

Is Meditation a Means of Knowing our Mental World?

Thupten Jinpa
Institute of Tibetan Classics
McGill University

The idea of meditation or some kind of disciplined inner reflection lies at the heart of spiritual practice in most ancient Indian spiritual and philosophical traditions and Buddhism is no exception. As the inheritor of classical Indian Buddhism, the Tibetan tradition too accords important place for meditation in its self-understanding. In these traditional contexts, however, the practice of meditation has always been closely linked to the project of seeking spiritual freedom irrespective of how such freedom may be characterized. In other words, meditation is seen as an integral part of a larger process where it exists alongside other activities, such as ethical discipline, cultivation of philosophical insights, as well as compassionate action. Today, like Yoga and Zen, meditation is increasingly becoming part of the contemporary popular culture. On the popular level, many people claim to meditate to seek some kind of inner tranquility. An important class of Buddhist meditation, namely mindfulness, has been successfully adapted in some contexts of health profession, especially with relation to treating stress and attendant ailments. Similarly, entire psychotherapeutic approaches appeared to have evolved inspired by Buddhist meditation practices. Now even the great embodiment of human reason, i.e. science, is turning its lenses on the phenomenon thus according the study of meditation a certain “respectability” and seriousness. It is this cultural backdrop that I should like to keep in mind when engaging in the discussion on meditation at this panel.

What I wish to do in this short presentation is to briefly examine the nature and role of meditation in traditional Buddhist contexts so it may help us understand the implications of the cultural encounter between meditation and science. My analysis of the concept and practice of meditation here is confined mainly to Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, a field that I am most familiar with. Since meditation has a long history of not just practice but also of philosophical theorizing in Buddhist thought, and since it is supposedly this phenomenon that is being studied, I feel that basic intellectual etiquette demands that scientists who study Buddhist meditation give certain respect to the voice of the tradition itself. In fact I would argue that, at least in the case of Buddhism, without taking seriously the tradition’s own self-understanding of the role of meditation this encounter between Buddhist meditation and science will not have the significant mutual enrichment it could otherwise potentially have.

When speaking of meditation in the contemporary cultural context, such as the scientific study of the phenomenon, one obvious fact that we tend to forget is that “meditation” is actually an English term and that, when applying it to convey a core element of Eastern spiritual practice, such as that of Buddhism, there might involve unrecognized conflation of meanings. In the classical Buddhist context, however, the term meditation is used to translate the Sanskrit term *bhāvana* and its Tibetan equivalent *gom* (spelt *sgoms*). Etymologically, the Sanskrit term connotes the notion of “cultivation,” while its Tibetan equivalent *gom* carries the idea of developing “familiarity,” together implying the idea of some kind of repetitive process of cultivating a familiarity, whether it is with respect to a habit, a way of seeing, or a way of being. In its actual usage, however, the term *gom* is applied not only to the process of “cultivation” or “development of familiarity,” it is also applied to the resultant states achieved through such processes. So, in this sense, meditation can refer both to the practice of disciplined cultivation as well as the cultivated result of such a discipline.

Given this broad definition of meditation, we find mentions of different types of meditations in the classical Buddhist texts. For example, there is the classic mindfulness meditation, wherein the individual learns to pay deep attention to the minute processes within the flow of his or her breath or mental processes, while remaining undistracted by other sensory or discursive thought processes. Then there is the meditation in the form of taking something as an object, such as when the person takes the fundamental truths of one's condition like the utterly transient nature of one's life, for instance, as the object of deep contemplation. Then there is the meditation in the form of cultivation of positive mental qualities, such as compassion and loving kindness. Here compassion and loving kindness are not so much as the objects of meditation; rather the person seeks to cultivate these qualities within his or her heart. There is also the practice of meditation as visualization or simulation, such as where the person visualizes himself or herself as going through the various stages of the experience of dying. In addition, there is the meditation in the form of prayer where, for example, the meditator aspires to attain the enlightened attributes of the Buddha for the sake of bringing about the welfare of countless sentient beings. Given this diverse typology, often the Tibetan term *gom* requires such different English terms as "cultivation," "visualization," "aspiration," "reflection," "meditation" and so on in different contexts. Broadly speaking, Buddhist tradition subsumes the practice of meditation into two generic categories: absorptive meditation (*'jog sgoms*) and discursive meditation (*dpnyad sgoms*), and the epitome of the two types of meditation are the "tranquil abiding of the mind" (*śamatha* or *zhi gnas*) and "insight" (*vipaśyana* or *lhag mthong*).

