

# Classical Buddhist Model of A Healthy Mind

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## Abstract

The purpose of this chapter will be to outline the classical Buddhist program for transforming the human mentality from one that is rigid, closed and prone to injuring itself and others to one that is flexible, open and competent to heal itself and others.

Traditionally the Buddhist path has been divided into three phases: ethics, contemplation and wisdom. Ethical guidelines, which have to do with the individual's interactions with other human and non-human beings, help the practitioner avoid actions that naturally lead to guilt, shame, remorse and other unpleasant mental states. A mentality that is relatively free of such negativity is said to be more capable of enduring the demands of contemplation. This is a process of quiet reflection leading to a heightened awareness of one's own physical and psychological conditions. This quiet reflection then culminates in the cultivation of wisdom. Wisdom itself also has three phases: study, reflection and cultivation. Study involves learning what various sages have had to say about the successful conduct of life. Reflection involves making an honest inquiry into fundamental questions of value by comparing one's own life to the standards set by sages and becoming aware of what specifically one has to do to make one's life more harmonious and contented. Cultivation consists in making the determination to change one's thinking by acquiring those attitudes that lead consistently to fulfillment. This leads in turn changing one's habits of acting and speaking. When the path is pursued to the end, it comes full circle to where it began: living ethically in the world. The difference between ethics at the beginning and at the end of this process is that the initial stages tend to be consciously governed by following prescribed rules and guidelines, whereas ethics at the end pours spontaneously out of an habitual and deeply ingrained feelings of love, joy and compassion. This process reflects the commonly expressed Buddhist conviction that one cannot benefit oneself without benefiting others, and one cannot benefit others without benefiting oneself.

This classical Buddhist program will be described in some detail with references to contemporary psychological theory and practice.

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# 1 Introductory remarks

Since the Buddha taught in India more than 2500 years ago, his followers have divided into countless divisions over dozens of issues, both practical and theoretical. To speak of Buddhism as a whole is therefore to run the risk of making the error that each of the blind men made in the famous Buddhist parable, namely, making the mistake of thinking that what is true of a part of an elephant is true of the entire animal. Let me say at the outset, then, that what follows is an attempt to be true to the contemplative and scholastic traditions of Buddhism with which I am most familiar. Other Buddhists would almost surely describe Buddhist practices, and perhaps even some Buddhist goals, differently.

The principal concern of the Buddha as he is portrayed in the canonical texts of India and Southeast Asia is the elimination of frustration. Frustration, observed the Buddha, arises when people (and other living beings) fail to get what they strive for, and when they are confronted with what they do not welcome. The task of reducing frustration could be approached in either of two ways. One way would be to devote most of one's energy to getting everything that one wishes to have and avoiding everything one finds unpleasant. This strategy involves, in effect, making the universe conform to one's will. Given that the universe is a large place, and notorious for being difficult to bend to one's will, this strategy is more likely to increase one's frustrations than to reduce them. The Buddha, therefore, suggested that a more successful strategy would be to adjust one's expectations to conform to reality. Rather than striving to acquire everything that one wishes to have, said the Buddha, one should strive to reduce one's wishes. Similarly, rather than working to rid the world of everything that one finds obnoxious, one should work to rid oneself of the tendency to find things obnoxious. If one succeeds in making the necessary changes, the result is a mentality that is flexible enough to adapt to changing realities. Such a mentality is open to a wide range of possibilities and competent to heal itself and benefit others. In short, such a mentality is said to be *kusala*, a Pali word that means healthy, fit and capable. This type of mentality is also the goal of psychotherapy. Modern psychology recognizes the frustrations identified by the Buddha and offers therapies to reduce them. This chapter will present the Buddha's path to the healthy mind sought by both Buddhist practitioners and those who practice psychotherapy.

Changing one's mentality, as everyone knows who has tried to do it, is not an easy task. It requires more than simply deciding to improve. Because the task is complex, Buddhists devised a number of programs to help people improve their outlooks and cultivate more realistic expectations. What will be described below is an outline of a representative classical Buddhist program for transforming the human mentality from one that is rigid, closed and prone to injuring itself and others to one that is healthy and resilient. As I hope will become clear, the traditional Buddhist methods of self-cultivation are at every stage closely connected with taking care of others. Ideally there is in the Buddhist view no distinction, and certainly no conflict, between serv-

ing one's own best interests and serving the best interests of others.

