

# Meditation in buddhism



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Buddhists pursue meditation as a means to attain their goal of escaping suffering and the cycles of rebirth: the achievement of nirvana (Pali: nibbana). The practice of meditation has been directly derived from Buddha's own experiences and teachings as it is generally accepted that the Buddha himself reached enlightenment through meditation. Meditation can be contextualized as part of the Noble Eightfold Path, the fourth of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths, specifically in regards to the final three factors: Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration (Harvey, 1990, p. 8-70).

While several variations of this practice have developed in different Buddhist traditions the core principles of the technique are preserved in ancient Buddhist texts. The ultimate goal of Buddhism can only be achieved through the cultivation of wisdom. Although this wisdom can be initiated through the reflection of scriptures and through spiritual teachers, meditation is required to help it mature fully (Harvey, 1990, p. 244). Meditation is the practice of mental concentration aimed at progressively increasing calmness and wisdom, or prajna.

Generally the mental exercise of meditation requires personal guidance, and is typically done under the supervision of a meditation teacher (Harvey, 1990). The Buddha himself sought the knowledge two spiritual teachers on his path to enlightenment, and nibbana (Anderson, 2010). Training in meditation can help enable the practitioner to control their mind regardless of external circumstances. Learning the practice of meditation has often been compared to gardening; as we cannot force a plant to grow, instead we

can only provide them with the right conditions so they can develop naturally (Harvey, 1990, p. 245).

The Buddha taught that there were five hindrances (nivarana) or negative mental states that can obstruct the meditation process, weaken wisdom and lead the practitioner away from enlightenment (Harvey, 1990, p. 249). The first of the five hindrances is sensual desire, the second ill will, sloth and torpor the third, restlessness and worry the fourth, and the final hindrance is doubt. The final of these hindrances is doubt, where the mind wavers due to a lack of conviction or trust. It is only once these hindrances are suspended that one can begin to attain the four progressive states of absorption meditation, or jhana (Britannica, 010).

Theravada Buddhism describes four stages of jhana that can be distinguished by the shift of attention from the outward sensory world (Britannica, 2010). The first jhana encompasses five component factors, which oppose the five hindrances and lead the mind from ordinary consciousness to the janic level. These factors include: applied thought, examination, rapture, happiness, and one-pointedness (Harvey, 1990, p. 250). As the practitioner transcends each of the level of jhana the grosser factors are eliminated and more energy is focused into one-pointedness (Harvey, 1990, p. 250).

The fourth jhana is a state of profound stillness and peace and is thought to be the state from which the Buddha progressed to enlightenment. Beyond the four jhanas lie four formless attainments including: Consciousness of infinity of space, consciousness of the infinity of cognition, concern with the

unreality of things, and the consciousness of unreality as the object of thought (Britannica, 2010). Theravada tradition practices two basic forms of meditation: calm or tranquility meditation (samatha) and insight meditation (vipassana). Simply put, the purpose of tranquility meditation is to calm the mind and train it to concentrate.

This technique often involves a kammattana, an object of concentration, which is used as a means of entering meditation. According to the fifth century Pali text, *Visuddhimagga*, there are forty kammattanas (Britannica, 2010), which include, but not limited to: certain devices (such as color or light), objects of repulsion (like a corpse), recollections (such as teachings of the Buddha), and virtues (like sympathetic joy; ReligionFacts, 2011). Kammattana are generally allocated to the pupil by the meditation teacher and vary according to the individual and situation.

The chosen object reflects some aspect of the pupil's personality particularly with respect to any negative tendencies that need improvement (Harvey, 1990 247). These meditation objects help suppress the five hindrances and in turn help the pupil progress through the four stages of jhana. Calm produces valuable changes in a person and acts as an ideal introduction to the practice of insight, providing the clarity to see things as 'they really are' as well as mature one's ability to concentrate on an object for extended periods of time (Harvey, 1990, p. 52). Ultimately, calm helps modify the mind making it a better tool for insight. Even though many of the skills learned in tranquility meditation can be applied to insight meditation the final goal is different. The function of insight meditation is to produce the level of understanding through which enlightenment can be obtained (ReligionFacts, <https://assignbuster.com/meditation-in-buddhism/>

2011). Vipassana requires intense concentration, which leads the practitioner to insight, helping them progress towards enlightenment.

