

# *Meditators at Work*

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When the Buddha taught meditation, he would often illustrate his lessons with similes that involved people at work or developing skills. A person engaged in mindfulness of breathing, for example, was like a carpenter turning a piece of wood on a lathe, sensitive to whether he was making a short or a long turn. A person trying to be mindful to discover what would bring the mind to concentration should be like a king's cook, trying to read the king's subtle signals as to what kinds of food he did or didn't like. A person entering and dwelling in the first jhana—the first level of right concentration—was to get pleasure and rapture to suffuse the body, just as a bathman mixing water into a ball of bath-powder would try to get the water to moisten every particle of powder and yet not drip outside the ball.

The Buddha's similes for the later stages of jhana do suggest less effort—a spring filling a lake with cool waters; lotuses immersed in a lake saturated with still, cool water from their roots to their tips; a man sitting wrapped in a white cloth—but that was simply to convey the point that once rapture and pleasure had been kneaded through the body in the first jhana, the act of spreading them through the body—together with awareness—became much easier as concentration deepened. As MN 111 makes clear, even a person who has entered the highest level of jhana still needs to employ acts of intention, desire, decision, and persistence to stay there. And when the Buddha described using any of the levels of jhana or formless attainments to develop discernment, he reverted to a more active simile: The meditator was now like an archer who has mastered the skills of shooting rapidly, shooting great distances, and piercing great masses with his arrows.

So, given all these similes of work and focused effort, it's odd that so many modern teachers insist that Buddhist meditation is not a matter of doing, but of simply allowing things to happen on their own. Mindfulness, we're told, is a purely receptive awareness, allowing things to arise and pass away without interference. Jhana, we're told, isn't something you can *do*. You have to wait and let it happen of its own accord.

But if there were no present effort involved in getting mindfulness or jhana to develop, then these qualities would be either determined by physical laws, determined by your past kamma, the result of the grace of a divine creator, or simply serendipitous: spontaneous events with no discernible cause at all. Yet, as the Buddha made clear in AN 3:62 and DN 2, to believe that present experiences come about purely in any of these four ways would allow no room for a path of practice to the end of suffering to make any sense. There would be nothing you could do in the present moment to choose such a path or to follow it. It would simply happen on its own. If you believe in the possibility of choosing and following a path to the end of suffering, you have to believe that you can make a

difference in the present with your present intentions. Otherwise, the path would be impossible.

As the Buddha pointed out, the purpose of meditating is to gain liberating insight into the mind's activity of fabricating its experience, and the best place to see this activity in action is by watching yourself fabricate qualities of mindfulness, concentration, and discernment right here and now. If, in the course of your meditation, you don't see yourself doing anything, that doesn't mean you're doing nothing. You're simply blind—or have blinded yourself—to what you're doing. And when you're blind, genuine insight won't have a chance to develop.

This insight into the mind's activity is where the practice of meditation intersects with the Buddha's teachings on kamma, or action. As he understood action, your present experience is shaped not only by your past actions, but also—and more fundamentally—by your present ones. And your most important present actions are taking place in the mind. The Buddha never taught his students to place their hopes and trust in their past actions, for that would be defeatist. The focus was always on learning to be skillful *right now*. This is why Buddhist meditation focuses on the mind's activities in the present moment.

But, by and large, modern teachers tend to regard the teaching on kamma as irrelevant to meditation. There may be many reasons for this, but three stand out:

- the belief that complete descriptions of mindfulness practice make no reference to interfering with the arising and passing away of feelings or mind states, which means that mindfulness must be a non-interfering acceptance of whatever arises and passes away;
- the belief that, because the goal of meditation practice is unfabricated, trying to do anything to reach it will actually get in the way of arriving there; and
- the belief that meditation should lead to the realization that, on the level of ultimate truth, there's no one there to begin with, so to believe that you're making choices as to what to do while meditating would get in the way of that realization.

These beliefs are common in modern meditation circles, but they're all based on misunderstandings. So it would be good to examine them one by one, comparing them with the facts, to appreciate where they go wrong. That way, we can approach meditation with the conscious understanding that we *are* doing it, and that we can learn about the nature of action and choice by observing ourselves in the act of trying to do it well.

