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The Triratna System of Meditation



This text is an edited version of A System of Meditation by Sangharakshita, in A Guide to the Buddhist Path.

Introduction

Buddhism grew out of meditation. It grew out of the Buddha's meditation under the Bodhi tree, 2,500 years ago. It grew therefore out of meditation in the highest sense: not simply meditation in the sense of concentration, nor even the experience of higher states of consciousness, but meditation in the sense of contemplation – a direct, total, all-comprehending vision and experience of ultimate Reality. It is out of this that Buddhism grew, and out of this that it has continually refreshed itself down through the ages.

Of the many methods of meditation developed within the Buddhist tradition, in my own teaching I have taken a few to form what can be called a system. The more important and well-known methods of meditation in this system are the Mindfulness of Breathing, the *Mettā Bhāvanā*, Visualisation Practice, the Recollection of the Six Elements, and the Just Sitting practice. We need a progressive arrangement of the methods of meditation, a definite cumulative sequence that takes us forward step by step.

The Mindfulness of Breathing

In such a series, first comes the 'Mindfulness of Breathing'. This is usually the first method we teach in Triratna, for various reasons. One does not need to know any distinctively Buddhist teaching to practise it. And it is the starting point for the development of mindfulness in general. We start by being mindful of our breath, but that is only the beginning. We extend this until we are aware of all our bodily movements. We become more aware of the world around us and more aware of other people. We become aware, ultimately, of Reality itself. But we start with the Mindfulness of Breathing.

The development of mindfulness is the key to psychological integration. All too often we do not have any real individuality. We are a bundle of conflicting desires, even conflicting selves, loosely tied together with the thread of a name and an address. These desires and selves are both conscious and unconscious. The Mindfulness of Breathing helps to bind them together; it tightens the string, so that they are not so loose in the middle. It makes more of a recognizable bundle of these different desires and selves.

The practice of mindfulness helps to create real unity and harmony between the different aspects of ourselves. Through mindfulness we begin to create true individuality. Individuality is essentially integrated; an unintegrated individuality is a contradiction in terms. Unless we become integrated, unless we are really individuals, there is no real progress. There is no real progress because there is no commitment, and you cannot commit yourself unless there is just

one individuality to commit itself. Only an integrated person can commit themselves, because all their energies are flowing in the same direction; one energy, one interest, one desire, is not in conflict with another. Awareness, mindfulness, at many different levels, is therefore of crucial importance – it is the key to the whole thing.

But there is a danger that in the course of our practice of mindfulness we develop what I have come to term ‘alienated awareness’. This arises when we are aware of ourselves without experiencing our emotions. Therefore, as well as practising mindfulness, it is very important that we establish contact with our emotions, whatever they are. Ideally we will establish contact with our positive emotions, but it is better to establish real, living contact with our negative emotions (which means acknowledging them and experiencing them, but not indulging them) than to remain in an alienated state and not experience our emotions at all.

The Mettā Bhāvanā

It is here that the ‘Mettā Bhāvanā’ and similar practices come in: not just developing loving-kindness but also compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity, as well as śraddhā, faith. All of these are based on mettā. Mettā, loving-kindness, friendliness, is the fundamental positive emotion. As I come into contact with more and more Order members, Mitras, Friends, and people outside the Movement, I see more and more clearly the importance of positive emotions in our lives – both spiritual and worldly. I would say that the development of positive emotions like friendliness, joy, peace, faith, and serenity, is absolutely crucial for our development as individuals. It is crucial for each of us individually, and for all of us in association with one another. Therefore the Mettā Bhāvanā, as the practice for developing the basic positive emotion of mettā, is absolutely crucial.

The Six-Element Practice

But suppose you have developed mindfulness and all these positive emotions. Suppose you are a very aware, positive, responsible person, even a true individual, psychologically speaking. Then what is the next step? The next step is death! The happy, healthy individual that you now are must die. In other words, the subject-object distinction itself must be transcended. The mundane individuality must be broken up. Here the key practice is the practice of the recollection of the six elements.

There are other practices which help us to break up our present mundane individuality: the recollection of impermanence, the recollection of death, and the śūnyatā (emptiness) meditations. But the śūnyatā meditations can become rather abstract and intellectual. The recollection of the six elements – which involves giving back the earth, water, fire, and other elements in us to the earth, water, fire and so on in the universe, relinquishing in turn each element, and even our individualized consciousness – is the most concrete and practical way of practising at this stage. This is the key practice for breaking up our sense of relative individuality.