## 2 The classical program

Traditionally the Buddhist path has been divided into three phases: ethics, contemplation and wisdom. Ethical guidelines, which have to do with the individual's interactions with other human and non-human beings, help the practitioner avoid actions that naturally lead to guilt, shame, remorse and other unpleasant mental states. A mentality that is relatively free of such negativity is said to be more capable of enduring the demands of contemplation. This is a process of quiet reflection leading to a heightened awareness of one's own physical and psychological conditions. This quiet reflection then culminates in the cultivation of wisdom. Wisdom itself also has three phases: study, reflection and cultivation. Study involves learning what various sages have had to say about the successful conduct of life. Reflection involves making an honest inquiry into fundamental questions of value by comparing one's own life to the standards set by sages and becoming aware of what specifically one has to do to make one's life more harmonious and contented. Cultivation consists in making the determination to change one's thinking by acquiring those attitudes that lead consistently to fulfillment. This leads in turn to changing one's habits of acting and speaking. When the path is pursued to the end, it comes full circle to where it began: living ethically in the world. The difference between ethics at the beginning and at the end of this process is that the initial stages tend to be consciously governed by following prescribed rules and guidelines, whereas ethics at the end pours spontaneously out of habitual and deeply ingrained feelings of love, joy and compassion. This process reflects the commonly expressed Buddhist conviction that one cannot benefit oneself without benefiting others, and one cannot benefit others without benefiting oneself. With that as a quick overview, let me now look more closely at some of the features of this traditional program.

### 2.1 Ethics

The beginning of the Buddhist path involves developing good habits (*sīla*) or good character. Good behavior begins with good intentions, a good intention being the wish to do what benefits oneself and others. The most fundamental kind of karma consists in just this motivation. According to Buddhist theory, all pleasant feelings and all comfortable experiences ultimately arise from one's moments of wishing well for self and others. Conversely, the fact that experiences are perceived as unpleasant and uncomfortable originates in an attitude of some kind of negativity. The negativity may take the form of greed, of resistance or of confusion—these three mental factors are said to be the principal source of all other forms of negativity. Other forms of negativity that are commonly listed are competitiveness, dogmatism, irresolution, laziness, excitement, shamelessness and immodesty.

The positive or negative valence of one's intentions usually manifests as speech or bodily actions. For example, negativity, such as competitiveness (the compulsion to compare oneself to others and one's achievements to those of others), may give rise to belittling others by drawing attention to their shortcomings or even by fabricating unflattering stories about them. Negativity such as resistance may take the form of anger or even hatred, which may manifest itself as sarcastic or scathing speech, or as inflicting physical harm or even death on another living being. From positive intentions, on the other hand, spring acts of generosity and other actions that promote feelings of harmony in oneself and others. These observations are summarized in the often-quoted opening verses of the Dhammapada:

Preceded by perception are mental states,  
For them is perception supreme,  
From perception have they sprung.  
If, with perception polluted, one speaks or acts,  
Thence suffering follows  
As a wheel the draught ox's foot.

Preceded by perception are mental states,  
For them is perception supreme,  
From perception have they sprung.  
If, with tranquil perception, one speaks or acts,  
Thence ease follows  
As a shadow that never departs.<sup>1</sup>

The first steps to be taken towards speaking or acting “with tranquil perception” are to follow the behavioral guidelines offered in the ten precepts. These precepts are usually given in the form of kinds of conduct to avoid. Three kinds of physical misconduct to be avoided are killing, stealing and harmful sensuality. Four kinds of verbal misconduct to avoid are lying, harsh speech, slander and idle chatter. Three kinds of mental incompetence to avoid are covetousness, malevolence and wrong views. All ten of these forms of incompetent use of the body, speech or mind result in negative feelings, such as remorse, that make it difficult to concentrate the mind. More to the point, they produce a generally unpleasant mindscape that is liable to be uncomfortable to inhabit when one's defenses have been lowered through the elimination of external distractions. On the other hand, when one's external behavior is less harmful, then feelings of guilt and remorse decline, and spending quiet time with oneself becomes less daunting.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Dhammapada: A New English Translation with the Pali Text and the First English Translation of the Commentary's Explanation of the Verses with Notes Translated from Sinhala Sources and Critical Textual Comments*. Translated by John Ross Carter and Mahinda Palihawadana. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987. P. 13.

## 2.2 Meditation

Despite the constantly growing body of literature available on Buddhist meditation, some misconceptions about it continue to circulate. Perhaps one of the most persistent of the inaccurate notions of Buddhist meditation is that it is a passive process of keeping the mind blank. In fact, there are many types of contemplative exercise used by Buddhists. All of these types fall into two broad categories on the basis of the immediate goal of the person doing the practice.

