



The Science of Enlightenment: How Meditation Works

By
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A central notion of Buddhism is that there's not a thing inside us called a self. One way to express that is to say that we are a colony of sub-personalities and each of those sub-personalities is in fact not a noun but a verb—a doing.

Defining enlightenment is notoriously tricky. Almost anything you say about it, no matter how true, may also be misleading. Having said that, here's a place to start: you can think of enlightenment as a kind of permanent shift in perspective that comes about through direct realization that there is no thing called "self" inside you. This is a very rough and ready definition. We might call it the "executive summary." Notice that I'm not saying that there is no self, but rather no thing called a self. Of course, there is certainly an activity inside you called personality, an activity of the self.

Meditation changes your relationship to sensory experience, including your thoughts and body sensations. It allows you to experience thoughts and body sensations in a clear and unblocked way. When the sensory experience of the mind-body becomes sufficiently clear and uninhibited, it ceases to be a rigid thing that imprisons your identity. The sensory self becomes a comfortable home, not a jail cell. That's why enlightenment is sometimes referred to as liberation. You realize that the thingness of self is an artifact caused by habitual nebulosity and viscosity around your mind-body experience.

Equanimity is the ability to allow sensory experience to well up without suppression and to pass away without identifying with it.

The first is to experience some degree of samadhi during formal sitting. The next is to experience it during simple tasks like cleaning, then to maintain it during more complex tasks like cooking meals, serving guests at the temple, and so forth. The next level of challenge would be to stay in samadhi during small talk. The ultimate challenge would be to stay in samadhi while having important, emotionally charged, social interactions with others.

I like to describe mindfulness as a threefold attentional skill set: concentration power, sensory clarity, and equanimity working together.

You can practice meditation while talking to someone. In fact, you could do that in a number of different ways. You can do that by intently focusing on the sights and sounds of that person—so intently focusing on those sights and sounds that you enter into what Martin Buber calls an “I-Thou” relationship with them. I call that approach Focus Out.

Another way would be to monitor, in a state of high concentration, your mental and emotional reactions to that person. I call that approach Focus In. Yet another way to meditate while talking to a person would be to intentionally create lovingkindness emotion in your body and then taste an expansive flavor of concentration by spreading that pleasant body sensation out into the room, enveloping your interlocutor with love. I call that approach Nurture Positivity.

With the combination of formal practice in stillness, formal practice in motion, and informal practice in daily life, your meditative skills grow in two dimensions. On one hand, deeper and deeper meditative states become available. On the other, you are able to maintain those states throughout more and more complex activities of life.

There are actually four subskills to concentration: learning how to restrict attention to small sensory events, learning how to evenly cover large sensory events, learning how to sustain concentration on one thing for an extended period of time, and learning how to taste a momentary state of concentration with whatever randomly calls your attention.

In the early twentieth century, the Burmese master Mahasi Sayadaw realized that momentary concentration (khanikasamadhi) on whatever spontaneously comes or calls could be as powerful as sustained concentration on one thing. This insight allowed him to develop a distinctive way to do mindfulness practice. At the time, this method was referred to as “the Burmese method of satipatthana,” but nowadays, it is simply called “noting.” Noting is currently perhaps the most popular approach to mindfulness both in the East and the West. But when Mahasi first started teaching it, it generated considerable controversy. Some masters from Thailand and Sri Lanka claimed that “noting whatever arises” is indistinguishable from a scattered, wandering state of mind. Mahasi pointed out (and quite correctly in my opinion) that momentary concentration is key. To “note” an experience entails more than just labeling it. Whether you use labels or not, to note a sensory event implies that you attempt to tangibly taste a momentary state of high focus upon that sensory event. This skill is especially useful for staying deep during complex daily activities.

Meditation is something that a person does for themselves, but it’s also something a person does to make the world a better place and to be of service to others.

The ultimate personal goal of meditation is to achieve happiness independent of conditions.

Happiness independent of conditions occurs whenever we have a complete sensory experience. To have a complete experience means to experience something in a state of extraordinary concentration, sensory clarity, and equanimity.

