

# What Buddhist Meditation has to Tell Psychology About the Mind<sup>1</sup>

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Some of what we classify as religious experience can be directly relevant to science, particularly to psychology. The discoveries of Buddhist meditation indicate that much of present psychological methods and assumptions are based on one particular limited form of knowing while other levels of knowing reveal a different portrait of the human mind and its capabilities. The knowing revealed by such deeper awareness includes: a nonjudgmental form of knowing that appears to pacify mental disturbances, an expansive panoramic knowing that reveals the interdependence of phenomena, an open and free knowing that releases, a timeless direct knowing, and an unconditional knowing not separate from a sense of inherent value. Such forms of knowing are traditionally understood to give rise to intelligent compassionate actions. The progressive development of these forms of knowing is illustrated by examples from the autobiography of a noted martial artist.

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One of the best-kept secrets of the last several centuries may be that some of what we classify as religious experience can make a fundamental contribution to scientific psychology. One hundred years ago William James suggested this radical idea in his classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, yet today mainstream psychology is no closer to considering the idea than it was in 1902. Surely one root of this recalcitrance is the way in which the categories and imagery of our society envisage an otherworldly religion and a naturalistic psychology which are on different planes of existence altogether and cannot communicate with one another. I believe that the Eastern traditions now arriving on our shore, particularly Buddhist thought and meditation, can bridge this divide and can reveal a quite new understanding of what the human mind and its knowing capacity actually are.

Psychology has so far treated meditation either as subsumed under our science (for example, as a biological or psychological means of stress reduction) or as part of religion (a portal to mystical states). The problem with taking a biological or psychological approach to meditation is that it assumes that our present version of the body or mind is the way things are, the bottom line. But by doing this we insulate ourselves against learning anything fundamentally new. Interestingly, it's the same story with "mysticism." (I can't tell you how many meditation groups I've seen where mysticism is considered the unspeakable "M word.") The problem is that if we identify meditative or

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religious experience with special states of mind, states of mind that are essentially different from normal everyday consciousness, this marginalizes the experience. It does not challenge our image of what normal everyday consciousness itself may be.

We all know the image of a human that is common in present psychology and cognitive science: the mind is seen as something isolated inside the body, peering tentatively out at a piecemeal and initially incomprehensible world, trying so hard to find simple predictive relationships between events so that it can survive. It stores the results of its experience in memory to form a coherent but inherently indirect and abstract representation of the world and of itself. Ideas, emotions, actions, and consciousness have evolved to fulfill the only originating value which is to survive and reproduce in an evolutionarily successful manner in a world of limited reward and much threat.

Such a portrait is not alien to the Eastern traditions. In Buddhism it is somewhat analogous to *samsara*, the wheel of existence to which sentient beings are bound by their habits; in Hinduism it might be depicted as lower states of consciousness; and in Taoism it might be portrayed, with a smile, as the activities of the monkey in us. All three Eastern traditions agree that in this habitual state of mind, we are mistaken about everything important — about who and what we are, what is real, and how to act. But this is not the only possible mode of knowing the world. And here we come to the central topic of this talk. There is an alternative way of knowing. And that alternative is seen as our original, natural, fundamental state, what we are right now, *not any particular or special experience*.

For simplicity in this talk let us call our more limited habitual mode of knowing *consciousness* and the alternative more basic, comprehensive, and wiser form of knowing *awareness*. There are many technical terms for such a distinction in various languages, but don't worry; we don't have to assume that all the words refer to the same thing — who could know? — in order to discuss alternative modes of knowing.

Were awareness available only to a few skilled and practiced religious athletes, it would be of little use either for daily life or for science. But it is said to be widely available, in fact closer to us than our own eyes. The trick is that consciousness and awareness are not actually two separate things — and this is where talking about such matters becomes elusive — because all experience is actually made out of awareness. This is analogous to Plotinus' "what sees is not our reason, but something prior and superior to our reason." And Rumi reminds us: "We seldom hear the inner music / But we're all dancing to it nevertheless."