The first of these broad categories includes exercises that one does for the sake of achieving a state of dispassionate calm. Specifically, the first goal is to arrive at a flow of mental states that are relatively free of five kinds of hindrance: sensual desire, restlessness, irresolution, laziness and hatred. Before one can begin to work on eliminating these states, of course, one has to recognize when they are present and what effects they are having. So the most fundamental principle of Buddhist meditation is that one must be fully honest with oneself about what one is observing in one's own mind. When one is irritated, then one must know and admit that one is irritated. When this irritation is allowed to evolve into anger or hatred, then one must fully acknowledge that fact.

Once a hindrance to tranquillity is recognized, then one can employ various methods to work on getting past it. One may, for example, reflect on ways in which the mental state feels uncomfortable. Just feeling how unpleasant a mood feels may be sufficient to make one drop it. Alternatively, one may think of real or imagined characters who are admirably free of these negative tendencies. Many Buddhists find it helpful just to look at a statue of a meditating Buddha with a slightly smiling serene countenance. Others may reflect on descriptions of the Buddha, or a living teacher or even a character from a novel or play or cinema, as a person with a remarkably calm and friendly disposition. The method by which one achieves the elimination of the hindrances is less important than the result of being free of them. The hindrances are so called because they hinder the ability of the mind to concentrate on a single object. Once the mind is capable of maintaining a focus on a single topic, it may begin to feel deeply contented and restful, open to watching whatever arises without fear or judgment.

Although achieving a state of calm and focussed alertness is very pleasant, the Buddha repeatedly made it clear that being in this state is not the end of contemplative practice. It is a valuable state to be in, for it gives one a direct experience of how pleasant it can be to be even momentarily free of worry, longing and disapproval, and this pleasantness may inspire one to strive to be in such a state of mind much more often. It may even help one form the habit of getting into that state quickly. Despite these benefits, being in a state of concentration does not in itself do much to eliminate the more deeply rooted habits of thinking that get one into troublesome moods when events do not conform to one's wishes and expectations. Uprooting deeply entrenched habits requires a change in the way one sees experience, and this

change is best achieved by the application of insight. Gaining insight is the task of the second broad category of Buddhist meditative exercise.

As we saw above, a principal observation of the Buddha was that frustration arises when people fail to get what they strive for. It is also be said that frustration arises when people do get what they strive for but then grow tired of it or find that getting it leaves them feeling still unsatisfied. Insight consists in seeing clearly, by reflecting on one's previous experiences, what kinds of accomplishment are, and which are not, capable of providing satisfaction. Much of the Buddhist program of meditation is based on the observation that very little, when examined carefully and honestly, provides the degree of satisfaction that it first shows promise of delivering. To recognize that this is so, and then to have the courage to stop striving for what finally yields only frustration, is to enter the domain of wisdom.

### 2.3 Wisdom

As was mentioned above, wisdom is traditionally said to evolve in the three phases of study, reflection, then cultivation. Study consists in hearing or reading discussions of virtue. Reflection entails thinking about those teachings and applying them in some detail to one's own living situations. Cultivation involves developing in oneself the virtues that one has heard discussed and making them a habitual part of one's own character. Wisdom means realizing virtue, in the sense of making it real or actual. Wisdom is said to be the antidote of fruitless outlook.<sup>2</sup> The stock formulation for fruitless outlook is to entertain the following thoughts: "There is nothing given, nothing offered, nothing sacrificed; no fruit and result of good and bad actions; no this world, no other world; no mother, no father; no beings who are re-born spontaneously; no good and virtuous recluses and brahmins who have themselves realised by direct knowledge and declare this world and the other world."<sup>3</sup> According to traditional commentaries, all these propositions have some connection to denying that one's actions have eventual consequences either in this life or in some future life. The propositions concerning parents and recluses and brahmins amount to denials that one has mentors from whom to learn what is important about the cultivation of good character.

It is said in many Buddhist texts that the ultimate source of frustration is ignorance about virtue. This ignorance is said in some texts to arise from associating with the wrong kinds of people. The elimination of ignorance, therefore, requires that one begin to seek out associations with good people

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<sup>2</sup>The Pali term *micchā-ditṭhi* is usually translated "wrong view." Some have rendered it "distorted vision." The word *micchā* has several meanings, among them "false, wrong, counterproductive, fruitless, barren." Given that many people tend to think of views as opinions or doctrines, I prefer to translate the second word as "outlook", since, as we shall see, the propositions here have more to do with a basic outlook on life than with articles in a creed.

