

# Analysis of meditation and dhyānain the context of buddhism

## Abstract

Meditation has been a spiritual and healing practice in many parts of the world for more than 5,000 year. Historically, religious or spiritual aims were intrinsic to any form of meditation. These traditional practices hold some type of spiritual growth, enlightenment, personal transformation, or transcendental experience as their ultimate goal. During the past 40 years, the practice of meditation has become increasingly popular and has been adapted to the specific interests and orientation of Western culture as a complementary therapeutic strategy for a variety of health related problems.

The aim of the review is to understand concept of meditation and its different techniques described in classical ancient Indian and Buddhist literature. The review has the following objectives: to compile authentic information about meditation from Indian and Buddhist traditional texts; to understand difference between *dhyāna* and meditation; to present different techniques of meditation from classical spiritual lore, being used in scientific research. To achieve these objectives aphorisms and verses from ancient Indian and Buddhist classical literature related to topic were collected, compiled and presented systematically. The aforementioned classical Yogic texts and *Vedic* sources were studied and referred to understand *dhyāna* and its different techniques described in these texts.

**Keywords:** meditation, *dhyāna*, buddhism, classical, techniques, vedic

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## Etymological meaning of meditation

In the English dictionary the word 'meditation' is defined as to ruminate, to reflect upon, or to contemplate. In Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese and Japanese languages, the word 'meditation' has been used in a very specific way: it is to make the mind free of disturbing thoughts. It is a method that makes one aware of Reality. This is an inward journey from the gross, to the subtle, to the most subtle aspect of one's being.<sup>1</sup>

The English word 'Meditation' is derived from two Latin words; *meditari* which means to think, ponder, dwell upon, exercise the mind, focus attention; and *mederi* which means to heal. Meditation is called '*Dhyāna*' in Sanskrit, which comes from the root word '*dhyāti*' meaning to contemplate. Over a long period of time, meditation has been loosely used to describe a variety of broadly similar practices, across cultures and traditions, ranging from techniques designed to promote relaxation or a state of well-being to techniques designed to achieve enlightenment. Meditation is also being used in place of Sanskrit words such as *Dhāraēā*, *Dhyāna*, *Samādhi* and *Bhāvanā*, which are used to describe various stages of meditation. Different words have been used in different countries to describe meditation such as Zen in Japan, Chen in China, *Dhyāna* in India, and 'contemplative prayer' in the Western world.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to know the difference between ordinary concentration and meditation. By the word 'meditation' *dhyāna* or contemplation is referred to. However, it is not just ordinary concentration. It is special type of concentration. In the first place, meditation is a fully conscious process, an exercise of the will. Secondly, meditation means concentration on spiritual idea which presupposes that the aspirant is capable of rising above worldly ideas. And finally, meditation is usually carried out at a particular center of consciousness.<sup>3</sup>

Most people have heard about meditation, few have any true conception and even fewer have actually experienced depths of meditation. Much as in other subjective experiences, it cannot really be described. The experience is real whereas a description is really a non-experience, especially in the case of meditation. The aim of meditation is to explore the different regions of the mind and eventually to transcend the mind completely. In the higher stages of meditation, consciousness moves to the higher state or region which is termed super consciousness. The meditator enters the dimensions of inspiration and illumination. The culmination of meditation is self-realization.<sup>4</sup>

## Purpose of meditation

One purpose of meditation is to transcend the usual limitations of human consciousness and expand to higher levels of awareness. In other word, its goal is to lead one to the center of consciousness by stilling the mind, from where consciousness flows in various degrees and grades. This can be accomplished by focusing one's mind which allows one to temporarily step aside from its constant chatter. The mind can then go beyond its normal scope into a vastness that cannot be described, only experienced. This is because language is geared towards the physical and the tangible. It cannot describe where the sky ends, or describe visualizing how many grains of sand there are on all the beaches or deserts of the words. The mind can only experience the totality of creation through the process of meditation.<sup>5</sup>

In the last 200 years, many meditation techniques are derived and revived from the ancient Yoga texts and promoted by numbers of spiritual yoga masters and yogis to calm the mind. In Indian philosophy meditation is a distinct practice which is described in the *Vedās*, the oldest scriptures of Hindu culture. This practice was a part of daily life and known to everyone during Vedic age. Meditation has been expounded in *Vedās*, *Upaniñad*, *Bhagavad Gētā*, *Patañjali Yoga Sūtra*, *Haōha Yoga Pradēpikā* and *Tantra* Texts. *Tantra* presents

112 meditation techniques to realize the ultimate reality. Meditation is keeping the mind uninterruptedly on a subject for a certain length of time. It is a mental process by which meditator becomes one with the object of meditation.

