

Living by Meditation Alone

Buddhism reduced to just meditation is a spiritual dead end.

By [Lama Jampa Thaye](#)



Illustration by James Thacher

One of the most insistent trends on offer in the spiritual marketplace has been the cult of meditation, which has had important implications for Buddhism. [Secular mindfulness](#) has found a place in society, but occupying a somewhat different cultural and spiritual space, a new Buddhism has emerged alongside it. Its adherents claim that the fruits of the Buddhist tradition can be acquired through sitting meditation alone. Contemporary practitioners, in other words, need not bother with study, ethical precepts, ritual practice (other than meditation), or merit making. The proponents of the “just sitting” trend often claim the mantle of

traditional systems, whether Theravada Vipassana, Japanese Zen, or Tibetan Dzogchen. All share the assumption that meditation must be as non-conceptual in content as possible, and that all other forms of activity can be largely, if not entirely, ignored.

While these new meditation programs are called Buddhist, their presentations of meditation run counter to those of the dharma from all periods of Buddhist history. Indeed, the most clearly defined and often cited status of meditation within Buddhist doctrine and practice positions it as one of the three trainings, the other two being ethics and wisdom. When one examines the place of meditation in the Vajrayana in particular, one finds again that it is not considered a self-sufficient means of spiritual accomplishment. It comes second in the triad of view, meditation, and action. *View* signifies the correct vision of reality that the Vajrayana master imparts to the student, and *meditation* signifies the subsequent development and stabilisation of the glimpse afforded by this introduction. Thus, it is only through both view and meditation, together with their enactment and testing in *action*, that one could even approach spiritual accomplishment.

Reacting to the demand for an entirely non-conceptual form of meditation, Buddhist reformers have clamoured to reimagine bare sitting as the core or entirety of Buddhism, a drive that animates a considerable part of the modern refashioning of dharma. While mere sitting may produce certain mental effects, one must nonetheless ask, *To what end?* Unallied with any ethical imperative and directed by unexamined assumptions, meditation becomes a purely internal mental technology. In other words, such allegedly non-conceptual meditation will, at best, be a neutral activity. Unmoored from the Buddha's teachings, it cannot lead to the particular compassion and wisdom that he taught.

It is ignorance of this vital point that frequently leads neophytes to overrate their meditation experiences, occasionally with catastrophic outcomes. Experiences of non-conceptuality, bliss, or clarity, all of which are common but fleeting, leave some individuals imagining they are enlightened.

The more fortunate subsequently discover that they have fooled themselves. The less fortunate, though perhaps more ambitious, simply proceed to redefine the actual nature of enlightenment so as to preserve their status. *Enlightenment* becomes merely a term for a transient meditation experience. This gets around the awkwardness of the fact that such “enlightened” meditators are still, after all, beings subject to disturbing emotions and ignorance.

More seriously, such free-floating meditation is ripe for subversion to whatever political or economic ends its proponents prefer. It easily absorbs the values of the most unsavoury elements of our culture. Worse, many meditators, thinking they are practicing the essence of the dharma, remain completely ignorant of the ideological commitments that might come to underpin the meditation they practice. In our society, this is likely to be a ruthless individualism congenial to both the market and state.

To compensate for this, meditation in the West grounds itself in a *mélange* of self-indulgence and gesture politics masquerading as compassion—a “compassion,” it must be said, that cannot see beyond self-regard. The result is the same vapid posturing that dominates so much of contemporary culture.

If current trends continue, meditation will become a mere app for stress-free living. In other words, it will simply come to accommodate the harmful consumption-driven lifestyles that still characterise much of life in wealthy Western countries. In such a scenario meditation would serve as a reinforcing agent to stabilise delusion.

In any event, it seems foolish to deny that the severing of meditation from ethics and wisdom could produce undesirable consequences. Given that many of us have little education in the dharma, the potential for misappropriation and derailing of Buddhism is huge. One of our major problems is the difficulty of convincing people to take training in Buddhist ethics seriously. Knowing so little about the dharma, many don’t have a worldview that supports such training.

One possible solution for this dilemma is to initially teach meditation alone in order to meet what seems to be a popular demand, and only later introduce the ethical and philosophical dimensions of the dharma. But unless links are made quickly and authoritatively to the other two

trainings, a negative outcome is more likely to develop from this strategy than genuine spiritual progress.

Perhaps the best answer for our dilemma is to teach all three trainings more or less simultaneously, while being mindful of the logic to their sequential development. A student's progress in one training will enable progress in the others. As the reordering of our life, brought about by moral training, creates the environment for meditation, the stillness of mind created by meditation will make possible the examination of reality that is the hallmark of wisdom.

[Lama Jampa Thaye](#) is a scholar, author, and meditation teacher from the UK.

-