

**Overview of Buddha's Techniques for Cognitive- Behavior Modification** Chapter in the Book, *The Buddha's Teachings: Seeing Without Illusion*, 2nd Revised ed. edition. By Rodger R Ricketts

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## **Overview of Buddha's Techniques for Cognitive- Behavior Modification**

*"All mental phenomena are preceded by mind, having mind as their master created by mind."* Dhammapaddha

*"The random, uncontrollable movements of the monkey symbolize the waywardness of the native human mind before it achieves a composure which only Buddhist discipline can effect."* [55]

Glen Dudbridge

*'If we look deeply into such ways of life as Buddhism, we do not find either philosophy or religion as these are understood in the West. We find something more nearly resembling psychotherapy'.*

Allan Watts [56]

In this chapter, we are going to explore the Buddha's general instructions to purify the mind and the cognitive-behavioral psychological approach. In Buddhist literature, when the mind has transcended attachments and agitations, as well as all discriminating thoughts, it can perceive the 'emptiness' of all phenomena, including the self. One can then experience the original mind, or what the Buddha experienced in his awakening. In the suttas the pre-enlightened mind, which is untrained, restless and frequently agitated, is referred as a nervous animal or a monkey swinging from tree to tree (monkey mind). As we have examined earlier in this book, the regular and progressive

development of *sīla* and self control is necessary to quiet the mind and develop concentration. Otherwise, our mind craves and grasps at the many sensations that arise and fall, causing distraction, tension and stress. One specific method of calming the mind is mindfulness.

Buddha taught, like modern psychology and a relapse prevention model, a doctrine that recognizes the possibility of the wellbeing of all sentient beings. Often, at the beginning of a Buddhist meditation session, one hears the phrase recited, '*May all beings be well and happy*', with the supreme contentment being the awakening of the original mind. To assist in that goal, the Buddha recommended a wide range of interventions, which are like established techniques of modern cognitive behavioral therapy. The specific desired behavior change determines the use of a specific technique(s). The suttas often mention the use of specific interventions to prevent or correct a lapse or relapse of unwholesome and unskillful behavior. Details of those techniques from original texts are explained in numerous publications including [47, 48] (De Silva, 1984; Mikulas, 1981). Therefore, while a full discussion of those techniques is unnecessary here, it is instructive to show some examples of behavioral interventions used in the Path.

### **Meditation's techniques and methods to overcome Unwanted Intrusive Thoughts:**

The Buddha's program gives primary importance to the control of unwanted, intrusive cognitive lapses because they are both a hindrance to one's efforts at thinking and acting in a wholesome manner as well as maintaining a serene mind in meditation and life. Thus, the practitioner is instructed that if unwholesome thoughts arise to awareness, one needs to quickly counter those thoughts by using recommended strategies. One example in the *Vitakkasanthana Sutta*, presents an intervention in a hierarchical fashion; applying the next if the preceding one fails. As accounted by Padmal De Silva [49](1990) the Buddha explained, if an unwanted thought manifests itself in one's consciousness, one should:

1. First, switch to an opposite or incompatible thought. Reflect on an object

associated with thoughts that are the opposite of the unwanted thought. *'When unwanted unskillful thoughts connected with desire, hate, and delusion arise, through reflection on an adventitious object, one should, (in order to get rid of that), reflect on a different object which is connected with skill. Then the unwanted unskillful thoughts are eliminated; they disappear. By their elimination, the mind stands firm, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated, just within (his subject of meditation).'*' This intervention of switching to an incompatible thought with the unwanted one is compared to: *'An experienced carpenter or carpenter's apprentice, striking hard at, pushing out, and getting rid of a coarse peg with a fine one,'* and is claimed to help eliminate the unwanted thought.

2. If the unwanted, unskillful thoughts continue to arise, to expunge them, one should reflect on the harmful consequences and disadvantages of the thoughts.

One reflects on the negative results to both oneself and others if the thoughts manifest – *'One should ponder on the disadvantages of unskillful thoughts and understand that truly these thoughts of mine are unskillful, blameworthy, and productive of misery. Then the unwanted unskillful thoughts are eliminated; they disappear. By their elimination, the mind stands firm, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated'*.

3. If unskillful thoughts continue to arise, the technique of ignoring, without attention and reflection, an unwanted thought is recommended. One is to strive not to pay attention, *"like a man who closed his eyes or looks in another direction in order not to see a visual object that he does not wish to see."* There are various distracting activities suggested that can be used in order not to pay attention to the unwanted cognition. These include recalling of a sutta passage one has learned, concentrating on neutral objects, and engaging in some unrelated physical activity.

