

## THE BUDDHIST TRADITION

# Stopping and Seeing

## *The Foundations of Buddhist Meditation*

by Hal Roth

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It seems to me that, among all the religions of the world, it's been Buddhism which has explored most fully the various aspects of consciousness, and how to bring about the unitary consciousness that is produced in a number of different mystical traditions. I will begin by quoting a short passage from the writings of a seventh century Buddhist monk, Chih I, who was a master of the T'ien-t'ai school of Buddhism. I like to think of this short passage as a kind of fundamental Buddhist model of meditation. Although Buddhism has very many schools, and has been transmitted to many different countries and exists in many different cultures, this basic structure of Buddhist meditation has remained remarkably consistent throughout.

*There are many paths for entering the reality of nirvana, but in essence they all are contained within two practices: Stopping and Seeing.*

*Stopping is the primary gate for overcoming the bonds of craving. Seeing is the essential requisite for ending confusion.*

*Stopping is the wholesome resource that nurtures the mind. Seeing is the marvelous art which fosters intuitive wisdom (prajna).*

*Stopping is the effective cause of attaining meditative concentration (samadhi). Seeing is the very basis of enlightenment . . .*

*It should be known, then, that those two techniques are like the two wheels of a chariot, the two wings of a bird; if their practice is lopsided, you will fall from the path.*

*(Adapted from Shinzen Young's translation in R. Robinson's The Buddhist Religion, third edition)*

The point that he's making here is that there are two complementary aspects of Buddhist meditative practice: Stopping and Seeing. Stopping is a process, a kind of step-by-step development of mental and physical calmness. It is literally called Stopping in Chinese, which is a translation of the Sanskrit term Samatha. Seeing is a step-by-step heightening of awareness; awareness means sensitivity and clarity to

our own conscious processes, the processes and patterns through which we have conscious experience.

You might call Stopping meditation introvertive meditation. It's almost exclusively done sitting. Zazen is a form of Stopping. Seeing you might think of as extrovertive meditation; it's often done as we walk, as we live, as we do various kinds of things, within the phenomenal world. This is also known as Vipasyana (*Sanskrit; Pali: Vipassana*) or Seeing meditation.

Through Stopping we develop the ability to gradually slow down our normal conscious thought-processes. And this is usually done in Buddhism by focusing on one object: it could be a koan (*Korean: kong-an*), it could be breathing. Different sects of Buddhism have developed different foci for use in this Stopping meditation. As you increase your facility, your ability to concentrate and become one-pointed, you develop what

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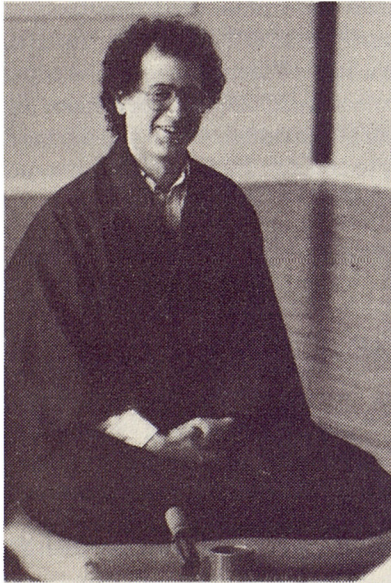


## Stopping and Seeing

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we call samadhi, the power of meditative concentration. This is one of the two wings.

The other of the two wings is Seeing or Vipasyana. This involves gradual development of the facility to see the different kinds of patterns which underly our conscious experience. And as we are able to do this, we develop what is known as intuitive wisdom. We develop clarity into the underlying structure of our own consciousness. This leads eventually to the experience that is called in early Buddhist writings, "Seeing things as they really are." And in the early Buddhist writings, this means Seeing things in terms of the Three Marks of All Conditioned Phenomena: that they are not self (anatman); that they are impermanent, constantly changing (anitya); and that they are dukkha (usually translated as "suffering" but probably "unsatisfactory" is a better translation.)



Hal Roth

Thus, Seeing is the continued clarity that we get as we apply the concentration of Stopping to our everyday lives. The passage I quoted above indicates that Stopping and Seeing must be practiced together. They're complementary. If we can practice in this manner, our practice is balanced. If we can't, we become unbalanced towards the Stopping side or Seeing side. There is a dynamic relationship between the two. Each builds upon the other. The degree of facility we develop in samadhi carries over into our everyday lives, and helps us develop clarity, clarity to see what's really going on beneath our feet. The amount of clarity that we develop in our everyday lives keeps us from becoming too attached to the experiences that we develop through Stopping meditation, keeps us from taking too much pride in the attainments that we have through Stopping meditation. So the two aspects, Stopping and Seeing, balance one another.

There are some examples in the Buddhist literature of Page 16

people becoming enlightened by following one or the other practice exclusively. In Theravadin Buddhism we sometimes hear of "dry insight workers," people who practice Vipasyana meditation exclusively. But these people are the exception, not the rule.

This emphasis on the complementarity of Stopping and Seeing is seen in some very important Ch'an texts. The Platform Sutra talks about the unity of dhyana (concentration) and prajna (wisdom), as another way of saying that we must have an equal balance between Stopping and Seeing meditation.

