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## Experiencing the Path: A Practicum-Based Inquiry into ‘Samatha’ and ‘Vipassanā’ Techniques of Buddhist Meditation.

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### Abstract

Through a ten-day retreat, this research paper investigates Buddhist meditation practices and links theory with personal practise. To move past textual approaches, the study applies mindful exercises to experience samatha meditation and vipassanā directly, mainly in the Theravāda Buddhist tradition. By studying the Satipatṭhāna Sutta and the Visuddhimagga, the paper investigates the process of developing these practices during a structured retreat and the effects they have on body, mind and perception. Over time, reflections and daily meditation logs reveal the way the practitioner is exploring impermanence, suffering and the reality of non-self as they happen in life. It is found that ongoing meditation supports focus, emotional management and morals, showing how theory and real life in Buddhism are aligned. This paper suggests that doing Dhamma practice deeply helps researchers see its transformative impact and makes a compelling argument for introducing meditation into studies. Because the writer studied and shared his own experience thoughtfully, the work is meaningful for those interested in the relationship between spiritual practice and scholarly study.

**Keywords:** compelling, transformative, meditation, practitioner

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### Introduction

Long believed to be the central practice in the Buddha’s approach, Buddhist meditation is now attracting increasing interest from spiritual practitioners as well as from experts in different fields. In Buddhism, meditation serves not just for reducing stress or improving mental health, but for growing wisdom about life’s nature and escaping the pain of suffering (dukkha)<sup>1</sup>. Many writings have appeared about Buddhist doctrines, but few discuss meditation from a personal and lived experience. The goal of this study is to address that gap by practicing meditation, while studying texts and observing Theravāda practices at a retreat.

Buddhism is usually explained as something you practice, rather than something you believe. On this path, meditative practice is central and it is usually understood as either samatha (calm-abiding meditation) or vipassanā (insight meditation)<sup>2</sup>. Samatha helps a person achieve deep peacefulness by keeping the mind extremely still, while vipassana works to open awareness to key traditional Buddhist ideas such as impermanence, suffering and no self. Even though these two are different practices, they are used together to achieve the same goal: liberation (nibbāna). The Satipatṭhāna Sutta explains in detail how someone can focus on the body, different feelings, the mind and its various states in mindfulness meditation<sup>3</sup>.

In recent years, psychologists began to study Buddhist meditation outside its religion which helped create MBSR and similar movements. Although these ways of teaching have certainly made meditation well-known in the West, they sometimes remove its spiritual and moral purpose.<sup>4</sup>

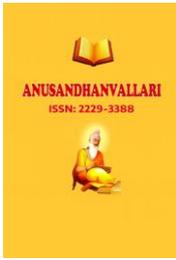
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<sup>1</sup> Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Henepola Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English* (Wisdon Publication, 2002)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald Purser and David Loy, *Beyond McMindfulness*, *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, 2013.



To resolve this problem, this study applies a practical approach by exploring meditation as taught and practiced in a current retreat environment. The study builds on a ten-day practice retreat focused on the principles of Mahāsi Sayādaw and S. N. Goenka<sup>5</sup>, leading teachers in the recent reintroduction of Theravāda vipassanā around the world. Every day, people kept reflections on their journals, helping us analyze how their thoughts, feelings and embodied understandings were evolving. Autoethnography agrees with the idea that learning about spiritual practices comes from both observing them and being involved.

A large number of studies now suggest that this approach is beneficial. Many scholars such as Francisco Varela, suggest employing first-person methods in the cognitive area to study consciousness and mental practice<sup>6</sup>. It is becoming clearer in religious studies that paying attention to personal, physical experiences is valuable, especially for traditions where experience plays a crucial role in how knowledge is passed on such as in Buddhism<sup>7</sup>.

This paper aims to present first how meditation is learned, practiced and absorbed in a traditional retreat context and second from what we learn in the retreat setting, to get keen understanding of philosophical and psychological core of Buddhist meditation. This approach allows for an expanding discussion between scholars and meditators about both the tradition of writings and the ability of meditation to change.

