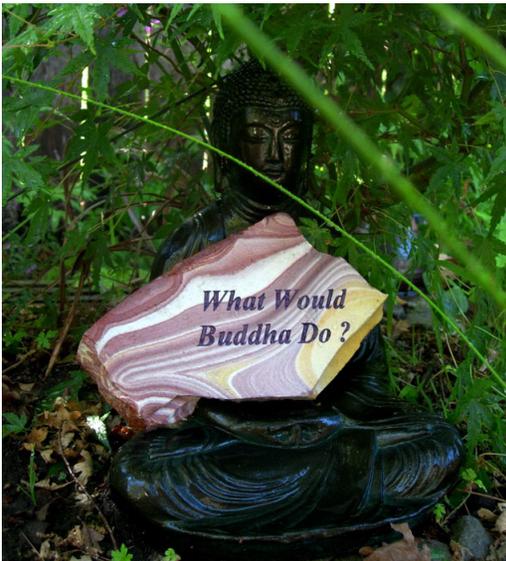


## Buddhist Contemplative Practice

### WHAT WOULD BUDDHA DO?

#### The Role of Meditation in Buddhism

For over 40 years, after his enlightenment and until his death, the Buddha said he taught only "Suffering and the end of suffering." So, exploring the role of contemplation in the Buddhist traditions is to explore its use in understanding and ending suffering. I'll begin whimsically...



My friend Erik gave me a slab of sandstone with the question "What Would Buddha Do?" carved into it. Every time it catches my eye, I'm reminded to think about whatever is going on in my life from the perspective of being a buddha. Yes, the Buddha was an actual human, but his name translates as 'one who is awake' and we can all aspire to be just that!

When I think of the Buddha I often see him sitting, meditating, teaching by example, saying "This is what I did to become enlightened."

Of course seeing a statue of the Buddha meditating doesn't tell us what was going on in his head or what should be going on in our own head, as we begin to learn how to meditate. Fortunately, thanks to the Pali canon<sup>1</sup> and the many people who have studied and passed on his teachings, we have a pretty good idea of how the Buddha used contemplation to become awake. I'll offer two summaries.

First, short and simple. We can say the Buddha

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<sup>1</sup>Pali is a language that emerged in Northern India over 2500 years ago. During his lifetime, the Buddha delivered his teachings orally. His disciples memorized his talks, and for some 500 years thereafter, his teachings were transmitted orally. Then, about 80 BC, they were written down in Pali. See <http://www.buddhamind.info/leftside/teachings/ti-pi3.htm>

*Used skillful means to investigate and understand the origins of suffering, and to end suffering and become awake*

Meditation, then, is part of 'skillful means.' It's not an end in itself; it's part of the means to an end of suffering.

Now here's a summary that really zeroes in on the role of contemplation in awakening.

*The Buddha perfected the ability to keep his mind focused on the present moment. Then, from that state of concentrated, direct experience of reality, he analyzed his own mental processes as they created that reality. In that state he gained insights about those reality-creating processes and saw they were (1) impermanent, (2) the origin of suffering and therefore incapable of leading to the permanent release from suffering he sought, and (3) responsible for creating his entire sense of self, which was otherwise non-existent.*

*His direct experience of these three insights allowed him to let go of those processes and the delusional sense of self and suffering they created. What was left was awakeness and enlightenment, freedom from the dimensions of time and space.*

So contemplation in Buddhism is profoundly investigative, analytical, and doesn't require us to believe anything we can't verify for ourselves. Although an image of the Buddha seated in meditation is rarely what comes to mind when one thinks of science, meditation is, in these ways, a scientific investigation.

Success with the practice does require, as repeating any scientific experiment does, that we follow the Buddha's experimental protocol<sup>2</sup>. The Eightfold Noble Path [ROBERT, MAKE THAT PHRASE - Eightfold Noble Path - A LINK TO THAT ARTICLE ON THE WEBSITE] outlines that protocol, and can be grouped into three areas: Morality, Concentration (which includes meditation), and Wisdom. Leading a moral, virtuous life—

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<sup>2</sup> You may find it useful, as I have, to think of the Buddha as a scientist of the heart and mind.

The best book I've found on this is "The Noble Eightfold Path" by Bhikkhu Bodhi. Follow the link below for an online copy, or you can purchase a bound copy elsewhere.

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/waytoend.html>

generous and kind to others as well as oneself— gives one the peace of mind and "bliss of blamelessness" needed to concentrate. Concentration allows us to experience what is really going on in the moment and leads to the insights of wisdom. Those in turn inspire us to greater virtue and concentration, which leads again to new insight; it's a cyclic pattern.

Meditating is the microscope we use to become aware of what is really happening. As we develop our meditative skills, we directly experience the truth of karma in action; meditation is the spotlight that illuminates the causal connection between our past actions and our current experience. It guides us in learning to be skillful and thereby create wholesome karma. It is the incubator for the seeds of our wisdom, the cyclotron that smashes apart the notion that "I" exist... It is meditating that allows us **direct experience** of the Four Noble Truths [[ROBERT, MAKE THAT PHRASE - Four Noble Truths - A LINK TO THAT ARTICLE ON THE WEBSITE](#)] and thereby the motivation to continue our quest.

It's important to realize that awakening is not an all or nothing proposition; as you live with greater kindness, generosity, and morality, your ability to be (and pleasure in being) present in every moment increases, and with that, greater insight into the nature of reality. Benefits accrue to every stage of the process.

May you, dear reader, and all beings enjoy the benefits of the Dharma.

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