

## CHAPTER VII

### · MEDITATION' OR MENTAL CULTURE :

#### *BHAVANA*

The Buddha said: 'O bhikkhus, there are two kinds of illness. What are those two? Physical illness and mental illness. There seem to be people who enjoy freedom from physical illness even for a year or two . . . even for a hundred years or more. But, O bhikkhus, rare in this world are those who enjoy freedom from mental illness even for one moment, except those who are free from mental defilements' (i.e., except arahants).<sup>1</sup>

The Buddha's teaching, particularly his way of 'meditation', aims at producing a state of perfect mental health, equilibrium and tranquility. It is unfortunate that hardly any other section of the Buddha's teaching is so much misunderstood as 'meditation', both by Buddhists and non-Buddhists. The moment the word 'meditation' is mentioned, one thinks of an escape from the daily activities of life; assuming a particular posture, like a statue in some cave or cell in a monastery, in some remote place cut off from society; and musing on, or being absorbed in, some kind of mystic or mysterious thought or trance. True Buddhist 'meditation' does not mean this kind of escape at all. The Buddha's teaching on this subject was so wrongly, or so little understood, that in later times the way of 'meditation' deteriorated and degenerated into a kind of ritual or ceremony almost technical in its routine.<sup>2</sup>

Most people are interested in meditation or *Yoga* in order to gain some spiritual or mystic powers like the 'third eye', which others do not possess. There was some time ago a Buddhist nun in India who was trying to develop a power to see through her ears,

<sup>1</sup>A (Colombo, 1929), p. 276.

<sup>2</sup>*The Yogavacara's Manual* (edited by T. W. Rhys Davids, London, 1896), a text on meditation written in Ceylon probably about the 18th century, shows how meditation at the time had degenerated into a ritual of reciting formulas, burning candles, etc.

See also Chapter XII on the Ascetic Ideal, *History of Buddhism in Ceylon* by Walpola Rahula, (Colombo, 1956), pp. 199 ff.

while she was still in the possession of the 'power' of perfect eyesight! This kind of idea is nothing but 'spiritual perversion'. It is always a question of desire, 'thirst' for power.

The word meditation is a very poor substitute for the original term *bhavana*, which means 'culture' or 'development', i.e., mental culture or mental development. The Buddhist *bhavana*, properly speaking, is mental culture in the full sense of the term. It aims at cleansing the mind of impurities and disturbances, such as lustful desires, hatred, ill-will, indolence, worries and restlessness, sceptical doubts, and cultivating such qualities as concentration, awareness, intelligence, will, energy, the analytical faculty, confidence, joy, tranquility, leading finally to the attainment of highest wisdom which sees the nature of things as they are, and realizes the Ultimate Truth, Nirvana.

There are two forms of meditation. One is the development of mental concentration (*samatha* or *samadhi*), of one-pointedness of mind (*cittakaggata*, Skt. *cittaikagrata*), by various methods prescribed in the texts, leading up to the highest mystic states such as 'the Sphere of Nothingness' or 'the Sphere of Neither-Perception-nor-Non-Perception'. All these mystic states, according to the Buddha, are mind-created, mind-produced, conditioned (*samkhata*).<sup>1</sup> They have nothing to do with Reality, Truth, Nirvana. This form of meditation existed before the Buddha. Hence it is not purely Buddhist, but it is not excluded from the field of Buddhist meditation. However it is not essential for the realization of Nirvana. The Buddha himself, before his Enlightenment, studied these yogic practices under different teachers and attained to the highest mystic states; but he was not satisfied with them, because they did not give complete liberation, they did not give insight into the Ultimate Reality. He considered these mystic states only as 'happy living in this existence' (*ditthadhammasukhavihara*), or 'peaceful living' (*santavihara*), and nothing more.<sup>2</sup>

He therefore discovered the other form of 'meditation' known as *vipassana* (Skt. *vipasjana* or *vidarsana*), 'Insight' into the nature of things, leading to the complete liberation of mind, to the realization of the Ultimate Truth, Nirvana. This is essentially Buddhist

<sup>1</sup>See above p. 38.

<sup>2</sup>See *Sallekha-sutta* (no. 8), of M.

'meditation', Buddhist mental culture. It is an analytical method based on mindfulness, awareness, vigilance, observation.