Understanding this diversity of meditation practices and their associated states is crucial if we are to avoid the temptation of viewing meditation as constituting some kind of homogenous mental state, characterized primarily by absence of thought. Especially with respect to scientific study of meditation, the cognizance of this diverse typology could bring greater precision to their understanding of the subject of enquiry. Since the scientific study of meditation, at least the neurobiological approach, is premised upon the practice of correlating specific brain states and activity with specific cognitive activities, this sensitivity to the typology of meditation could help prevent the temptation of homogenizing the biochemical expressions of meditation to a narrow type, such as higher than normal level activity of gama frequency or a greater activity in the left prefrontal cortex area. These may be brain level expressions of certain types of meditation practice; however, given the range of diversity in the types of meditation, one would expect different biochemical expressions to different meditational states.

What is the role of meditation in the context of Buddhist enlightenment project? Mark Siderits has argued that "Buddhist enlightenment project is aimed at helping us overcome existential suffering by dissolving false assumption underlying such suffering – that there is an 'I' whose life can have meaning and value," and that role of meditation is to bring home to the practitioner "in a concrete and an immediate way the fact that there is no one home." He has also suggested that the role of meditation in the enlightenment project represents an instance of the general Buddhist epistemological stance that perception, because of its perceived directness with contact with the fact being cognized, is the foremost means of knowledge. Although I agree with Siderits' broad characterization of the meditation's role in the enlightenment project, I would argue that meditation also has an epistemic role, at least in the self-understanding of Indo-Tibetan tradition, in gaining "knowledge" of the mental reality. In other words, I would argue that meditation plays both a negative role of dismantling our deep-seated notions of self-hood and interior subjectivity as well as a constructive role of giving insights into the nature and functions of the mental world.

So how does the Indo-Tibetan tradition see the role of meditation within the project of seeking enlightenment? Here it may be helpful to look at some important classical formulations of the process of development that underlie the tradition's understanding of the overall concept of

spiritual transformation. From very early sources we find references to the concept of the “three levels of understanding” that convey the tradition’s understanding of the progressively deepening stages of insight into the truth of human existence. They are referred to as “understanding derived through hearing (or learning)” (*śrutamayīprajñā*), “understanding derived through reflection” (*cintāmayīprajñā*) and “understanding derived through meditation” (*bhāvanāmayīprajñā*). An individual practitioner may first develop a certain understanding of, for example, the Buddha’s teaching on no-self (*anatman*) based either on listening to a teacher’s exposition of the doctrine or on the basis of reading. Here the understanding remains somewhat superficial and tied closely to understanding the meaning of the words. From the epistemological point of view, at this point the individual’s understanding remains only an informed assumption. However, as he or she then reflects deeply upon the meaning of no-self based on application of discursive analysis as well as relating the doctrine to one’s own existence, eventually a deep sense of conviction arises of the truth of no-self. At this point, to use an epistemologist’s language, the person can be seen to having gained a true knowledge of no-self, albeit at the level of the intellect. The fourth century Yogacāra master Asanga explains this process of reflection in terms of deep contemplation on the individual and general characteristics of the given fact or an event.¹ As part of this process he speaks of analyzing the concerned phenomena within the framework of what are known as the “four principles” – the principle of nature, of dependence, function, and evidence.² However, in order for this knowledge to have a radical impact on the individual’s psyche and behavior, that knowledge of no-self needs to be totally integrated into one’s very being such that it is incorporated into the habit of the person’s mindset. This third level of understanding is thought to arise only as a result of prolonged internalization of the insight into no-self through a repetitive process of disciplined inner reflection, i.e. meditation. This level of understanding is characterized as being “experiential,” “spontaneous,” and “effortless.” A good analogy here is the process of acquiring a skill, such as swimming or riding a bicycle where the key factor is actual practice.

In Indo-Tibetan tradition this process of progressively deepening levels of perfection is applied not only to paradigmatically cognitive contexts like cultivating insight into the truth of no-self, it is thought to apply equally to cultivation and enhancement of ethical qualities, what in traditional Buddhist parlance is referred to as the “method aspects of the path,” as well. The ninth century Indian author Kamalaśīla applies this process beautifully to the cultivation of universal compassion and loving kindness.³ A well-known Mahayāna scripture draws a memorable parallel between the experience of tasting the sweetness of eating the bark of a sugar cane and its core.⁴ The first levels – of learning and reflection – are compared to eating the bark, while the meditative derived level is likened to eating the inside of the sugar cane.

