

VBG SUTTA SHARING - JAN 2018 : MEDITATION

(This article is to be read in conjunction with the previous two months articles on Sati and Satipatthana)

TYPE OF MEDITATION PRAISED BY THE BUDDHA

Meditation has a long history in India, and in the last five thousand years practically all types of meditation you can think of have been practised by the yogis of India. So what exactly is the type of meditation that the Buddha praised, and what type of meditation did he not praise? Fortunately for us this is spelt out clearly for us by the Ven. Ananda in Sutta MN 108 below.

MN 108 (Gopakamoggallana Sutta)

“The Blessed One, brahmin, did not praise every type of meditation, nor did he condemn every type of meditation. What kind of meditation did the Blessed one not praise? Here, brahmin, someone abides with his mind obsessed by sensual lust, a prey to sensual lust, and he does not understand as it actually is the escape from arisen sensual lust. While he harbours sensual lust within, he meditates, pre-meditates, out-meditates, and mismeditates. He abides with his mind obsessed by ill will, a prey to ill will...with his mind obsessed by sloth and torpor, a prey to sloth and torpor...with his mind obsessed by restlessness and remorse, a prey to restlessness and remorse...with his mind obsessed by doubt, a prey to doubt, and he does not understand as it actually is the escape from arisen doubt. While he harbours doubt within, he meditates, pre-meditates, out-meditates, and mismeditates. The Blessed One did not praise that kind of meditation.

And what kind of meditation did the Blessed One praise? Here, brahmin quite secluded from sensual desires, secluded from unwholesome states, a monk enters upon and abides in the first jhana... With the stilling of thought directed and sustained, he enters upon and abides in the second jhana...With the fading away as well of delight...he enters upon and abides in the third jhana...With the abandoning of pleasure and pain...he enters upon and abides in the fourth jhana...The Blessed One praised that kind of meditation.”

So we see from the above that the type of meditation that does not lead to the elimination of the five hindrances was not praised by the Buddha. The reason given here is that the person harbors the five hindrances within him, and so he abides with a mind obsessed by these hindrances.

The type of meditation praised by the Buddha is the type that leads to the attainment of the four jhanas. This also implies that with the attainment of the four jhanas, the five hindrances are eliminated. The four jhanas are called Right Concentration and that is the eighth factor of the Ariyan Eightfold Path.

Note that before a person can enter and abide in the first jhana he has to renounce sensual desires and unwholesome states. This is the fundamental training of a renunciant.

ELIMINATION OF THE HINDRANCES

Why is the elimination of the five hindrances so important? The answer is found in sutta SN 46.40 quoted below.

SN 46.40 (Bojjhanga Samyutta)

“Monks, these five hindrances are makers of blindness, causing lack of vision, causing lack of knowledge, detrimental to wisdom, tending to vexation, leading away from Nibbana. What five? The hindrance of sensual desire is a maker of blindness...The hindrance of ill will...The hindrance of sloth and torpor...The hindrance of restlessness and remorse...The hindrance of doubt is a maker of blindness...leading away from Nibbana. These five hindrances are makers of blindness, causing lack of vision, causing lack of knowledge, detrimental to wisdom, tending to vexation, leading away from Nibbana.”

Elimination of the five hindrances occurs at three levels: temporary, long-term, permanent.

- i) Temporary elimination occurs when a person pays focused attention (yoniso manasikara). This is stated in SN 46.38.

SN 46.38 (Bojjhanga Samyutta)

“When, monks a noble disciple listens to the Dhamma with eager ears, attending to it as a matter of vital concern, directing his whole mind to it, on that occasion the five hindrances are not present in him; on that occasion the seven factors of enlightenment go to fulfillment by development.”

Because of the temporary elimination of the five hindrances a person can attain right view (which is synonymous with stream-entry) when listening to the True Dhamma (Suttas).

MN 43 (Mahavedalla Sutta)

“Friend, there are two conditions for the arising of right view: the voice of another (teaching the True Dhamma) and focused attention. These are the two conditions for the arising of right view.”

- ii) Long-term elimination of the hindrances occurs when a person attains the jhanas

MN 68 (Nalakapana Sutta)

“What should be done, Anuruddha, by a clansman who has gone forth thus? While he still does not attain to the delight and bliss that are secluded from sensual desires and secluded from unwholesome states (i.e. first jhana), or to something more peaceful than that (i.e. higher jhanas), covetousness invades his mind and remains, ill will invades his mind and remains, sloth and torpor invades his mind and remains, restlessness and remorse... doubt... discontent... weariness invades his mind and remains...