### Meditation defined: classically

The following are the definitions/terms used for meditation/ *dhyāna* in the classical texts. Meditation is keeping the mind focused uninterruptedly on a subject for a certain length of time. It is a mental process by which meditator becomes one with the object of meditation. Meditation is the seventh step of Añōaiga Yoga of Patañjali. He defines *dhyāna* as follows.<sup>6</sup>

### #tÇ àTyyEktanta Xyanm!

*Tatra pratyayaikatānātā dhyānam*, (Patañjali Yoga Sūtra III.2)

Uninterrupted flow of the mind towards an object is meditation. Sage Vyāsa further explains *dhyāna* in his commentary to *Yoga Sūtra*.

### tiSmNdeze xeyalMbnSy àTyySyEktanta s†z> àvah> àTyyNtre.apram&òae Xyanm!.

*Tasmindeçe dheyālanbanasya pratyayasyaikatānātā sadācau pravāhaū pratyayantareēparāmāñōo dhyānam*.

Meditation is continuous flow of knowledge which has the object of meditation as its support; i.e. continuous flow of knowledge untouched by any other knowledge. The Sanskrit word '*tatra*' means 'in that place' and refers to the place where *dhāraēā* is carried out. The word *pratyaya* is the total content of the mind. '*Pratyayaēkatānātā*' meaning continuous flow of mind, refers to the absence of interruptions of distractions which are present in *dhāraēā*. This can be compared to the flow of oil from one vessel into another. Meditation is cultivating a single thought on the object of meditation by repeating it over and over again. By following the same method and concentrating on the same subject at the same center of consciousness, that single thought becomes a giant thought-wave. In course, of time the mind develops a channel for that thought-wave and the practice becomes effortless.

### Meditation and dhyāna

In Western psychology, three states of consciousness are described: sleep, dream and wakefulness. In Eastern philosophy and in several Western religious and mystical traditions, an additional and supposedly 'higher' state of consciousness has been described, that is 'fourth state of consciousness' or the state of 'thoughtless awareness'.<sup>7</sup> In thoughtless awareness the incessant thinking processes of the mind are eliminated and the practitioner experiences a state of deep mental silence. This state can be achieved by the practice of 'meditation'.

Although today a large variety of meditation practices have emerged, some of them aim to achieve nothing beyond relaxation. However, the original goal of meditation is the elimination or reduction of thought processes, the cessation or slowing of the internal dialogue of the mind, the 'mental chatter'. This elimination of the thinking process has been reported to lead to a deep sense of physical and mental calm while at the same time enhancing pure awareness, untainted by thoughts and perceptual clarity.

Rubia has reported the effects of meditation at different levels which are thought to be therapeutic and have attracted the interest of Western Science. These reported long-term trait effects of meditation practices include: a) at a physical level: feelings of deep relaxation and stress

relief; b) at a cognitive level: enhanced concentrative attention skills, improved self-control and self-monitoring and better ability to inhibit irrelevant interfering external and internal activity; c) at the emotional level: positive mood, emotional stability and resilience to stress and to negative life events (detachment); and d) at a psychological level: personality changes such as enhanced overall psycho-emotional balance. These are the subjectively reported benefits of meditation. Relatively few studies have investigated the objectively measurable psychological, physiological, and neurophysiological changes that correlate with the subjectively reported benefits of meditation.<sup>8</sup>

According to Sage Patanjali, '*dhyāna*' is the seventh anga or limb in eight-fold Yoga. It is generally translated as meditation which does not bring full meaning of *dhyāna*. Although widely used, the term 'meditation' is often employed in a highly imprecise sense such that its descriptive power is greatly decreased. One underlying reason for the term's inadequacy is that, in its typical usage, it refers generically to an extremely wide range of practices.<sup>9</sup> In this context, it is necessary to throw light and understand the distinction between *dhyāna* and meditation.