### Methodology

The methodology for this study involves study along with personal experience through Buddhist meditation. Unlike only reading or observing from the outside, this approach believes that in-person experiences matter in learning. I use principles from autoethnography, first-person phenomenology and contemplative methods in my work. I have structured the study as an autoethnographic account of what it means to attend a 10 day retreat guided by S.N.Goenka along with Mahāsi Sayādaw tradition. Using Autoethnography helps researchers share and explain their experience in order to highlight cultural and philosophical aspects of their study. Reviewing the field journal notes helped reveal on repeated occasions an increase in mindfulness, contact with challenges, knowledge of change and growing evenness in feelings and mind state. Afterward, these findings were reviewed in relation to official texts and recent explanations of Buddhist meditation.

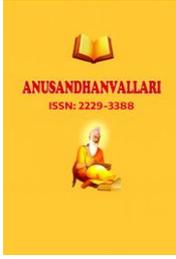
In this study, we take guidance from contemplative research approaches which highlight fairness between subjective and objective knowledge. In this approach, the researcher both takes part in and observes the study, just as the Buddhist principle suggests we must see for ourselves what is true (ehipassiko). The main problem with this approach is that it depends on individual opinions. Because researchers have unique experiences, their findings may not be the same as those in other traditions. Being subjective in this way is not a bad thing—it's a unique strength of contemplative research. As the research was focused on observing inner forces, I used post-retreat reflection to separate coming ideas from my own personal instincts. Also, traditional approaches were checked to be certain the new understanding matched.

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<sup>5</sup> Erik Braun, *The Birth of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism, and the Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Francisco Varela and Jonathan Shear, *First-Person Methodologies: What, Why, How?*, *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 6(2–3) (1999): 1–14.

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Samuel, *The Origins of Yoga and Tantra: Indic Religions to the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).



### Historical Background

The way Buddhist meditation has developed reflects many changes from centuries of doctrines, cultural interactions and hands-on testing. Based on the teachings of Siddhārtha Gautama, the Buddhist's liberation path (nibbāna) is centered around meditation which has adjusted both its methods and purposes at different times and locations.

**Early Indian Foundations:** Buddhist meditation grew out of a cultural setting in India in the 5th–6th century BCE, during which various śramaṇa groups urged people to think wisely and control their lives through contemplation<sup>8</sup>. In these intense times, Siddhārtha Gautama came up with a system focused on watching your thoughts closely and leading an ethical life, with the objective of overcoming suffering. The Meditation as Described in Lord Buddha's Enlightenment was his understanding of existing practices can be seen in his account of how he overcame suffering, recorded in the Ariyapariyesanā Sutta (MN 26)<sup>9</sup>. To begin with, he studied the formless absorptions (arūpa-jhānas) with Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta, but later decided they could not help him end suffering. Buddha gained his understanding not by studying deep metaphysics, but by experiencing the world for himself during deep meditation under the Bodhi tree—mentioning that everything in life is anicca, dukkha and anattā<sup>10</sup>. From these bases, the Buddha created a detailed program of meditation, placing special importance on ethical actions (sīla), training the mind (samādhi) and gaining wisdom (paññā)—the reasons behind the threefold training (tisikkhā) adopted as the main beliefs in Buddhist practice.

In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and the Ānāpānasati Sutta, we find thorough meditation instructions using direct observation of the body and mind. The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta explains that the Buddha teaches 4 Foundations of Mindfulness (satipaṭṭhāna).

1. Body Contemplation (kāyānupassanā),
2. Feelings Contemplation (vedanānupassanā),
3. Mind Contemplation (cittānupassanā),
4. Mental Objects Contemplation (dhammānupassanā)<sup>11</sup>.

They allow us to notice our breath as it changes, let go of our thoughts and grasp the idea that all things change over time. It should be remembered that these instructions were made for both monastics and lay followers, shown in some of the teachings given to householders<sup>12</sup>.

At the same time, the Ānāpānasati Sutta describes the practice of mindfulness of breathing in sixteen clear steps that bring together noticing the body, controlling feelings and understanding that impermanence affects everything. Today, this technique is used broadly by Buddhists and the Buddha supported it as a complete meditation method that can bring total freedom<sup>13</sup>.