Any ordinary sensory event, when experienced completely, becomes extraordinary and paradoxical: its richness is maximal but its somethingness is minimal. A complete experience of pleasure delivers pure satisfaction but has little substance. A complete experience of pain is deeply poignant but not problematic. A complete experience of desire is desireless. A complete experience of mental confusion nurtures intuitive wisdom. A complete experience of self convinces you there never was a self.

Meditation is partially something you do to help yourself at many levels, including the ultimate level, which is to transcend your self. People usually identify with their thoughts and feelings, their minds and their bodies. The thinking mind and the feeling body thus become a prison within which most people spend their lives. Meditation makes it possible to transcend that limited identity, so that the mind and body become a home that you can go in and out of, rather than a prison that you are stuck in. And how do you free your mind-body? By having a complete experience of your mind-body! This is one possible way of viewing the path to enlightenment.

Most people don't maintain a continuous mindful relationship with their subjective thoughts and feelings, so most people do not have the ability to experience anger, fear, sadness, shame, and confusion without suffering. When an objective problem presents itself, it produces uncomfortable subjective mental and emotional states, and you suffer. A salient feature of suffering is that it distorts behavior.

Meditation allows us to experience pain without suffering and pleasure without neediness. The difference between pain and suffering may seem subtle, but it is highly significant.

When physical or emotional pain is experienced in a state of concentration, clarity, and equanimity, it still hurts but in a way that bothers you less. You actually feel it more deeply. It's more poignant but, at the same time, less

problematic. More poignant means it motivates and directs action. Less problematic means it stops driving and distorting actions.

When we are involved in the path of love and service, we need self-care, a resource to avoid what I call the “three outs”: Burn-Out, when we lose energy and motivation to help; Bum-Out, when we suffer deeply when our efforts to help don’t work; and Freak-Out, when we respond in a distorted, perhaps even abusive way.

The monastic system of Europe was founded by Saint Benedict. According to the Benedictine tradition, the main reason for entering the monastery is to attain a habitually concentrated state (*recollectio*) and to use that to radically transform one’s self (*conversio*). A monastery is like a giant feedback mechanism where a person’s life is simplified, and there is nothing to do but concentration-building activities like simple physical labor, chanting, prayer, and so on. Before the Counter-Reformation (in the sixteenth century), obtaining the prayer of quiet was deemed central to European Christian life. It’s still central in the Eastern Orthodox form of Christianity.

First came the philosophy of oneness exemplified in the teachings of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu. In this system, the mystical “one” was called the Tao. We achieve the Tao through surrendering to the fundamental forces of the universe, expansion (*yang*) and contraction (*yin*). Later masters developed an elaborate technology of physical exercises involving three steps to facilitate this process. First essence (*jing*) is transmuted into energy (*qi*). Then energy is transmuted into spirit (*shen*).

Although the words sound quite different, the Taoist experience of *qi* and *shen* is related to the Buddhist experience of *anicca* (impermanence). *Qi* and *shen* represent two stages in the process of contacting the impermanent nature of a given sensory event. After you have held a single sensory quality in a concentrated state long enough (essence, *jing*), you start to notice subtle waves and vibrations in that event. Those waves and vibrations are *qi*. At a deeper level, that sensory event polarizes into pure *yang* and pure *yin*. Pure *yang* is a

kind of efflux—space effortlessly spreading out. Pure yin is a kind of reflux—space effortlessly pulling in. Space itself is simultaneously expanding and contracting. That’s shen. This roughly parallels something that happens in the material world: a frozen substance may melt into liquid (jing), then vaporizes into gas (qi), and finally polarizes into a plasma (shen).

According to the Raja yoga system, the first step in the concentration continuum is dharana, which literally means “holding.” In dharana, you take some object and attempt to concentrate your awareness on it. The object of focus could be anything: the breath, a sound, a visualization, a flower, a person. When your attention wanders, which inevitably it will, you gently bring it back to the object. When it wanders again, you gently bring it back again, over and over. This act of bringing the attention back each time it wanders is called dharana. We are making an effort to hold on to the focus object.