The early Buddhist writings talk about this practice of Stopping, and actually identify nine distinct stages of meditative concentration which an individual practicing this kind of Stopping meditation proceeds through. These are known as dhyanas — in fact, it is dhyana that lends its name to the school of Buddhism that we practice. Ch'an is the Chinese transliteration of the Sanskrit term dhyana, and Zen is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese transliteration.

The dhyanas are kind of signposts in the development of samadhi. They are presented in a very interesting passage from the early Buddhist Canon preserved by the Theravadin school. The text is known as the Holy Quest. It contains an early version of Shakyamuni's First Sermon at Deer Park. We begin with the fifth dhyana, "the plane of infinite ether":

*And again, monks, a monk, by passing quite beyond the plane of infinite ether, thinking 'Consciousness is unending' enters on and abides in the plane of infinite consciousness. And again, monks, a monk, by passing quite beyond the plane of infinite consciousness, thinking 'There's not anything,' enters on and abides in the plane of no thing. And again, monks, a monk, by passing quite beyond the plane of no thing, enters on and abides in the plane of neither perception nor non-perception. This monk, O monks, is called 'One who has put a darkness round Mara (the Evil One)' and who, having blotted out Mara's vision so that it has no range, goes around unseen by the Evil One . . .*

*(From I.B. Horner's Middle Length Sayings [Majjhima Nikaya I.174.5.J])*

Notice there's a very important transition: up to this point we have the monk who passes beyond the plane of infinite consciousness thinking "there is not anything," but when we move beyond the plane of no thing, the monk is not thinking or self-reflecting; there is no longer self-and-object differentiation. And so, that's the eighth stage: neither perception nor non-perception.

*And again, monks, a monk, by passing quite beyond the plane of neither perception nor non-perception, enters on and abides in the stopping of perception and sensation.*

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No more perception; not even basic pure sensation. This is the experience of complete merging of self and other, of subject and object; what might be called the “unitary consciousness,” what is sometimes referred to in Buddhist writings as “consciousness with no object,” or “objectless consciousness,” or in some Zen writings as “absolute samadhi.” This is also sometimes called the “experience of absolute zero.”

But this is not, in and of itself, ultimate. Because the text continues:

*And having seen by intuitive wisdom (prajna) his cankers are utterly destroyed.*

Now cankers is a technical term; these are the asravas, the passions — desire for sense experiences, desire to be reborn — and ignorance about the way the world is really put together, about the way our consciousness works.

So it is at the transition between absolute samadhi, the cessation of sensation and perception, and the return to the phenomenal world, when there is this moment of clarifying insight into the fundamental processes of existence. And it is this moment which, in the Buddhist tradition, is often spoken of as the moment of enlightenment; it is this moment — this return to the phenomenal world — that is the satori that’s talked about in the Zen tradition.

At this point one begins what you might call a positive samadhi, in which you manifest this experience of absolute samadhi through your own everyday life, through your own conscious experience. This is the full realization of prajna; this is the cognition without being tied by a self or an ego.

This is also called in early Buddhist writings “Nirvana with remainder.” There are two types of Nirvana in early Buddhism: “Nirvana with remainder” and “Nirvana without remainder.” It’s a very awkward English translation; it sounds like a mathematics problem. “Nirvana with remainder” is the mode of living in the phenomenal world after you have this foundational experience of absolute zero. You might call it selfless phenomenality.

A lot of people talk about Nirvana as if it were this experience of absolute zero, but I don’t think that’s right. It is rather the mode of experience when you return from absolute zero to living in the phenomenal world.

This “Nirvana with remainder” is conceived of differently in different schools of Buddhism. That is, there are different concepts which are based on this mode of experience. These vary from the “emptiness” and “suchness” of the Indian Perfection of Wisdom writings to Rinzai’s “True Person of No Fixed Position.” Now looking back to the Indian background of Buddhism, it seems to me that the experience of absolute samadhi or absolute zero is objectified in Hinduism and raised into a concept of the ultimate ground of the cosmos: the

Brahman, which is the same as the Atman, a kind of Universal Self. Early Buddhism is very uneasy about doing that; it tries very hard to avoid objectifying this experience at all. Hence the emphasis on the doctrine of non-self.

It seems to me from reading the early sutras that Shakyamuni Buddha is very concerned about the effects which a belief in a Universal Self has on one’s ability to practice. When you identify an “Ultimate Ground of the Cosmos”, and look upon the experience of it as a goal, that actually prevents you from transcending yourself. This concern for the objectification of this absolute zero experience differentiates early Buddhism from Upanisadic Hinduism.

Another difference is that there seems to be a much greater emphasis — not only in early Buddhism but throughout the Buddhist tradition — on life in the phenomenal world, on applying this experience of Stopping to everyday life. We don’t have to wait twenty, thirty, forty years (until we have absolute zero experience) to develop prajna, to develop insight into our conscious thought-processes and into the way we experience the world. Instead, in Buddhist practice, there are many different levels of experiencing this. As we develop an increasing calmness in our zazen practice, we also develop an increasing ability to apply our concentration in our daily lives. It’s not an all-or-nothing proposition.