Early Buddhist meditation also involves working on jhānas which combine deep concentration, a sense of joy and equanimity. It is explained in Dīgha Nikāya and Majjhima Nikāya that the four material jhānas help purify the mind and help stabilize it before any insightful practice<sup>14</sup>. Nevertheless, the Buddha pointed out that reaching

<sup>8</sup> Johannes Bronkhorst, Greater Magadha: Studies in the Culture of Early India (Brill, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Nāṇamoli Bhikkhu & Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya (Wisdom Publications, 1995), MN 26.

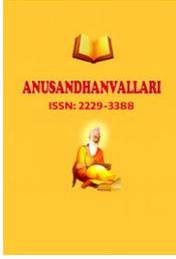
<sup>10</sup> Richard Gombrich, What the Buddha Thought (Equinox Publishing, 2009), Ch. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Bhikkhu Anālayo, Satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization (Windhorse Publications, 2003), pp. 43–72.

<sup>12</sup> Anālayo, Satipaṭṭhāna, pp. 176–179.

<sup>13</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya (Wisdom Publications, 2000), SN 54

<sup>14</sup> Ajahn Brahm, Mindfulness, Bliss, Beyond: A Meditator's Handbook (Wisdom Publications, 2006), pp. 2550.



jhānic absorption is not enough to be liberated unless your vision for the true nature things improves as well. The mixing of methods for tranquilization (samatha) and awareness (vipassanā) was central to early Buddhist meditation and this continues to influence practices in Theravāda and Mahāyāna<sup>15</sup>.

Behind the instructions on meditation is a thorough philosophy that is anchored in the doctrine of dependent origination and describes how suffering starts and how it can be removed. As a result, meditation is not only a mental activity but an active way of seeing how certain things in us develop and pass which releases us from craving and ignorance<sup>16</sup>. As a result, Hindu Buddhist meditation was something individuals could do to relieve suffering by studying themselves and learning from what they noticed during their practice. As found in the Pāli Canon and shared in later writings, these basic methods form the main experience for modern Buddhist meditation and current investigative practice.

**Classical Period and Scholastic Elaboration:** From the third century BCE stretching to fifth century CE, a major change occurred in how meditative techniques were taught and organized. At this time, ways of practicing Buddhist meditation were defined in manuals, more closely connected to emerging Abhidharma traditions and influenced by the new ideas in Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna. During this time, teachers moved from guiding meditation by practice to explaining its laws and principles in schools.

The Abhidharma caused Scholastic Meditation to rise in the tradition, After the Buddha died, Buddhist communities worked to save, study and restrict his teachings which brought about the Abhidhamma Piṭaka in the Theravāda tradition and similar Abhidharma systems in the Sarvāstivāda and other traditions<sup>17</sup>. The goal of these writings was to separate every phenomenon into its simplest form, giving a close view of what students could notice during meditation about both mind and body. In the Theravāda Abhidhamma, consciousness, mental factors and matter are sorted into detailed groups corresponding to what is seen in vipassanā meditation<sup>18</sup>. This way of learning guides helped to structure meditation instruction, making the methods used by monks more controlled and similar. The Visuddhimagga is considered the most authoritative explanation of Theravāda meditation in the world. During this period in Theravāda, the publication of Visuddhimagga (Path of Purification) by the 5th-century scholar-monk Buddhaghosa was the most important literary work<sup>19</sup>. This manual became the standard work for learning Buddhist meditation in Sri Lanka and was used later in Southeast Asia. By examining sīla (ethics), samādhi (concentration) and paññā (wisdom), the book presents:

1. Forty meditation subjects (kammaṭṭhāna), including breath, loving-kindness (mettā), corpse contemplation, and color kasinas.
2. A detailed map of the jhānas (concentration attainments) and their corresponding mental factors.
3. The “sixteen insight knowledges” (vipassanā ñāṇas) leading to the realization of nibbāna.
4. A narrative and psychological framework for understanding progress and obstacles on the path.