The second step in Raja yoga’s concentration continuum is called dhyana. This word could cause some confusion, because the term is used in Buddhism in a similar but not identical way. Within the context of Raja yoga, dhyana is what comes after we have paid our dues, so to speak. We’ve brought our attention back over and over again to our object of focus, and finally, the attention doesn’t wander, but stays put, gently resting on that object.

The third and final step in Raja yoga’s concentration continuum is samadhi, which refers to unitive experience. Again, there is a possible confusion in terminology here, because in Buddhism samadhi often refers to any level of concentration, from the lightest to the deepest. In the state of samadhi as understood in Raja yoga, we not only have unbroken concentration, but we actually become the thing we are concentrating on. This is what is meant by the often-heard phrase “to become one with something.”

That’s the growth of concentration as described in the Yoga Sutras. We progress from simple focus exercises (dharana), to states of continuous concentration (dhyana), and finally to oneness with the unborn Source (nirbija, or seedless,

samadhi). If you can consciously taste moments of seedless samadhi in daily life, we'll say you attained the initial stage of enlightenment.

While concentrating and calming down is certainly a part of meditation, it is only half of the story. The other half of the process is clarifying, that is, observing, analyzing, and deconstructing sensory experience. Clarifying leads to insight. This clarifying aspect of meditation is known technically as vipassana. One way to think about meditation is as a dialectical interplay between a calming-concentrating aspect (samatha) and a clarifying-dissecting aspect (vipassana). For simplicity, I'll just call these two sides of meditation the calming part and the clarifying part.

There are subtle, fleeting, restful experiences available to anyone during the day: physical relaxation, an absence of body emotion, a brief pause in mental talk, and the darkness/brightness behind your closed eyes. These are visual, auditory, and somatic restful states that are available once you know what to look for. Most people aren't even aware that these states are happening. But if you use them as an object of concentration, then the small pleasure they produce becomes more pronounced, more pleasant. When you then concentrate even more, they become more pronounced, creating a feedback cycle. Through concentration, you magnify those tiny, subtle, pleasant experiences into something that is hugely enjoyable and available to you any time you want. It's not exactly getting something from nothing, but it's getting quite a lot from a very little. I call this approach Focus on Rest. You let your attention move between visual rest (darkness/brightness behind your closed eyes or defocused external gaze), auditory rest (mental quiet or physical silence), and somatic rest (physical relaxation and emotional tranquility).

The Buddha was not some sort of god or myth. He was an actual, historical person named Siddhartha Gautama. He was a prince, the son of the king of the Shakya nation, which was located in modern-day Nepal.

Siddhartha Gautama was born into a royal family about five hundred years before the birth of Christ. A court astrologer said that Siddhartha would either be a world-conquering emperor or a world-changing guru.

The clarification/insight side of meditation involves analyzing sensory experience into components and then tracking how those components interact. For example, if you are going through an emotional experience and want to practice meditation, you could decide to use a clarification meditation and, moment by moment, analyze your emotional experience in terms of basic sensory elements and their interactions.

The three basic components of any emotional experience, then, are mental imagery, mental talk, and emotional-type body sensations. In order to have a quick way to describe things, I often refer to mental images as “See In,” mental talk as “Hear In,” and emotional-type body sensations as “Feel In.”

Breaking a complex experience down into its components makes it easier to understand, thus giving us insight. It also divides up a difficult experience into smaller, less individually challenging pieces. And this makes it easier to cope with.

When we apply concentration, clarity, and equanimity to sensory experience, moment by moment, we generate a process of insight and purification. Over time, this improves our lives, the lives of those around us, and the world in general. It can make dying bearable, even meaningful.

When you think about it, all of human experience can be understood as sensory experience. That is, we only know about self and world through our senses. Recall that thought is sensory (mental image and mental talk) and emotions are sensory (mental image, mental talk, plus emotional body sensations).

In the West, we tend to think that there are five senses, but in Buddhist theory, there are six. The six senses in Buddhist theory are hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, the feeling body, and the thinking mind.

At some point, surface pictures and explicit words tend to die away. At that point, you begin to detect a subtle undercurrent, a sort of subterranean stirring in image space and talk space. That's your subconscious mind! You don't see explicit images or hear explicit words, but you know which part is visual and which part is auditory by its location.

