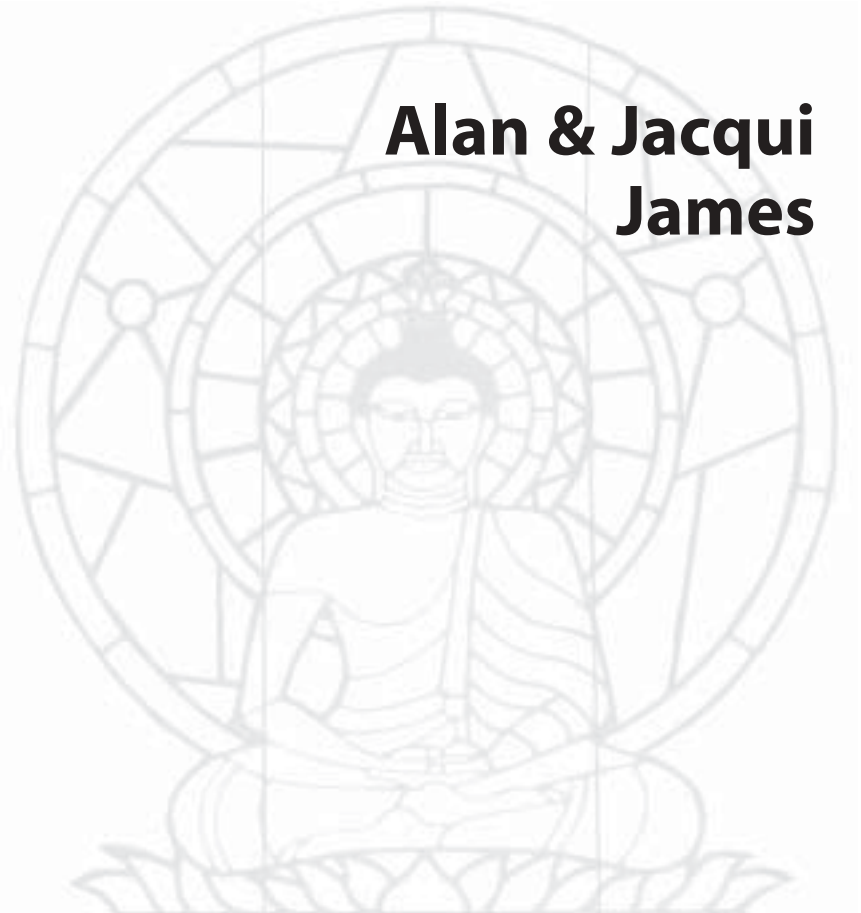


A MEDITATION RETREAT

**Alan & Jacqui
James**

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The House of Inner Tranquillity

The Difference Between Concentration and Mindfulness Meditations

‘Meditation’ has become a household word today and many people in this country and abroad have come to practise it in one form or another. I suppose that the major interest in the subject started in the sixties, seemingly as an offshoot of the hippy generation. I think it was, in fact, part of a far larger trend and this is beginning to show definite effects today as the distrust of oriental disciplines becomes less and less. There seem to be an endless number of different types of meditation: there is TM; there are the various meditations associated with Yoga practice; there are meditations connected with Spiritualism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sufism, Cabbala and so on.

All of these many different types of meditation actually fall into only two categories, namely Concentration Meditation on the one hand and Mindfulness (or awareness) Meditation on the other. Knowing how to distinguish the main features of each, you will be in a far better

position to apply yourself most effectively to the task. You will gain far more benefit from your efforts and, hopefully, will find the whole arena of meditation becomes somewhat less of a jungle.

Concentration Meditation

The number of different types of concentration meditation is enormous. In Buddhism alone there are thirty-nine distinctly different catalogued and practised concentration meditations. Concentration meditations exist in all cultures, in all geographical locations, in all ages throughout history. They are not strange to us, for they somehow make sense. They are all concerned with leaving the world behind in one way or another. Most of us have felt the urge to ‘run away from it all’ at some point in our lives. With concentration meditation you can—and many do.

The major objective of this class of practices is to gain calm and tranquillity. The world of normal living is seen as stressful and as a trial: as something which perhaps has to be endured rather than enjoyed. This meditation seeks to remove the hurt and the agitation from our lives by inducing ever calmer and more delightful states of mind into our experience. It is found that, for such practice, external quiet is a prerequisite: it is not really possible to develop tranquillity to the full in a life that is crowded with people and happenings; with noise and bustle; with responsibilities and duties; with family and friends.

Concentration meditation typically is practised in secluded surroundings: in forest retreats, Himalayan caves, country monasteries, isolated cottages or crofts. The external quietude is extremely beneficial to the inner search for serenity. Always a teacher is necessary. The practices, once past the early stages, have all kinds of pitfalls and dangers for the unwary or uninstructed. Not a few people

have gone literally mad as a result of unwise endeavour along this path. Of course, with a competent teacher the chances of a mishap are dramatically reduced—but even so, part of the teacher's competence lies in his ability to extricate his pupil from difficulties should the need arise. Part of the danger is that concentration meditations can and do lead towards the development of occult powers. For the unwary, the greedy or the unscrupulous, these are a terrible trap for they promise so much, thereby obscuring the greater benefit that is to be had by leaving them behind. But I suppose you could say the same thing of concentration meditation itself: it seems to hold all the answers but can be a subtle trap if you are not careful.