The six-element practice is itself a śūnyatā meditation, because it helps us to realise the voidness of our own mundane individuality – it helps us to die. There are many translations for the word śūnyatā. Sometimes it is translated ‘voidness’, sometimes ‘relativity’. But śūnyatā could well be rendered ‘death’, because it is the death of everything conditioned. It is only when the conditioned individuality dies that the unconditioned Individuality begins to emerge.

The recollection of the six elements and the other śūnyatā meditations are vipaśyanā (Pāli vipassanā) or insight meditations, whereas the Mindfulness of Breathing and the Mettā

Bhāvanā are Śamatha or pacification-type meditations. Śamatha develops and refines our conditioned individuality, but vipaśyanā breaks down that individuality, or rather it enables us to see right through it.

Visualisation practices

When the mundane self has died, what happens next? In not very traditional language, out of the experience of the death of the mundane self the transcendental self arises. In a visualisation practice, the visualised figure before you, the figure of a Buddha or Bodhisattva, sublime and glorious though it may be, is, in fact, you. It is the new you – you as you will be if only you allow yourself to die. In certain forms of visualisation practice we recite and meditate first of all upon the śūnyatā mantra, which means ‘om, all things are pure by nature; I too am pure by nature’. Here pure means Void, pure of all concepts, pure of all conditionality, because we cannot be reborn without passing through death.

There are many different kinds of visualisation practice. There are many different Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, dakas, ḍākinīs, dharmapālas that one can visualise. The practices most widely current in the Order pertain to Śākyamuni, Amitābha, Padmasambhava, Avalokiteśvara, Tārā, Manjuḥṣa, Vajrapāṇi, Vajrasattva, and Prajñāpāramitā. Every Order member has his or her own visualisation practice, together with the mantra pertaining to it, which they received at the time of ordination. I would personally like all the more experienced Order members to be thoroughly familiar with at least two or three different kinds of visualisation practice.

The general significance of visualisation practice comes out with particular clarity in the Vajrasattva practice. Vajrasattva is white in colour: white for purification. Here the purification consists in the realisation that in the ultimate sense you have never become impure: you are pure from the beginning, pure from the beginningless beginning, pure by nature, pure essentially. In the depths of your being you are pure of all conditionality, or rather you are pure of the very distinction between conditioned and Unconditioned, and hence are Void.

In visualisation practices when we see Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, these are not outside us; they are the manifestation of our own True Mind, the manifestation of the dharmakāya, and we can identify with them and thus be spiritually reborn, in a transcendental mode of existence.

Summary of the four stages

I hope that we can now begin to see the whole system of meditation, at least in outline. There are four great stages, which I will briefly recapitulate. The first is the stage of integration. That is the first thing you must do in connection with meditation. Integration is achieved mainly through practice of the Mindfulness of Breathing, as well as with the help of mindfulness and awareness in general. Here, in this stage, we develop an integrated self.

The second great stage is the stage of emotional positivity. This is achieved mainly through the development of mettā and so on. Here the integrated self is raised to a higher, more refined and at the same time more powerful level.

Then there is the third great stage of spiritual death, achieved mainly through the recollection of the six elements, but also through the recollection of impermanence, the recollection of death, and the śūnyatā meditations. Here the refined self is seen through, and we experience the Void, experience śūnyatā, experience spiritual death.

And then, fourthly, there is the stage of spiritual rebirth. This is achieved through the visualisation and mantra recitation practice. This, in broad outline, is the system of meditation.

But perhaps you are wondering: Where does ordination fit in? Where does the arising of the Bodhicitta¹ fit in? What about the 'Just Sitting' practice? I will deal briefly with each of these questions.

The place of ordination

Where does ordination fit in? Ordination means Going for Refuge. Going for Refuge means commitment. One cannot commit oneself unless one is reasonably integrated. Otherwise you commit yourself today, but tomorrow you withdraw the commitment, because the total being was not involved. You also cannot commit yourself unless you have a certain amount of emotional positivity, otherwise you have nothing to keep you going. For commitment, there should also be a faint glimmer of Perfect Vision. Ordination therefore comes somewhere between the second and third stage. One might say that it comes when one has just begun to enter on the third stage, the stage of spiritual death.

