



Early Buddhist Meditation, Part 2: Nondual Mindfulness

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This is the second of a series of five explorations of the topic of early Buddhist meditation, which in the present case concerns in particular antecedents to nondual mindfulness practices of the type found in Himalayan and East Asian Buddhist traditions.

In an attempt to express a rather complex matter in simple, practical terms, nondual mindfulness could be understood to stand for a mode of being aware that has left behind the subject-object duality characteristic of usual experiences of the human mind. In addition, nondual mindfulness should also operate in a manner often qualified as being nonconceptual, in the sense that, alongside being fully alert and awake, the usual functions of the mind in recognizing, reflecting, and making sense of experience are left behind to such an extent that only the bare, knowing nature of the mind remains.

As a form of meditative abiding, nondual mindfulness needs to be distinguished from an attainment of meditative absorption, which is similarly nondual and also requires leaving behind reflective activities of the mind. The type of nondual mindfulness under discussion here is more dynamic than static, and it is not a result of simply deepening concentration. It requires manifesting or embodying tranquility and insight in conjunction, rather than cultivating each of these individually and in a gradual manner. Alongside natural, uncontrived stillness of the mind, the type of insight to be embodied in this way is emptiness above all. This calls for completely *emptying* experience of any prop for, or tendency toward, reification of whatever there may be as a “thing” in its own right. Such insight can be understood as being in conformity with the type of emptiness promoted in Perfection of Wisdom literature, combined with a Yogācāra perspective on the nature of the mind. Hence, everything is seen

as ultimately originating in the mind and thoroughly empty of even a trace of independent existence as an entity of sorts.

The practical challenges of such nondual mindfulness are considerable, since the practitioner should completely relax into the absence of all mental operations and concomitantly let go of any reference point in terms of an object, yet at the same time remain fully present and aware rather than succumbing to distraction or mental dullness. In support of navigating such challenges, alongside various preparatory practices, Himalayan Buddhist meditation traditions—known under the names of Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen—have developed ways of empowerment through personal teacher-to-disciple transmission in the form of pointing out the nature of the mind. The role performed by a teacher in this way can find expression in more sudden, unexpected ways of delivering instructions in East Asian lineages, such as Chan and Zen, which additionally have developed auxiliary practices best known by the Japanese term koan. These direct a mental quality of nonconceptual inquiry or doubt, even wonderment, to a rationally insoluble problem, eventually leading beyond all attempts at sense-making to a realization of the nature of the mind.

Signlessness

Without in any way intending to ignore or downplay the distinct cultural and historical characteristics and developmental trajectories of these Himalayan and East Asian traditions and their distinct Indian Buddhist roots, the main characteristics of nondual mindfulness could perhaps be related to signless meditation described in early Buddhist texts. The notion of a “sign” (*nimitta*) features in the early Buddhist analysis of cognition as central for the process of perceiving through any sense door in a way that enables recognition. However, in the average case of an unawakened mind, such a sign is not just an innocent reflection of what the senses apperceive, instead of which it comes inexorably intertwined with subjective evaluations, even biases, which from the viewpoint of the perceiver appear as if these were

Note Guided meditation instructions corresponding to the practices described in this article are freely available at <http://agamaresearch.dila.edu.tw/bhikkhu-analayo-meditation-instructions>.

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features intrinsic to the object. Said differently, early Buddhist thought can be understood to articulate a construction of experience, where the subject plays a large role in shaping and quite literally constructing what is perceived and cognized (Anālayo 2023).

The cultivation of signless meditation in turn requires complete relinquishment of all attempts to make sense of experience, of trying in some way to recognize and process input through any of the senses. This can be achieved through the cultivation of “nonattention” (*amanasikāra*) in relation to any sign whatsoever. The resultant experience of signlessness is one in which concepts no longer operate in the usual way and, due to the absence of an object, also one in which the common subject-object duality has been left behind.

