

# Refl' Acti💡n

## Travelling the same river through different waters: reflections from the world of meditation

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## Traveling the same river through different waters: reflections from the world of meditation

*The world turns softly  
Not to spill its lakes and rivers.  
The water is held in its arms  
And the sky is held in the water.  
What is water,  
That pours silver,  
And can hold the sky?<sup>1</sup>*

The history of meditation practices is ancient and complex. It collects centuries of philosophical and religious evolutions that draw on many distinct cultures and countries. This article will briefly introduce the most significant meditative thought schools, retracing their historical places and times. This will be followed by a short interview with Arturas Deltuva<sup>2</sup>, a Vipassana<sup>3</sup> expert who kindly agreed to tell us about his experience in the world of meditation. One of the most problematic aspects of dealing with meditation in writing is that most schools of meditative thought prefer the oral and experiential form to the written one. Therefore, our purpose will not be to describe or define the indescribable or the indefinable but to provide some hints or brief reflections on the points where meditation, contemplation, and reflection converge.

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<sup>1</sup> Conkling, Hilda, *Poems by a Little Girl*, Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1920 [to know more about](#)

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<sup>3</sup> The term means "to see deeply, insight" refers to a specific meditative technique of Indian origin, focused on acquiring control over the senses and passions of the soul to develop the ability to concentrate and mental and spiritual serenity.

## Habitus: habit as a common interpretation key in meditative practices

Among the ancient Romans, the word *habitus* played a fundamental role. The term referred not only to clothing, different for each position and social class but also, conceptually, to what we now call habit. The repeated action of time forms the character or body of the person who performs it. Although the Latin term is from a masculine grammatical point of view, from a conceptual point of view, the *habitus* is what most represents the meaning of neutrality. Habit in itself is not good; it is not bad; before becoming a habit, it is nothing more than an action that has not yet revealed its long-term consequences. In this sense, the Latin word draws attention to the well-known saying, "the dress does not make the monk," which reminds us that it is not the dress but the action that tells us the story of the people we face. Although the world of meditation is to be considered from a cultural and historical point of view, a vast corpus of different theories and practices is not attributable to a single generic definition. Certainly, one of the points in common between the many ideas and techniques is precisely that of being based on the assumption of good habits, capable of transforming the perception, the state of mind, and sometimes the health of the human being.

The history of meditative practices has its roots in India in 5000 BC, which is testified by some wall paintings of people in meditative poses represented with half-closed eyes. The oldest texts refer to meditation dating back to 1500 BC, the sacred *Vedas*<sup>4</sup>. In the 6th century BC, the ancient and inspiring stories about Lao Tze and Siddhartha Gautama date back. The philosophical and mystical traditions of Hinduism, Taoism, and Buddhism combine and diverge in applications and techniques. Still, many converge on the aims and objectives of meditation techniques: to free man from the sufferings of the body and of daily life to of a reunion with nature, with God, with the spirit that leads to well-being and serenity.

This is the most generalizable datum despite the different traditions emerging in other countries and eras. Man's inherent unhappiness derives from his having moved away from what many meditative theories define as his real nature, which is precisely nature itself, in its simplicity, devoid of any conceptual attribution and judgment. To combat suffering, man can, and in a certain sense within mystical theories, must be able to get closer to his real nature, to rejoin the *authentic Self*<sup>5</sup>, the divine, and his deep inner

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<sup>4</sup> The meaning of the term is sacred knowledge. A collection of sacred literature handed down by the rishis, the most ancient sages recognized by the Vedic religion, in which the disciples found indications on how to rejoin their deepest conscience and through their own spirituality to reach the divine.

<sup>5</sup> In various mystical and philosophical theories, the authentic self represents the real nature, the essence of every human being. Also, in Socrates we find references to one's own authentic interiority that can be reached through an honest relationship with oneself.

peace. To reach this state of inner bliss and serenity, man must recognize what is harmful and does not belong to his nature.