It is impossible to do justice to such a vast subject in a few pages. However an attempt is made here to give a very brief and rough idea of the true Buddhist 'meditation', mental culture or mental development, in a practical way.

The most important discourse ever given by the Buddha on mental development ('meditation') is called the *Satipatthana-sutta* 'The Setting-up of Mindfulness' (No. 22 of the *Digha-nikaya*, or No. 10 of the *Majjhima-nikaya*). This discourse is so highly venerated in tradition that it is regularly recited not only in Buddhist monasteries, but also in Buddhist homes with members of the family sitting round and listening with deep devotion. Very often bhikkhus recite this *sutta* by the bed-side of a dying man to purify his last thoughts.

The ways of 'meditation' given in this discourse are not cut off from life, nor do they avoid life; on the contrary, they are all connected with our life, our daily activities, our sorrows and joys, our words and thoughts, our moral and intellectual occupations.

The discourse is divided into four main sections: the first section deals with our body (*kaya*), the second with our feelings and sensations (*vedana*), the third with the mind (*citta*), and the fourth with various moral and intellectual subjects (*dhamma*).

It should be clearly borne in mind that whatever the form of 'meditation' may be, the essential thing is mindfulness or awareness (*sati*), attention or observation (*anupassana*).

One of the most well-known, popular and practical examples of 'meditation' connected with the body is called 'The Mindfulness or Awareness of in-and-out breathing' (*anapanasati*). It is for this 'meditation' only that a particular and definite posture is prescribed in the text. For other forms of 'meditation' given in this *sutta*, you may sit, stand, walk, or lie down, as you like. But, for cultivating mindfulness of in-and-out breathing, one should sit, according to the text, 'cross-legged, keeping the body erect and mindfulness alert'. But sitting cross-legged is not practical and easy for people of all countries, particularly for Westerners. Therefore, those who find it difficult to sit cross-legged, may sit on a chair, 'keeping the body erect and mindfulness alert'. It is very necessary for this exercise that the meditator should sit erect, but not stiff; his hands

placed comfortably on his lap. Thus seated, you may close your eyes, or you may gaze at the tip of your nose, as it may be convenient to you.

You breathe in and out all day and night, but you are never mindful of it, you never for a second concentrate your mind on it. Now you are going to do just this. Breathe in and out as usual, without any effort or strain. Now, bring your mind to concentrate on your breathing-in and breathing-out; let your mind watch and observe your breathing in and out; let your mind be aware and vigilant of your breathing in and out. When you breathe, you sometimes take deep breaths, sometimes not. This does not matter at all. Breathe normally and naturally. The only thing is that when you take deep breaths you should be aware that they are deep breaths, and so on. In other words, your mind should be so fully concentrated on your breathing that you are aware of its movements and changes. Forget all other things, your surroundings, your environment; do not raise your eyes and look at anything. Try to do this for five or ten minutes.

At the beginning you will find it extremely difficult to bring your mind to concentrate on your breathing. You will be astonished how your mind runs away. It does not stay. You begin to think of various things. You hear sounds outside. Your mind is disturbed and distracted. You may be dismayed and disappointed. But if you continue to practise this exercise twice daily, morning and evening, for about five or ten minutes at a time, you will gradually, by and by, begin to concentrate your mind on your breathing. After a certain period, you will experience just that split second when your mind is fully concentrated on your breathing, when you will not hear even sounds nearby, when no external world exists for you. This slight moment is such a tremendous experience for you, full of joy, happiness and tranquility, that you would like to continue it. But still you cannot. Yet if you go on practising this regularly, you may repeat the experience again and again for longer and longer periods. That is the moment when you lose yourself completely in your mindfulness of breathing. As long as you are conscious of yourself you can never concentrate on anything.

This exercise of mindfulness of breathing, which is one of the simplest and easiest practices, is meant to develop concentration

leading up to very high mystic attainments (*dhyana*). Besides, the power of concentration is essential for any kind of deep understanding, penetration, insight into the nature of things, including the realization of Nirvana.

Apart from all this, this exercise on breathing gives you immediate results. It is good for your physical health, for relaxation, sound sleep, and for efficiency in your daily work. It makes you calm and tranquil. Even at moments when you are nervous or excited, if you practise this for a couple of minutes, you will see for yourself that you become immediately quiet and at peace. You feel as if you have awakened after a good rest.