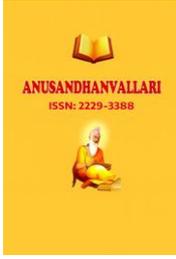
<sup>15</sup> Paul Griffiths, On Being Mindless: Buddhist Meditation and the Mind-Body Problem, Journal of the American Academy of Religion 47(4) (1979): 651–678.

<sup>16</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi, The Noble Eightfold Path: Way to the End of Suffering (BPS, 1994)

<sup>17</sup> Collett Cox, Abhidharma Buddhism to 150 A.D. (Brill, 1988).

<sup>18</sup> Y. Karunadasa, The Theravāda Abhidhamma: Its Inquiry into the Nature of Conditioned Reality (BPS/Wisdom Publications, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (tr.), The Path of Purification: Visuddhimagga by Buddhaghosa (BPS, 2011).



Because he added Abhidhamma ideas to his approach, the Visuddhimagga can be used for meditation as well as for studying Buddhist philosophy, bringing together the religious, practical and theoretical parts of Buddhism<sup>20</sup>. It is strongly felt today, especially where Theravāda is practiced and in groups focused on vipassanā.

New Practices in Mahāyāna Meditation, Above all, Mahāyāna Buddhism progressed, leading to the introduction of different philosophical views and meditation routines. Following the examples of the Perfection of Wisdom (Prajñāpāramitā) texts, Mahāyāna teachings focused on emptiness (sūnyatā), union and dedicating oneself to the Bodhisattva ideal. Thus, interested people practiced meditation for both personal freedom and to build widespread compassion and a strong intent to help all beings reach enlightenment.<sup>21</sup>

The books Śūraṅgama Sūtra, Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra and Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra described detailed methods of mental practice.

1. Visualization of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (e.g., Amitābha in Pure Land Buddhism).
2. Contemplation of emptiness and interdependence using Madhyamaka dialectics.
3. Zen/Chan practices emphasizing sudden realization (satori) and direct transmission beyond words<sup>22</sup>.

Thus, Mahāyāna expanded the scope of meditative practice from a focus on personal insight to universal liberation, often fusing philosophy with symbolic and ritual elements.

Vajrayāna uses mantra and mandala as meditation practices. During the late classical period, Vajrayāna Buddhism began in India and Tibet, bringing more meaning and influence to Buddhist meditation. In Vajrayāna, mantras, mandalas, seed syllables and visualizing deities are key tools for helping a practitioner change both their self-awareness and view of reality rapidly. Many saw tantric meditation as involving “purity of perception,” where everything a person observes is enlightened. Deity Yoga, Guru Yoga and Mahamudra were said to help practitioners reach realization more quickly by blurring the difference between subject and object with proper instruction<sup>23</sup>. The meditative tradition of Vajrayāna complemented its intellectual traditions with mysterious rituals. As a result, it needed to keep strict guidelines regarding who was permitted to receive new teachings (samaya). While Vajrayāna practices are more organized than the first, they still follow the Buddha’s directions for a personal spiritual journey—though its methods are made symbolic.

Cross-Traditional Legacy, The result of the classical period was that meditation practice was both ordered by various texts and expanded by the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna movements. Since the time of the Buddha, these two approaches have shaped how modern Buddhist practice is carried out, especially during retreats and in therapy programs<sup>24</sup>. In the current study which emphasizes practical experiences, honest reflection and early core teachings, discipline in observing the mind is continued and the long history of evolution among Buddhist meditation practices is acknowledged.

**Modern Revival Movements:** During the 1800s and continuing into the 1900s, meditation practices were transformed and rediscovered mainly because of colonialism, globalization and an increase in the spread of education. In Myanmar (Burma), monks Ledi Sayādaw and Mahāsi Sayādaw spread interest in vipassanā meditation by making it useful for the everyday person and arranging it in shorter retreats<sup>25</sup>. The way he guided

<sup>20</sup> Rupert Gethin, Meditation and Mental Cultivation in the Pali Tradition, Journal of the Pali Text Society 21 (1995): 201–226.