When one goes into *āsana*, one is shifting away from the perspective of a doer. When one is in *prāēayāma* one is shifting away, relaxing away, from the perspective of the breather. And when one is moving from *dhyāna* into *samādhi*, one is shifting towards the seer and away from the sense of the self. And in that shift, one could say the totality of the interconnectedness of all conditions and impersonal phenomena asserts itself not as the apprehension of information but as an experience, as a being state, as a state of selflessness, as a state of embeddedness in the totality of the universe, as a state of peace and acceptance. And then one goes into *samādhi*.

Most Buddhist traditions use a term for meditation that correlates with the *Saāskāta* term *bhāvanā*, literally, 'causing to become'. In the Tibetan tradition, the usual translation for *bhāvanā* is *gōm* (*sgom*), which roughly means 'to become habituated to' or 'to become familiar with'. The meditative traditions of Tibetan Buddhism often employ the term in a generic fashion, and as a result, it is often translated into English with the equally generic term, 'meditation'. The generic usage of *gōm* or 'meditation' reflects its application to a remarkably wide range of contemplative practices: for example, visualization of a deity, recitation of a *mantra*, visualization of 'energy' flowing in the body, focusing of attention on the breath, the analytical review of arguments or narratives, and various forms of objectless meditations would all be counted as 'meditation'.

Meditation and its generic usage extend from sitting quietly to deep inward focus to concentrated attention on particular object as practiced in many traditions. National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM), USA, states thus: "Meditation techniques include specific postures, focused attention, or an open attitude toward distractions. People use them to increase calmness and relaxation, improve psychological balance, cope with illness, or enhance overall health and wellbeing".<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the definition of meditation is based on a mental process to calm and reduce psychophysiological load on a person due to different reasons.<sup>11</sup> The consequence of such a practice is lowered metabolism that goes by the well-known phrase, relaxation response.

Travis et al has categorized meditation into three types, namely, focused attention, open monitoring and automatic self-transcending. Here the term meditation is used in the context of awareness – either focused or open – when the mind is focusing within an area of activity. The distinction made here is based on the EEG profiles.<sup>12</sup>

In awareness, at least one of the senses is active along with the mind while in *dhyāna*, all the senses are quiet and mind alone is active.<sup>13</sup> Mind in *dhyāna* is focused toward its original state, and that is said to be 'the center of the being'. The symbolic lotus bud in the heart is usually turned downward. This lotus bud turns upward and opens when practices such as *japa* and *prārthanā* are carried out. Thus, *japa* (repetition of a sacred formula) and *prārthanā* (intense dedication) are the necessary prerequisites for *dhyāna*. Further, awareness has an end point that is related to acquiring or creating worldly knowledge or perhaps a touch of spiritual experience (as say, in listening to music). This is still seeking experience through and for the body and mind. In *dhyāna*, we attempt to go beyond experience; We are at the level of ultimate reality and we are lost in that reality. This reality is not relative but an absolute one.<sup>11</sup> There are no words to describe this since it is an experience beyond the mind. Hence, it is said in the ancient classical texts: 'He who knows does not talk'.

