

# The dharmic foundations of the reflective meditation approach

~ by Winton Higgins • [wintonhiggins.org](http://wintonhiggins.org)

On exposure to the reflective meditation approach (or its predecessor, recollective awareness) people often ask: what has it got to do with the dharma? How ‘Buddhist’ is it? It’s a natural question, given how starkly reflective meditation diverges from more mainstream Buddhist – and especially Theravādin – formulaic, technique-driven practices, such as the various forms of *vipassanā*. And for this reason it necessarily diverges from ubiquitous forms of *vipassanā*-derived mindfulness meditation.

Another reason this question crops up a lot is that some teachers of this approach deliberately refrain from explicit talk about the dharma in the context of practice, because they fear that meditators will – consciously or unconsciously – skew and express their meditative experience to align with dharmic concepts and expectations, and thus lose a full and authentic sense of their actual experience. This fear seems to arise from the approach’s critique of formulaic meditation practices – that they dismiss a great deal of our actual meditative experience as ‘not meditation’.

I agree with the criticism of the formulaic practices, but I don’t think the fear of dharmic concepts is justified. So my short answer is that reflective meditation has *everything* to do with the dharma. Indeed it takes the direct route back to the dharma itself rather than approaching it via the labyrinthine detour of the *Abhidhamma* – to which I’ll return to in a moment.

We should invite our mind – using Barry Magid’s phrase – to display its contents; *all* its contents, so we see the whole pattern of our complex, layered experience. But we must also complement our meditation practice with the greatest possible familiarity with the core of the dharma that we can cultivate. We need the core of the dharma at our fingertips. The Buddha himself taught meditation on this basis.

The dharma as taught by the Buddha provides us with the language with which to gradually come to ‘clearly know’ – clearly *understand* – our experience. To express it and interpret it, both internally and in communion with our dharma friends. That’s

what *the culture of awakening* is all about – what we collectively and together are trying to bring forth. For while meditation is an intimate practice, it's also a communal endeavour – a communicable and interpretive process – otherwise we hyper-individualise it, psychologise it, and thereby impoverish it.

## **Dharmic roots of reflective meditation**

The reflective approach to meditation arose in the long-established dharmic practice of *insight meditation*, which remains its main home. Insight meditation has an obvious foundational text – the *Satipatthāna sutta*, which is the Buddha's principal teaching on meditation in general and on insight meditation in particular. These days, this practice is sometimes simplified and rebadged as 'mindfulness meditation'. On the other hand, practitioners who want to restore it to its original subtlety and complexity call it 'satipatthāna practice'.

But isn't this what the vipassanā schools themselves are doing? Well no. These schools grow out of the *Abhidhamma* – a later monastic rewrite and drastic reinterpretation of the Buddha's teaching. Vipassanā techniques and formulas rely heavily on the *Abhidhamma*, not on the *sutta*. The *sutta* is rather complex, which is why it's a favourite study text for secular Buddhist sanghas and practitioners of reflective meditation.

In the *sutta*, the Buddha first suggests that we set up the right conditions for the practice. To paraphrase him: go to the forest, or to the root of a tree, or to an empty hut; sit down by folding our legs crosswise, set our body erect; and establish awareness in front of us. Be attentive, and let go of fretting about and hankering for worldly things. Then we can get to the heart of dharmic meditation, and the substance of the *sutta*.

The *sutta* takes its underlying structure from what the Buddha called the four aspects of *sati*, that is, the *satipatthānas* of the *sutta*'s title. From a practice perspective, *sati* may well be the most vital word the Buddha used. It comes from a root verb meaning *to recollect*, but he used it in such a way that it also imports attention, awareness, alertness. So 'reflective awareness' is probably the best translation of *sati* we have, certainly far more inclusive than the conventional 'mindfulness'.

Very often in the *sutta*, the Buddha uses a compound word, *satisampajāñña* – not just being aware of our experience, but 'clearly knowing' it. That is, understanding it in

real time and in context, as it unfolds. Once we sharpen our attention to our experience in real time, we see that it's very complex and layered. No doubt for this reason the Buddha pragmatically suggests in the sutta that we break our experience down into four aspects: bodily experience, feeling tone, mind states and moods, and the cognitive contents of mind *as filtered through key dharmic concepts*.

You'll notice there's a logical (but not temporal) sequence here. It starts with the relatively basic and tangible sorts of experience, those to do with the body and the physical senses. The sequence then moves up into more and more subtle experiences. But this is a sequence, *not* a hierarchy, as our embodiment remains the sounding board for all experience. Feelings, moods and thoughts all have knock-on effects in what we experience in our body. Meditation is not something that goes on just in the head.

To 'clearly know' our experience is not just to be able to make a list of them, but to understand them in context, *dynamically*. At the most fundamental level we notice that all experiences arise, persist for a while, and then fade away. Nothing lasts, and so it has no enduring core or substance. We might also notice that almost all of our experience is *turbulent* because it relates to our fundamental human condition as vulnerable, desiring and ever-changing beings living with conditions that are themselves constantly shifting and indifferent to us (or positively disquieting).

Knowing a spot of basic dharma can alert us to this dynamic pattern: we experience first hand that vital little list of *the three characteristics of existence*: impermanence, *dukkha* (i.e., the essential difficulties we face in life) and not-self. This list isn't just book-learning – it's right there in our lived experience! We might also notice that our experience unfolds in interlacing cause and effect relationships. Ah, so *dependent arising* (aka 'contingency') – the Buddha's central philosophical idea – is for real too!