The seventh century Indian Buddhist epistemologist Dharmakīrti presents a schema according which he explains how an initial intellectual understanding could, through prolonged habituation, eventually culminate in an experiential understanding that is characterized with immediacy, spontaneity and effortlessness. The example Dharmakīrti cites is the naturalness and immediacy of our basic emotions, such as attachment. So, viewed in this way, Siderits is right when he suggests that the role of meditation represents part of the general Buddhist epistemological stance that accords great primacy to direct experience as opposed to inference and testimony.

¹ *Śravakabhūmi*, (*Nyan thos kyī sa*, Tengyur, Tibetan Critical Edition) I, p.72.

² *Ibid.*, p.73.

³ *Bhāvanakrama*, II.

⁴ *Adhyāśāyasañcodanasūtra* (*bLhag pa’i bsam pa bskul ba’i mdo*). Cited in Tsongkhapa’s *Clear Elucidation of the Intent* (Sarnath: Geluk Student’s Committee), p.16.

In the Tibetan tradition this framework of the three levels of understanding is subsumed further into a larger framework of the trinity of “view, meditation and action” (*lta gom spyod gsum*). On this model, the first two levels of understanding are part of the view, or one’s basic outlook on reality, while the understanding derived from meditation belongs to the second element. The third element, namely action, refers to the manifestation of one’s outlook and meditatively derived insight into actual action or behavior. The interesting thing about this scheme is that it makes explicit what remains salient in the model of the three levels of understanding. This is the relation between knowledge and action. While the Greek philosophers diagnosed the weakness of will to be the problem of why knowledge does not immediately translate into action, Buddhism would argue that the problem is the failure to integrate such knowledge into the person’s being. In other words, it is meditation that is seen as serving the link between an intellectual knowledge and the desired change in one’s attitude and behavior.

Finally, this framework of the trinity of view, meditation and action is further subsumed into a larger framework that embraces the entire Buddhist enlightenment project. Here I am referring to the Tibetan tradition’s popular category of ground, path and result (*gzhi lam ‘bras gsum*). The ground in this context refers to the understanding of the basic nature of reality, while path refers to both the meditation and ethical action based on the insights of meditation, and the result to the attainment of full awakening of Buddhahood.

What we discern from this brief discussion of the traditional understanding of the role of meditation is that, at least in its self-understanding, meditation appears to play several different but interrelated roles. As Mark Siderits correctly points out, meditation plays a key role in bringing home in a concrete and direct manner the understanding that there is no interior subject that is our “real” self. And according to Mahayana tradition, at least according to Nagārjuna, meditation also plays a critical role in gaining a deep insight into the thoroughly contingent and constructed nature of everything. This way meditation acts as a therapeutic process whereby one learns to let go of even the most deep-seated tendency to grasp at some kind of ground for security. I would argue that meditation also plays a role in teaching us how to see the world, including one’s own existence, in a new, “enlightened” way. In Abhidharma parlance this would include seeing the world in terms of the plurality of factors called *dharma*s, while in Nagārjuna’s language this is the seeing of world in terms of utter dependent origination and mere arisings within a network of interrelations with no discreet entities as relata.

The critical question for our panel is, as Siderits puts it, “Is meditation a valid means of knowledge” as well? This is a more complicated question. To some extent the answer depends on how we define meditation. For example, if meditation is understood in a broader sense of “disciplined inner reflection that employs, among others, introspection as a key method,” I would argue that meditation can be seen as a means to knowledge, at least with respect to the mental world. Even if, as Nagārjuna would argue, there is no such thing as the “final truth about the mind itself,” it still does not preclude the truths about the mind within a relative, conventional framework. Within this framework even Nagārjuna would have to accept that certain theories of mind and its functions are more accurate than some other models. In fact, in his *Precious Garland (Ratnavali)*, Nagārjuna lists 57 mental factors not so dissimilar to the list found in some Abhidharma texts. The question is whether the Abhidharma taxonomy of the mental world represents a true map of our mental reality, or whether it is best seen as a guidebook to understanding certain truths of that world? Sometimes the impression is given in contemporary literature on Buddhism that all statements found in the classical Buddhist texts constitute the facts of our mental world “discovered” through meditative insights. Here the idea seems to be that

these descriptions relate to the reality of our mental world uncovered through meditation as an inner science. Personally, I am not convinced that even the classical Buddhist authors themselves saw these descriptions in such light.