Signless meditation is a tranquil abiding in mental composure, a *samādhi*, which at the same time does not involve any focus, as there is nothing left on which to focus. Signless meditation has a remarkable insight potential, even though it does not involve any of the mental activities required for understanding and thus for actively generating insight. Actualizing this insight potential requires sufficient preparation ahead of the meditative abiding in signlessness, in particular in terms of a direct understanding of the empty nature of all phenomena and of the constructed nature of experience. Without such groundwork, signless meditation risks becoming merely an abiding in a tranquil condition of the mind. In fact, signless meditation as such features in early Buddhist thought as not necessarily liberating, and its cultivation can be followed by substantial retrogression if the practitioner discontinues the practice and lacks the needed insight.

A meditative setting that provides a powerful support for signlessness to unfold its full liberative potential can be found in a discourse that describes a gradual meditative entry into emptiness: the Smaller Discourse on Emptiness. Here, the overarching concern of the instructions to foster a deepening understanding of emptiness ensures that abiding in signlessness is grounded in, and imbued with, the required input and support by liberating insight.

A Gradual Entry into Emptiness

The Smaller Discourse on Emptiness, extant in Pāli, Chinese, and Tibetan, describes a gradual entry into emptiness in the context of which signless meditation features as one particular meditative step, situated just before the culmination point of the whole trajectory in a potential breakthrough to Nirvana. The Chinese and Tibetan parallels help to correct an apparent error in the Pāli version, which stands alone in preceding signless meditation with an experience that is neither perceptive nor non-perceptive. Leaving aside this apparent error, the progression in the parallel versions

can be understood to involve the following form of practice (Anālayo 2024):

The gradual entry into emptiness sets out by noting what is absent in the present situation. This ties in with other practices recognized in early Buddhist meditation theory that direct mindfulness to what is absent (Anālayo 2022). In the setting of the discourse, the Buddha and his audience are in a forest monastery, where various aspects of ancient Indian city life are absent. The instructions begin by drawing attention to this type of absence in order to lead to a perception of the forest, in the literal sense of the actual surrounding as well as in the symbolic sense of the type of seclusion that is conducive to meditation practice. The same principle can in turn be applied to the individual situation of the contemporary meditator, by way of simply noting what potential sources of disturbance are absent in whatever secluded setting has been chosen for formal meditation.

Based on this first step in a progressive pattern of directing mindfulness to different types of absence, the gradual entry into emptiness proceeds by expanding the scope of what is absent until eventually reaching the rather thorough type of absence of any object or conceptualization whatsoever with the experience of signlessness. The approach of relying on a gradual progression that leads up to signlessness enables individual practitioners to ease themselves step by step, by adjusting to personal needs and capacities, into becoming able to abide in a mental condition that is free from any object and also free from any mental activity related to conceptualizing and understanding. In this respect, the final result of such a gradual approach appears to be comparable to nondual mindfulness practices in the Himalayan and East Asian traditions. In other words, with this type of practice yet another, alternative modality appears to emerge for navigating the challenges of abiding in a condition of the mind that is substantially different from the typical way the mind functions. Here, this takes place through a gradual approach that expands the types of absence attended to and concomitantly divests the mind step by step of the ways it usually employs to pay attention.

From the perception of seclusion, exemplified by the notion of the forest, the next step is the perception of earth as representative of matter, in particular from the perspective of its solidity. This perception should be cultivated by disregarding individual differences in whatever manifestations of solid matter may be in the practitioner’s surroundings. Instead of attending to these, prominence should be granted to what all of these have in common, which is precisely their solidity, the earth element. In this way, the practice proceeds from absence of disturbances to the absence of individual features of materiality.

With the next step, the perception of space replaces the perception of earth. This comprises space as the absence of anything material and the space occupied by matter, the

combining of which can result in the perception of space as infinite. The instructions here are just about cultivating the perception as such and do not require formal attainment of a deep state of concentration regularly described in the early discourses as being based on the same notion of infinite space, whose cultivation requires having mastered all four levels of meditative absorption (*dhyānaljhāna*) recognized in Buddhist meditation theory. Instead, the perception of infinite space relevant here could be understood as comparable to taking space as the object for cultivating a “totality” (*kṛtsna/kasiṇa*), which can take place based on levels of mental composure well before even the attainment of the first of the four levels of absorption. In terms of absence, this stage in the meditative progression leaves behind all matter, and practitioners perceive themselves and all surroundings as if dissolved into a unified experience of space. The resultant meditative perception quite thoroughly undermines any tendency to reify or even just be attached to material objects, by pointing to their ultimately insubstantial nature.