This point might be clarified, hopefully, by a computer analogy. The consciousness mode of knowing the world can be likened to a particular computer program running on a more basic operating system. In daily life and in cognitive science we mistake the limited consciousness program for the whole system. We keep trying to study how the system works, but all we can see is the functioning of the program in which we are confined. Every attempt to see beyond or get out of the program, either in science or in religious striving, is frustrated because to try to get out, we are only using the operations of the program itself.

Such a possibility ought to give scientists of the mind some pause because it implies that the very techniques, rules, hypotheses, assumptions, tests, and suspicions designed to make the study of the mind objective are themselves but products of operations of that same program. So how do you ever get out; where's the exit key? There are a number of methods common, in varying degrees, to the world religions, but the specialty of Buddhism is to find awareness in the everyday experiences of consciousness itself, including all the senses, by means of cultivating intense mindfulness and intimacy with ongoing experience. That is what makes Buddhist practice particularly valuable as a link to psychology.

The aim of the rest of this talk is to point out some ways in which the wisdom of awareness shows up in the functioning of our minds in everyday life. I'll also try to show how that is directly applicable to psychology, both academic and clinical. It is the understanding that consciousness is really awareness in disguise that makes this endeavor possible. Consciousness is constantly making gestures toward its more basic knowing capacities. I like to think of the following categories, as the Six Great Gestures.

## 1 Pacifying: Finding the Unbiased Mind

Have you ever paused in what you were doing for a moment and simply listened? Maybe late at night just before finally getting up to go to bed. Crickets, a distant train. . . Maybe on a visit to the seashore. Waves, gulls. . . Maybe a pause in the middle of the day caught off guard for a moment just opening the ears and letting the sounds come in — traffic noises, the chirping of birds, the hum of appliances, human voices. . . Does that kind of moment feel different from the way one normally hears things?

The mind operating from consciousness does not ordinarily simply let in or allow experience. Consciousness is attracted and repulsed by polarities: pleasure versus pain, gain versus loss, praise versus blame. . . the whole catastrophe. Notice that these polarities are centered around Me, the ego, and what I want, don't want, and don't care about. Buddhist psychology gives a detailed account of how an egocentric world with its desires and fears arises and is perpetuated in consciousness. It begins with the bare sense of separateness from the world inherent in the senses. (Look at the wall in front of you right now — you're separate from it, right?) That external world is then seen as either desirable or threatening or boring to the perceiver who then grasps for the desirable, rejects the undesirable, and tries to ignore the irrelevant. Such cognitions and actions breed further habits. Desires can never be fully satisfied because they trap consciousness into the self-perpetuating logic of these three basic impulses; for example, the present escalation of world conflict can be seen as a classic case of the way in which aggression feeds back upon and perpetuates itself.

But Buddhism (and some other traditions) have something else to point out. Those very senses that started off the cascade with their experience of duality and polarized desire, at the same time have another more basic form of functioning, a simple receptivity. The example of listening with which this section began might provide a glimpse of that mode of knowing which simply allows and is not thrown off balance by experiences. (Likewise

the bumper sticker one sees around Berkeley: “Nonjudgment Day is Near.”) Beginning Buddhist meditation techniques, such as focusing on the breath, typically have similar goals but also involve an element of concentration that requires more time to develop. Because there is a peacefulness available in this simple mode of knowing, it is sometimes referred to as *pacifying*. Even a glimpse of such peaceful abiding allows the mind to begin to open to experience, any experience, in an unbiased (some call it a centered, some call it centerless) way. Note that this is not indifference; indifference is one of the motivations of the more limited consciousness. Awareness is perhaps closest to the appreciative mode with which we experience the arts. Have you ever noticed that, since you know you’re not the character in a book or film, you can identify and participate sometimes more fully than in real life in the vividness of that character’s delightful or more usually horrific life and world?