Everything arises according shifting conditions. So where's the 'Me' in all this: She or He Who Decides, the One it's all about? Well, when we look carefully at the total wealth of our experience, we find no such entity has been there – no footprints or fingerprints, no traces of DNA in any moment of our experience. We've stumbled onto something quite radical here – something at first scary, but (when we let it permeate our understanding) something deeply liberating.

The practitioners who heard the Buddha delivering this sutta already knew their dharmic concepts. He was expounding it late in his life, and had developed the concepts and basic teachings decades earlier. Even the *satipatthanas* themselves – the four focuses of awareness: they had also appeared, however cryptically, in much earlier teachings. But now he was elaborating them and relating them directly to meditation practice.

And when he got to the fourth aspect (cognitive contents of mind – thoughts, images, stories etc.) he suggested that his listeners sort them according to his by then well known lists: the five hindrances, the five ‘heaps’ or bundles of experience, the six sense-spheres, the seven awakening factors, and the four great tasks. All of which they had at their fingertips. In this way, the sutta (and the practice it prescribes) refracts and contains the whole buddhadharma.

In other words, the Buddha had already laid the foundations of a *culture of awakening*, and he delivered the sutta from within it. Evidently, he entertained no fears that knowledge of these foundations would distort his followers’ meditation experience. On the contrary, he’s essentially asking them to milk these foundations for all their worth, in order to clearly know and understand their own experience.

### **Making the path our own**

Does the Buddha give those listening to the sutta specific techniques and formulas to apply, step by step? Does he spoon feed them? Not on your sweet nelly he doesn’t! He doesn’t talk about body scanning, primary and secondary objects, watching the breath at the nose or the abdomen, or the 17 ‘insight knowledges’ – paraphernalia derived not from this sutta but from the *Abhidhamma*. His pedagogy is the opposite to spoon feeding. He uses the four aspects of awareness to open up a cornucopia of possibilities for how our meditative experience might unfold, and where we can take it.

At the beginning of the sutta, he describes this practice as ‘the direct path to realisation’, but clearly this is a *DIY* path, not an ants’ caravan. We get told what the journey is all about, what might turn up along the way, and handed a compass. Each of us clears and prepares her own path, depending on her unique life experience and proclivities. Each of us needs to take responsibility for our practice, working with the possibilities that the sutta opens up.

Insight meditation using the reflective approach exemplifies this teaching. The approach is only controversial because it goes directly to the sutta, and so bypasses the *Abhidhamma* and its formulaic meditative byproducts. The sutta constitutes an important part of the Buddha's own exposition of the dharma, and in compressed format contains virtually his whole teaching.

### **Receiving the dharma, imaginatively**

In what spirit should we as modern western meditators approach the dharma itself? We should not only read or listen to what (as far as we can know) the Buddha said, but also the whole situation in which he spoke, including his audience. They lived in a preliterate society which relied on oral transmission, yet they were learned people. A learned person was defined at the time as 'one who had heard a lot'. And presumably inwardly digested it as well – something that comes naturally if you're carrying teachings around in your head instead of in a book or digital device.

It was a quite different way of absorbing learning, one that some still appreciate. For instance, the late, great literary critic, Harold Bloom, claimed you couldn't write great poetry if you hadn't *memorised* swathes of other people's great poetry. We need an internal library of forms, imagery, cadence and tone to call on when we write our own lines. Bloom was implicitly acknowledging that such an individual practice as writing poetry is in fact a *communal* practice. Just like dharma practice.

Two points arise for us here. Firstly, as I indicated at the beginning, meditation is another such *personal* practice that is at the same time *communal*. It turns on the third refuge, community or *sangha*, in which we can communicate with each other using a shared language, shared terms, and shared values. Without that shared language we can't even communicate with ourselves; we have no vocabulary with which to articulate our inner life. In the reflective meditation approach we're encouraged to communicate with and through our practice community.

Journalling our meditative experience can supplement this communal and communicative aspect. We can even treat it as a standalone practice. It helps us to track our experience, and it helps us to interpret it – to 'clearly know' it. And once we put it down on paper, it 'clears a space' in our minds for new inputs instead of leaving us to endlessly churn over the old ones for fear of forgetting and losing them. In itself journalling can be a way of letting go, a way of processing our life, as any serious diarist will tell you.

## In conclusion

Insight meditation practised in reflective mode is a quintessential dharma practice. Moreover, our culture of awakening depends on the communal nature of our practice, and both of them depend on our absorbing the dharma as a vital resource in our practice.

One of my earlier teachers said a meditator should be like a spider (think: one of our common or garden Australian east-coast orb weaver spiders) sitting in the middle of its elaborate and extensive web. Come the least tremor, and the spider knows exactly where in that web the disturbance is coming from, and races to it. We should know the dharma like the spider knows its web, and be able to instantaneously access the relevant part of it.

To understand the dharmic basis of this approach to insight meditation, and also its communal nature, is to overcome a problem that meditators sometimes report: a sense of skidding their wheels, of facing the same old mental routines day after day, of ‘not getting anywhere’ and becoming dispirited. Without a living relationship with the dharma and our practice community, we can gravitate into the syndrome I mentioned at the beginning, of hyper-individualising, psychologising, and thereby impoverishing our practice.

But by bringing the dharma to bear on our practice we can invigorate it with one of those all-important seven factors of enlightenment – the spirit of inquiry (*dhamma vicaya*).

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