Awareness takes us into likes and dislikes and to analysis and perhaps synthesis. The earlier (including previous life) *samskāras* or pregenetic experiences and thoughts arise and are made stronger or modified as we seek new knowledge about the world and of ourselves. *Dhyāna* is practiced to break old *samskāras*; it is based on total *vairāgya* or complete detachment. All attachment to body and mind should be transcended and only the motive to reach reality should light the path to liberation. Another significant difference between awareness practices and *dhyāna* is this: in the former, we seem to transcend the mind and seem lifeless, whereas in *dhyāna*, we are totally aware of our state. The reason is as follows. Only *Ātmā* is endowed with consciousness and self-awareness. It is the intelligent principle activating all aspects of mind and body. Hence, any state of the mind is only a transient state and even a state such as deep sleep wherein the mind seems to be switched off is indeed a state of the mind. The void of deep sleep is termed *jada samādhi*, a lifeless *samādhi*! In *dhyāna*, *Ātmā* alone shines and hence the person is in a state of total awareness. In focused thought, there is no awareness, let alone the total awareness experienced in *dhyāna* and *samādhi* states. Further, in *dhyāna*, it is important we enclose a feeling of Love as the basic driving emotion. This is lacking in meditations with Focused Awareness (FA) and Open Monitoring (OM). This Love is not comparable to love for objects and people; it is at the highest level, Love for God or *Puruṇā*. Like an infant feeling one with its mother, we feel one with *Puruṇā* and dissolve ourselves in this feeling. Focused attention takes us away from this intense feeling of Love, whereas *dhyāna* sustains on the Love for guru and *Puruṇā*. As in true Love, here too we Love God for the sake of God, not for any personal benefits. This Love is called *Bhakti* and is defined as intense longing and surrender to God with Love driving our longing. Thus, it may be said that in *dhyāna*, deep feeling of Love is the sustaining force that binds us to *Puruṇā*. *Dhyāna* is again not simply staring at an image or icon of God and then closing the eyes; we try to feel one with God.

Without previous training in *pījā* etc. our effort will only lead to churning the memory whereby good and bad recollections surface. These memories could lead us away from our goal of *dhyāna*. Only when we feel the connection and Love for God, *dhyāna* starts. It should be noted that a blank mind is not one in *dhyāna*. When we experience an object with one of our senses, it is conveyed to the mind which then presents it to the Self. It is the Self or *Puruṇā* that ultimately experiences the object. Mind and all its derivatives are like the wires in a telephone network; they just communicate but have no consciousness of their own. Like the wires in this example, mind may distort the message; mind adds its own component to the sensory data based on its biases and preferences. Mind is always dynamic,

seeking outlet to its fantasies and resting never. Note that mind could be fluctuating all the time though it is devoid of consciousness; the waves in an ocean are not intelligent, yet they are active all the time due to many extraneous reasons.

The model presented in *Yoga Sūtra* is as follows. Mind interacts with the world and this interaction has three components; the mind itself, the object, and the process of interaction. A term *samāpatti* is used to distinguish the three modes.<sup>14</sup> The object, the mind, or the process of observation could be the focus in each type of *samāpatti*. In FA, the object is in focus, while in OM, the process is being observed. In automatic self-transcendence (ST), it is likely that the mental modifications are arrested. ST starts with *japa* and dedication. As we advance in meditation practice, *japa* (on a mystical syllable) also falls off. Automatic self-transcending is not related to just focus; in fact, it has neither focus nor any individual effort. The author says, "Thus, automatic self-transcending appears to define a class of meditations distinct from both focused attention and open monitoring". In another paper, it is said, "With concentration on a mystical *mantra*, and with Love and dedication to a higher principle, the person is moving from meditation to *dhyāna*".<sup>11</sup> *Puruṇā* in *Yoga* or Self shines of its own accord to a person in deep *dhyāna* and the person is ready for *samādhi* states. Thus, the taxonomy proposed by Bhajanananda.<sup>13</sup> is of great interest to authenticate the *Yogic* model of interaction of the mind with the external world and the ways to transcend its workings to reach a state of oneness with the Self. This is the starting point of deep *dhyāna* and a requirement for liberation.

Thus, it is seen that there is a distinction between meditation and *dhyāna*. As many researchers, have reported, meditation is to calm the body mind complex, reduce stress, and achieve normal homeostasis. Meditation may also confer a glimpse of 'bliss' about which many advanced practitioners have often reported. Unless there is deep seated Love and reverence for an eternal principle, meditation may not be translated as *dhyāna*.