The Bodhicitta

Secondly, where does the arising of the Bodhicitta fit in? Bodhicitta is often translated as 'Will to Enlightenment', but it is not an egoistic will, it is more of the nature of a supra-individual aspiration. It arises when the individuality in the ordinary sense has to some extent been seen through. The Bodhicitta is the aspiration to gain Enlightenment for the benefit of all – that is how it is usually popularly phrased. Not that there is a 'real individual' seeking to gain Enlightenment for the sake of 'real others'. The Bodhicitta arises beyond self and beyond others – though not without self and others. It arises when the mundane self is seen through, but before the transcendental self has really emerged. It arises when one is no longer seeking Enlightenment for the (so-called) self, but has not yet fully dedicated oneself to gaining it for the (so-called) others. The Bodhicitta therefore arises in between the third and the fourth stages, between the stage of spiritual death and the stage of spiritual rebirth. The Bodhicitta is the seed of spiritual rebirth. There is an anticipation of this at the time of the private ordination when one receives the mantra. The mantra is the seed of the Bodhicitta.

After all, when one is ordained one has gone forth, at least psychologically, if not physically. One has died to the group. One aspires after Enlightenment. And one aspires not just for one's own sake, but for the sake, ultimately, of all. It is not surprising, therefore, that at that time some faint reflection of the Bodhicitta should arise, at least in some cases.

Just Sitting

Thirdly, what about the 'Just Sitting' practice? It is difficult to say much more about this than 'when one just sits, one just sits'. In all the other meditations, conscious effort is required. But one must be careful that this conscious effort does not become too willed, even too wilful, and in order to counteract this tendency we can practise Just Sitting, in between the other methods. There is a period of activity, during which you are practising, say, the Mindfulness of Breathing or the Mettā Bhāvanā, and then a period of passivity, a period of receptivity. In this way we go on: activity – passivity – activity – passivity – and so on. Mindfulness of Breathing – Just Sitting – Mettā Bhāvanā – Just Sitting – Recollection of the Six Elements – Just Sitting –

1 The word 'Bodhicitta' literally means something like 'Mind (or heart) of Enlightenment'. In Mahayana Buddhism, the Bodhicitta is often seen as arising when our motivation for spiritual development becomes more about the well-being of others than about our own happiness. This is seen as the supremely important spiritual event this side of Enlightenment, because we have begun to genuinely transcend our egocentric motivations.

Visualisation – Just Sitting. We can go on in this way all the time, having a rhythm and balance in our meditation practice. There is taking hold of, and letting go; there is grasping, and opening up; there is action, and non-action. Thus we achieve a perfectly balanced practice of meditation, and the whole system of meditation becomes complete.



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. *“All too often we do not have any real individuality. We are a bundle of conflicting desires, even conflicting selves, loosely tied together with the thread of a name and an address.”*
Do you agree with this statement? What symptoms would we expect to see in someone for whom it was true? What would someone who had what Sangharakshita describes as ‘true individuality’ be like?
2. Why might the mindfulness of breathing help us to integrate the different parts of ourselves and develop more individuality?
3. *“I would say that the development of positive emotions like friendliness, joy, peace, faith, and serenity, is absolutely crucial for our development as individuals.”*
Do you agree? Why, or why not?
4. What is your emotional response to the idea of spiritual death? Do you think there might be a connection between spiritual death and insight into the true nature of reality?
5. How do you respond to the idea of visualisation practice? Do you think there could be a connection between visualisation practice and the development of a ‘mind-made body’ described in the text we looked at last week?
6. In this text and the last one we looked at two different descriptions of the process of spiritual growth. Do you think these are in conflict with one another? Are there any similarities? Which do you think is most applicable to your own situation?
7. Which stage or stages of Sangharakshita’s system of meditation do you think you should give most priority to? Before going beyond the first two stages we might ask ourselves:
 - a. Do I find it easy to carry out my resolutions? Can I stick at long term tasks and projects? How much energy do I have, and how effectively do I use it? Do I tend to change my mind or switch from one enthusiasm to another? How much inner conflict and anxiety do I experience? (All relate to integration.)
 - b. How positive and upbeat is my emotional response to the world and other people? Am I generally happy most of the time? How often do I complain, or feel low, negative, or resentful? (All relate to positive emotion.)