The trap lies in the very attractive nature of the calmness and tranquillity developed as one practises. Most people find that they dearly wish to hold on to the peace. It is such a welcome contrast from the hurly-burly of the day-to-day world. But it cannot be maintained indefinitely, for the peace, like everything else, is transient: it does not last; it cannot last. It is a little bit like taking an aspirin to deal with a severe toothache: it most definitely solves the problem of the pain for the time being; equally, however, it is of no use whatsoever in the longer term. The same is true of concentration meditations: they are a wonderful boon to the weary and the sore at heart; but they do not and cannot provide lasting relief from pain and suffering. Even if, through systematic and diligent practice, one should be reborn after death in a heaven world, even then the problem is not solved, for any birth in any realm is but a shorter or longer stay in a transient body, no matter how refined. The problem is most definitely not dealt with.

Concentration meditation comes in a variety of forms most of which have in common the holding of the attention on a single object. That object may be a mantra;

a candle flame; a specially constructed, coloured disc (plain or patterned); or a mental image or concept. In every case the success of the meditation is determined primarily by the degree of calm produced, although this will be accompanied by different phenomena, depending on the object chosen as a focus. It does *not* produce enlightenment but, for some, may be a necessary detour on the way there.

Mindfulness Meditation

Mindfulness or awareness meditation is found in all successful spiritual ways but is only very rarely identified clearly. Buddhism is perhaps paramount in identifying this, awareness, as ‘the one way’ to come to the cessation of suffering which is *nibbāna*.

It might be useful to note at this point that one of the strongest attributes of the Buddhist teaching is the way in which all the necessary factors for the practice of the spiritual way are so clearly identified. There needs to be very little guesswork and, therefore, there needs to be very little blind faith. Faith is necessary, however. It is necessary to have a certain trust, or faith, in the method or nothing can be done. That trust can be seen as realistic: it is what you might call a reasonable trust, given the circumstances. What does this mean? Buddha-dhamma is a way described by the Buddha as *ehi passiko* or ‘come and see’. It is a way to be tried and tested by individual experience. It is a way which provides the individual with proof of the accuracy of its teachings; that proof coming from the undeniable wisdom gained through the *correct* practising of mindfulness meditation.

Notice that there is an accent on the word ‘correct’. You have heard of the eightfold path and its factors which all begin with the word ‘right’: right view, right thought,

and so forth. The correct practising of mindfulness meditation needs *right* mindfulness: one of those very factors. Right mindfulness is something we are very concerned with here at the House of Inner Tranquillity. It forms the backdrop for everything we do and this weekend you will be hearing about it at length and in detail. It is applied to every aspect of living, not just to sitting still and turning the mind inwards, which is what most people understand by the word 'meditation'. So, what *is* mindfulness and how should we apply it? How does it differ from concentration?

How Mindfulness Differs from Concentration

Mindfulness differs from concentration in that the object of the attention is quite different. Instead of taking a single object, mindfulness is applied to all objects, but in a particular way. It is concerned to see that all objects whatsoever actually arise and pass away: they rise and fall; they are transient. It is a meditation designed to show us the truth of things as they are. It is a meditation designed to strip away the veils of ignorance from the eyes of the mind. We are conditioned to believe that things are in some way lasting; that they can give us pleasure, and that we can somehow lay claim to them by means of ownership. Mindfulness will show that these beliefs and perceptions are mistaken: all conditioned things are *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*: they are transient, unsatisfactory and cannot be owned.

Such meditation does not develop the very deep calmness of concentration meditation. In contrast, it is much more concerned with the way in which we meet and deal with our internal and external environments. Relatively speaking, it stays much more on the surface and in contact with the world. This being so, mindfulness

meditation is more like a visit to the dentist rather than taking an aspirin: the immediate pain is, if anything, more apparent but the treatment ensures a long-term solution to the problem.

It is said that mindfulness meditation is only found in the world when a buddha appears. Some interpret this rather narrowly and confine the idea to Buddhism alone (even though 'Buddhism' never existed when Siddhatha Gotama was alive). Others, more realistically, are of the view that a 'buddha', in this context, means an enlightened person: either one enlightened by rediscovering the way for himself (an historical buddha of *any* race or culture) or someone who has become enlightened by following an existing teaching. In any event, mindfulness meditation is 'the one way' to the complete cessation of suffering, no matter how it may be described.

First Steps in Practice

Both concentration and mindfulness meditations start off the same way. It is necessary firstly to quieten the mind at least to the point where it can attend to a particular object or series of objects. Not until that has been accomplished will it be possible to develop true concentration or true awareness.