Unbiased knowing has various levels of implication for psychology. In the first place, there is the attentive observation which unbiased mindfulness allows of the ongoing stream of all our biased, off base states of consciousness and emotionality. This can tell us a great deal. Affect psychology is just starting to discover by experimental means some of the features of emotions that meditators have known for centuries.

But there is more to it than that. Let’s take the example of the sense of hearing with which we began. There is a sense of profundity in simply listening — and of being simply listened to. Note that one of the primary complaints of divorcing couples is he/she doesn’t *listen* to me. In some Chinese medical systems the ear and hearing is the water element so that simple listening can have healing effects on the whole body. Notice how Freud advised psychoanalysts to listen to the patient with “evenly suspended attention” and to “simply listen, and not bother about whether [one] is keeping anything in mind.” A technique called “deep listening” accomplishes remarkable effects in conflict resolution, for example, in contexts such as truth and reconciliation. And remember that hearing is just one of the senses, all of which have their wisdom qualities.

William James, that master of expression, sums up some deeper reaches of the unbiased mind thus: “The more commonplace happinesses which we get are ‘reliefs,’ occasioned by our momentary escapes from evils either experienced or threatened. But in its most characteristic embodiments, religious happiness is not a mere feeling of escape. It cares no longer to escape. It consents. . .”

Meditation is sometimes taken as simply this kind of pacifying function. But this is only the beginning of awareness. Let’s continue.

## 2 Expansiveness, Enriching

### A *Panoramic Vision*

Think of a time when you were driving along a winding mountain highway and stopped at a vista point. Remember what it was like to look out, to feel the sense of mountains, valleys, sky, and space around you, and, perhaps, the awareness of your own body and senses as a small point within this vast surround. Or perhaps such an experience has

happened to you in a city with tall buildings. Or amongst people, as in playing a team sport in which, for a moment, the movements of all the other players seem known as a whole? (Martial artists and star basketball players frequently report experiences like this.) You could even be expansive while listening to this talk. Try letting your eyes focus on an object in front of you such as someone's head. Then, keeping the central focus, become aware of your peripheral vision, and, let peripheral vision expand. Now try a focus inside your body such as the center of your chest. Then let awareness expand to surround the body (front, back, sides, above, and below); let it expand further to the walls of the room, and further into space.

In this exercise, we've used, not the ears, but the visionary quality inherent in the eye and vision. The mind of awareness is vaster than we may ordinarily think, and this is potentially relevant to our cognitive sciences. As the meditation practitioner tunes into a more basic and more integrated sense of being and knowing, a realization quite revolutionary to our psychology may begin to dawn: perceiving and knowing are not something limited to a personified consciousness confined behind the eyes peering out at a separated world, but are something happening from all of it together: environment, mind, and organism. The supposed knower is just a part or aspect of this knowing field.

Our present science of perception, both physiological and psychological, is based on investigating how information from an external world can be picked up and interpreted by the sensory systems and brain of a separated and self enclosed organism. What religious, meditative, artistic, and just plain everyday enthusiastic or loving experience suggests is a kind of knowing in which one is not separate. Buddhist thought and meditation tell science to take this seriously because the non-dualistic mode of knowing the world is literally true of the way the senses function in ordinary life (and, note well, is not dependent on special states of either the spirit or the parietal lobes).

The kind of knowing in which mind and world are not separate has not gone entirely unnoticed by perceptual psychology. One need only think of the ecological optics of J. J. Gibson, the development of ecological psychology in which Ulric Neisser has been instrumental, and the biological systems thinking of such recent figures as Walter Freeman, Maturana and Varela, and Jarvilehto. This work indicates the kind of synergy that can exist between meditation experience and concrete research strategies.