Embodied experience is a very complex phenomenon, but we can break it down into two main constituents: physical-type body sensation and emotional-type body sensation.

These are the two basic qualitative categories of body sensations: physical and emotional.

If we limit our consideration to just emotional-type body sensations, the most common flavors are anger, fear, sadness, embarrassment, impatience, disgust, interest, joy, love, gratitude, humor, and smile.

If you want to be happy independent of conditions, you'll need to learn how to have a complete experience of each basic type of body sensation. On the spiritual path, we have to learn how to have a complete experience of anger, so that anger does not cause suffering which then distorts our behavior. For the same reason, we have to learn how to have a complete experience of fear, sadness, and so on. We even have to learn to have a complete experience of physical pain, as well as other unpleasant feelings in the body such as fatigue and nausea. When I say, "Have a complete experience of x," it's just a quick way of saying, "Experience x with so much concentration, clarity, and equanimity that there's no time to coagulate x—or yourself—into a thing." You and x become an integrated flow of energy and spaciousness.

When we become skilled at tracking the subtleties of our internal sensory landscape, we can encounter our experience in a clearer way. Take for example the experience of anger. When you have an experience of anger, you have talk in your head: “He said such and such.” “How dare he do such and such.” “The next time he does such and such, I am going to do such and such.” “But what I would really like to do is such and such.” We hear words like these in our mental “talk space.” Meanwhile on the internal screen (the mind’s eye), there are pictures that go with these words. We might picture ourselves striking back or stalking off. Taken together, these internal words and pictures constitute the thought component of the anger experience. While these are going on, a tight quality is happening in the gut, a shaky quality is arising in the legs and spreading through the rest of the body, a hot quality is moving over the face and also spreading subtly over the rest of the body, and a pressured quality is arising in the chest. These feelings are the emotional-type body-sensation component of the anger experience. These three components of anger—mental image, mental talk, and emotional body sensations—often occur simultaneously. Without clarity, they become a tangled skein. Without equanimity, that tangled skein coagulates into a solid mass of congealed suffering. And what’s true of anger is true of all mind-body experience. If we develop an ability to discern the components of the experience, we can begin to keep track of what part is thought and what part is feeling.

Such exacerbated suffering will often distort our response to a situation, leading to even more suffering. This is the essence of the vicious cycle that Buddhists refer to as samsara.

The basic model for the mindfulness-based spiritual path is to take some type of experience and infuse it with a high degree of concentration, sensory clarity, and equanimity. Concentration means to focus attention on just what you deem relevant. Sensory clarity involves discerning the components that constitute an experience and detecting their subtle essence. Equanimity means that we give permission for these components to expand, to contract, or to be still—to do whatever they naturally would do. Equanimity is a radical noninterference with the natural flow of our senses. In other words, we can take any type of experience and attempt to be focused, precise, and allowing with it.

Concentration + Sensory clarity + Equanimity + Time = Insight + Purification

We store influences from the past in the subconscious, those influences inappropriately affect our behavior and perception in the present, and our job is to somehow remove those distorting influences.

Just as there are many facets to the insight process (prajna), there are many different ways in which we can talk about the purification process (vishuddhi). If you want to use a theological paradigm, you would say that purification is the working through of our sinfulness, gradually burning away what's lodged between the surface self and the spiritual Source of self. For example, a form of meditation is practiced in the Eastern Orthodox Church that is in some ways remarkably similar to mindfulness. It's called nepsis (sober observation). It expresses the idea of purification using the Greek word catharsis, which means "cleansing." It is a doctrine of the Eastern Orthodox Church that we can cleanse away enough sinfulness to experience theosis, which means literally "becoming like God." According to the Orthodox Church, theosis is the goal of human life.

Ordinary experience, when greeted with concentration, clarity, and equanimity catalyzes a process of insight and purification which culminates in the ability to have complete experiences whenever you want.