It needs to be added that the revelation of the ultimately insubstantial nature of all matter is only meant to undermine attachment and should not be taken too literally. Seasoned practitioners of this meditation will still not be able to walk through a wall. The point is only to reveal that a wall is not an entity but much rather a combination of causes and conditions. Their presence nevertheless makes the wall sufficiently solid to foil any attempt to walk through it, which will only result in banging one’s head.

The all-encompassing experience of space can in turn be viewed from the perspective of the consciousness that is aware of space, which by dint of taking an infinite object has become infinite itself. This shift in perspective leads to the next step of infinite consciousness, at which stage the subject-object duality dissolves, since the subject has become its own object. Just mind as such is left. Without going so far as to postulate a form of idealism, this meditative step can reveal the primacy of the mind in not only any activity but even in the very construction of experience. It enables a personal verification of a central orientation in early and later Buddhist traditions toward the role of the mind and its overarching importance.

The trajectory of attending to absence continues even when only mind is left, as the next step in the gradual entry into emptiness takes the form of attending to that very experience of just the mind as being “no thing.” In keeping with the overall trajectory of the discourse, the notion of “no thing” or “nothing” can conveniently be used as a pointer at emptiness. On this understanding, the present step of perceiving “no-thing-ness” can become an actualization of the insight that all phenomena, including the mind itself, are void of any thingness, of being an entity of some kind, let alone being some sort of a self. This type of absence or emptiness stands right at the heart of the early Buddhist path

to liberation and carries profound repercussions for progress in formal meditation just as much as for improving daily life interactions. Such insight into emptiness features among the most transformative aspects of Buddhist meditation.

Arrival at signlessness then requires letting go even of this insight into emptiness, in order to be able to abide in a condition of total lack of involvement in anything, a condition in which any mental cultivation, properly speaking, no longer takes place. The subject-object duality has already been left behind previously with infinite consciousness, and even the sense of a subject has been deconstructed with nothingness. With all the preparation in place in this way, it is less of a challenge for the practitioner to take one more step by letting go even of the perception of emptiness itself. At this stage, practice has quite definitely gone beyond any involvement in evaluations and reckonings, and for this reason can no longer be itself evaluated and reckoned in any way. The most thorough type of silence prevails at this peak conjunction of tranquility and insight, which can only be surpassed by the realization of Nirvana itself.

The trajectory that emerges in this way comes with a constant pointer at the need to avoid any attachment to the indeed rarefied and profound meditation experiences that can result from this mode of practice. This pointer takes the form of directing attention not only to whatever disturbances have been left behind with each step, but also to viewing what is still present as a remainder of disturbance. The diminishing of attachment inculcated in this way can eventually lead beyond signlessness to the breakthrough to Nirvana, which in early Buddhist thought constitutes the supreme type of emptiness: its full realization, which results in becoming an arahant or a Buddha, will *empty* the mind of all defilements.

The Immeasurables and Emptiness

The thorough deconstruction of ordinary ways of perceiving and cognizing described in the Smaller Discourse on Emptiness has a remarkable liberating potential, but at the same time it also comes with considerable challenges. An important dimension of such challenges is the need to avoid that what is deconstructive becomes destructive.

The possibility of becoming destructive would manifest when contemplation of emptiness leads to dissociation, aloofness, and indifference. Particularly in the individualistic setting of contemporary Westernized societies, this type of tendency presents a significant issue. Another, related problem in the same setting is the potential presence of unresolved traumas, which may become triggered by the type of meditative practices described above.