The expansiveness of awareness also has clinical importance. When people feel small, limited, fenced in, and estranged they feel bad; when they feel at one with something larger they feel better, sometimes remarkably so. In William James' words "when we have a wide field we rejoice." Creative action too stems from a wide field; again James' eloquence: "Your great organizing geniuses are men with habitually vast fields of mental vision, in which a whole programme of future operations will appear dotted out at once, the rays shooting far ahead into definite directions of advance."

Note here how theoretical basics and clinical usefulness go together. It is a shift in one's basic mode of cognition, the functioning of the senses themselves, rather than any change of mental contents, which can affect such a radical change. The theme that find-

ing one's more basic forms of cognition heals will be continued throughout our observations.

### *B Interdependence*

Expansive enrichment is also available to the operations of the intellect that, as academics and students know, has its own visionary capacities. Look at this piece of paper. On what does the existence of this paper depend? . . . A cloud may seem remote from the paper, but in the words of Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese peace activist, meditation teacher, and poet: "Without a cloud there will be no water; without water trees cannot grow; and without trees, you cannot make paper." And sunshine? ". . . the forest cannot grow without sunshine. . . And if you look more deeply. . . with the eyes of those who are awake, you see. . . that everything is here, the wheat that became the bread for the logger to eat, the logger's father — the paper is full of everything, the entire cosmos." From the perspective of panoramic awareness, what we call an object or event is seen as part of an interdependent whole rather than as something with a separate identity. You might try looking at a bite of food in this way at your next meal.

The limited and enclosed consciousness attempts to see the world in terms of separate billiard balls striking each other with consequent results; expanded awareness tunes into networks of relations beyond what reason can consciously analyze. There are many implications. For one, this challenges completely materialistic or bottom up assumptions. In an interdependent universe, causality can come from any direction. A field view also challenges reliance on single causes. Modern physics notwithstanding, in psychology, experiments are most easily performed and communicated, and are considered most elegant, when manipulation of a single variable can be tied to a single outcome. But this may have more to do with narrative vividness than with finding out how things work. That psychologists have wisdom intuitions about interdependence is shown by everything from the development of new multivariate statistical tools to the creation of various forms of systems analysis.

An understanding of interdependence has clinical significance. It can provide people who suffer from guilt, depression, or anxiety with a vision of themselves as part of an interdependent network in which they need neither blame themselves nor feel powerless. In fact it may be that it is only when people are able to see the way in which they are not responsible for events that they can find the deeper level at which it is possible to take responsibility beyond concept and (depending upon the terminology of one's religious affiliation) repent, forgive, relax, or have power over the phenomenal world.

Interdependence also has societal implications. The mandate for designing psychological experiments virtually demands that the form of the argument be posed as an opposition between single rival factors: nature *versus* nurture, form *versus* function. We think of this as science, but anthropologist Deborah Tannen in her book *The Argument Culture* points out that this is just part of a general cultural pattern: our legal system, press reporting, talk shows — single oppositions, all of them. By no means do all cultures see things this way. It is through the meditative awareness of interdependence that one can see the

sadly simplistic nature of most argument culture thinking.

### 3 Bringing it All Together: Timeless, Direct Knowing

Can you recall an experience where time seemed to stand still or where life seemed to be complete in a single moment? It might be a moment of great personal meaningfulness such as a near death experience or a moment of love (Joan Baez sings, “Speaking strictly for me, I could have died right then. . .”); or it could be in a completely ordinary moment, such as walking down the street. The expansive and inclusive knowing of awareness brings everything together in one point, one moment. The meditation traditions that talk in this way also say that every moment is like this, born afresh with no past from a timeless source.

We don’t generally believe such talk. How could it apply to the demands of daily life? Here is one answer: “Of Saint Catharine of Genoa it is said that ‘she took cognizance of things, only as they were presented to her in succession, *moment by moment*.’ To her holy soul, ‘the divine moment was the present moment. . . and when the present moment was estimated in itself and in its relations, and when the duty that was involved in it was accomplished, it was permitted to pass away as if it had never been, and to give way to the facts and duties of the moment which came after’.”