Meditation has been a spiritual and healing practice in many parts of the world for more than 5,000 years.<sup>15</sup> Historically, religious or spiritual aims were intrinsic to any form of meditation. These traditional practices hold some type of spiritual growth, enlightenment, personal transformation, or transcendental experience as their ultimate goal.<sup>16,17</sup> During the past 40 years, the practice of meditation has become increasingly popular and has been adapted to the specific interests and orientation of Western culture as a complementary therapeutic strategy for a variety of health related problems.<sup>16,18</sup> Both secular forms of meditation and forms rooted in religious and spiritual systems have increasingly attracted the interest of clinicians, researchers, and the general public, and have gained acceptance as important mind-body intervention within integrative medicine (the combination of evidence-based conventional and alternative approaches that address the biological, psychological, social, and spiritual aspects of health and illness).<sup>19</sup>

Meditation has been characterized in many ways in the scientific literature and there is no consensus definition of meditation. This diversity in definitions reflects the complex nature of the practice of meditation and the coexistence of a variety of techniques that have been adopted into practice. Meditation practices may be classified according to certain phenomenological characteristics: the primary goal of practice (therapeutic or spiritual), the direction of the attention (mindfulness, concentrative, and practices that shift between the field or background perception and experience and an object within the field).<sup>17,20</sup> the kind of anchor employed (a word, breath, sound, object or sensation).<sup>21-23</sup> and according to the posture used (motionless sitting

or moving.<sup>21</sup> Much like other complex and multifaceted therapeutic interventions, meditation practices involve a mixture of specific and vaguely defined characteristics, and they can be practiced on their own or in conjunction with other therapies.<sup>24</sup>

The *Vijāna Bhairava Tantrā* presents 112 meditation techniques. These include several variants of breath awareness, concentration on various centers in the body, non-dual awareness, chanting, imagination and visualization and contemplation through each of the senses. Basically in the form of a dialogue between lord *Śiva* and his consort *Parvatī*, this text discusses 112 meditation techniques which can be used for realizing our true self.<sup>25,26</sup>

There are many types of meditation techniques, designed to bring relaxation, altered consciousness or 'enlightenment'. Most have religious or cultic origins but there are also non-cultic forms developed for therapeutic or experimental purposes.

The following are some of Buddhist meditation techniques – practiced for the spiritual development and applied at large for the scientific explorations in the field of therapeutic application.

### Buddhist schools of meditation

Twenty-five hundred years ago, the coming of Gautama the Buddha was an epoch-making event in the history of Indian civilization and culture. He was an early historical figure to make profound impression on the Indian mind, to challenge the thought processes all over India. So great was his influence that even though Buddhism no longer exists as the dominant organized religious institution in India, his message and personality are still living reality in the life of India and will long continue to be a source of strength.<sup>27</sup>

The term Buddha means an Enlightened One. Buddha's humanity is so evident that he was and continues to be a true friend, philosopher and guide to mankind. There have been many Buddhas in the past and many more will follow in the future. As long as there are beings in need of emancipation from the bonds of this inexorable progress of life and death, Buddhas will appear with their liberating Truth and will lead beings to deliverance, *Nibbāna* (*Nirvāṇa*). His genuine humanity made him take a vow at the feet of Buddha Dipankara to become a supreme Buddha himself and solve the riddle of life of all beings, mundane and divine. That vow was a pledge to fulfill the ten Perfections required of a Bodhisattva, that is, one who aspires to become a Buddha. The ten Perfections (*Pāramīs*) are Liberty, Morality, Renunciation, Wisdom, Energy, Forbearance, Truthfulness, Resolution, Good Will and Equanimity.

### The schools of buddhism

Buddhism has demonstrated the capacity to reinvent itself through the ages through a principle called 'skillful means' (*Upāyakaucalya*) as expounded in *Upāyakaucalya Sūtra*. It is thus possible to perceive Buddhism as an evolving practice. The Dalai Lama is strongly focused on combining science and its developments with Buddhism to help resolve contemporary issues.<sup>28</sup> The order of monks established by Buddha is called the *Saṅgha*. It is made up of the disciples of Buddha who tread their Master's path of unattached life in order to achieve, here in this life, the deathless state of *Nibbāna* (*Nirvāṇa*).

