

Reflections On Meditation

“Reflections” is an occasional section in Interreligious Insight. Pieces draw on various traditions to unfold an important theme in spirituality, philosophy, or interreligious work. We hope that readers will make their own fruitful connections for dialogue and engagement. This offering includes a Buddhist and a Jewish perspective on meditation.

Buddhist Meditation

THE BUDDHIST GROUP OF KENDAL

Pali was the language spoken by the Buddha. The Theravada Pali Buddhist Canon is practised in the five Theravada Buddhist countries of South-East Asia: Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Laos and Cambodia. From the time of the passing away of the Buddha in 543 BC, his teachings were transmitted in oral tradition, in the form of chanting, by generations of monks until about 100 BC when they were, for the first time, written down in Sri Lanka: the result was the Theravada Pali Buddhist Canon, which then spread to the other Theravada Buddhist countries.

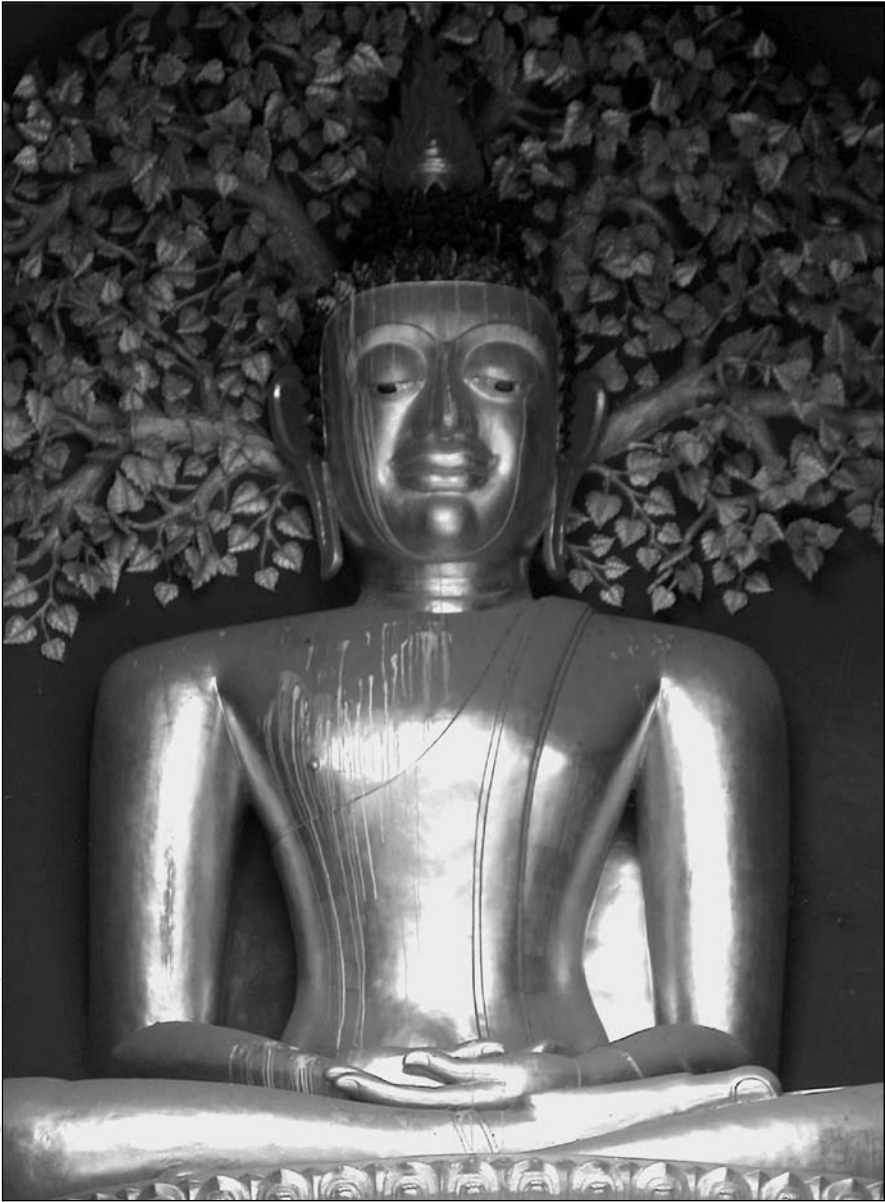
These countries all follow the same Canon, and over the centuries they have met to compare their own copies of the Canon to ensure that no alterations, additions, watering-down or other changes have occurred; but that the teaching continues to remain in its pristine purity. The last (sixth) of these meetings was held in 1956-57 to coincide with the 2500th anniversary of the passing away of the Buddha. (The Buddhist calendar is reckoned from the year of the passing away of the Buddha as the year zero).

BUDDHIST MEDITATION

There are two types of meditations taught by the Buddha. The first type was already in existence in India before the Buddha was born. It is called Tranquillity Meditation (*Samatha Bhavana*). It consists of the repetition of any mental, vocal or physical action.