Another very important, practical, and useful form of 'meditation' (mental development) is to be aware and mindful of whatever you do, physically or verbally, during the daily routine of work in your life, private, public or professional. Whether you walk, stand, sit, lie down, or sleep, whether you stretch or bend your limbs, whether you look around, whether you put on your clothes, whether you talk or keep silence, whether you eat or drink, even whether you answer the calls of nature—in these and other activities, you should be fully aware and mindful of the act you perform at the moment. That is to say, that you should live in the present moment, in the present action. This does not mean that you should not think of the past or the future at all. On the contrary, you think of them in relation to the present moment, the present action, when and where it is relevant.

People do not generally live in their actions, in the present moment. They live in the past or in the future. Though they seem to be doing something now, here, they live somewhere else in their thoughts, in their imaginary problems and worries, usually in the memories of the past or in desires and speculations about the future. Therefore they do not live in, nor do they enjoy, what they do at the moment. So they are unhappy and discontented with the present moment, with the work at hand, and naturally they cannot give themselves fully to what they appear to be doing.

Sometimes you see a man in a restaurant reading while eating—a very common sight. He gives you the impression of being a very busy man, with no time even for eating. You wonder whether he eats or reads. One may say that he does both. In fact, he does neither, he enjoys neither. He is strained, and disturbed in mind,

and he does not enjoy what he does at the moment, does not live his life in the present moment, but unconsciously and foolishly tries to escape from life. (This does not mean, however, that one should not talk with a friend while having lunch or dinner.)

You cannot escape life however you may try. As long as you live, whether in a town or in a cave, you have to face it and live it. Real life is the present moment—not the memories of the past which is dead and gone, nor the dreams of the future which is not yet born. One who lives in the present moment lives the real life, and he is happiest.

When asked why his disciples, who lived a simple and quiet life with only one meal a day, were so radiant, the Buddha replied: 'They do not repent the past, nor do they brood over the future. They live in the present. Therefore they are radiant. By brooding over the future and repenting the past, fools dry up like green reeds cut down (in the sun).'

Mindfulness, or awareness, does not mean that you should think and be conscious 'I am doing this' or 'I am doing that'. No. Just the contrary. The moment you think 'I am doing this', you become self-conscious, and then you do not live in the action, but you live in the idea 'I am', and consequently your work too is spoiled. You should forget yourself completely, and lose yourself in what you do. The moment a speaker becomes self-conscious and thinks 'I am addressing an audience', his speech is disturbed and his trend of thought broken. But when he forgets himself in his speech, in his subject, then he is at his best, he speaks well and explains things clearly. All great work—artistic, poetic, intellectual or spiritual—is produced at those moments when its creators are lost completely in their actions, when they forget themselves altogether, and are free from self-consciousness.

This mindfulness or awareness with regard to our activities, taught by the Buddha, is to live in the present moment, to live in the present action. (This is also the Zen way which is based primarily on this teaching.) Here in this form of meditation, you haven't got to perform any particular action in order to develop mindfulness, but you have only to be mindful and aware of whatever you may do. You haven't got to spend one second of

your precious time on this particular 'meditation': you have only to cultivate mindfulness and awareness always, day and night, with regard to all activities in your usual daily life. These two forms of 'meditation' discussed above are connected with our body.

Then there is a way of practising mental development ('meditation') with regard to all our sensations or feelings, whether happy, unhappy or neutral. Let us take only one example. You experience an unhappy, sorrowful sensation. In this state your mind is cloudy, hazy, not clear, it is depressed. In some cases, you do not even see clearly why you have that unhappy feeling. First of all, you should learn not to be unhappy about your unhappy feeling, not to be worried about your worries. But try to see clearly why there is a sensation or a feeling of unhappiness, or worry, or sorrow. Try to examine how it arises, its cause, how it disappears, its cessation. Try to examine it as if you are observing it from outside, without any subjective reaction, as a scientist observes some object. Here, too, you should not look at it as 'my feeling' or 'my sensation' subjectively, but only look at it as 'a feeling' or 'a sensation' objectively. You should forget again the false idea of T. When you see its nature, how it arises and disappears, your mind grows dispassionate towards that sensation, and becomes detached and free. It is the same with regard to all sensations or feelings.