When he attains to the delight and bliss that are secluded from sensual desires and secluded from unwholesome states (i.e. first jhana), or to something more peaceful than that (i.e. higher jhanas), covetousness does not invade his mind and remain, ill will...sloth and torpor...restlessness and remorse...doubt...discontent...weariness does not invade his mind and remain!”

DN 2 (Samannaphala Sutta)

“As long, Sire, as a monk does not perceive the disappearance of the five hindrances in himself, he feels as if in debt, in sickness, in bonds, in slavery, on a desert journey. But when he perceives the disappearance of the five hindrances in himself, it is as if he were freed from debt, from sickness, from bonds, from slavery, from the perils of the desert.”

This long-term elimination of the hindrances is different from permanent elimination. After a person attains the jhanas, if he creates extremely heavy evil kamma, he can lose his ability to attain jhana again and the hindrances can return. This was the case with the Buddha’s disciple Devadatta who attempted to kill the Buddha. As a result he lost all his psychic powers and his jhanas.

- iii) Permanent elimination of the five hindrances occurs on attainment of arahant hood (liberation)

SN 54.12 (Anapana Samyutta)

“Friend Mahanama, those monks who are trainees (sekha – all ariyans except the arahant), who have not attained the mind’s ideal, who dwell aspiring for the unsurpassed security from bondage, dwell having abandoned the five hindrances...

But, friend Mahanama, for those monks who are arahants...the five hindrances have been abandoned, cut off at the root, made like palm stumps, obliterated so that they are no more subject to future arising.”

In the temporary and long-term elimination of the five hindrances, sensual desires, ill-will, sloth and torpor, restless and remorse, and doubt are still present, but at a low level and do not obsess the mind. That is why they are not hindrances. However, since these states are still

present albeit at low level, they can resurface as hindrances in future. Only the arahant has permanently eliminated the five hindrances.

HOW TO ATTAIN THE FOUR JHANAS

So how do we meditate to attain the four jhanas? That is given in MN 44 quoted below:

MN 44 (Culavedalla Sutta)

“Unification of mind, friend Visakha, is concentration; the four satipatthana (intense states of mindfulness) are the basis of concentration; the four right kinds of striving are the accessories of concentration; the repetition, development, and cultivation of these same states is the development of concentration therein.”

So we need to practise the four satipatthana to attain the four jhanas, and what type of meditation fulfills the four satipatthana? One such meditation is mindfulness of breathing (anapanasati), as explained in MN 118 (Anapanasati Sutta).

In the explanation of the practice of satipatthana given in SN 47.1 it is said :

SN 47.1 (Satipatthana Samyutta)

“...Here, monks, a monk dwells contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly aware, mindful, having removed covetousness and grief in regard to the world. He dwells contemplating feelings in feelings...mind in mind...Dhamma in Dhamma, ardent, clearly aware, mindful, having removed covetousness and grief in regard to the world.”

We note above that a condition for practising satipatthana competently, skillfully, is “having removed covetousness and grief in regard to the world.” When something in the world gives us pleasure and delight, we want to covet (possess) it. Greed arises. And if we cannot get it, grief arises. So to remove covetousness and grief in regard to the world, we have to turn our backs to worldly pleasure, to renounce the world. In other words to be able to practise satipatthana successfully and attain the supernormal states (uttarimanussa dhamma) of jhana, we have to renounce sensual pleasures. This is corroborated by the suttas below.

MN 75 (Magandiya Sutta)

“What do you think, Magandiya? Have you ever seen or heard of a king or a king’s minister enjoying himself, provided and endowed with the five objects of sensual pleasure who, without abandoning craving for sensual pleasures, without removing fever for sensual pleasures, was able to abide free from thirst, with a mind inwardly at peace, or who is able or who will be able to so abide...?” “No, Master Gotama.”

“Good, Magandiya. I too have never seen or heard of a king or a king’s minister enjoying himself, provided and endowed with the five objects of sensual pleasure who, without abandoning craving for sensual pleasures, without removing fever for sensual pleasures, was able to abide free from thirst, with a mind inwardly at peace, or who is able or who will be able to so abide...”

MN 14 (Culadukkhakkhandha Sutta)

“Venerable Sir, I have long understood the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One thus : ‘Greed is an imperfection that defiles the mind, hatred...delusion is an imperfection that defiles the mind.’ Yet while I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One thus, at times states of greed, hatred, and delusion invade my mind and remain. I have wondered, Venerable Sir, what state is still unabandoned by me internally, owing to which at times these states of greed, hatred, and delusion invade my mind and remain.”