4. If unskillful thoughts continue, another recommended strategy is to reflect on the removal of the source of those unskillful thoughts. Then the unskillful thoughts disappear. This is explained using the analogy of a man walking briskly who asks himself: *"Why am I walking briskly?"*, then reflects on his walking and stops and stands; then reflects on his standing and sits down, and so on.

5. If unwanted, unskillful thoughts still continue, the strategy of control with forceful effort is recommended. It consists in forcefully restraining and

dominating the mind. One should restrain and subdue the unwholesome mind by the wholesome mind. This is likened to "*a strong man holding and restraining a weaker man,*" by using the "*effort of one part of the mind to control the other.*"

As seen in the example above, the Buddha's mind management techniques have flexibility and base their applications on a person's specific needs. A range of clearly defined techniques is available for use with common lapse problems. While these interventions were developed over 2,500 years ago, they are like psychotherapeutic techniques independently established by modern clinical research.

Once someone has gained a relatively stable control of their mental processes through *sīla* and has learned skillful applications of interventions, *bhavana* (mental development/cultivation), commonly known as meditation, is then utilized.

Henepola Gunaratana, in an article, explains that there are two inter-related meditation systems described in the Pali canon [33] (Gunaratana, 2013). One is the development of serenity and right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration – together known as *samādhi*. The second is right view and right thought that make up insight or wisdom (*paññā*). The practice of serenity meditation aims at developing a stilled, firmly established, and unified mind as a means of experiencing inner peace and as a foundation for insight, while the practice of insight meditation aims at developing a knowing which grasps the transformation of all phenomena. While the two types of meditation work together for the achievement of enlightenment, Buddhism regards the development of insight as the essential key to liberation, the direct redress to the ignorance underlying bondage and suffering.

## **Mindfulness techniques**

A well-known Buddhist *samādhi* and cognitive-behavioral intervention is mindfulness of breath. It is used to develop focus and concentration by the breath and thereby clearing disrupting thoughts from one's awareness. For the untrained mind, not only do thoughts gain strength by use and repetition but also, as in the expression 'birds of a feather flock together', similar thoughts

connect and gather. Therefore, when one thought emerges, many associated thoughts combine with it and influence us. If we struggle to forcibly eliminate our unwholesome thoughts, we can temporarily succeed but, in the end, the energy created by that conflict only strengthens them. Instead, letting them go by the least resistance of non-attention provides an excellent result.

One method of mindfulness of breath recommends we first ease any physical tension, relax taut muscles, and gently withdraw the mind internally by fixing it on the in/out breath. We anchor our awareness on our breathing. Mindfulness of breath awareness creates ongoing concentration which becomes stronger and established through calmly observing the continuously changing of events. However, persistent thoughts often drag us away from maintaining a placid mind. When we find it difficult to maintain our awareness on the breath, we can briefly take mental note of our thoughts, objectify and label them with an appropriate term. Depending on the thoughts, the label can include: "planning," "remembering," "imagining," etc. For example, while meditating, if we begin thinking about what to make for dinner or what to do for a work project, we label those thoughts 'planning' and return to the breath. If you 'dream' about of your next vacation, label those thoughts 'fantasy' and bring your attention back to the present breath. We also gently remind ourselves, "let these thoughts go." In doing so, the intensity of thoughts lessens, making it easier to return to focusing on the breath.

Acknowledging thoughts, labeling and objectifying them, and coming back to the present, to the breath, trains us to give attention on what we choose. We, also, learn to not cling to thoughts since, by lingering with thoughts or ideas, we intensify them. Gradually, the thoughts cease and we can notice the quiet space between one thought before the next one arises. With the ability of maintaining mental control, it is easier to enter our 'inner refuge', an alert yet calm and spacious mind of a placid natural mind – a hint of our original mind.

Another technique that the Buddha recommended if the mind becomes agitated during meditation, is directing the mind to some inspiring theme. One inspiring theme could be an image of the Buddha dispensing loving-kindness. This can arouse pleasure and restore serenity and concentration. Once calmed, we place the mind back on the original point, for example, the breath. This flexibility to transform our thoughts and feelings clearly shows us that we have the ability for mental and emotional control.

