

Qualities to Be Developed by Meditation

An early and influential summary of the qualities to develop on the path, many of which are strongly related to meditation, are the thirty-seven 'qualities that contribute to awakening'. These consist of seven sets of qualities:

(1) The four applications/establishments/presencings, or perhaps foundations of mindfulness (Pali *satipatthana*, Skt *smrtyupasthana*): to be 'diligent, clearly knowing and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world' when contemplating the body, feeling-tones, states of mind, and significant basic patterns in experience (*dhammas*).

(2) The four right endeavours (*samma-ppadhana/samyak-pradhana*): to direct desire-to-act (*chanda*), effort and energy to: avoiding the arising of unwholesome/unskillful states of mind; abandoning those that have arisen; arousing wholesome/skillful states; and sustaining and further developing these.

(3) The four bases of accomplishment (*iddhi-pada/rddhi-pada*): to supplement the forces of endeavour with concentration gained by desire-to-act, energy/vigour/courageous engagement (*viriya/virya*), inclination of mind (*citta*), and investigation.

(4) The five faculties (*indriya*): trustful confidence/faith (*saddha/sraddha*), energy, mindfulness, concentration, and understanding/wisdom.

(5) The five powers (*bala*): the faculties when at the level of being unshakeably established.

(6) The seven factors of awakening (*bojjhanga/bodhyanga*): mindfulness, discrimination/analysis of *dhammas*, energy, joy, tranquillity, concentration, equanimity.

(7) The Noble Eight-factored Path.

These qualities or mental skills have been important both in pre-Mahyna and Mahyna traditions.

The seven sets are groups of skills that can be combined in different ways. Several qualities recur under the same or similar names, being like notes that can appear in different chords. While the last set is the culminating one, the five faculties are perhaps the set that brings together the most recurrent factors.

Faith, and associated moral virtue, gives a good-hearted foundation that naturally leads on to the engagement of energy in practice, and hence the application of mindful awareness; this in turn helps the mind to become unified, concentrated, calm, which in turn aids the arising of understanding and wisdom from a clear mind.

Energy/courageous engagement, equivalent to right endeavour or right effort, is the expression of 'go to it and keep at it'. It serves to enable the meditator to develop and sustain the specific kind of activity that meditation is; for it is not a passive thing. It also serves to undermine unskilful states of mind which intrude on the process of meditation. To prevent such states arising, the meditator practises 'guarding the sense-doors': being circumspect about how he or she relates to sense-objects, so that they do not trigger habitual responses of attachment, aversion or confusion.

Mindfulness (Pali *sati*, Skt *smṛti*) is the process of bearing something in mind, be it remembered or present before the senses or mind, with clear awareness; it keeps one connected to what is actual, and reminds one of what is skilful. It came to be defined in the Theravada as 'not floating away' (*Asl.*121), that is, an awareness which does not drift along the surface of things, but is a thorough and undistorted observation.

Mindfulness involves 'standing back' from the processes of body and mind and calmly observing them, with full presence of mind, alert attention, mental clarity, being wide awake, fully with-it, vigilant, not on 'autopilot'.

Tse-fu Kuan (in *Mindfulness in Early Buddhism* [2008], London: Routledge, pages 41–57) has shown that mindfulness has four aspects:

(1) 'Simple awareness . . . conscious registering of the presence of objects . . . non-judgemental observation and recognition' (2008: 41–2), such as knowing one is breathing in, or being aware of the passing sensations arising when lifting an arm, or changing feelings. It observes without preferences, without habitual reaction, but clearly acknowledging what is actually there in the flow of experience, noting its nature. It has been described as a kind of 'bare attention' which sees things as if for the first time.

(2) 'Protective awareness', which adds a presence of mind that naturally brings restraint of unskilful reactions to sense-objects.

(3) 'Introspective awareness', which identifies unskilful states that may nevertheless have arisen, and calls to mind, and thus calls into play, counteractive qualities (as in the *Sutta* on the removal of distracting thoughts: *Majjhima Nikāya* I.118-22).

(4) 'Deliberately forming conceptions', which recollects and notes such things as the qualities of the Buddha, *Dhamma* or *Sangha*, or of loving-kindness, or the ingredients of the body, its stages of decomposition, and the inevitability of death, all of which help to undermine unskilful states and cultivate skilful ones.

Of these aspects, the first is the basis of the rest. Mindfulness is crucial to the process of meditation because without its careful observation one cannot see things 'as they really are'.

People's normal experience of 'concentration' usually varies from a half-hearted paying attention, to becoming absorbed in a good book, when most extraneous mental chatter subsides.

Buddhist meditation, in common with many other forms of meditation such as Hindu yoga, aims to cultivate the power of concentration until it can become truly 'one-pointed', with 100 per cent of the attention focused on a chosen calming object.

In such a state, the mind becomes free from all distraction and wavering, in a unified state of inner stillness: mental unification. This is what is meant by meditative 'concentration' (*samadhi*) – that is, the state of being concentrated. The process of concentrating, however, is an aspect of engagement or effort.

In order for meditation to develop appropriately, the tools must be used in the right way. If a person attempted to become strongly concentrated on an object, but with insufficient energy, he would become sleepy; but too much energy and too little mental unification can lead to restless excitement (*Vism.*129–30). If he vigorously developed a concentrated state without also using mindfulness of the object, he could become obsessed or fixated on the object, this being 'wrong concentration'. Concentration, then, if developed on the basis of right effort, in unison with right mindfulness, is 'right concentration'.

The four applications of mindfulness are listed first in the above seven sets, which emphasizes their foundational role in the cultivation of all the qualities.

The practice of applying mindfulness, making it present, to four aspects of experience is detailed in the *Satipatthana Sutta* (M.I.55–63) and *Maha-satipatthana Sutta* (D.II.290–315), its expanded version. These texts contain what can be seen as the earliest summary of appropriate focuses of Buddhist meditation, and associated meditation methods.

Under mindful contemplation of the body (*kaya*) are mindfulness of:

- (1) what sustains it: breathing in and out,
- (2) what it does: postures (walking, standing, sitting and lying down), and various bodily movements,
- (3) what it is composed of: its various solid and liquid components, and the four elements (earth/solidity, water/cohesion, fire/heat and wind/motion),
- (4) its stages of decomposition after death.

Beyond the body, mindfulness observes:

Feeling (*vedana*): the pleasant, unpleasant and neutral feeling-tones that arise, whether from body or mind, or from ordinary worldly causes or spiritual ones, such as the joy that may arise in meditation.

Mind-states (*citta*): the presence or absence of unwholesome states of mind, and of one's degree of mental development and concentration.

Reality-patterns (*dhammas*) as delineated in the Buddha's *Dhamma*: the five hindrances to meditative calming; the five bundles (*khandha*); the senses and their objects and how, between them, fettering attachments can arise or be avoided; the seven factors of awakening, and how to perfect them; the four True Realities for the Spiritually Ennobled.

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