When awareness functions in this way, experience is direct, atemporal, unmediated, and one feels real. Such experience contains several messages. One is for science. As J. J. Gibson, Kurt Lewin, and others have pointed out, everything happens in the present; how could it be otherwise? To say that an organism has learned something means that the organism has changed so that it is a specific way right now. If you think you have a memory, that means that there is something going on in your mind right now that you’re labeling as a memory. Only the present can be the anchor for genuinely functional explanations.

The other message is personal. The royal road to feeling alienated, fragmented, and less than real is to live in the time-obsessed mind of consciousness. How many people today try to “get real” by amping up sensory stimulation or by taking risks? From the Buddhist point of view, the consciousness version of emotions and goals is like a printed menu that the starving try to eat as a substitute for food. Direct awareness can satisfy and empower in ways abstracted consciousness never can.

Of course the philosopher may object that the present moment is specious, nonexistent. Just so, says the Buddhist meditator, and that is precisely what makes it the portal to our next topic.

### 4 Releasing: Freedom, Openness, “Emptiness”

The denouement then releases us from the story. According to Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, each moment is inherently not only timeless but also open (“empty”), and free (“self liberated”). Both meditation and certain “mind transmissions” from dharma

teachers are designed to point this out.

Ah, but ordinary life does too; humor is one of the most immediate ways. Laughter releases. Remember a time when you heard a really good joke about something that was bothering you (teenage children, parents, dieting, doctors. . .) — can you remember the feeling that settled in for a moment thereafter? Hearing about people who have everything but still feel miserable also seems to release (as in our fascination with tales of tortured movie stars and the life of the Buddha alike). Actually, shock itself releases. In real life, we may be too busy coping with the implications of the shocker for our survival to notice the open instant, but think of the effect of the juxtaposition of images in a haiku or those beloved scenes in classic horror movies where the audience screams. As a matter of fact every moment releases; this is one of the open secrets of life.

## 5 Returning to the Center: Inherent value

So what's so good about being released? It "returns" you. If we were to think of all the aspects of awareness that we have discussed as having the form of a mandala, this one would be the center. When we are deeply struck, for example, when the terrible climax of a tragedy is known and felt as perfect, we seem to catch a glimpse of a mode of being that has nothing to do with survival or achievement or any of our usual motivations.

In science and education, facts and values are considered indisputably two separate things, but in Buddhist meditation, deeply looking into the nature of what it is to know and to be a knower leads to a vision of the world as *unconditional*. The closest English word to that sensibility seems to be *value*.

Humans abound with intuitions of the unconditional. The concept of unconditional love; how many westerners blame their mothers for not having given it to them — or, now with advances in sexual equality, their fathers too? (Grouchiness about imperfection means that one has some intimation of perfection.) How many remarkably ill-written romances become wildly popular if they can successfully trigger a glimmer of deathless love? Look at all the trouble theologians have made for philosophy as they try to reconcile the intuition of the unconditioned with anthropomorphic imagery.

In academia we are as allergic to taking value seriously as we are to religion. Might the introduction of contemplative and meditative insights allow value to start to be explored in a more meaningful manner in psychology?

## 6 Action; Spontaneous Action

Action is the fruition of realization. Buddhism distinguishes between actions that originate in consciousness, and thus are controlled by habits and what is wanted or not wanted by the small ego self, and actions that arise spontaneously from the expanded field of awareness and the depths of openness. Spontaneous action is compassionate and it can be shockingly effective. Western religions also teach of a way of living that comes from beyond one's limited self. Recall Mother Theresa's famous, "I am only a pencil God uses

to write with.”

Even the habitual actions of daily life can gesture in the direction of this wider field. Think of the spontaneity of conversing with friends (you’re not reading your replies off a teleprompter, are you?) or the sudden clarity of writing a paper when the deadline looms. Note how the concepts of *flow* and of *being in the zone* have resonated with the popular imagination. And then there are those actions that just seem to pop up out of nowhere, as in discovering that one has uttered an unusual but magically appropriate statement to comfort a friend (most clinicians have at least one story in which this happened with a client).