Theravada texts emphasize the use of both samatha and vipassana in various combinations, noting that both calm and insight are necessary ingredients for attaining nibbana (Harvey, 1990, p. 254). However, in the 20th century, increasing emphasis was placed on vipassana, making it the primary form of meditation practiced in Theravada Buddhism (Britannica, 2010; ReligionFacts, 2011). The Ch'an (or Zen in Japanese) tradition emphasizes that the practice of meditation is the key component to reaching liberation.

Zazen, or sitting meditation is the heart of Zen practice, as it is the basis for both awareness and koan meditation, which are emphasized by the Soto and Rinzai schools, respectively (Harvey, 1990, p. 270). In contrast to the traditional Tathagata meditation, the way of Calm and Insight, these techniques are regarded as patriarchal meditation. The Soto School places particular emphasis on posture in zazen focusing attention on the area just below the navel, known as the tanden, from which energy develops and radiates throughout the rest of the body (Harvey, 1990, p. 70).

Once the disciple is able to control his wandering mind they may proceed to higher degrees of awareness while sitting, a technique known as 'just sitting'. This technique is akin to the Theravada Vipassana-yana where Calm is preceded by Insight as the pupil encourages nothing but sitting, allowing streams of thought to arise and pass without interference (Harvey, 1990, p. 270). In order to maximize the effects of meditation the Ch'an tradition has

developed several other techniques including koan meditation and the meditative arts.

Rinzai Buddhism emphasized the use of koans, paradoxical puzzles or questions, as a tool to help the pupil overcome the normal boundaries of logic. Koans are constructed to help the practitioner focus on just one object, therefore this practice begins by first developing a deep Calm. In this way Rinzai koan meditation parallels the Theravada Samatha-yana, in which Insight is preceded by Calm (Harvey, 1990, p. 273).

This technique is often accompanied by a sudden shout or strike from the master, which can help induce a state of no thought or jhana, bringing with it various levels of insight (Harvey, 1990, p. 275). The meditative arts of Zen include: ink paintings of landscapes and Zen masters, calligraphy, poetry, landscape gardening as well as various other activities not usually considered 'arts', such as archery, swordsmanship, and the 'Tea ceremony'.

These arts require free flowing intuition that arises from the state of no thought. An aspiring Zen artist first must perfectly grasp the technical skills of the art before they are able to develop one-pointedness (Harvey, 1990, p. 277). When the artist gets lost in their task and is able to perform the task instinctively and naturally they are able to progress to a state of mind that is empty of normal dualistic consciousness (Anderson, 2010).

Pure Land is a branch of Mahayana Buddhism and is focused on Amitabha Buddha. Followers of this school believe that in order to be reborn in the Pure Land (Sukhavati) one must simply have absolute faith in the power and vows of the Buddha Amitabha (Anderson, 2010). Pure Land Buddhists focus on the

mindfulness practice of reciting “ namah Amitabha Buddha”, either vocally or mentally, to reinforce a proper and sincere state of mind and to gain admission to the Pure land at death.

Another practice used in Pure Land Buddhism is the meditative contemplation and visualization of the Pure land and the Amitabha Buddha. In this practice jhana is attained through a series of sixteen meditations, which are outlined in the Amitayur-dhyana Sutra (Harvey, 1990, p. 258). The practitioner begins by first contemplating the setting sun and ends with a visualization of the Pure Land, the Amitabha Buddha and his two Bodhisattvas, along with understanding of the various levels of rebirth in the Pure Land (Harvey, 1990, p. 258).

This practice is understood as a form of Insight meditation as visualization is a means to gain an insight into what lies beyond conceptual thought (Harvey, 1990, p. 259) In conclusion, Meditation occupies a central role in nearly all forms of Buddhism; however, over the years several variations have developed in different Buddhist traditions. Regardless of what form it takes meditation aids in the cultivation of wisdom and the attainment of nibbana. The practice of meditation in Buddhism will likely continue to evolve as to meet the needs of its practitioners.