All too often we tell ourselves that we are a changeless state of being; that we are depressed, that we are angry, that there is something 'wrong' with us, and we define ourselves using certain personality characteristics that give credibility to that view. To counter this tendency of absolutism, it is valuable to observe mindfully and make note of the moments in our day when we are not experiencing, for example, depressed or angry states. As [57] Olendzki (2003) writes, "*The doctrine of independent origination elucidates how the present mind moment is influenced by preceding mental states, and how present states condition succeeding moments of experience.*" That is, in every moment we physically and cognitively change, we transform and condition our next experience through the experience of the present. In fact, our brain neurons, which we stimulate every moment, affect the next ones and so on, resulting in the possibility of our schemata and cognitive as well as emotional 'world' being flexible and changing.

By knowing the true nature of transformation and dependent origination, we adopt a dynamic and flexible perspective instead of a static and biased point of view of our self and existence. This flexibility allows our successful use of a relapse prevention plan that teaches and develops the skills to transform and transcend the ignorance and hindrances and eventually arrive at our sublime original mind.

## **The Jhanas**

*"When right samādhi has been developed, wisdom has the chance to arise at all times."* [50]

Ajahn Chah

Samādhi, or meditative absorption, changes ordinary fluctuating consciousness in a way that the practitioner experiences a serene, open and focused stability. With a unified mind, one can develop the insight necessary to detach from habitual patterns that give rise to dukkha. You must have a certain amount of concentration ability to enter even the first jhana. Established behavior in Sila or morality/ethics through the Precepts is a prerequisite. Without an upright and ethical life based on the Precepts, the mind/heart is not sufficiently controlled to

become concentrated in the jhanas. Without Sila there is too much desire, aversion, fear, hate, worry, etc. active in the mind/heart. Nevertheless, when samādhi is attained, one goes through a transformation of stages, each stage representing a qualitatively different state of consciousness. One samādhi training are the stages of meditative attainments called the *Jhanas* (contemplations) and they are typically included in courses of Buddhist training. The inducement of Jhanas is a skill that is intentionally developed and it is not beyond the ability of motivated individuals with normal human neurology to attain [51] (Bhikku Bodhi, 1999). Interestingly, the development of samādhi is not exclusively Buddhist. Yogis before the Buddha practiced concentration meditation, and Siddhartha – the future Buddha – even studied with two meditation masters and attained all the jhanas.

With the jhanic meditation experience (a very focused, very stable state of concentration), each level of the jhana took Siddhartha to more rarified levels of ‘divine’ mental states with corresponding delight, pleasure, and increased insights. He realized a greater pleasure than the normal sense-based happiness. However, not finding true liberation, Siddhartha searched beyond the jhanic mental states and with insight, later came to find complete peace and deliverance – nibbāna. While the jhanas were not the direct portal to nibbāna, the Buddha repeatedly encouraged practitioners to cultivate samādhi through the jhanas, for these leads to higher wisdom and the ending of the unwholesome mental states. Meditative development of these sublime states is aided by reflecting often upon their qualities, the benefits they bestow, and the dangers of their opposites. As the Buddha said, “*What a person considers and reflects upon for a long time, to that his mind will bend and incline.*” Especially with training in the jhanas, the services of a qualified teacher who can give knowledgeable meditation explanation and instruction based on his or her experience is important. Since much has been written[12], and because practical experience with proper instruction is important for samadhi practices, we will not spend much time detailing them in this book. For our purposes, a general overview for a ‘Right View’ is all that is necessary.

The Jhanas, which are mentioned numerous times in the suttas, were important to the Buddha in his own meditative experience and he frequently exhorted his disciples to develop them. After Awakening, throughout the Buddha’s life, he practiced the jhanas and referred to them as ‘his heavenly dwelling’ (D.iii,220). A meditator can begin the higher jhanas after

accomplishing the preliminary requirements of achieving moral virtue and attaining the first jhana – mindfulness of the breath. Traditionally, the stages of absorption or one-pointedness are divided into eight levels of jhanas, each marked by greater depth, refinement, and subtlety than its predecessor. The first four states of mind, *mettā*, *karuna*, *mudita*, and *upekkhā* (loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity) represent the highest levels of mundane consciousness. These meditations are called Brahma-vihara-bhavana: the meditative development of the sublime or ‘divine’ states. The meditations on kindness, compassion and sympathetic joy produce the attainment of the first three absorptions, while the meditation on equanimity leads to the fourth Jhana. The second group of four *Jhanas* also forms a set: the four immaterial states (aruppa). The eight follow attainment in a progressive order.