In early Buddhism, impermanence was closely linked with another concept, dukkha, which is usually translated as "suffering." The Buddha said that human suffering is caused by grasping. One way grasping can cause us to suffer is when we pin our happiness on things that cannot and will not last. Most people depend solely on things like health, wealth, reputation, relationships, appearance, family, or children for happiness. The problem is that these things are not eternal. People change; our health eventually deteriorates; wealth comes and goes; war may follow peace. All sources of conditional happiness are impermanent. In the words of Ecclesiastes, "All things must pass." If we make these impermanent things the cornerstone of our happiness, then we set ourselves up for inevitable suffering, or dukkha. So in early Buddhism,

impermanence had a negative connotation. We suffer because we count on impermanent things for our happiness. We pin all hope of happiness on things that will not last.

When we develop body mindfulness, we attempt to be very precise about the locations of sensations, and we try to have equanimity with them to the best of our ability. In essence, we take the ordinary aches and pains we experience while sitting, and convert them into a kind of acupuncture stimulus. As a result of pinpointing them and opening to them, they start to flow and vibrate, creating an experience analogous to the deqi of acupuncture.

If equanimity is not deep, the intense See Out (physical sight) and the subtle See In (mental image) are both coagulated, and you have the ordinary experience of an I looking at an it. But if the See Out of the sand and the See In of visual association are not fixated, they become a single wave.

We have talked about impermanence as sort of a pessimistic worldview, we have talked about impermanence as a characteristic of experience, and we have talked about impermanence as something that helps us along in our meditation. We have also talked about impermanence as an integrator that frees us from our fundamental alienation and connects us to the All.

Just because the sense of self as a thing goes away does not for a moment imply that the activity of personality goes away. The enlightened people who constantly talk about no self often have strong, charismatic personalities. You might think that's paradoxical, but it is a logical consequence of the experience of no self. It happens because the sense of self as something material has gone away, and all the energy that was bound up in that is now freed up for a fluid expression of personality.

So enlightened people often have expressive, engaging, and charismatic personalities. That's because their internal fluidity manifests as external

spontaneity. They possess the doingness of self as opposed to being possessed by the somethingness of self.

Practicing Just Note Gone is pretty straightforward. Whenever a sensory experience suddenly disappears, make a note of that fact: clearly acknowledge when you detect the transition point between all of it being present and at least some of it no longer being present. You can use the mental label “Gone” to help you note the end of the experience. If nothing vanishes for a while, that’s fine. Just hang out until something does. If you start worrying about the fact that nothing is ending, note each time that thought ends. There is only a finite amount of real estate available in consciousness at any given instant. Each arising somewhere causes a passing somewhere else.

It’s also intuitively obvious that if you’re going through an uncomfortable experience, focusing on vanishings could bring microrelief. And it’s not a big stretch to imagine that, if your ability to continuously focus on Goneness is high, those moments of microrelief might sum to significant relief, macrorelief.

Enlightenment is simply the ability to formulate a clear sensory representation of the formless state that immediately precedes each experience of form.

Quotes:

“It took me twenty years to hone my current definition of Gone.”

“Each day is peppered with a holy glow.”

“The Tibetans have an exclamatory cry reserved just for when that window opens. The cry is Emaho! which might be loosely rendered “Oh my God! Who would have thought it’s this simple!”

“It’s fine to sometimes use these archetypes as a conduit to get information from the depths, but I recommend that you mostly use them as a conduit to bring clarity and equanimity to the depths. Become fascinated with how they move, and less tripped out with what they mean.”

“Such a Zen dialogue is basically a contest, but it’s really an anti-contest. It’s a kind of reverse or paradoxical contest. It works like this: two people talk, and the first one who speaks from the ego loses. The one who wants to win is certainly going to lose.”

“you can dramatically extend life—not by multiplying the number of your years, but by expanding the fullness of your moments.”

“Freedom should be manifested within clear ethical guidelines and an egalitarian feedback structure. Informed”

“unbalanced view of the nature of sensory experience.”

“In India, there is a word that means both “cessation” and “satisfaction” as a single linked concept. The word is nirvana.”

“a beginning meditator can sometimes get a taste of the stage that, according to the Visuddhimagga, immediately precedes enlightenment.”

“You simply notice which part of your void-triggered bum-out is emotional body sensation, which part is mental images, and which part is mental talk. Keep those clearly delineated.”

Sources:

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