We find that this is not as easy as we would wish: there are definite obstacles to the endeavour. These are well-known and are classified into five general types under the heading 'hindrances'. You will be hearing more about these in a later talk. For now it is sufficient to know that they exist and that they need to be suppressed for the most effective meditation to be possible. When the hindrances are suppressed, the mind is relatively free from disturbance and is fitted to the task of developing along its chosen direction. It is at this point that the two ways, of

concentration and awareness meditations, diverge: concentration going in the direction of increasingly greater depths of calm and tranquillity; awareness going in the direction of greater and greater penetration into the true nature of the phenomena of mind and body.

Concentration meditations develop calm and tranquillity but avoid the development of transcending or supermundane, penetrative insight into existence. Mindfulness meditation develops insight into the ultimately true nature of phenomena, as transient, painful and unable to be owned, and avoids the development of too much calmness and serenity. It is necessary to distinguish this difference between concentration and mindfulness for the most effective practice of either kind of meditation.

* * *

So vipassanā is the only type of meditation that's going to get you all the way to enlightenment?

Yes, no other kind of meditation can get you there. Indeed, in a sense, even *vipassanā* doesn't get you there—because you have to transcend even that. But it's the only one that takes you to that end point. It may be given other names, and incorporated into different practices. I am not claiming that Buddhism has the sole right to *vipassanā*—but I am saying that it has the purest form of it that I have seen.

So if a person pursues samatha (concentration) meditation, they would then have to turn to vipassanā later on?

Right.

Is that made plain when someone begins samatha? I mean, don't people realise what they're doing?

Many people rightly appreciate the benefits of concentration meditation, but do not know that, on its own, it cannot lead them to enlightenment. However, there are a

few Buddhist teachers who teach the monks under their instruction *samatha* and *vipassanā* together. They teach them how to attain the jhanas, the deep concentration states, but they make sure that they also develop *vipassanā* based on retrospective examination of those states. Usually, they have the perfect environment for it: they're off on their own—in a forest, perhaps—with minimal commitment to the world. In those circumstances, and under wise guidance, the combination of *samatha* and *vipassanā* can be very powerful. For the average Westerner, however, circumstances are usually very different, and it is often not practicable to go for the *samatha* way first.

The states which *samatha* meditation can offer are very attractive. You get very much calmer, often very much more quickly, than you would with *vipassanā*. If you become skilled enough at concentration to be able to enter the *jhāna* states—the fixed meditations—you find that the bliss, the joy, the peace in those meditations is so desirable that much of the pleasure that you had known previously pales into insignificance beside it. And not only that—it goes on getting more and more peaceful, and ordinary life becomes more bearable as a result.

In contrast, if you're doing *vipassanā* properly, it gets very unpleasant from time to time. In other words, you look *dukkha* (suffering) square in the face and identify many areas of ignorance and wrong view.

But it's possible to do vipassanā and samatha together ... ?

Most definitely. It does demand specific circumstances and extremely good guidance. Those conditions are rare, particularly today. It is difficult to find the right environmental conditions of an almost monastic solitude or, if you can, there may then be no competent teacher in the locality. It makes it a difficult exercise.

You said that even vipassanā can't take you to enlightenment ... ?

Vipassanā is learning what not to do. When you've learned what not to do—you're not doing *vipassanā* any more.

So when you're doing vipassanā meditation and you're having a really nice time, you're really not gaining anything ... ?

Not necessarily. There are delightful states in the course of *vipassanā* meditation. Also, very calm states arise from time to time. When such delightful or calm states disappear, new things develop—it gets less calm, more interesting, and certainly less blissful. This is the natural course of *vipassanā* practice. But if you become attached to the calm or enjoyable states—you just get into them and attempt to stay there—then you're not learning; in fact you're not doing any *vipassanā* to speak of at that time.

The distinction between the two types of meditation, then, is that the very calm states generated through *samatha* are too deep to allow the observation necessary for *vipassanā* at that time, whereas insight meditation is always actively engaged in the observation of transience, unsatisfactoriness or non-self. The meditator pursuing tranquillity alone dives down to a calm level and stays there, basking in the beautiful quietness—and resolutely refuses to let go of it. At that time, no insight work can be done. This applies whether you are doing *samatha* or *vipassanā* meditation. Even if you stay in such states of calm for hours at a stretch, no insight work is done—but you do get a good rest.



A Meditation Retreat

The Buddha said that there is just one way to overcome the suffering seemingly inherent in the human condition. The practice of mindfulness generates insight into the way our minds work, revealing why it is that we feel dissatisfied and distressed, and exactly how suffering can be overcome.

With a clarity and directness of approach that can only come from understanding, Alan and Jacqui James elucidate the practice of mindfulness, covering such topics as how to meditate, hindrances to the practice and how to surmount them, the relationship between teacher and student—and enlightenment itself, the final goal of the spiritual journey.

Based on profound experience and very clearly written ... there is much throughout the book which will prove of benefit to many.

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