The first teachings about the road to (re) travel for the reunion of man with himself are found in the Vedic texts, composed, and transmitted from 1500 to 500 BC, only in oral form from the teacher to the disciple, without the use of writing<sup>6</sup>. The Vedic scriptures, indicated with the term *Samhita*, are composed of four fundamental nuclei: *Rigveda*, *Samaveda*, *Yajurveda*, and *Atharvaveda*<sup>7</sup>. In addition to the work's metaphysics and purely spiritual and philosophical content, the *Veda* texts contain different *mantras*, and cosmic sounds/terms, the use of which within meditative and contemplative practices is fundamental. The mantra is a sacred "object" in the Hindu mystical visions thanks to the repetition of which man is facilitated and supported in his path of reunion with the divine. Mantric meditations materialize in the repetition of words, sounds, or prayers that invite the deities from their celestial world to the land of men. Through a sincere and confident abandonment of the mantra, such as the most sacred *Om*, the heart and mind of the disciple merge, allowing him to rejoin the celestial abode of the deities.

Within the Vedic tradition, it is possible to identify an enormous quantity of meditative and contemplative practices proper to man for the realization of his happiness - which, as we have mentioned, coincides with the real nature of the human being, with his serenity and reunion. With the *authentic and deeper Self* - among which many have a privileged relationship with the four elements of nature. Water is of primary importance in the Vedic tradition and Buddhist or Taoist literature.

*The water is fluid, soft, and pliable. But the water will wear down the rock, which is stiff and cannot yield. As a rule, anything that is fluid, soft, and yielding will outweigh anything stiff and hard. This is another paradox: what is soft is strong*<sup>8</sup>.

In the Vedas, one of the fascinating figures of the first Hindu translation is that of *Agni*<sup>9</sup>, a divinity in which water and fire coexist, representing one of the fundamental principles of the Vedic tradition: the denial of any form of dualism. In the tradition of Western thought, dualism is present in many forms: good and evil, body and mind, and thought and action are all examples of concepts often read and considered separate and in opposition. In Eastern thought, this dualistic vision of reality is replaced by an idea of the world and nature in which evil, corporeality, and thought undoubtedly exist. Still, they are not concepts seen in opposition and separation from reality. Evil, for example, is not a settling entity but a habitual reality experienced by the human being who moves away from nature and reality. In light of this, it is fascinating to investigate

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Witzel, *Vedas and Upaniṣads* in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism* (a cura di Gavin Flood). Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2003

<sup>7</sup> Respectively: *Veda of hymns*, *Veda of melodies*, *Veda of prayers and formulas* and *Veda of enchantments*.

<sup>8</sup> Quote by Lao Tze.

<sup>9</sup> [To know more about](#)



the consideration of body and sensation typical of many meditative practices. The body and its functions are often privileged means for the different meditative techniques: concentration on the breath, the primary and select vehicle of many contemplative practices; the recognition of the various *chakras*<sup>10</sup> located in specific parts of the human body; sex<sup>11</sup> read as a means of joining nature and the divine in the Taoist tradition, etc.

Let's see some meditative techniques collected in the mystical and philosophical texts we have mentioned. In the Rigveda, we find the word yoga, which refers to the union with the universal reality to which the disciple aspires. Even in later Vedic texts, the term yoga and yogic practices return as examples of possible paths to reunite with one's spirituality to find inner peace.

The road ahead<sup>12</sup> consists of eight stages of implementation in which each of the stages is inextricably linked to the previous one:

1. Yamale, moral abstinence: do not kill, do not steal, do not lie, etc.
2. Niyama, the observances to be kept reaching the virtues of purity
3. Asana, the meditative position of the body
4. Pranayama, breath control, and breathing stops
5. Pratyahara, control of the senses
6. Dharana, concentration on a chosen object
7. Dhyana, meditation
8. Samadhi, the absorption, and stopping of mental activity

To succeed in the realization of the eight phases, the human can and must replace every negative thought with an opposite view, linked to good, to nature in its simplicity, and to purity, which is the first tool to combat the impurity of the mind. That is the first cause of the malaise of the human being. This thought-substitution technique is also found in Dharma talks, in which Buddha lists it alongside several other systems to combat what prevents the disciple from walking his spiritual path.