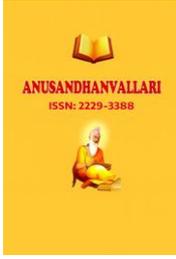
<sup>21</sup> Paul Williams, Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations (Routledge, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> Heinrich Dumoulin, Zen Buddhism: A History (India and China) (Macmillan, 1988).

<sup>23</sup> Robert Beer, The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols (Shambhala, 2003).

<sup>24</sup> Chögyam Trungpa, The Path of Individual Liberation (Shambhala, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> Erik Braun, The Birth of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism, and the Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw (University of Chicago Press, 2013).



practitioners, by noticing things as they happen, became popular all around the world. In India, Vipassanā techniques were strongly propagated by lay followers in the Goenka tradition. Based on the teachings of the Sayagi U-Ba-Khin, S.N.Goenka introduced ten-day silent retreats on body scanning (vipassanā through vedanānupassanā), by stressing that the same practice is for all and can be verified by personal experience. Thanks to its discipline and accessible ways of teaching, this model has become known around the world and guides the training used in this study<sup>26</sup>.

**Worldwide Distribution and Secular Consideration:** Currently, mindfulness-based forms of Buddhist meditation are used more broadly. These methods are guided by Buddhism, but tend to focus more on psychological benefits and therapy than on old goals of spiritual enlightenment<sup>27</sup>. Even so, people continue to practice traditional Buddhist meditation in temples and at home and more attempts are being made to bring direct experience into academic investigation. The present study is part of this recent development, blending the study of texts with real practice, drawing on both the textual background and everyday experience of meditation.

### Practicum Experience: Meditation Retreat

As the last section, the practicum part involved fully taking part in a 10 day silent Vipassanā retreat in tradition of S.N.Goenka, who had learned it under Sayagi U Ba Khin. In a peaceful, local tradition in India, I practiced the Ānāpānasati and Vipassanā methods as they were recorded by Theravāda schools. Rather than observing only, I used meditation as the central area for exploring, using self-notes, notes from others and self-observation to create observations.

All communication during the retreat was allowed only with teachers or the management, since everyone involved wanted to learn in an environment of noble silence (ariyo mauna). They did not read, write (just their field journals) or make eye contact which helped them achieve isolation of the sense faculties (indriya-saṃvara)<sup>28</sup>.

Participants started their day at 4:00 AM, meditated formally for about ten hours and continued up to 9:00 PM each day. There were three parts to how the curriculum was carried out.

1. Days 1–3: Ānāpānasati (mindfulness of natural breath) for sharpening concentration (samādhi).
2. Days 4–9: Vipassanā bhāvanā (insight meditation) involving systematic body scanning to observe impermanence (anicca).
3. Day 10: Mettā bhāvanā (loving-kindness meditation) to conclude the retreat with emotional balance and compassion.

This structure paralleled classical models from early Buddhist texts like the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and Ānāpānasati Sutta, offering an opportunity to validate textual theory against lived experience<sup>29</sup>. Throughout the retreat, people recorded information about their bodies, feelings and thoughts in a daily meditation journal four times per day. The reason for using this approach is that it fits well with the style of research typically used in contemplative studies<sup>30</sup>.

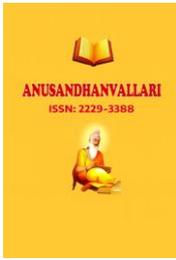
<sup>26</sup> S. N. Goenka, *The Art of Living: Vipassana Meditation as Taught by S. N. Goenka* (Vipassana Research Institute, 1994).

<sup>27</sup> Ronald Purser and David Loy, *Beyond Mindfulness, Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* (2013).

<sup>28</sup> Bhikkhu Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization* (Windhorse, 2003), pp. 45–49.

<sup>29</sup> . Nāṇamoli Bhikkhu & Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (Wisdom, 1995), MN 10 & MN 118.

<sup>30</sup> Claire Petitmengin, *The Neurophenomenology of Meditation*, in *Handbook of Mindfulness* (Springer, 2014).