**1. The Belief: Complete descriptions of mindfulness practice make no reference to interfering with the arising and passing away of feelings or mind-states.**

**The Fact: There are such descriptions in the Pali Canon, but their context shows that they're not complete.**

The two longest discourses on mindfulness—the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta (DN 22) and the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10)—limit their discussion of feelings to a list

of various feelings—pleasant, unpleasant, and neither—stating simply that the meditator discerns them as they are present, but there is no mention of doing anything about them. Similarly with mind-states: The same discourses list skillful and unskillful mind-states, stating that the meditator discerns them as they are present, but nothing is said about developing those that are skillful or abandoning those that are not.

But even though the discourses containing these passages are long, they're not complete descriptions even of the standard *short* formula for establishing mindfulness. The discourses themselves make this point clear in the way they're organized.

They start with the standard short formula:

*"There is the case where a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings... mind... mental qualities in & of themselves—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world."*

But then they pose and answer questions on only part of the formula: what it means to "remain focused" on each of the four frames of reference in and of itself. Among other things, they provide no discussion of how ardency functions in the practice, of what it means to subdue greed and distress with reference to the world, of how the various frames of reference interact in practice, or of what the stages in the practice are. For this information, we have to look at other treatments of these topics found elsewhere in the Canon.

And when we look at MN 118, the discourse on mindfulness of in-and-out breathing, we find that mindfulness of feelings and mind-states involves a great deal more than simply discerning their presence and absence. That discourse lists sixteen steps of breath meditation, divided into four "tetrads," or sets of four steps each. Each tetrad, it says, develops the short version of the full formula for establishing mindfulness at each of the four frames of reference. The tetrad related to feelings reads,

*"He trains himself, 'I will breathe in sensitive to rapture.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out sensitive to rapture.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe in sensitive to pleasure.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out sensitive to pleasure.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe in sensitive to mental fabrication [perceptions and feelings].' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out sensitive to mental fabrication.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe in calming mental fabrication.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out calming mental fabrication.'"*

Here it's clear that, to develop even just the short version of the full formula for establishing mindfulness of feelings in and of themselves, you have to do a lot more than simply discern feelings as they come and go. Ardency—the effort to give rise to what's skillful and abandon what's not—plays a large role. You actively cultivate the feelings of the first jhana, i.e., rapture and pleasure; you become sensitive to how they have an effect on the mind—that's what being "sensitive to mental fabrication" means—and then you consciously train yourself

to calm that effect. In keeping with the descriptions of jhana practice, this would mean bringing the mind to the fourth jhana, where pleasure and pain are replaced with the more calming feeling of equanimity.

Similarly with the tetrad related to mind-states:

*“He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to the mind.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to the mind.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in gladdening the mind.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out gladdening the mind.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in steadying the mind.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out steadying the mind.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in releasing the mind.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out releasing the mind.’”*

Even though the first step requires simply that you be sensitive to what’s going on in the mind, the steps don’t stop there. If the mind is sluggish or constricted, you gladden it. If it’s scattered, you steady it. If it’s burdened with unskillful thoughts—or with factors present in the lower jhanas but absent in the higher ones—you release it. Here again, ardency is a dominant part of establishing mindfulness rightly and well.

This means that complete descriptions of mindfulness practice actually do describe actively interfering with the arising and passing away of feelings and mind-states: abandoning unskillful ones and cultivating skillful ones in their place. Now, there are cases where simply watching an unskillful mind-state with equanimity is enough to make it go away, but as MN 101 makes clear, this doesn’t always work. Sometimes when you stare at such a mind-state, it stares right back. In cases like that, you have to exert the activity of fabrication to get rid of it.

All of this is in line with the description of right mindfulness in MN 117: You’re mindful to abandon unskillful states and to develop skillful ones to replace them.