First, those who approach meditation to find greater serenity and more significant self-awareness are invited to practice controlling the senses. This does not mean eliminating the sensory aspect of one's life but becoming a master of it by learning to know it so as not to be subjected to desires and sufferings.

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<sup>10</sup> [To know more about chakra](#)

<sup>11</sup> Needham, Joseph. *Science and Civilization in China*, 5:2. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1983.

<sup>12</sup> Here, reference is made to the practices collected and codified by Patanjali in the 2nd century AD. To learn more, see: [to know more about](#)

Among the many forms of meditation typical of Buddhist philosophy, we find, for example, *awareness meditation*, the purpose of which is to focus on the mind to observe the rise of thoughts and observe their movement, coming to let them go. The exercise practiced with habit helps a man not to hold back or become attached to those thoughts that can cause him anxiety and negativity. To reach complete self-awareness, this exercise of concentration is not enough; the one who embarks on the path of awareness will have to pass through a second meditative phase, more complex and profound, that of *Vipassana*, or deep vision.

A clear example of the use of the body in Buddhist meditation techniques is that of *Samatha* meditation, a term that translates as *Calm abiding*. It develops in nine stages:

1. Bring your mind inward through breath control or concentration on an external object or mantra.
2. Focus on the attention directed to your while in a long way.
3. Get used to the second stage by repeating it over time.
4. Increase the degree of mental attention by fixing it over time.
5. Discipline the attention paid to the inside.
6. Bringing the mind to peace by removing beliefs, phenomena, emotions, and illusions.
7. Stabilize the mind in a state free from harmful thoughts.
8. Focus your inner attention by eliminating any dualism.
9. Stand and keep yourself in balance.

Metta's meditation practice is fascinating among the many forms of Samatha. This is based on the development of compassion, a universal value to be poured out towards oneself and all other living beings. Among the many practices of *Metta*, that of *Theravada* is particularly interesting, based on three phases inspired by peace and happiness. The technique is developed in three steps: in the first, the wish for peace is addressed to oneself, in the second to the people one loves, and in the third and last, the wish for serenity and love is addressed to those with whom we do not go. Agree or with whom we have had disagreements.

Very close to *Metta* meditations are the four *Muda*, developed by Lharampa Tenzin Kalden<sup>13</sup>. *Mudra*<sup>14</sup> is divided by reason: love and good, wisdom, bodhicitta, and meditative practice. The first is an invitation to nature, in which it is required that all living beings be able to know happiness; the second is an invitation so that every life can be freed from suffering; the third is the hope of waking up from the sleep of the

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<sup>13</sup> [To know more about](#)

<sup>14</sup> A specific symbolic position of the hands is associated with each of the desires, [look at](#)

ego; the fourth is an affirmation of awareness in which it is hoped to be able to achieve mental peace through continuous meditation for the personal and universal good.

This short journey through meditative practices highlights the power and functionality that these practices can have in everyone's daily life. Even more inspiring are the words of Arturas Deltuva that follow.



## Interview with Arturas Deltuva

- Hi, Arturas. Thank you for agreeing to participate in our research. The interview we will carry out will be collected in a research article that is part of the series we publish for the Erasmus + Refl'ation project. In previous articles, we have investigated the meaning and history of the term reflection. Thanks to your great experience in the field of meditation and, more particularly, of Vipassana, we are very curious to know your story.
- Before we get into your experience with Vipassana, we want to ask you what meditation is for you.

*I've been trying different techniques all the time, and also what I used to be searching for when I was looking for meditation are two elements for me: something to help you concentrate the mind, to stay focused on and to be able to stay focused on something and to be able to see reality, which is not accessible otherwise. Specific to Vipassana and other meditations, the final result of what we saw is different in Vipassana. We see that the object of what we want to see it's reality as it is, and "reality as it is" is very simple. But sometimes we avoid seeing it because fact sometimes is not comfortable. Sometimes it is different from my desire, but if you practice meditation, you can see reality as it is, without disappointment or pleasure.*

- Thank you very much; now, could you define most simply what Vipassana is?