To begin with there are too many diverse lists in the classical sources. To give but a few examples, as mentioned before Nagārjuna provides a list of 57 mental factors, the well-known *Great Treatise on Instantiation (Mahāvibhāṣā)* of Sarvastivada School gives a different list of 57 mental factors, while Asanga gives 51 in his *Compendium of Higher Knowledge (Abhidharmasamuccaya)*, Vasubhandu in his *Treasury of Higher Knowledge (Abhidharmakośa)* lists 46, and the influential Theravada classic *Abhidhammasamgaha* gives a list of 52.⁵ The thirteenth century Tibetan author Chim Jampel Yang, drawing from different sources, gives a list of 72 mental factors. Furthermore, what is clear is that each of these lists is closely tied to specific contexts, which unavoidably dictate the way in which our mental world is parsed as well as how each factor is defined. For example, the mental factor of diligence (*virya*) is defined as a virtuous factor in the ethical sense in many of the lists, while in Theravada classic's list mindfulness is included in the list of virtuous factors. My own view, for whatever it is worth, is that these different taxonomies of mental factors is best seen as emerging from a combination of several different sources. First and foremost there are the scattered comments of the Buddha that pertain to consciousness and mental states which are later compiled together in the early Abhidharma canonical texts. In addition the personal experience of subsequent Buddhist masters such as Nagārjuna and Asanga developed on the basis of meditative reflections, including especially the relating of the Buddha's statements to their experiences, may have enriched their understanding of the various mental factors. Finally, philosophical analysis of these factors, their definitions, functions and interrelations, may have also played a role in standardizing their preferred taxonomies. However, it must be noted that nowhere does any of the authors give the impression that their preferred list represents the complete picture of the mental reality.

In the light of this analysis of the status of the various taxonomies of the mental world, let us now turn to the final question of whether Buddhist meditation can be, as Siderits puts it, "more than a new object of investigation for brain science – whether the two can enter into an epistemic partnership?" Here I do not share Siderits' skepticism. Granted that cognitive scientists are willing to engage deeply with Buddhist meditation, both at the level of understanding its method of mental training as well as at the philosophical self-understanding of the processes involved, this meeting of Buddhist meditation and brain science could hold important potentials of developing a scientific understanding of our mental reality. Regardless of whatever one's stand on the debate on physicalism, so long as cognitive science takes "first person experiences as brute facts of life,"⁶ as a well-known neuroscientist puts it, neuroscience will have to find its vocabulary of mental reality to speak about these first person experiences from somewhere. Within the West's own tradition, I could see several possible sources for this. First of all there is the rich spiritual tradition of meditations on human soul, conscience and so on in the Judeo-Christian teachings. Then there are the diverse disciplines of modern psychology, from behaviorism to psychoanalysis. Finally, there is the rich resource of literature, especially the novels written by keen observers of human psychology, such as those in the tradition of existentialist philosophy. It is in this area that Buddhist meditation tradition could potentially play an important role. Buddhist meditation tradition and its attendant theory of mind represent

⁵ An excellent English translation of this classic together with commentary can be found under the title *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1993).

⁶ Christof Koch, *The Quest for Consciousness: A Neurobiological Approach* (Englewood: Roberts and Company Publishers, 2004), p.7

one of the most systematic attempts at not only parsing our mental reality, but also a sustained systematic approach to defining the individual mental states and their interrelations. Another potential area where this meeting of Buddhist meditation and cognitive science could have significant implication is the possibility of reintroducing introspection as a legitimate means of enquiry with respect the mental world. The late neuroscientist Francisco Varela initiated a sustained attempt to making this possible and his work is today being developed further by some of his colleagues.

Perhaps I am being too optimistic but I would like to see that there are at least the following three important ways in which Buddhist meditation and cognitive science can interact. On one level Buddhist meditation can become an important object of scientific investigation in that neurobiological understanding is sought for the meditational states and causal mechanism that underlie these states. This could, as Siderits suggests, potentially lead to new techniques for attaining wellbeing and liberation from suffering. On another level the scientific study of meditation can provide a promising avenue for a rigorous scientific study of the mental world. The idea here is meditation, requiring a disciplined application of introspection, could lead to greater awareness on the part of the individual's own subjective experiences so that there is a greater accuracy his or her self-reporting. On this model there is the potential for a true epistemic partnership whereby the first-person perspective of a trained subject can be integrated with the third-person perspective of neuroscience. Finally, Buddhist meditation and its underlying philosophy of mind could contribute towards the creation of a comprehensive taxonomy of our mental world, which could help facilitate greater depth to the neurobiological project of correlating our subjective experiences to their corresponding brain expressions. In any case, I feel that this encounter between Buddhist meditation and cognitive science is something that the Buddhist tradition should welcome.