So it’s not true that mindfulness is a non-interfering awareness of things as they arise and pass away. As the Canon defines mindfulness (SN 48:10), it’s a factor of the active memory. What right mindfulness remembers is to do what you can to bring skillful mind-states about, and to protect them when they’re present to keep them from passing away (AN 4:194; AN 4:245). And the similes are right: This often involves work.

**2. The Belief: Because the goal of meditation practice is unfabricated, trying to do anything to reach it will actually get in the way of arriving there.**

**The Fact: The Buddha discovered that causality works in such a way that the act of fabricating a path, even though it can’t cause the unfabricated, leads to its threshold.**

The Buddha was always careful to call the practices leading to unbinding a *path*. In other words, they don’t cause the goal, but they can take you there. One of his most extended similes for the path is of a raft: To get to the far shore of a

flooding river, you take twigs and branches on this shore—which stands for the ways in which you create a self-identity—and you bind them together into a raft, which stands for the noble eightfold path. Then, in dependence on the raft and making an effort with your hands and feet—this stands for persistence—you make your way across the flood to the far shore of unbinding (SN 35:197).

In other words, the raft doesn't cause the further shore, and making effort with your hands and feet doesn't get in the way of reaching the further shore. In fact, if you don't make an effort, you'll be swept down the flood of sensuality, views, becoming, and ignorance.

Now, it's possible to argue that this simile is inadequate. And, in one important way, it is: The far shore to any river is fabricated, whereas unbinding is not. However, the Buddha acknowledges that fact, even while keeping the simile of crossing the river. In SN 1:1, a deva asks him how he crossed over the flood, and he responds that he did so by neither pushing forward nor staying in place. The deva is confused—the Buddha's riddle may have been intended to humble her pride—but the riddle is more than just a rhetorical trick. It indicates that there's a point in the practice where you have to abandon the dichotomy of staying where you are and making the effort to go someplace else. That's where the opening to unbinding comes. But the fact is, you can't reach that point without first having made the effort to get there.

A more modern simile is that of a complex non-linear system, such as the gravitational relationships among Saturn, its moons, and its rings. In simple, linear systems, A causes B, B causes C, and so on. Sometimes there may be a feedback loop or two, in which C turns around and influences A. But the causal principle is fairly straightforward. As long as you keep acting within such a system, you maintain the system and stay in it. The only way to get out would be if a force from outside the system came to knock it off kilter.

However, in a complex non-linear system, there are so many feedback loops that they can interact in unpredictable ways—not because the math gets too hard to calculate, but because the math itself starts playing tricks.

One of these tricks is that the laws governing the system can be manipulated, not to maintain the system, but to get out of it. Escape doesn't require something coming from outside the system. It can come through following the laws within the system itself.

This, for example, is why there are gaps in the rings of Saturn. Any ice ball in the ring that wanders into the gaps is soon ejected because the equation describing its trajectory—influenced by the gravity of Saturn combined with the gravity of one or more of its moons—contains a number (any number aside from zero) divided by zero. This makes the ice ball's trajectory undefined, and that puts it out of the system. The ice ball escapes, not because it defies gravity, but because gravity has brought it into a spot where the laws of gravity allow it out.

The Buddha never discussed complex non-linear systems or used them as similes, but he did say that the results of action are so complex that they're inconceivable (AN 4:77). This means, of course, that his vision of action was not of a simple system. Actions and their results interact in many complex ways.

And his most detailed description of the actions leading to suffering—dependent co-arising—contains many feedback loops.

But rather than get into all the details of how these factors interact, he focused on the practical opportunity they provide. Unlike ice balls, he didn't get out of the laws governing fabrication because he was compelled to. He intentionally made an effort to find the spots in the system of intentional action where the laws within the system allow for escape from intentional action: what he called the kamma that puts an end to kamma (AN 4:237). And what he found was that the factors by which we define ourselves—the aggregates—could be manipulated to bring the mind to the point of neither moving nor staying in place, where it would no longer be defined. That would be its release.

So it's important that we not let simplistic ideas of causality prevent us from taking advantage of the Buddha's insight: It is possible to use the twigs and branches of our minds to reach an undefined, unfabricated goal—but we can't get to the moment of non-definition simply by embracing the twigs and branches or by doing nothing. We have to make an effort to find it.

