

Six Ways Not to Approach Meditation

Ken McLeod

The Six Realms of Existence comprise a principal feature of Tibetan Buddhist cosmology. The possibilities of existence are classified into six forms of existence:

- hell beings dominated by anger
- ghosts and demons dominated by greed
- animals dominated by dullness
- humans dominated by desire
- titans dominated by envy, and
- gods dominated by pride

Like many mythologies, this classification scheme describes specific structures in our psychological/emotional makeup. For instance, the old proverb “Pride goeth before a fall” is reflected in the description of the god realms, experiences of great richness and enjoyment that can and do end only in descent to lower less happy states of existence. Similarly, the terrible and terrifying descriptions of existence as a hell being reflect the subjective experience of a person totally consumed by anger: every aspect of experience is threatening, painful, and tortuous. Even the division into hot and cold hells reflects the way hot rage and cold hatred manifest internally.

A contemporary Zen teacher, Uchiyama Roshi, offers an interpretation of these six realms in possible attitudes to meditation. In my work with students, I have come across all of these, so I am going to describe them briefly here and offer some suggestions about how to step out of the particular fixations that each realm represents.

Hell realm meditation

First is the hell realm meditation. This realm arises when we feel we are forced to sit, that we have to do it. It is most commonly encountered in monastic situations, but arises frequently in retreats. There is an active hatred of meditation, but one just has to sit there, usually because of the felt constraint of external conditions. This, surely, is meditation from hell! There is nothing but our own hatred of what we are doing. How to we find freedom from this state? The essential point is to recognize that our practice of meditation is voluntary; it is something we have decided to do. No one is saying, “You have to meditate!” We can always stand up and leave. When we clearly recognize and own our own decision to practice, there is little basis for experiencing this particular realm of meditation.

Ghost/demon realm meditation

Second is the demon realm of desperation. We are greedy for results. Something should be happening. Where is the flash of illumination, the flash of insight, or even a flash, a glimmer of

light? We are looking for something to satisfy us, to make us whole, to fill up this deep hole we feel in ourselves. But no matter what happens, that hole is never filled, so we return to our practice as hungry as ever. This greed for results, for something dramatic, undermines our practice completely. The effects of meditation are subtle and take time to mature. When we are constantly looking for some kind of sign or attainment from our practice, we are essentially looking outside ourselves. We can never find any real satisfaction there because the hole is inside. Instead, we need to look at the hole that drives the desperation, feel it, let it be present in our awareness. As we discover the capacity to sit with that empty feeling we gradually discover a contentment and peace within. Our desperate want for something to fill us dissolves.

Animal realm meditation

Then there is animal meditation. Animals seek shelter and food and then they are satisfied. In this form of meditation, a person finds a way to sit comfortably and quietly and makes no more effort. It's relaxing, he or she feels refreshed after practicing, it's a nice rest, but there is no insight, no understanding, no movement to a deeper experience of life with all the risks and adjustments that involves. Essentially, one hides out in the practice. Dullness is one of the hardest problems to overcome since it is so hard to recognize from the inside. Here, consultation with a teacher or instructor is important. They can recognize dullness when we may not be able to and shake us up enough to move out of it.

Titan realm meditation

What about titan meditation? In some ways, this approach is as bad as the hell realm. Who can sit the longest? Who can sit the most still? How many hours did you put in? The sense of competition brings out our envy, our self-doubt, and our competitive nature. Who are we trying to beat? What does winning in the meditation game mean? When we've out-sat everybody else, we are still left with ourselves: we are right back where we started in the first place. Closely related to this attitude is the matter of asking people about their meditation practice. How do we feel when people ask us about ours? Meditation practice is intensely personal. It is one of the most intimate parts of our lives. Tradition says only discuss practice with your teacher and with people who are your close practice companions. Such discussions are very helpful. They bring out aspects we may be overlooking. But beware of the competitive mind! Ask yourself, who am I trying to beat and why?

God realm meditation

God realm meditation has the sense of being above it all. In this approach, a person wants to become a saint or at least a hermit, removed from the confusion and the messiness of daily life, serene in seclusion, actual or imagined. In my experience, this superior attitude is often simply an avoidance mechanism, pride compensating for deep doubts about confidence or ability. The practice of meditation is not meant to remove us from life, but to bring us more intimately into life. So, one remedy here is to question the feeling of being better than others, of living life in a superior way.

Human realm meditation

Human realm meditation is motivated by the desire for results. This is not the desperation of the demon realm, but the desire that meditation be a productive use of our time. Much meditation instruction is presented in this way. Meditation is to improve ourselves, to improve our relationships, to become more centered, to become more balanced, to become more loving, etc. We practice expecting to receive something in return. As long as this expectation is operating we will never know ourselves. As one Tibetan teacher said, "Give up all hope for results." We are not practicing meditation to produce something. Rather, it is a way of practicing being, and again, not being something, just being, being completely.

Ideally, the practice of meditation is not based on any of these six approaches. In practice, they arise in our experience all the time. We are human after all! We can, however, use the mindfulness and awareness we cultivate in our practice to know what is arising in us, to let it be there, but not to identify or merge with these habitual emotional patterns. This is a difficult practice, for it requires us to make an effort at being in a way we are not at all used to. Slowly, over time, we find that our efforts bear fruit: a way of being that isn't any one of these six realms.