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*We don’t have to wait twenty, thirty, or forty years to develop prajna.*

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However, when we are able to experience absolute zero, and then return to the phenomenal world, there is a great transformation of consciousness, and we simultaneously see unity and multiplicity; we live in a world without a fixed self or ego.

When I was younger, I used to ask my teacher, “Well, if everything is empty, and if we experience complete merging of subject and object — if this is the basis of Buddhism — then why don’t we just walk into walls or stumble over things? I mean, how does this work?” And he said two things to me. He said, “Even in absolute zero, you have to come out and go to the bathroom.” Then another time he said, “You must re-form your ego from some place in complete emptiness.” That is a very profound point.

We inevitably have to go to the bathroom, so we have to return to the phenomenal world. That’s another point at which Buddhism differs from Hinduism: in its emphasis on Conditioned Origination, the fact that even the most profound experiences that we can have through Stopping meditation — complete merging of subject and object — are also transient. They pass away; we can’t even get attached to them when we see things as they really are. We have to return to and live in the phenomenal world.

When we can do this selflessly, when we are no longer



driven by our ego-patterns, by the kind of compulsive drives that we have, then we can see simultaneously all individuals as the same ground which is the basis of all of us. Someone once told me that your Zen Master, Seung Sahn, uses this example. I think it's quite apt: "You hear somebody screaming in anger at you, and you react no differently than if you heard birds chirping . . ." It's a very different way of living in the world, but one that I think expresses nicely this transformed mode of consciousness which early Buddhists called "Nirvana with remainder".

Now, as I see it, these two fundamental aspects of Buddhist meditation, Stopping and Seeing, reflect two different aspects of our daily consciousness that are constantly going on beneath our normal awareness, the experience of unification, and the experience of separation.

My teacher talks a lot about this. As I understand it, there is this continual unification and separation going on, as he says, I think metaphorically, 64,000 times a second. So that, when we hear a bird chirping, we become one with the bird. In that instant there is no separation between us and the bird. There is just this experience of complete unity with the bird-chirping. Then, we separate: recognize it as a bird. Then, we separate even more: we objectify that and say, "Ah, it's a cardinal!" or "Ah! It's one of these pesky bluejays and he is eating my corn!" or "Those crows are in my garden!" We have these secondary, tertiary reactions. This tends to obscure the fact that this activity of unification and separation is continually going on beneath our feet. One of the things that happens in Zen practice is that we become clearer and clearer on these underlying movements of consciousness, unification and separation.

And so, we develop a different kind of perspective on our own experience: it's no longer what my teacher calls a "two-dimensional perspective"; instead it's a "three dimensional perspective." What this means is that we must fully experience what is going on within our consciousness, but not separate from it, objectify it, try to paint a picture of it as if we stood outside of it (which is the two-dimensional perspective).

Chuang Tzu, the old Taoist, talks about walking without touching the ground; he also talks about flying without wings, and using ignorance to understand. I see each of these three ideas, especially walking without touching the ground, as lovely metaphors for what the experience is like, living in the phenomenal world in a selfless, egoless fashion; manifesting zero constantly in our conscious experience.

A good illustration of this, I think, is what my teacher calls "Zen Math". He does this on the blackboard. He says,

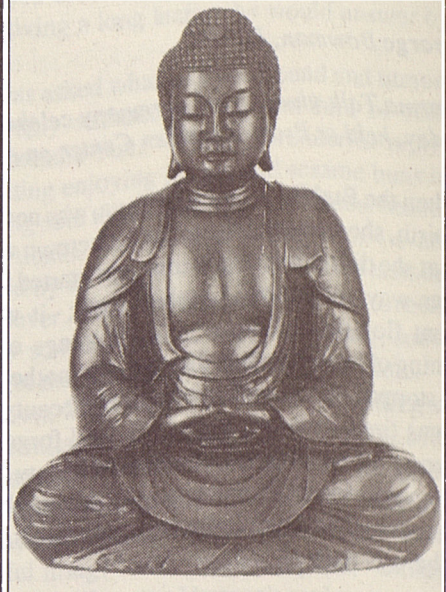
"Zero equals . . . Zero. One equals . . . Zero. Two equals . . . Zero. Five equals . . . Zero. Ten equals . . . Zero. A hundred equals Zero; a thousand equals Zero; a million equals Zero."

This is also, I think, what was suggested by that line from the Diamond Sutra which the Sixth Patriarch Hui-neng heard and suddenly became enlightened. The line reads something like: "You must raise a thought which is supported by nothing at all . . ."

The same thing: zero equals ten. The same thing: walking without touching the ground. The same thing: flying without wings; knowing through ignorance.

We can experience this consciousness every day, at every moment. The balanced practice of stopping and seeing leads us to this experience. Through it, we develop the ability to accord with the activities of unification and separation which are the dynamic ground of consciousness. It is very important to understand that in our practice we have these two elements, and it's important not to neglect either element, to work on them simultaneously.

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