The Tranquillity Meditation recommended by the Buddha and followed in Theravada is: being aware of the in-breath and the out-breath (*Anapana Sati Bhavana*). This meditation has the effect of temporarily suppressing the defilements of the mind, and the result is a peaceful and tranquil state of mind: hence the term Tranquillity Meditation. This meditation not only tranquillises the mind, it also purifies the mind and trains the mind to hold on to one object without drifting into other matters. This meditation is an integral part of Theravada Buddhism practice. Tranquillity Meditation includes 40 different kinds of meditations taught by the Buddha.

The Buddhist Group of Kendal (Theravada), in the north-west Lake District of the UK, is a small group which holds an open meeting once a month for meditation and study.



Buddhas: photos, Cetna Kenney

Another important Buddhist meditation coming under Tranquillity Meditation is *Metta Bhavana*, the Meditation on Universal Loving-kindness to all living beings – which includes not only humans but animals, birds, fish, insects, etc.

The basis of *Metta Bhavana* is *The Metta Sutta (The Discourse on Loving-Kindness)* taught by the Buddha. The following excerpt is taken from the *Sutta*.

One who is skilled in the good and wishes to attain that state of calm, *Nibbana* [the unconditioned], should act thus; one should be sincere to oneself, upright and conscientious, of soft speech, gentle and not proud.

Contented, living simply, peaceful and unburdened, with senses calmed, prudent, modest, and without showing anxiety for support.

One should not commit any slight wrong on account of which wise men might censure one.

[One wishes:] May all beings be happy and secure, may their hearts be wholesome!

Whatever living beings there be – those mentally feeble or strong, physically long, stout or medium, short, small or large, those seen or unseen; dwelling far or near; those who are born and those who are to be born – may all beings, without exception, be happy minded!

Let none deceive another nor despise any person whatsoever in any place; in anger or ill-will let one not wish another harm.

Just as a mother would protect her only child at the risk of her own life, in the same way, let one cultivate a boundless heart towards all beings.

Let thoughts of infinite love pervade the whole world – above, below and around – without any obstruction, without any hatred, without any enmity.

Whether standing, walking, sitting or lying down, as long as one is awake, this mindfulness should be developed: this, the wise say, is the highest conduct here.

Not embracing false views, virtuous and endowed with insight, giving up attachment to sense desires – indeed, such a person does not come again for repeated becoming [i.e. for rebirth over and over again].

The section above is the actual meditation. The remainder of the *Sutta* includes instructions for the meditator. This is the best known from among all the meditations taught by the Buddha and it is never omitted in any Theravada Buddhist *puja* (a Buddhist service).

As already mentioned, the Meditation on Universal Loving-kindness given above comes under Tranquillity Meditation. The meditations under the blanket term ‘Tranquillity Meditation’ make the mind – and the meditator – suitable for the practice of the second of the two types of meditation taught by the Buddha: Insight Meditation (*Vipassana Bhavana*). This meditation was a unique discovery of the Buddha and it was this meditation that led to the remarkable spiritual experience called Enlightenment, after which he insisted on being called a Buddha – a fully enlightened being who had attained to enlightenment by his own efforts unaided by any teacher. Insight Meditation, the Buddha’s own discovery, he described as something “not known before”.

In Insight Meditation (*Vipassana Bhavana*) the object of the meditation is one's own self: layer by layer, the self-constructed entity that a person calls himself or herself is unravelled.

This article has outlined the most important meditations practised in Theravada Buddhism: Meditation on the In-breath and the Out-breath, the meditation on Universal Loving-kindness, and Insight Meditation.

Jewish Meditation

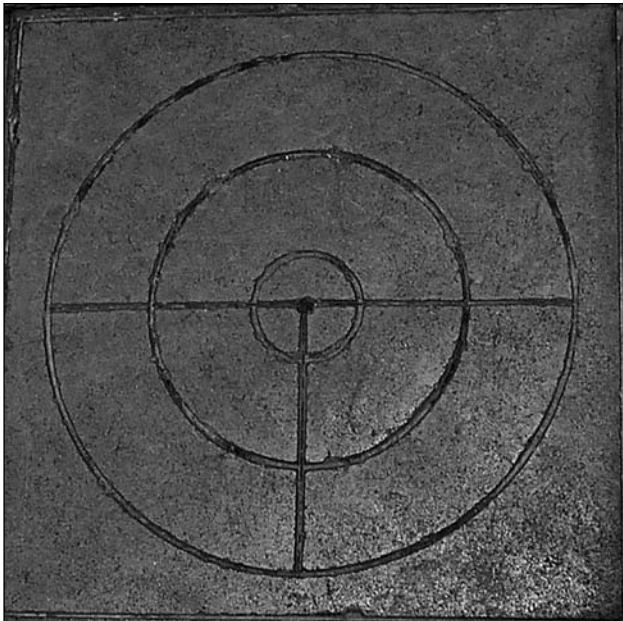
JACQUETTA GOMES

I became interested in Jewish meditation when my teacher, Rabbi Reuven Silverman, conducted a Jewish meditation class. I discuss below some books which I have found to be of special interest.

