

## The Challenges of Meditation

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### Keywords

Buddhism; Practices and Traditions: meditation, determination

### Notes for teachers

Meditation is a key practice for Buddhists. It is often carried out formally, in one of four recommended postures (sitting, lying, standing and walking), but it can also be integrated into various activities. In the early tradition there are said to be five hindrances to meditation: desire, ill will, sloth and torpor (mental and physical tiredness), restlessness and worry, and doubt. Stories of people encountering – and overcoming – these challenges are a good way of encouraging Buddhists to continue to pursue meditative states.

The first of the two stories here is one such tale, and to make it all the more encouraging it refers to the monk Moggallana, who was one of the two seniormost followers of the Buddha. Moggallana is struggling to stay awake during his meditation, and the Buddha provides a variety of ways to tackle this, moving towards ever more pragmatic advice such as getting up and splashing the eyes with water. And if none of these succeeds in getting rid of the drowsiness, the Buddha advises a nap!

The second story also concerns a senior follower of the Buddha, the monk Ananda. Here there is a focus on overcoming desire. Not only is Ananda's attachment to the Buddha said to be the reason for him not having achieved awakening / nirvana during the Buddha's lifetime, but desire to achieve this state in time for the great gathering of monks after the Buddha's death is a hindrance to the goal. In addition to showing how Ananda overcame his desire and attachment, the story of his achievement of awakening while climbing into bed – explicitly not in any of the four recommended meditation postures – reminds the audience not to take the prescriptions about practice too seriously.

## Questions for Discussion

### Comprehension of the stories

What is the problem in each of these stories? What is the solution?

What do we learn about the challenges of meditation?

What do we learn about the Buddha and his followers?

### Application to other contexts

Is the Buddha's advice about overcoming sleepiness helpful in other situations?

Is it always a good idea to try really hard?

Can you think of situations where it might be better to let go rather than keep trying?

How would you be able to decide whether you should keep trying or give up?

### Reflecting on wider Buddhist issues

Why is meditation an important practice for Buddhists? What does it lead to?

What are the challenges of meditation? Are there other challenges not discussed here? Can you think of other stories that might help encourage Buddhists who are experiencing difficulties in their meditation?

What is the role of effort or determination in the Buddhist path? How does effort relate to attachment or desire?

Why might Buddhists tell stories of key followers of the Buddha?

## Sources / Further Reading

The tale of Moggallana is translated (with some parts abbreviated) from the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (7.61) and the tale of Ananda is summarised from the Pali commentarial tradition. A good general resource for meditation texts from the Buddhist scriptures is Sarah Shaw, *Buddhist Meditation: An Anthology of Texts from the Pali Canon* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006).

## The Challenges of Meditation: Sleepy Moggallana

At one time the Buddha became aware, through his supernormal vision, that the Venerable Moggallana, one of his most senior monks, was sitting and dozing in a far away region. As quickly as one might bend one's arm or straighten it again, the Buddha disappeared from where he was staying and reappeared in front of Moggallana.

"Are you dozing, Moggallana? Are you nodding off?" he asked. "Yes, lord," replied Moggallana. The Buddha advised:

"Well then, Moggallana, whenever you become drowsy you should not give any attention to that thought of sleepiness. By doing that, it is possible that your drowsiness will vanish."

"If your sleepiness does not vanish through that, then you should reflect upon the Teaching as you have heard it and learned it, you should think it over and examine it carefully in your mind. By doing that, it is possible that your drowsiness will vanish."

"If your sleepiness does not vanish through that, then you should recite in full the Teaching as you have heard it and learned it. By doing that, it is possible that your drowsiness will vanish."

"If your sleepiness does not vanish through that, then you should pull both ears and rub your limbs with your hands. By doing that, it is possible that your drowsiness will vanish."

"If your sleepiness does not vanish through that, then you should get up from your seat, splash your eyes with water, and look around you in all directions and upwards to the stars and constellations. By doing that, it is possible that your drowsiness will vanish."

"If your sleepiness does not vanish through that, then you should concentrate on the thought of light, and focus on the perception of day thus: 'As by day so by night; as by night so by day.' With your mind clear and open, you should cultivate a mind that is full of brightness. By doing that, it is possible that your drowsiness will vanish."

“If your sleepiness does not vanish through that, then you should walk up and down, with your senses turned inward and your mind restrained, being aware of what is in front of and behind you. By doing that, it is possible that your drowsiness will vanish.”

“If your sleepiness does not vanish through that, then you should lie down on your right side, mindfully and clearly aware, keeping in mind the thought of rising. And when you wake up, you should quickly get up, thinking ‘I will not indulge in the pleasure of resting and reclining, in the pleasure of sleeping.’ In this way, Moggallana, you should train yourself.”

### **The Challenges of Meditation: Ananda tries too hard**

After the Buddha’s death, the senior monk Venerable Maha Kassapa called a meeting of five hundred monks, all of whom had achieved awakening (nirvana). The Buddha’s personal attendant, a monk named Ananda, was not invited, as he had not yet achieved awakening, perhaps because of his strong attachment to the Buddha. This was troubling, for not only was Ananda a longstanding and loyal follower, he had also committed to memory all of the Buddha’s teachings. It was therefore very important that he be included in the gathering, but Maha Kassapa was adamant that only awakened monks could attend.

In the days leading up to the meeting Ananda tried his hardest to achieve awakening. He meditated extensively in all the different recommended ways, and exerted himself to the full, but try as he might, he could not achieve awakening. At last, the night before the great meeting, he admitted defeat and gave up. Then, as he climbed into bed, feet barely off the floor and head not yet on the pillow, the Venerable Ananda finally achieved awakening.