

MINDING CLOSELY

The Four Applications of Mindfulness

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already achieved it in many prior lifetimes. Similarly, Plato held that much of the knowledge we seem to acquire in this lifetime consists of rekindled memories from past lifetimes.

The Buddha described this very profound state of samadhi, the first dhyana, as being accompanied by coarse and precise investigation. The mind is utterly controlled and settled in a state of equipoise that is nothing like a trance, in which you cannot think or function. To the contrary, in this state you can engage in general investigations or precise analysis of any subject. Your intelligence and conceptual abilities are fully available, but you are completely free of obsessive-compulsive thinking. This state is suffused with a blissful well-being; it's not ecstasy or teeth-chattering, incapacitating bliss. Being born of seclusion means the mind is withdrawn from the sense fields and compulsive ideation, resting naturally in balance. When the mind is settled in the first dhyana, bliss arises from the very nature of awareness.

At the age of thirty-five, the Buddha remembered his spontaneous experience as a youth. Having recalled it, the thought arose, "Might this be the way to enlightenment?" He was clearly referring to the first dhyana, the first of four stages within what is called the form realm. This state is imbued with discerning intelligence, a sense of blissful well-being, and a highly focused mind. Buddhists claim that a mind settled in such equipoise—with awareness that is malleable, supple, calm, clear, and intelligent—comes to know reality as it is.

Following this thought, the Buddha recognized that this was indeed the way to enlightenment. I am happy to take that statement at face value; he couldn't have said it more clearly. He did not mention the second meditative stabilization, let alone the formless absorptions, in which the capacities for investigation and analysis are dormant. He simply said that the first dhyana was the way to enlightenment.

Vipashyana Method

Very shortly thereafter, the Buddha sat beneath the bodhi tree with an adamant resolve: "I shall not move from this seat until I have achieved enlightenment," and that's what he did. The first dhyana seems to have been his platform for launching into vipashyana. This ultimately

led him to what is called supermundane vipashyana, the examination of the facets of reality that directly liberate the mind.

But first, in mundane vipashyana, one simply investigates certain critical aspects of the phenomenal world in which we live. The Buddha described his experiences during that night's three watches, each lasting about three hours. He might have sat down as the sun was setting, and in the first watch of the night, he settled immediately into samadhi. From this platform, he directed his attention back in time to ascertain the circumstances in thousands of his previous lifetimes. In this first exploration, the Buddha probed the history of his own mind-stream, and he declared that he saw with direct knowledge the vast sequence of his past lives.

In the second watch of the night, he directed his attention panoramically, attending to the mind-streams of other sentient beings. He found that they also had long histories, and he attended to their myriad past lives. Then, still applying mundane vipashyana, he examined the patterns in this massive database of the lives of myriad sentient beings, performing a meta-analysis of their actions and the consequences. The results of the Buddha's analysis in the second watch of that night came to be known as the laws of karma; the Sanskrit term "karma" means action. He saw that actions in one lifetime are like seeds sowed that eventually give rise to consequences in later lifetimes. He observed regular patterns of causal sequences from one lifetime to the next, and his experiential insights into rebirth and karma were significantly different from any of the views that were prevalent before his enlightenment. So recent claims that he simply adopted these ideas from common beliefs of his era are entirely spurious, without any basis in historical fact.

In the third watch of the night, he probed into the reality of suffering and its origins, the path, and the culmination of the path. He directly realized the twelve links of dependent origination, the mechanics of samsara, and the path to liberation. As the sun rose, he achieved enlightenment—the Buddha awakened! His platform was the samadhi of the first dhyana.

There are many methods for achieving the first dhyana, and dozens of them were taught by the Buddha. Bear in mind that in teaching the