“Mahanama, there is still a state unabandoned by you internally, owing to which at times states of greed, hatred, and delusion invade your mind and remain; for were that state already abandoned by you internally you would not be living the home life, you would not be enjoying sensual pleasures. It is because that state (i.e. sensual desires) is unabandoned by you internally that you are living the home life and enjoying sensual pleasures.

Even though an ariyan disciple has seen clearly as it actually is, with proper wisdom that sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering and despair, and that the danger in them is still more, as long as he still does not attain to the delight (piti) and bliss (sukha) that are apart from sensual desires, apart from unwholesome states (i.e. first jhana), or to something more peaceful than that (i.e. higher jhanas), he may still be attracted to sensual pleasures...”

To make us understand the unrestrained, uncultivated mind, and how to restrain or cultivate it, the Buddha gave the simile of the six animals in sutta SN 35.247.

A hunter caught six animals – a bird, snake, crocodile, monkey, dog, jackal – and tied a rope around the neck of each of the animals. He then tied the six ropes together in a knot and released the animals. Each would pull in a different direction. The strongest would pull and the others have to follow. When tired, another would take over pulling the others. This is similar to the normal uncultivated mind which is pulled by sights/forms, sounds, odours, flavours, tangibles, and thoughts. It is moving from object to object all the time. This is the scattered, uncultivated mind, still seeking after pleasurable sense objects.

To discipline the mind, the Buddha again taught by using the simile of the six animals. The hunter should tie the six ropes to a strong stout post. Then whichever direction the animals fly, jump, run, they only go round and round the post until they become tired and obediently lie down beside the post, tamed. In the same way, to tame the mind we should meditate by tying the mind to one object only, eg. mindfulness of breathing (anapanasati). Then no matter which direction the mind runs out to, we should pull it back to that one object each time. With

perseverance one eventually can tame the mind to stay with that one object and attain the first jhana.

THE MEDITATION PRACTICE OF THE BUDDHA

What meditation did the Buddha personally practise? The answer is found in the following suttas.

SN 54.11 (Anapanasati Samyutta)

“Monks, if wanderers of other sects ask you : ‘In what dwelling, friends, did the Blessed One generally dwell during the rains residence?’ – being asked thus, you should answer those wanderers thus : ‘During the rains residence, friends, the Blessed One generally dwelt in the concentration by mindfulness of breathing’...

If anyone, monks, speaking rightly could say of anything: ‘It is an ariyan dwelling, a divine dwelling, the Tathagata’s dwelling,’ it is of concentration by mindfulness of breathing that one could rightly say this.”

SN 54.8 (Anapanasati Samyutta)

“It is in this way, monks, that concentration by mindfulness of breathing is developed and cultivated so that it is of great fruit and benefit.

I too, monks before my enlightenment, while I was still a bodhisatta, not yet fully enlightened, generally dwelt in this dwelling. While I generally dwelt in this dwelling, neither my body nor my eyes became fatigued and my mind, by not clinging, was liberated from the asavas.”

CONCLUSION

We see that the only type of meditation praised by the Buddha is the four jhanas, which is synonymous with perfection of satipatthana. However to be successful one has to renounce sensual desires and unwholesome states, which is practically impossible for most lay persons, and very difficult even for a monastic. This is why the Buddha stressed on listening to his discourses (suttas) by calling all his monastic as well as lay followers as savaka, i.e. listeners or hearers of his words. That at least can bring one into stream-entry, and so be destined for enlightenment in not more than seven subsequent lifetimes.

Nowadays some monastics say that jhanas are not necessary for liberation. Some also claim there is no mindfulness while in jhana, and that jhanas are external sect meditation, not the Buddha's. The Buddha warned that irreverence/disrespect for concentration is one of five factors leading to the decline of the True Dhamma (SN 16.13)

There may be different types of concentration (samadhi), but right/perfect concentration is the four jhanas. The states of jhana as described in the suttas are exemplified in MN 111.

MN 111 (Anupada Sutta)

“And the states in the first jhana – the thought directed, thought sustained, delight, bliss, and unification of mind; the contact, feeling, perception, volition, and mind; the zeal, decision, energy, mindfulness, equanimity, and attention – these states were defined by him one by one as they occurred; known to him those states arose, known they were present, known they disappeared.” ... (followed by the description of the other jhana states).

It is evident that the Buddha's jhanas are states of intense, discerning, penetrative mindfulness, being completely rid of hindrances. And that can lead to deep, profound insights for the realization of nibbana when they are supported by the other seven factors of the Ariyan Eightfold Path.