlessness. Then he said *crosses his legs*, to show firmness in the sitting position, easy occurrence of the in-breaths and out-breaths, and the means for discerning the object. Here, *crosses his legs* is the sitting position with the thighs fully locked. *Straightens his back*: placing the upper part of the body erect with the eighteen vertebrae resting end to end. For when he is seated like this, his skin, flesh and sinews are not twisted, and so the painful feelings that would arise moment by moment if they were twisted do not arise. That being so, his mind becomes unified, and the meditation object, instead of collapsing, attains to growth and increase. [Visuddhimagga VIII: 159-60]

Posture, in other words, is concerned with making the body stable and comfortable, balancing our energy so that there is neither too much (leading to restlessness) nor too little (leading to dullness). With the body still but awake, the mind unifies and the meditation object clarifies. This is not easy, for as we discover when we begin a meditation practice, the body is restless and painful. One thing anyone will discover when they try keep the body still for any period of time is the inherent painfulness of the body. This is why posture is so difficult - it is genuinely difficult to keep the body steady *and comfortable*. Usually the inherent pain of the body is hidden by habitual movement - just as the inherent pain of the mind is hidden by habitual thought. So we tend to shift about, adjusting a limb here, scratching an itch there. The difficulty of maintaining a steady and comfortable posture can be shown by this simple experiment. Adopt the most comfortable posture you can think of; the posture in which you feel most comfortable and most at ease. Now see how long you can maintain this posture without moving. As soon as you feel you must move, ask yourself “Why?” Why do I want to move? The answer will be that I am not comfortable, and I want to move in order to get comfortable. And if I want to move in order to get comfortable, this means I am in some degree of pain.

If we want the mind to become serene, unified and concentrated, the body must be still and comfortable. This is the art of posture. So in beginning any sitting, pay attention to how the body is placed. How are you making contact with the cushion, bench or chair? Having arranged the legs, roll the pelvis forward, with the belly out and the buttocks back. Feel the back and, lifting up from the pelvis, make space between each vertebra. Lift the chest up and out, and roll the shoulders back. Tuck the chin in, so there is a slight stretch in the back of the neck. Imagine a plumb line dropping from your nose tip to your navel. Arrange the arms and hands so there is no tension in the shoulders. Imagine yourself pushing the ceiling up with the top of your head. And then rest the focus of your attention in the abdomen, from which you can spread your awareness throughout the whole body. As the sitting progresses, continue to monitor the balance of your posture, adjusting it from time to time. As you notice that you slump, straighten up; as you notice any tension developing, relax. The whole body is erect, alert, and still.

## **Sitting in stillness**

Within this stillness of the body, we can develop stillness of the mind. Stillness and concentration are closely linked. Concentration is traditionally defined as “the unification of the mind.” All aspects of the mind are brought together, evenly and harmoniously, and focused on a single object. When this happens, the mind becomes still and serene. This serenity is useful for itself, as it enables us to release a great deal of distress and become more grounded and connected with both ourselves and our environment. For the Buddha, however, the major advantage of serenity is that it establishes a foundation from which we can see the real nature of ourselves and our environment. It is this clear seeing, or insight, that has the potential to liberate us from our self-inflicted suffering.

This week we will examine the nature of serenity by using the breath as our meditation object. Breath links body and mind. Posture is the work of bringing the body into stillness, balance and harmony. Ultimately, we want to bring the mind into stillness, balance and harmony. We use the breath to move from body to mind. Calming and clarifying the breath, we calm and clarify body and mind.

Begin with arranging the body, so it is erect, balanced and still. Feeling the whole body, focus your attention on the abdomen. What do you feel there? Do you feel any movement within the stillness? That movement is the breath. Focus your attention on the breath. Any time your attention wanders to thinking, bring it back to the breath. Don't get entangled in self-judgement, any sense of failure because your mind is not behaving as you think it should. Just come back to the breath, and to the sense of the whole body sitting there in that posture. When you feel your posture has slumped to any degree, adjust the body and return it to its original erectness, then again focus on the breath. Where do you feel that the breath is clearest? Focus on that point. It may be in the abdomen, or in the chest, or at the nose; or it may move around. But focus on that part of the body where the breathing is clearest to you.