Now let us discuss the form of 'meditation' with regard to our minds. You should be fully aware of the fact whenever your mind is passionate or detached, whenever it is overpowered by hatred, ill-will, jealousy, or is full of love, compassion, whenever it is deluded or has a clear and right understanding, and so on and so forth. We must admit that very often we are afraid or ashamed to look at our own minds. So we prefer to avoid it. One should be bold and sincere and look at one's own mind as one looks at one's face in a mirror.<sup>1</sup>

Here is no attitude of criticizing or judging, or discriminating between right and wrong, or good and bad. It is simply observing, watching, examining. You are not a judge, but a scientist. When you observe your mind, and see its true nature clearly, you become dispassionate with regard to its emotions, sentiments and states.

<sup>1</sup>MI (PTS), p. 100.

Thus you become detached and free, so that you may see things as they are.

Let us take one example. Say you are really angry, overpowered by anger, ill-will, hatred. It is curious, and paradoxical, that the man who is in anger is not really aware, not mindful that he is angry. The moment he becomes aware and mindful of that state of his mind, the moment he sees his anger, it becomes, as if it were, shy and ashamed, and begins to subside. You should examine its nature, how it arises, how it disappears. Here again it should be remembered that you should not think 'I am angry', or of 'my anger'. You should only be aware and mindful of the state of an angry mind. You are only observing and examining an angry mind objectively. This should be the attitude with regard to all sentiments, emotions, and states of mind.

Then there is a form of 'meditation' on ethical, spiritual and intellectual subjects. All our studies, reading, discussions, conversation and deliberations on such subjects are included in this 'meditation'. To read this book, and to think deeply about the subjects discussed in it, is a form of meditation. We have seen earlier<sup>1</sup> that the conversation between Khemaka and the group of monks was a form of meditation which led to the realization of Nirvana.

So, according to this form of meditation, you may study, think, and deliberate on the Five Hindrances (*Nivarana*), namely:

1. lustful desires (*kamacchanda*),
2. ill-will, hatred or anger (*vjapada*),
3. torpor and languor (*thina-middha*),
4. restlessness and worry (*uddhacca-kukkucca*),
5. sceptical doubts (*vicikiccha*).

These five are considered as hindrances to any kind of clear understanding, as a matter of fact, to any kind of progress. When one is over-powered by them and when one does not know how to get rid of them, then one cannot understand right and wrong, or good and bad.

One may also 'meditate' on the Seven Factors of Enlightenment (*Bojjhanga*). They are:

<sup>1</sup>See above p. 65.

1. Mindfulness (*sati*), i.e., to be aware and mindful in all activities and movements both physical and mental, as we discussed above.
2. Investigation and research into the various problems of doctrine (*dhamma-vicayd*). Included here are all our religious, ethical and philosophical studies, reading, researches, discussions, conversation, even attending lectures relating to such doctrinal subjects.
3. Energy (*viriya*), to work with determination till the end.
4. Joy (*piti*), the quality quite contrary to the pessimistic, gloomy or melancholic attitude of mind.
5. Relaxation (*passaddhi*) Of both body and mind. One should not be stiff physically or mentally.
6. Concentration (*samadhi*), as discussed above.
7. Equanimity (*upekkha*), i.e., to be able to face life in all its vicissitudes with calm of mind, tranquillity, without disturbance.

To cultivate these qualities the most essential thing is a genuine wish, will, or inclination. Many other material and spiritual conditions conducive to the development of each quality are described in the texts.

One may also 'meditate' on such subjects as the Five Aggregates investigating the question 'What is a being?' or 'What is it that is called I?', or on the Four Noble Truths, as we discussed above. Study and investigation of those subjects constitute this fourth form of meditation, which leads to the realization of Ultimate Truth.

Apart from those we have discussed here, there are many other subjects of meditation, traditionally forty in number, among which mention should be made particularly of the four Sublime States: (**Brahma-vihara**): (1) extending unlimited, universal love and good-will (*metta*) to all living beings without any kind of discrimination, 'just as a mother loves her only child'; (2) compassion (*karuna*) for all living beings who are suffering, in trouble and affliction; (3) sympathetic joy (*mudita*) in others' success, welfare and happiness; and (4) equanimity (*upekkha*) in all vicissitudes of life.