It's almost as I described. It is a look inside our minds. When we look this way, we can notice the mechanisms or the habits of our mind, including those that make our life miserable. When we see this mechanism inside our minds, we get rid of it, and sooner or later, it disappears. So, Vipassana aims to clean out that mechanism that creates suffering. The objective is to destroy misery in our minds.

- Clear! Thank you. Would you like to tell us when your journey to discover Vipassana began?

I met this word in 1990/1991. We had some professors coming from an institute of humanistic psychology, and two of them didn't teach us this. Still, they introduced me to Vipassana and gave me some first instructions, basically about breathing and staying focused on the breath. I practiced for almost ten minutes/twenty minutes per day, sometimes twice. If I did not, I felt like I didn't shower... but at that time, I did it but not very seriously, and then I started to look around what was available and approached some courses that were held in Germany on teaching, "Dharma." So, in 2004, I took these courses and felt like I could go home, that I had discovered something. It was a powerful feeling for me, and when I got home, there wasn't a day when I didn't want to

practice for two hours a day. Meantime, between 1991 and 2004, I practiced many different things; I studied psychology and psychotherapy and collected many other viewpoints and practices.

- Was your first experience challenging?

Yes, emotionally and physically, but observation was one of the first things I learned in the courses. For example, I observed a sensation or a feeling, such as pain. And one of the things that changed was how to look at the pain, which comes and goes, so why be afraid of it? And how to react to it.

What changes in the relationship with the sensations or feelings? Pleasure also comes and goes, like pain. But thanks to observation, the relationship you have with, for example, pain changes. It is easier to think of it as a part of the journey and not something that prevents you from moving forward.

- Could you recommend an exercise or practice to introduce a person to vipassana that anyone can do without attending a course or having skills?

It is something that everybody can do; it has nothing to do with religion or anything similar. Lifestyle's something that helps people to focus better. And I know that some people do it. It is not possible to be perfect. I mean, it's impossible not to lie entirely, or not to kill, of course, we don't shoot people, but driving the car we destroy a lot of natural elements, so the lifestyle is not to be perfect, but take the direction of these rules to help us focus better.

Another technique is to train our minds to stay focused. The instructions are pretty simple. We ask people to sit in a comfortable position and focus their attention on the entrance of the nose. Stay focused on moving the air in and out, and try to stay focused. The mind will go back and forth, losing attention and trying to refocus only on the movement of the air. When we notice that the mind is gone, we can go back. It's a straightforward technique that anyone can learn. Whenever the mind is distracted, a memory or a conversation is focused, the imagination tries to return to a concentration on the breath. You can start by trying to stay focused on your breath for one minute, two minutes, and then work your way up to five, ten, or even an hour. The important thing is not to give too much information about what will happen through these techniques, also because everyone has their reaction times. And not to force or demand specific results. To learn the accurate Vipassana technique, it is always better to have a guide or to attend a course.

- Would you like to give us an example of a course that introduces Vipassana?

The course we hold takes place in ten days. We think it is the minimum time to get the information and live the first contact experience with the deep and meaningful inside.

During the ten days, the participants are silent, they can speak with the course organization and the teacher, but they can't talk to each other. They cannot bring books, notebooks, or telephones to facilitate concentration. People participate in different ways, from the participant who comes to acquire meditation techniques to those who cook, clean, and care for the organization. You can speak with the teacher only at certain times to ask for clarification or support.

The day goes like this: you wake up at about 4. It is hard at first, but then it becomes very natural, and you meditate for about two hours. From 6.30 to 8, we have breakfast, and from 8 to 11, another meditation session, even in a group, or you can go for a walk or rest in the room. There is a lunch break from 11 to 1 and another meditation session from 1 to 5. From 5 to 6, there is an hour of rest or group meditation. Next, we have what is called discourse or literature in which it is told how the meditation sessions and the daily work. After another short meditation session at 9 am, we sleep. Mainly we meditate, eat and sleep.

- Thank you very much for your availability and clarity. As you said, listening to an experience sharing differs from reading its description.

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## Useful links

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hilda\\_Conkling](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hilda_Conkling)

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mudra>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patanjali>

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