In Harold Heifetz's book, *Zen and Hasidism*, there is a chapter "On Meditation in the Jewish Mystical Tradition" by Rabbi William M. Kramer. He explains:

There was...meditation in Judaism since first there was wonderment and methods of achieving it have been quite fully delineated in the splendorous tradition of Zohar. The Jewish locus classicus for Kabbalistic meditation...is to be found in the writings of Abraham Ablulafia (1240 – circa 1291-1300). He taught that one who seeks to channel the heart to G-d alone should prepare by cleansing the body and dressing it, preferably in white, and then selecting for the experience a meditative, an isolated place, where one's voice would be unheard by man.

Centerstone, North Shore Congregation Israel,
Glencoe, Illinois; photo, Cetta Kenney



He suggested that meditation begins best by day and is best completed in the night...The isolated silence should be gifted with the meditator's voice speaking out to G-d the thoughts of a mind unencumbered by worldliness.

David Rome was head of Schocken Books in 1983 when he received the late Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan's manuscript for *Jewish Meditation: A Practical Guide*. The introduction states, "Many people expressed the need for a guide to Jewish meditation written in non-technical terms for the layperson." Rodger Kamenz, in his book *The Jew in the Lotus*, describes David Rome's reactions on reading the manuscript:

Schocken is known for books about Jewish mysticism, notably Buber's *Tales of the Hasidism* and Scholem's monumental *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. But to David Rome, Kaplan's book "was very different because an Orthodox Rabbi and practitioner was saying, 'You can do this.' And that's certainly not what you get in Scholem. And in Buber you will only get a sense of inspiration and of a philosophical view or an ethical view, but not specific meditative exercises..."

Rabbi Kaplan's *Meditation and the Bible* uses Kabbalistic literature to illustrate how meditation methods had been used by the Prophets to attain their unique states of consciousness. It also combines ancient Kabbalistic teachings with modern research into meditation practices. His *Meditation and Kabbalah* explains that the Kabbalah is divided into three branches – theoretical, meditative, and magical. The meditative techniques used by the ancient Kabbalists are described.

The Jew in the Lotus describes a meeting between American Jews and the Dalai Lama in 1990. At this meeting Rabbi Jonathan Omer-Man explained that there are "two forms of Jewish meditation. One attempts to open a person up to greater insights, clarity and vision. The other works on 'purifying the vessel, changing the human being, making the human being more perfect'. Though distinct, these two purposes to some extent overlap."

Rabbi Jonathan Omer-Man said of Nan-Fink Gefen's book, *Discovering Jewish Meditation: Instruction and Guidance for Learning an Ancient Spiritual Practice*, "Meditation lies at the very core of the Jewish spiritual experience. This book will take you there gently, wisely, helpfully."

In *Letters to a Buddhist Jew*, Rabbi Akiva Tatz states, "The meditation of Shabbat is the meditation of being, not becoming". In the chapter "Meditation" he explains, "Prayer is a deep meditation before it even begins."

The chapter "Jewish Meditation" in Rabbi Nissan Dovid Dubov's book, *The Key to Kabbalah: Book One*, states that:

Belief must be intellectualized, internalized, and integrated in to one's actions, and that is the purpose of Jewish meditation. Sadly, most Jews today have never heard of Jewish meditation, and typically when asking a group of Jews

how many of them meditate on a regular basis, the answer is only a few... meditation is an essential ingredient of our religion and the base of all observance...Deep meditation and intimate knowledge of G-d brings one to love Him...If prayer is to be effective during the course of the day, it must involve meditation...Meditation gives us the tools not only to understand the words of the prayers, but to carry these words and their meaning into our daily lives when we engage in the day-to-day activities that can sometimes seem far from obvious G-dliness...Meditation requires practice and study...The more detailed the meditation, the stronger its effect.”

Sylvia Boorstein says in her book, *That's Funny You Don't Look Buddhist*:

Clearly, the path of *mitzvot* [mandated observance] is a form of meditation. The intention to act impeccably requires complete dedication and unwavering attention...mitzvot practice is the path to clear seeing...

Jewish meditation must be conducted either by a Rabbi or an authorised teacher of Jewish meditation. As I am not authorised to teach Jewish meditation my teacher, Rabbi Reuven Silverman, has approved publication of this article.

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Jacquetta Gomes was included in *Burkes Landed Gentry, Volume III, England's Northwest including Contemporary People of Distinction* (1996) as a Contemporary Person of Distinction in recognition of her religious work. The Mayor of Kendal (2007-08) Councillor Gwen Murfin requested that a Blessing Ceremony be conducted for the Mayor's Parlour in Kendal Town Hall to celebrate this achievement.