<sup>3</sup>*The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya.* Translated by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995. P. 381.

(*sap-puriso*), with people who are true friends (*kalyāṇa-mitta*). It could be said that the principal purpose of the Buddhist community is to be a collection of good friends who together show the rest of the world the joyous benefits that arise from living together in harmony. This is true of the community of monks and nuns, but it is no less true of the community of lay Buddhists.

### 3 A Good Society of Good Friends

The early Buddhist literature naturally set the tone for most of the forms of Buddhism that later evolved. This early literature is filled with advice for those who renounce the world to lead a homeless life, but it also contains much of value for those who choose to remain in the world to raise families and pursue careers. Much of this advice is given by means of narrative accounts of early times. Such stories bear many of the marks of satire and irony and were probably meant to amuse as well as to edify. Some of the stories are obviously parodies of stories found in earlier Indian literature, such as the Veda and the Upanishads. Like all myths, these stories were meant to instill values in their hearers. Several of the early Buddhist myths deal with the ideal society. One of the most important of these is a text called “The Lion’s Roar on the Turning of the Wheel” (Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta).<sup>4</sup> This is one of several texts in the Pali canon that gives advice to kings and other heads of government.

#### 3.1 Advice for a Government

Without retelling the entire story in the “The Lion’s Roar on the Turning of the Wheel,” let me summarize the essential points. This text tells the story of a king who lived long ago. Concerned about keeping his kingdom intact, he sought the advice of wise men, who told him that everything would be fine so long as he sought the counsel of sober people of high integrity and so long as he made sure to provide for the needs of the poor. The king followed this advice, and for seven generations his descendants followed his example. Eventually, however, one of his descendants began to neglect the poor. As a consequence of this neglect, poverty became increasingly widespread. As poverty spread, the poor had no means of making a living, so some of them began to steal from those who had what they needed. In order to forestall the increase in theft, the king introduced capital punishment for theft. Thieves then began to arm themselves to protect themselves from the police. This led to a general increase in weapons among the populace, for people with property took up arms to protect themselves against the thieves. As more

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<sup>4</sup>This text is found in *Thus Have I Heard: The Long Discourses of the Buddha*. Translated by Maurice Walsh. London: Wisdom Publications, 1987. Pp. 395–405. A translation also appears in an appendix in Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Collins provides an excellent discussion of Buddhist visions of the ideal society in his chapter entitled “The perfect moral commonwealth? Kingship and its discontents.”

and more people took up weapons, murder increased among the population. As crime increased, law enforcement became more stringent. People fearing arrest began to lie. Meanwhile, some people saw an opportunity to get their rivals into trouble with the law and began making accusations against their neighbors. This eventually led to a breakdown in people's trust for one another. As trust eroded, animosity increased. As animosity increased, people's thinking became more careless. This carelessness led to people no longer respecting their parents and teachers. As respect for wise and experienced people decreased, so did the human lifespan. Soon the kingdom was beset by shortages in pleasant-tasting food and then of nourishing food. Eventually the very idea of "good" disappeared, and people began to regard one another as animals, with the result that there was incessant strife among the population.

The text offers a dismal portrayal of the human condition that eventually results from neglect of the poor, and the narrative emphasizes several times that all this social chaos came about gradually as an inevitable consequence of neglecting the needs of the poor. Having made that point, the text then provides a narrative of how the situation was eventually reversed. People grew tired of chaos. Some people simply decided to live differently. They went away to a relatively secluded place and began to live in harmony together. Eventually, other people saw that those who lived in harmony were much happier and more prosperous than those who fought with one another. And so gradually all the conditions were reversed, with the result that finally a government was established that saw the advantages of looking after the poor. Those first people who grew tired of strife are described as living lives remarkably like the life that the Buddha recommended for monks and householders. The obvious but unstated message of the sutta is that the Buddhist community should strive to set a positive example of harmonious living for the rest of the world. The task of the Buddhist, then, is not to add to the chorus of conflicting opinions about how to live, but rather to show people how to live by actually living in a way that obviously leads to peace and contentment for all who choose to live that way.

### **3.2 Advice for Family People**

Keeping a harmonious society is not the sole responsibility of the head of state. According to several Buddhist texts, one of which we have looked at above, the government does have the responsibility of levying enough taxes to cover the expenses of protecting citizens and caring for the poor and weak, and it also has the responsibility of setting a good example of integrity for the people. The smooth running of a society, however, requires more than good government; it also requires the good conduct of citizens. Although some members of society may take the option of remaining celibate so that they can dedicate all their time and energy to learning and teaching, only a minority can or should do this. The majority of people should dedicate themselves

to family life. Realizing this, the Buddha provided guidelines for the laity as well as for world-renouncing monks.