**3. The Belief: Meditation should lead to the realization that, on the level of ultimate truth, there's no one there to begin with, so to believe that you're making choices as to what to do while meditating would get in the way of that realization.**

**The Fact: The Buddha never taught that there's no one there.**

One of the biggest misunderstandings in the Buddhist tradition—dating back millennia—is that the Buddha taught two levels of truth: conventional truth, in which beings and individuals exist; and ultimate truth, in which beings and individuals don't exist and never have.

This is a mistake on two counts. First, the post-Canonical position on conventional truths—which postdates the Buddha by many centuries—is that conventional truths are skillful means: statements that help some people get on the path even though, on the ultimate level, such statements are false. Because the Buddha talked about individuals existing and selves depending on themselves, this would mean that some of the Buddha's teachings were useful fictions—beneficial even though they weren't really true. This, however, violates the Buddha's own observation on what he would and wouldn't say. Only if something was true, beneficial, and timely would he say it. When he set out a table of types of speech, the possibility that something would be false but beneficial didn't even make it on the table. This means that as far as he was concerned, such statements didn't even exist (MN 58).

Second, the Buddha never said that beings don't exist. When asked to define what a being is, he didn't say that, on the ultimate level, there are no beings. Instead, he gave a straightforward answer: "Any desire, passion, delight, or craving for form... feeling... perception... fabrications...consciousness: When one is caught up [*satta*] there, tied up [*visatta*] there, one is said to be 'a being [*satta*].'" (SN 23:2)

In other words, the Buddha defined beings as processes—and processes exist (SN 22:94). He also noted how those processes take rebirth: When a being has set one body aside and has yet to be born in another one, it's sustained by craving (SN 44:9). And he noted that all beings have one thing in common: They depend on nutriment, which is the same as saying that they all suffer (Khp 4).

But as he pointed out, it's not necessary to keep on identifying as a being. If you can develop dispassion for any craving for form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness, then you're freed from being a being (SN 23:2). And he discovered further that, in doing so, you don't go out of existence. Instead, you're now immeasurable—so immeasurable that labels of existing, not existing, both, or neither, don't even apply (SN 44:1).

So the purpose of meditation is not to discover that you aren't a being and never have been. Instead, it's to show you how you've been defining yourself as a being through your attachments, and how you can find freedom through putting those attachments—your identity as a being—aside (SN 22:36).

Now, as the simile of the raft suggests, and SN 51:15 and AN 9:36 state clearly, this will involve using the raw materials of your identity—your desires and attachments, along with their objects, such as form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness—to bring about the end of desire and attachment, so that you're no longer limited to identifying yourself as a being. But that simply shows the Buddha's skill as a strategist, seeing how to cross over the river by going from one attachment to more subtle attachments, and then finally putting all attachments aside. In the words of Ven. Ānanda, "It's amazing, lord. It's astounding. For truly, the Blessed One has declared to us the way to cross over the flood by going from one support to the next" (MN 106).

What this means in practical terms is that it is possible to make choices and to act in the present—to *do* the meditation—without blocking the insight to which the meditation leads: how to free yourself from having to identify as a being.

So when we look at the Buddha's instructions on mindfulness in their entirety, we can see that there's no reason to regard meditation as an exercise in making no choices and doing nothing at all. And when we understand the relationship of the path to the goal and the lessons learned on reaching the goal, there's no reason—up until the very last steps of the path—to insist that an attitude of *doing* mindfulness or jhāna will get in the way of the goal. In fact, as the Buddha's similes suggest, these forms of meditation are very much things you do.

This means that there's every reason to take the Buddha's active similes for meditation seriously, and to take seriously his statement that the noble eightfold path—including right mindfulness and right concentration—is a type of kamma: the kamma leading to the ending of kamma (AN 4:237). This kamma is not a matter of doing nothing or of denying what you're doing. Instead, it involves mastering skills—the skills of meditation—and being clear about what you're

doing while you're doing it. Only then will you understand action, and only then can you go beyond it.

The goal can't be reached in any other way.