Psychology has long been in conflict over issues of volition and consciousness in action. The tendency is to assume that if behavior occurs outside of consciousness, it must be the product of low-level automatic mechanisms. What the experience gained by contemplative and meditative awareness have to offer to the sciences in this regard is the distinction between automatic behavior, which stems from habitual impulses, and another kind of spontaneous action which can come from the wider field of awareness.

Action has still another face; it affects the mind. Mercy is twice blessed because it touches the giver as well as the receiver. Everyone knows about the transformative powers of action. Buddhism goes one step further. In Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, wisdom and compassionate action are seen as co-defining and inseparable. That is how a path is possible. This is why it is so useful to find and follow the gestures made by the everyday mind toward awareness. Imitating the mind-set of wisdom (as in meditation) or the actions of compassion can bring about the real thing. Such an insight supplies the final piece to the puzzle of how one can ever exit from the imprisoning consciousness program; one does not need to exit but only to find the active compassionate wisdom of awareness that lies at the heart of consciousness itself. In this way science and the personal also come together. The limited self of consciousness should not be the basis of daily life (another Berkeley bumper sticker: “Don’t Believe Everything You Think”), and it cannot serve as the only basis for psychology as a science. But awareness knowing may have a different kind of authority. In a troubled world, the possibility that religion, meditation, and psychological science might combine to offer a path of compassionate action is hardly to be dismissed.

## 7 Conclusions

I’d like to end with a case study. Peter Ralston ran a martial arts school in Berkeley for many years unnoticed until he won the world martial arts championship, the first Westerner to do so. A martial artist is a good subject for us because what he does involves action in a very overt form, and action is a particular sticking point for people. We tend to believe that the things in this talk may sound good, but we personally would never actually do anything if we weren’t pushing ourselves in the ordinary conscious way. (At some meditation centers, this is called the enlightened jellyfish question.) In the martial arts you not only have to act, but there’s immediate feedback on your actions that is obvious to everyone. (So you should listen to this man because he has a credential much honored

in our society — he really can beat people up.) Here are some quotes from Ralston's autobiography that show his progression on his path (the explanatory headers are mine):

**One:** The starting point: ambition, focused intention.

"As a teenager I wanted to be the best fighter in the world. Period!"

**Two:** Recognition of the unsatisfactoriness of the ordinary conscious way of doing things. (May come with success.)

"Around that time, I would go to classes and fight black belts and win, but still feel like I lost. . . Something wasn't right. . . I was winning from natural ability, but I wasn't winning because I really understood anything. . ."

**Three:** Finding the unbiased mind beyond fear and desire. Opening perceptions. Appreciation.

"It was in that situation that I first learned to drop fear of getting hit, or of winning or losing. . . What that did was open up my perception to what was really happening. I just saw a fist coming and I'd move. . . When I'd get worried about it, I'd get stuck somewhere and get hit. . . It's a beautiful secret, an exacting and tremendous feedback."

**Four:** Expansion of the knowing field. Also some change in sense of time.

". . . abilities like being able to read somebody's disposition accurately started to come. The moment they would think to hit me I would stop them. That's it. Handled. I just kept finishing everything before it got started."

**Five:** Actions from awareness; simply knowing what to do and it's always appropriate.

"New abilities started to arise. . . I didn't have to be cognizant of any movement on their part, psychic or otherwise, to know what to do. I just knew. That blew me away. I didn't have to perceive a thing. . . very simple, very simple."

**Six:** Comes full circle; transformation of the original ambition and intention.

"I decided that if I were to continue to do this, I wanted to start contributing what I did and what I knew in a much larger way. I wanted to transform the martial arts in the world into a place for the development of the human being, and of honesty."

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