

# “The Less Dust, the More Trust”

Participating in  
The Shamatha Project  
Meditation and Science

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# Prologue

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The meditative practices that were central to the scientific study known as the Shamatha Project consist of two kinds: (1) the shamatha practices of mindfulness of breathing, settling the mind in its natural state, and shamatha without a sign; and (2) the cultivation of four sublime qualities of the heart known in Buddhism as the four immeasurables, namely loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. The first set of practices is explicitly designed to develop attentional balance through the cultivation of relaxation, stability, and vividness, qualities that are then used to introspectively explore the nature of the mind and its potentials. The second set is for the sake of developing a greater sense of kindness and acceptance toward oneself and others, which has a deep impact on one's values, ideals, and emotional balance.

In this volume Adeline van Waning admirably brings to bear her professional training and experience as a psychiatrist together with her knowledge and experience as a meditator to explain the nature and significance of these practices from both Buddhist and scientific perspectives. Since the turn of the century, a rapidly growing number of scientific studies have revealed the health benefits of various kinds of mindfulness-based meditation. Brain scans, EEG measurements, behavioral studies, and questionnaires have shown the influence of meditation on the brain and behavior, which in the minds of many people lends some degree of credibility to the practice of meditation. In the overwhelming majority of such studies, those who conduct and report on the research are professionally trained scientists, intent on applying objective measures to understanding the nature and effects of meditation. In contrast, the meditators are treated as subjects in these studies, similar to human and non-human subjects in other psychological and neuroscientific

kinds of research. So their identities are almost invariably ignored in scientific reports on meditation, and all discoveries pertaining to meditation are claimed by the scientists, who in many cases have little or no meditative experience. Consequently, whatever discoveries about the nature of the mind may have been made by the meditators themselves are generally overlooked in scientific papers, presumably because they are not deemed “objective” and are therefore not “scientific.”

This bias for objective, third person evidence over subjective, first person experience is problematic when it comes to understanding the nature of mental processes and states of consciousness, all of which are undetectable by all objective systems of measurement. In contrast, on the basis of the development of refined attention skills using the above methods of shamatha meditation, one gains an increasing ability to observe a widening array of mental processes and states of consciousness. By so doing, one may make discoveries about the mind that are inaccessible to third person methods of observation. With her exceptional background as a scientist and as a meditator, Dr. van Waning bridges this gap between third person and first person methodologies, showing how each one can complement the other. This, clearly, is the way forward if we are to seek the most complete understanding of the mind and consciousness.

Among the three methods of shamatha explained in this book, “settling the mind in its natural state” is especially oriented toward making first person discoveries about the unique qualities of one’s own mind and about the nature and potentials of the mind in general. Bearing many qualities in common with “insight meditation” practices commonly taught in the Theravada and Zen traditions of Buddhism, it enables one to make internally “objective” observations of the origination, nature, and dissolution of discursive thoughts, desires, emotions, and other mental processes. In this way, such experiential inquiry has great epistemic value for understanding the mind firsthand. In addition, however, the practice of

maintaining clear, nonreactive awareness of such mental events also has great therapeutic value, which is clearly explained in this volume by a mental health professional. So the epistemic and pragmatic significance of this and other shamatha methods are deeply integrated: knowing thyself is integral to healing thyself. There is a similar synergy between the practices of shamatha and the four immeasurables, each one deepening and enriching the other.

While modern popularizers of yoga and meditation often teach various methods as stand-alone techniques, independent of any theory, values, or lifestyle, this reductionist approach is alien to the Buddhist tradition and all other great contemplative traditions of the world. If one adheres to a materialistic worldview, believing that everything in the universe, including all living organisms and states of consciousness, can be thoroughly understood solely as emergent properties of matter, this must have a direct impact on one's values and priorities. If one believes that only matter and its emergent properties are real, those are the only things one will value, and the only kinds of happiness one will seek are stimulus-driven, hedonic pleasures, arising from interactions of matter and energy. Moreover, if one's values are thoroughly materialistic and hedonic, this will inevitably result in a consumer-driven way of life bent on material acquisition and consumption and the pursuit of hedonic pleasures.

Buddhist meditation, in contrast, is embedded in a worldview that embraces both physical and nonphysical elements of the natural world. Within the Buddhist Eightfold Noble Path, authentic mindfulness and concentration arise only in conjunction with an authentic worldview—not subject to the limitations of materialism—and with an authentic aspiration oriented toward genuine happiness, which arises from ethics, mental balance, and wisdom.

The origins, nature, and potentials of consciousness, together with the nature and means of realizing genuine happiness, are of the utmost importance, especially in today's world, in which the devastating effects of unbridled materialism are wreaking havoc on modern society and the natural environment. Materialistic assump-

tions about human nature continue to hamper open-minded inquiry into the relation between the body and mind, including how consciousness first emerges in a human fetus and what happens to it at death. Materialists assume it first emerges from complex interactions of neurons and it simply disappears at death, but they have never scientifically demonstrated the truth of their beliefs. Contemplatives from multiple traditions East and West reject that assumption, but the first person discoveries on which they base their conclusions have yet to be taken seriously by the scientific community.

As an analogy, even after Copernicus presented his brilliant heliocentric theory of the movements of the planets around the sun, medieval scholastics continued to cling to their belief that the sun and planets orbited around the earth. Both the heliocentric and geocentric views accounted for the appearances to the naked eye of the relative movements of these celestial bodies. It was only when Galileo refined the telescope as an instrument for making precise observations of the sun, moon, and planets, that he was able to discover the phases of Venus, which provided irrefutable evidence that the medieval geocentric view was invalid.

Nowadays, learned scientists and theologians continue to debate about the fate of human consciousness after death, with each group adhering to their own assumptions, without being able to point to evidence that settles the issue for all intelligent, open-minded seekers of truth. According to Buddhism, the achievement of highly refined states of focused attention, trained inwardly, transcending the limitations of the normal human psyche, sheds light on dimensions of consciousness that are not contingent upon the brain. If this discovery is valid and can be replicated by anyone with sufficient contemplative training – regardless of their metaphysical beliefs – this will shift the modern understanding of the mind from a “material-centric” to an “empiric-centric” view. This will herald the first scientific revolution in the mind sciences, in which experience will once again triumph over dogma, and antiquated metaphysical

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beliefs about the nature and potentials of consciousness will be defeated by rigorous observation. Rather than a victory of religion over science, this will be a victory for both science and spirituality, opening the way to the deepest exploration of human nature and our capacity for realizing genuine happiness through knowledge of ourselves and our relation to the natural world as a whole.