In modern times, there are only two major schools of Buddhism – *Theravāda*, which is found mainly in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos; and *Mahāyāna*, which is found in China, Tibet, and Japan. A third school of Buddhism, *Tantrayāna* is not a separate school but is an added characteristic of the *Mahāyāna* Buddhism of Tibet. The original tradition was that of *Theravāda* (the Way

of the Elders), the orthodox followers whose tradition has been maintained in *Pālē* and whose rules and teachings go back to the earliest times. The two major schools of thoughts today which have today known as *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna*, flourished side by side for centuries, but eventually *Mahāyāna* became dominant form of Buddhism in North India. Later one of the sects followed the *Saṅskāta* tradition of Buddhism and became powerful; they chose the name *Mahāyāna* (Great Vehicle) for themselves and called those who followed the orthodox tradition *Hēnayāna* (Little Vehicle), a somewhat condescending name. *Mahāyāna* Buddhism differs from *Theravāda* in its use of *Saṅskāta* rather than *Pālē* sources.<sup>27</sup>

### Theravāda schools of meditation

All the teachings of the Buddha can be summed in one word: Dhamma which means truth. The *Saṅskāta* form of the word is *Dharma*. Dhamma, the law of righteousness, exists not only in man's heart and mind; it exists in the universe also. Life, especially in the context of Dhamma, is a matter of nature (*dhama-jāti*). This *Pālē* word *dhama-jāti* may not correspond to the English 'nature' exactly, but they are close enough. The Dhamma of life has four meanings: a) nature itself; b) the law of nature; c) the duty that must be performed according to that law of nature; and, d) the fruits or benefits that arise from the performance of that duty.<sup>27-29</sup>

All Buddhists recognize that the attainment of the ultimate goal can come only by following the Eightfold Path which culminates in meditation. In the words of Buddha, it is very clear that the culture and perfection of the mind come through meditation. There are two kinds of meditation – the kind which leads to tranquility (*Samāthā*) and the kind which leads to insight (*Vipaṣyanā*). There are forty subjects of meditation divided into the ten devices, the ten impurities, the ten recollections, the four sublime states, the four immaterial states, the one notion, and the one analysis.

### Ānāpānasati meditation

*Ānāpānasati* is a core meditation practice in Theravāda, Tiantai, and Chán/Zen traditions of Buddhism, as well as a part of many modern Western mindfulness-based programs. *Ānāpānasati* meditation is an initial part of the *Vipaṣyanā* meditation. It is a meditation in which one obtains mastery over one's unruly mind through objective observation of natural and normal breath. In *Pālē* literature it is known as '*Ānāpānasati*', which means awareness of one's own respiration. This practice of *Ānāpānasati* meditation helps sharpen the mind and induces peace of mind to the participants for the next step of *Vipaṣyanā* meditation. '*Vipaṣyanā*' means to observe things as they really are in their natural and their true characteristics of impermanence (Shinde & Dongare, 2012). This technique (*Ānāpānasati* Meditation), in modern time, is simplified and popularized in India by Mr. Subhas Patri under the collection known as – Pyramid Spiritual Societies Movement.

### Conclusion

Thus, the ancient tradition of yoga and meditation began in Indian prehistory as a system of mental, physical and spiritual exercises. The present compiled review of literary research provides an authentic information about *dhyāna* described in ancient Indian and Buddhist classical texts namely in *Śrēmadbhagavadgētā*, *Patañjali Yogasūtra*, *Yoga Vasīṇōha*, *Upaniṣad* and in Buddhist text (*Mahā Satipatthāna Suttā*). Here review of various literature throws light on the difference between *dhyāna* and meditation in the classical Eastern and Western perspective. Meditation is to calm the body–

mind complex, reduce stress, and achieve normal homeostasis whereas *dhyāna* is to go beyond mind–body complex and absorb in absolute reality.

An attempt is made to understand different meditation techniques in the context of Buddhist Schools of Meditations, basically from *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna*. Thus, if one practices meditation regularly, one may achieve a state of intuitive, self-absorptive consciousness with serenity and presence of mind, which could lead to *Samādhi* or enlightenment.

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## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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