There were three ways to categorize the entries:

1. Physical Observations (e.g., pain, tingling, lightness, warmth),
2. Emotional Dynamics (e.g., restlessness, tranquility, irritation, joy),
3. Cognitive Activity (e.g., imagery, mental talk, distractions),
4. Meditative Insight (e.g., recognition of impermanence, non-self, clarity).

For example, by Day 5, the journal reads: “Pain in the lower back dissolved into vibration. No longer ‘my pain’ but a process arising and passing. Brief flash of joy at this insight, followed by clinging to the joy itself—then suffering.”<sup>31</sup> this circle demonstrates that dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) shows that suffering is caused not by things as they are, but by our craving and our anger. A number of patterns were seen during the retreat.

1. A lack of sound made bodily sensations clearer, noticeable by Day 3 (for example, warmth and a beating). This relates to the part of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice described in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*<sup>32</sup>.
2. Between Days 6–7, I realized that sensations came and went in the body, rather than focusing on it being a constant thing. It became curious as my skin moved from painful to numb to itchy. Understanding *anicca* this way was very important for me.
3. The more uncomfortable we were, often because of fighting our own minds, the harder it was to remain sitting still. When resistance decreased, suffering lessened, proving the accuracy of the Buddhist psychological model of the Second Noble Truth.
4. With more time, participants developed even-tempered reactions and noticed their instability became less frequent. After some fluctuations, attention settled at a new stable level which pointed to improved *upekkhā*, a main quality obtained through *vipassanā*<sup>33</sup>.

These insights align with both traditional Buddhist frameworks and contemporary scholarship in contemplative science. The subjective reports resonate with findings in neurophenomenology and Buddhist psychology, which treat first-person data as epistemologically valid under rigorous conditions<sup>34</sup>. For instance, the transition from pain to sensation without affective overlay mirrors clinical studies on mindfulness and pain regulation<sup>35</sup>. More importantly, the retreat underscored that meditation is not a cognitive exercise or emotional management tool alone—it is a radical epistemology and existential method. The meditation hall becomes a lab where concepts like *anattā*, *dukkha*, and *anicca* are not believed but known through direct, repeatable experience..

### Conclusion.

The practicum-based exploration of Buddhist meditation, situated within a structured retreat format, affirms the historical and doctrinal coherence of meditation as both a philosophical and experiential path. By engaging directly with techniques outlined in foundational texts such as the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and interpreted through scholastic elaborations like the *Visuddhimagga*, the retreat revealed the continuity between canonical theory and lived phenomenology. The retreat experience demonstrated that concepts such as *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha*

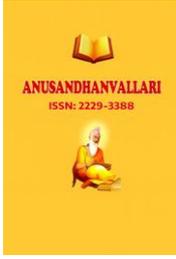
<sup>31</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha* (Wisdom, 2000), SN 12.1–12.65.

<sup>32</sup> Rupert Gethin, *Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 171–178.

<sup>33</sup> Daniel Goleman & Richard J. Davidson, *Altered Traits: Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain, and Body* (Penguin, 2017), Ch. 6.

<sup>34</sup> Evan Thompson, *Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy* (Columbia University Press, 2014), pp. 120–135.

<sup>35</sup> Jon Kabat-Zinn et al., *Alterations in Brain and Immune Function Produced by Mindfulness Meditation*, *PNAS* 101.35 (2003): 10570–10574



(unsatisfactoriness), and *anattā* (non-self) are not abstract metaphysical propositions but observable truths accessible through disciplined introspection. The progressive refinement of attention, coupled with the emergence of equanimity and insight, mirrors the traditional Buddhist path of *bhāvanā* (mental cultivation), validating centuries of transmission across Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions. Moreover, the embodied realization of these insights supports the claim that Buddhist meditation is not merely a psychological technique but a soteriological system aimed at existential transformation. The use of micro-phenomenological journaling further supports the integration of first-person methodology into contemplative research, bridging ancient practice with contemporary academic standards. Ultimately, this study concludes that the Buddhist meditation practicum serves both as a method to inner observation and powerful epistemological tool, one that dissolves dualities between theory and experience, observer and observed, self and world, thus reinforcing the relevance of traditional Buddhist soteriology in both modern contemplative science and personal transformation.

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