

# The art of cultivating a phenomenological state of mind

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It continues to be a renowned belief of Buddhism that upon coming to the conclusion that neither the extreme course of self-denial practiced by the ascetics nor the life of self-indulgence which he had led as a prince was the right path towards enlightenment, Siddhartha Gautama adopts what he refers to as the Middle Way. He then, having the notion that the answer to what he seeks is buried within his own consciousness, sits in meditation beneath a fig tree for a duration of four (some say seven) weeks.

Throughout this length of time, he manages to withstand a barrage of attacks and temptations from the devil Mara while gradually ascending through higher states of consciousness, until he transcends the realm of conventional awareness and attains enlightenment. Such is the final aspiration of those pursuing the Buddhist path: to acquire, through right thoughts and good deeds, “ release from the round of phenomenal existence with its inherent suffering... to attain nirvana, an enlightened state in which the fires of greed, hatred, and ignorance have been quenched” (Buddhism).

The primary ethic that serves as a guide toward one’s ascent to nirvana is one that is both “ detached and inner-oriented,” requiring the individual searching to cultivate “ four virtuous attitudes, known as the Palaces of Brahma: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity” (Buddhism). However, in one’s striving to do so, it is important for them to first understand that in regards to Buddhist theory of the mind and consciousness, “ there is no self that is aware of the experiences one undergoes or the thoughts one has.

Rather the thoughts themselves are the thinker, and the experiences the experiencer" (Indian Theories of Mind). As long as one continues to believe in the existence of a self, it is not possible for them to properly understand the concept of mental activity as it is expressed within the Buddhist tradition.

Only once the belief in an inner self is renounced, and the belief in Atman, "the non-material spiritual element that merely witnesses the mental activities involved in the ordinary awareness of objects" (Indian Theories of Mind), is nurtured, is the individual then capable of amassing together positive mental factors which will aid in their resolve to veer from both the practices of austere asceticism and sensual indulgence, and instead follow the Middle Way to enlightenment.

Current scientific research on the consciousness has observed that the ordinary person is inclined to "attend to the world strictly as it appears, the world as it is phenomenally manifest" to him (Phenomenology). In other words, man considers the objects around him to be mere associations to a specific experience, thus he concentrates not on them, but on the manner in which they appear to him.

Buddhists, on the other hand, adopt the 'phenomenological attitude' by detaching themselves "from the natural attitude, not to deny it, but to investigate the very experiences it comprises" (Phenomenology). By employing this phenomenological mindset, Buddhists prove that, contrary to common belief, the acquisition of perceptions from an experience is not confined only to emotional or tactile receptors, rather, the awareness of these phenomenal aspects can also be granted through conscious thought.

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The Abhidharma, which constitutes one of the ‘ three baskets’ into which the Buddhist scriptures are divided, endeavors to organize Buddhist teachings in such a manner as to provide detailed analyses of experience. In examining these analyses, it becomes evident that in some aspects they are redolent of “ those in cognitivesciencethat aim to account for cognitive processing without invoking a homunculus or ‘ little man’ inside the head who oversees the workings of the mind (or merely passively witnesses the results...)” (Phenomenology).

For example, the Abhidharma investigates matter as a composition of multiple basic elements. However, in contrast to the standard definition which describing an element as being a concrete object unable to be divided into simpler forms, the Abhidharma classifies an element as being an evanescent material occurrence fluctuating in and out of existence according to the given circumstances. In a similar manner, the Abhidharma categorizes the human mind into its basic components: a “ succession of mental states” or “ stream of consciousness. In line with this reasoning, Buddhists hold this point of view with regards to the functioning of the mind: “ It is a mental imposition of unity where there is in fact only the arising of a multiplicity of interrelated physical and mental events. The sense of control belonging to one’s sense of self is thus largely illusory. There is really nobody in charge of the physical and mental processes, which arise according to their own causes and conditions, not our whims.

The mind is not ruled by a central unite, but by competing factors whose strengths varies according to our circumstances” (Indian Theories of Mind).

Buddhists thus attribute the “ limited but intuitive presence” an individual senses in response to their cognitive experiences, not to a metaphysical self, but to the spontaneous, non-recurrent awareness one has in relation to their own mental states; it can be interpreted as one of many varieties of perception.

It is the Atman, or non-spiritual element, “ that merely witnesses the mental activities involved in the ordinary awareness of objects” (Indian Theories of Mind). While on his deathbed, the Buddha told his disciples these words: “ Seek salvation alone in the truth; look not for assistance to anyone besides yourself. ” He was, in effect, admonishing them to seek enlightenment by no means other than developing right thinking and good deeds on a personal level.

When taking into account the path a Buddhist is required to follow, the significance of them cultivating a phenomenological mindset becomes progressively more apparent to the observer. Consider the concept of Renunciation. A Buddhist author, Gill Farrer-Halls, explains in layman terms: “ Renunciation means lessening both our attachment to those things we like and our aversion to unpleasant situations and feelings, by realizing that none of these things have an inherent ability to make us happy or unhappy” (Buddhism Seeks Enlightenment and Ultimate Reality).

To an ordinary person, adopting such a view regarding material possessions is no effortless task. However, in assuming the phenomenological attitude, they no longer become concerned with “ what things are in themselves... but rather in exactly how they appear, and thus as strict rational correlates of

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[their] experience” (Phenomenology). This is the Buddhist mindset. Believing material things to be sheer “ correlates of [their] experience” and nothing concrete, they are then able to hold them with a relaxed hand, so to speak.

In the event these possessions are removed from them, Buddhists, instead of becoming distressed, accept this as a trait of matter, which, according to the Abhidharma, fluctuates within the realm of existence according to causes and conditions. Farrer-Halls elaborates on this concept further: “ A tightly closed fist tries to grasp hold of things, but they slip away because of this grasping. If we open our hands, things pour over and move unimpeded. In this way, by not trying to control the natural flow of life, we can enjoy it.

When we loosen our grasping we become open, which makes us receptive to our environment.

We can appreciate other people and our surroundings beyond our tightly held perceptions” (Buddhism Seeks Enlightenment and Ultimate Reality). Through these examples, it is evident that the cultivation of a phenomenological mindset enables one to develop a detached appreciation for the material things of the world. If this psychological approach wasn't administered through routine meditation, the three poisons: desire, craving, and lust, would effortlessly trounce the Buddhist's determination to follow the Middle Way first established by Siddhartha Gautama, and thus attain enlightenment and ultimate reality.