One common way of viewing the initial four jhanas and the four immaterial attainments is by placing them in a sequence of gradual development. The path from the first jhana through the fourth jhana is the cessation of that part of the mind that differentiates between pleasure and displeasure. The transformation from the fourth jhana to the fourth immaterial attainment is the cessation of the remaining activity of the mind called “knowing.” Through the eight attainments, first one let’s go of attachment to the body and the world of the five senses. Then one let’s go of the experience of the ‘doer’. Then one let’s go of pleasure and displeasure. Then one let’s go of space and consciousness. Then one let’s go of knowing. When one let’s go of a mental object, the object disappears, ceases from awareness. If it remains, one has not let go. Through letting go of cognitive knowing, knowing ceases. This is the cessation of all the constructions in the mind; where in consciousness there are no cognitive representations, no duality, where subject and object are wholly destroyed. This is the last step in the cessation of the last vestige of knowing.

In the first level, after the access level, delight and pleasure arises. The developmental states of jhana refine these emotions until later only equanimity is left. Even though each of the first four jhana develops a quiet and alert mind, there is still a small amount of disturbance. The first jhana includes the five absorption factors: initial application, sustained application, rapture, happiness, and one-pointedness. As samādhi deepens and refines, in the second jhana, the mind becomes more tranquil and more unified, but, even this stillness and delight become tiresome. When that is surpassed, the result is the

greater stillness of the third jhana; yet, even then, in the third jhana, the pleasure becomes a distraction in the mind. To surpass the sublime happiness of the third jhana, we exert ourselves further. When we succeed by means of letting go or non – attaching, we enter the fourth jhana, which is defined by two factors: one-pointedness and a balanced feeling. It has the perfect purity of both equanimity and mindfulness. At this level, Right Effort ceases, as intentional effort is unnecessary. Then the Buddha reflected: *“With the stilling of applied and sustained thought, I entered upon and abided in the second jhāna ... With the fading away as well of rapture ... I entered upon and abided in the third jhāna ... With the abandoning of pleasure and pain ... I entered upon and abided in the fourth jhāna ... But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain. [...] My concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability.”*[13] Samādhi settles into a deep jhana of its own and no effort is needed or desirable.

The first four states – loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity – are also known as the boundless states because, in their true nature, they are unlimited, impartial, and have no limit caused by preferences or biases. It is impossible for a mind during the attainment of these states to harbor hatred or other defilements. To achieve a mental attitude of wholesome impartiality, we use the four qualities of mettā, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity as principles of conduct, objects of reflection, and as subjects of methodical meditation. Another practical benefit of the ‘divine’ states is that if our everyday conduct is directed by these sublime states of mind, we will experience much less resentment, tension, and irritability, and our meditation periods will be more responsive to wholesomeness. Since our everyday life and thought has a strong influence on our meditative mind, it is easier to attain a steady meditative progress and achievement of the highest aim of our practice when there is little difference between the everyday and the meditative mind.

Beyond the first four jhanas lie the four immaterial states, levels of absorption in which the mind transcends even the subtlest perception of visualized images sometimes persisting in the jhanas. The four attainments are named after their respective objects: the base of infinite space, the base of infinite consciousness, the base of nothingness, and the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. They stand at the height of mental

concentration, the absolute highest degree of unification possible for consciousness. However, they still lack the wisdom of insight, and are not sufficient for gaining nibbāna. Ultimately, Buddhist meditation goes beyond tranquility meditation and any identification with, or clinging to, serenity and tranquility. Meditation becomes a transcendence of a more radical type of insight, allowing us to understand the dualistic relativity of world concepts, their falsifying nature, and the misperception of permanence underlying them. It allows one to achieve Awakening.

However, the Buddha did not attain Awakening or Enlightenment through samādhi. It is more like opening a door to enlightenment. In fact, some teachers do not believe their study is necessary. Nevertheless, samādhi quiets the mind, clarifies our mental processes and loosens the grip of our dualistic, subjective and constructed reality. The experience shows us that the 'world' – both internal and external – that we normally perceive is not as 'substantial' as we previously suppose. During our relapse prevention program, learning the application of the jhanas requires a knowledgeable teacher and adequate time devoted for meditation practice. Nevertheless, instruction and practice in the first four jhanas is very useful in the maturing of our mind and hence with integrating their wholesome applications in our lives.