

(BY BHIKKHU PESALA)

The word *meditation* in Pali is '*bhāvanā*,' and it has a much broader meaning. It means 'mental culture,' and includes all efforts to develop the spiritual side of life. Practising charity, morality, paying respect to elders and religious symbols, helping others, memorising suttas, listening to religious discourses, reading to enhance both secular and religious understanding, discussing ethical and philosophical questions — all of these are included in the term '*bhāvanā*.' The most important aspect of mental culture is insight meditation to realise the causes of suffering within one's own psyche. Only direct realisation of the causes will eradicate the effects.

Whether one grows in wisdom or not depends on one's own efforts. Mere worship of others, however wise they might be, will not develop wisdom. Anyway, if someone is not wise, how would he know if others are wise or foolish? Wisdom must be cultivated through one's own inner experience and understanding of the human condition. Cultivating wisdom can be compared to cultivating crops. One cannot force crops to grow, but one can provide the best possible conditions by removing weeds and by providing plenty of fertiliser, water and sunlight. If one removes the weeds of immoral conduct and unwholesome thoughts, if one studies and listens to teaching on the Dhamma, if one makes strenuous efforts in meditation, if one practises tolerance and loving-kindness, then wisdom will inevitably develop — though its growth may not be easily discernible. Day-by-day, and from moment-to-moment we have to cultivate mindfulness; only this, and no amount of prayer or wishful thinking, can produce the desired result.

The Buddha showed the way that leads to perfect peace, but it is up to each individual to fulfil the conditions that will enable him or her to realise the same peace for himself or herself. Though the way is not easy, each step taken is one step nearer to the goal, and the benefits follow immediately. To attain the perfect peace of *nibbāna* there is no need to wait for death.

The goal of *nibbāna* is extremely subtle. People are generally obsessed by the pursuit of pleasant feelings, or by avoiding unpleasant ones. So the absence of feeling may be imagined as some kind of annihilation or self-denial. Yet feeling is a raging inferno, consuming all fuel with which it comes into contact. Satisfaction is impossible to achieve by running after feelings. If you spend a few hours in meditation, you can appreciate the peace that comes from not feeding this fire. Then you could perhaps imagine what it would be like to be totally cool!

Practising meditation is like pouring cold water on the fire. Gradually the heat of craving will be reduced and the mind will become more serene. However, practice must be persistent; if you

stop pouring water onto the fire, and resume heaping on fuel as before, craving will soon reassert itself. Continuity is the secret of success in meditation. First learn the technique, then work hard to improve it. Once you are on the right track, practise repeatedly until practice makes perfe

"The mind is difficult to control; swift and fickle, it flits wherever it pleases. To tame the mind is good, for a well-tamed mind brings happiness."

"Not by a shower of gold coins can sensual pleasures be satiated; sensual pleasures give little satisfaction and are fraught with evil consequences. Knowing this, the wise man, the disciple of the Buddha, does not delight even in heavenly pleasures, but rejoices in the cessation of craving (nibbāna)."

(*Dhammapada* vv 35, 186, 187)