As soon as we begin to practice, we discover that our mind is out of control. The process of meditation is one of starting again. In this moment, return to body and breath. Drop the past, just return to this breath, now.

Once you feel established in your posture and connected with the breath, begin to count your breaths at the end of the exhalation. Count your exhalations from one to ten, and then return to one. If you lose the count before ten, just go back to one. If you find yourself counting beyond ten, just go back to one. So your attention is focused on the breath at the point where it is clearest to you, and on the count. Buddhaghosa explains that linking the breath with the count helps unify the mind, “just as a boat in a swift current is steadied with the help of a rudder.”

If the mind becomes peaceful to some degree, and the current of thought is no longer submerging your meditation object, then drop the count and just focus on the flow of breath. And at this point, bring your attention to the nostrils and upper lip, the point where you feel the touch of the breath as it enters and leaves the body. Rest your attention at that point. Keep your attention focused on that single, closely defined location, and the touch sensations of the breath as it enters and leaves the body. Examine these sensations closely. Where do you feel them? Do you feel the sensations associated with the inhalation at the same point as those associated with the exhalation? Or somewhere else? Is the temperature of the sensations associated with the inhalation the same as the temperature of the sensations associated with the exhalation? Is the inhalation the same length as the exhalation? Is inhalation clearer than exhalation? Or is exhalation clearer to you than inhalation? Or are they the same? Don't be content with a vague sense of the breath. Be

precise. What exactly is the experience of this inhalation? What exactly is the experience of this exhalation?

Don't expect physical discomfort and thought to immediately vanish. Distraction is inherent to the meditation process. When you are distracted by pain, check the posture of the body and adjust it if necessary. Then return to the breath. When you are distracted by thought, just drop it and return to the breath. Don't take distraction seriously, and above all, don't take distraction personally. You are dealing with the mind-body process, and restless movement is inherent to it. It's not personal.

## Distraction

What does it take to be continuously aware of breathing? This is a fundamental question. Very quickly we discover how hard it is to maintain attention on something as simple as the breath. Why? What makes continuous attention difficult? Finding the answer to this question is a fundamental aspect to developing a meditation practice.

We begin to practice, and run straight into distraction. The mind will not stay still. It will not do what we tell it to do. So since we have no choice but to work with distraction, it is important that we get to know how distraction operates. In the experience of distraction we can see two clear parts: the moment we lose the meditation object and become lost in distraction; and the moment we realise we are distracted.

Attention is the deliberate placing of awareness on its object - in this case, the breath. This act of placing awareness on its object takes just a moment; and it lasts for just a moment. We can only be aware of what is happening *now*, so we must attend to the breath *now*. In this moment we are aware of the breath; in the next moment we are lost in thought. So the deliberate placing of awareness on the breath must be done now; and again now; and again now; and again now; and so on. This is the relentlessness of the practice. It is never finished. We never reach the point where we can simply cruise and relax. In this moment, we are either deliberately placing awareness on the breath, or we are lost in distraction. There is a quality of immediacy to the practice. If we are not doing it now, we are not doing it.

In the same way, the moment we realise "I'm distracted!," this very moment is a moment of awareness. In this moment, the distraction is already in the past, and what we have is an awareness of distraction itself. As the practice can only be done now, the past is irrelevant. In the moment we become aware of distraction itself, the distraction is already in the past. But realising "I'm distracted!," we have a tendency is to get caught up in self judgement, condemning ourselves for our inability to concentrate. But that self judgement is simply another distraction, added to the last. We must learn to drop all judgements about ourselves and our practice and simply return, *now*, to the breath. When we notice we are judging ourselves, return *now* to the breath. And this act of returning, now, to the breath is the entirety of the practice. Nothing else is necessary.

Returning, now, to the breath, the mind naturally unifies and settles. In practising meditation we are dealing with natural process. Natural process cannot be hurried. It can be slowed down, if we deal with it unskillfully, but it cannot be hurried. We need to avoid delaying the unification of the mind by getting out of the way of the natural process, and we do this by keeping in touch with the immediacy of the practice. Right now, return to this breath. Drop everything else, just return to this breath. Practising in this way, the natural serenity of the mind unfolds.