In order to address such problems, the meditative approach presented here precedes the emptiness practices with a

cultivation of the four immeasurables of loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. This first of all ensures that a sustained arousal of positive mental attitudes provides the much-needed grounding for embarking on emptiness practices. Such grounding serves not only as the starting point but also as a constantly available option to which to return in case any of the emptiness practices should threaten to become destabilizing. In addition, placing the immeasurables at the forefront in this way exemplifies the importance to be given to an opening of the heart as the main measuring rod for successful cultivation of emptiness. True and genuine realization of emptiness manifests in the spontaneous arising of the immeasurables in response to any situation; hence, the latter can indeed serve as a valid measure to evaluate progress in the former.

From the viewpoint of the gradual entry into emptiness, cultivation of the immeasurables undertaken as a boundless radiation, in line with the relevant indication in the early discourses, provides a convenient launching pad for emptiness meditation. It has already established a mode of meditative abiding that requires more a form of being than a form of doing, and that additionally does not rely on a circumscribed object as its focus. This to some extent already foreshadows a deconstruction of normal ways of experiencing, yet this takes place in an integrative manner that foregrounds positive emotional states. Once this trajectory reaches its culmination point in immeasurable equanimity, the actual characteristics of this meditative experience are so close to the perception of infinite space that little effort is required to proceed from the one to the other.

A drawback of this procedure of cultivating the four immeasurables and then directly moving to the perception of infinite space is that it does not do full justice to the entire progression of the gradual entry into emptiness described in the Smaller Discourse on Emptiness, wherefore practitioners are encouraged to explore the full progression from time to time as well. Nevertheless, the procedure of starting off with the immeasurables and then proceeding from that directly to the perceptions of infinite space, infinite consciousness, and nothingness still captures the main meditative momentum leading up to signlessness. The perception of infinite space thereby completes the trajectory of growing mental tranquility already cultivated with the immeasurables, being based on the absence of a concrete, individual object. In line with a recurrent qualification of the actual attainment of the sphere of infinite space as involving the leaving behind of perceptions of diversity, the resultant experience in the present step in the gradual entry into emptiness is a unified state of mind. This takes as its object just space—and therewith the total absence of any solidity or matter—as an exemplification of insight into the insubstantial nature of any material phenomenon.

With the ensuing perception of infinite consciousness, the subject becomes its own object, in a way, and all experiences

come to be seen as grounded in the mind. This can take the form of realizing that all experiences are, in the final count, constructed by the practitioner's own mind, a realization that in turn thoroughly undermines any tendency toward getting caught up in conceptual proliferation (*prapañca/papañca*). This unveils a remarkable potential relevant as well to daily life outside of formal meditation, in the form of the possibility of taking refuge, as it were, in the knowing part of the mind. This can provide a vantage point of inner stability and freedom from which to face the ups and downs of life without getting carried away by any inner chatter and its constant evaluations, judgments, and other proliferations.

The next step then involves the most direct implementation of the doctrine of emptiness, in the sense that all phenomena, *dharmas*, are seen as void of anything substantially real or permanent. This is indeed the early Buddhist position, differing in this respect from a tendency toward reification of *dharmas* in some later exegetical traditions, in the form of positing an intrinsic nature or own-being (*svabhāva/sabhāva*) of *dharmas*, which in turn has stimulated a spirited reply in the form of promoting a radical notion of emptiness in Perfection of Wisdom literature. From a practical perspective, experience in formal meditation as well as in daily life comes to be pervaded by the same taste of all-embracing emptiness.

With signlessness, then, meditative cultivation in a way proceeds beyond meditative cultivation, as by this time practitioners no longer actively cultivate anything other than letting go of all attempts by the mind to cognize, recognize, make sense, or understand. At this point, the relevance of time and space as the basic reference points of ordinary experience is no longer fully evident. Nevertheless, the experience of signlessness is quite definitely not one of being unaware or even unconscious; it is not a form of being just mindless. Mindfulness is fully present, even to a rather high degree, but the mind no longer conceives of anything in any way whatsoever.

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