One of the best-known texts for householders is called the Sigālaka Sutta.<sup>5</sup> In this sutta, it is said that a Brahmin youth named Sigālaka had promised his father that every day he would perform certain ablutions in the sacred waters near his home. His ritual required him to face each of the four directions and offer a prayer and sprinkle some water in that direction, then offer water upwards and downwards. One day he was doing his purification rituals, when the Buddha happened to see him and inquired what he was doing. When Sigālaka explained the promise he had made to his father, the Buddha commended him for his loyalty and advised him to continue doing the rituals. He then explained that Sigālaka could honour the six directions in an additional way. He could think of each of the directions as representing a kind of social relationship.

The Buddha advises Sigālaka to let the east stand for his parents. In addition to offering prayers and water towards the east, he should honor the east by honoring his parents and being a good son. Similarly, the south can be honored by honoring teachers, the west by honoring spouse and children, the north by honoring friends, the space above by honoring employers and the space below by honoring subordinates. This leads to a long discussion of the particular ways in which one might honour all these people with whom one has a social relationship.

In this text and in many others like it, the Buddha talks about the benefits of true friendship, that is, friendship with beneficial companions. Good friends, says the Buddha, are those who offer help when one is in need, remain loyal in bad times as well as in good times, offer advice about what is best for one, and provide sympathy. Each of these four ways of being a good friend is then expanded. Helping a friend, for example, may take the form of looking after the friend's property when the friend has become careless or indisposed, or it can take the form of providing comfort in times of fear and distress. Remaining loyal consists in such things as being a trusted confidant and listening to confessions, and so on.

Contrasted to the true friend is the companion who entices one to waste time, spend money foolishly, pursue frivolous goals, and indulge in gossip and small-talk. The false friend is the companion who offers flattery rather than criticism, and temptation rather than sound advice.

It is said in the canonical writings that the Buddha's cousin and faithful attendant, Ānanda, once said "I think that good friendship is half the religious life." The Buddha responded "Don't say that, Ānanda. Good friendship is not half the religious life; it is the entirety of the religious life." Nothing is more important than being a good friend to everyone to whom one is related, whether as a kin, as a business associate, as a neighbor, as an elder or as a junior. Just attending to the quality of all these relationships, it is said, is a means by which one can go the full distance to liberation from the petty-

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<sup>5</sup>Translated in *Thus Have I Heard*, pp. 461–470.

mindedness that leads inevitably to frustration and discontent.

## 4 Conclusions

What we now call Buddhism was called the middle path by the Buddha. As he explained the name, his method of achieving an end to frustration was one that avoided extreme self-denial and extreme self-indulgence. If we look at his path from the perspective of social activism, we could also call Buddhism a middle way between one extreme of complete withdrawal from worldly affairs and the other extreme of an overly intense involvement in political struggles. As anyone who has engaged in social and political reform or in environmental work knows, it is easy to become so overwhelmed by the enormity of the task that one becomes discouraged into a state of paralysis. This phenomenon of becoming “burned out” may result from paying too much attention to external events and too little attention to the internal architecture of one’s own mentality. As the Buddha put it, one cannot get others out of quicksand when one is mired in the quicksand oneself. It is essential to build a solid foundation for oneself before embarking on the task of rescuing others in distress.

The essence of the middle path is to keep these two aspects of life in a careful balance. Paying attention only to external factors can lead, as noted above, to burning out. Paying attention only to internal factors, on the other hand, may lead to becoming so self-absorbed as to be of little value to others. The key to finding this balance is to situate oneself in a network of relationships with other people, and with other sentient beings. One begins by finding a small circle of true friends whom one can trust and who offer one support and encouragement and guidance. And gradually one expands that circle to include others. By learning to expand one’s circle of friends by befriending more and more people whom one once regarded with fear, suspicion and uneasiness, one gets oneself into a proper perspective, neither bloated with pride nor shriveled up with diffidence. If one patiently works at expanding the circle of friendship to include all of humanity, and then all of life, before one knows it, fear gives way to trust, despair to hope, arrogance to confidence, competitiveness to cooperation, anxiety to serenity and folly to wisdom. And then, without giving the matter any further thought, one shines as a beacon by which others can also find their way.