

Language and Meditation

Jason Siff

What we have from the Buddha are his words, phrases, metaphors and similes about the types of experiences he found in meditation. We do not have his experiences, the ones he was basing his knowledge on when he used those expressions. Those states of mind perished with him. There is no way to recover those experiences by solely analyzing his words, which creates the situation where a person has to have similar experiences and match the Buddha's words to them correctly (and what the Abhidhamma texts may say as well). This is a process that is fraught with error and uncertainty, and yet it is seldom examined due to the belief that certain well-respected individuals who speak of meditative experiences and attainments using the Buddha's language cannot be deceiving themselves and are therefore correct in their conclusions.

Let me begin by making it clear that this is not a paper about questioning the legitimacy of claims to certain attainments by meditation masters and practitioners alike, for I have no access to their privileged inner worlds to determine the exact nature of their experiences; all I have are their verbal expressions. This paper will instead focus on verbal or written descriptions of meditative experiences and attainments and what kinds of descriptions may be considered honest and reliable.

A Language of Existence and a Language of Becoming

In the preface to David Kalupahana's book, "The Buddha's Philosophy of Language," (Kalupahana 1999) distinguishes between a "language of existence" and a "language of becoming," stating that the Buddha taught using the latter. A language of existence is for those "who look for absolute clarity and precision in the medium of expression," while a language of becoming "allows room for revisions at the more specific level of explanation or description without having to run into contradictions at the level of generality." He sees a language of becoming as "a corrective to the language of existence, not a replacement." A language of becoming in the context of meditative experiences would thus allow for variations in descriptions of experiences within a general category, rather than as definitive experiences that have objective or transcendent reality as they would in a language of existence.¹

The area I would like to analyze regarding the use of a language of existence is the system of *ñāṇa* or "stages of knowledge," which serve as the basis for interpreting *vipassanā* meditation experiences and determining a meditator's progress on the path to becoming a *sotāpanna* (stream-entry). These sixteen stages of knowledge are conceived as experiences and insights meditation students will have when they practice *vipassanā*. They will occur in linear order. At some point the student's reports on her meditation sittings will have to fit into the first stage of knowledge, "when the meditator comes to know the difference between a bodily process and a mental process,"² and from then on the teacher can both give guidance for each stage he believes she is in.

¹ Kalupahana, D. (1999). The Buddha's Philosophy of Language. Sri Lanka, Sarvodaya Vishva Lekha: pp. i-iv.

² Sayadaw, Mahasi (1971). Practical Insight Meditation. Sri Lanka, Buddhist Publication Society: p. 20.

The main method of meditation that uses this system, the Mahasi Method of Insight Meditation, appears to utilize a language of becoming when giving meditation instructions. The student is instructed to note her experiences using the present continuous tense, though without the personal pronoun or auxiliary verb (e.g. instead of “I am hearing” one notes, “hearing”).³ The experiences that are being noted are sometimes changing rapidly, especially when bodily movement is involved, and the student is instructed to note each phase of the physical action. When drinking a glass of water for example, the student notes looking at the glass as “looking,” touching it as “touching,” taking it by the hand as “taking,” bringing the glass to the lips as “bringing,” drinking the water as “drinking,” and swallowing the water as “swallowing.” If it was a flavored beverage, one would note “tasting” just after “drinking,” and perhaps how it tasted (e.g. “sweet”). These are basic instructions on how to be mindful of the body and can be applied to any and every bodily activity, since such activity is most often sequential, of short duration, and clearly demarcated from one event to another. The exercise of breaking down continuous bodily movements into parts is not only accomplished by noting in the present continuous tense, but is aided by intentionally slowing one’s movements down to such a degree that they do appear to be separate actions.

When observing anything other than intentional physical movement, such as sense impressions, thoughts, and emotions, using the present continuous tense tends to function as a language of existence rather than one of becoming. The instructions to note “hearing, hearing” is an attempt to train one to replace the experience of hearing a particular sound with the concept of a pure act of hearing. Sayadaw U Pandita states in his book, “In This Very Life,” that “labeling technique helps us perceive clearly the actual qualities of our experience... This direct awareness shows us the truth about our lives, the actual nature of mental and physical processes.”⁴ I believe this way of labeling and understanding one’s experience leads to a view of a transcendent reality beneath appearances, even though students are presented with the classic triad of “sense-consciousness, sense-organ, and sense-object.” By focusing on the act of hearing, as such, “hearing” becomes perceived as a true reality underneath the appearances of hearing sounds. One can easily believe it exists in an eternal present moment. The same goes for the other four senses and the mind. So when one is trying to conceive of “knowing, knowing” in this way, one is liable to have the view that there is a permanent, unchanging consciousness beneath all these fleeting thoughts and feelings. This might be seen as conjecture on my part, but I have heard it so often from students who have practiced this method. I believe it is not an intended outcome of the meditation practice, but rather a byproduct of the way language is being used to describe experiences, and shows the pitfall of a language of becoming unconsciously turning into a language of existence. Also, this may help to explain somewhat why so many Western Insight Meditation students, and teachers alike, are drawn to *Advaita Vedanta* and similar belief systems without experiencing any contradiction.

Returning to the analysis of the stages of knowledge (*ñāṇa*), the language used in this area is much different than the present continuous statements of the meditation instructions. It involves expression of statements regarding universal truths. When someone uses the terminology of the stages of knowledge, that description shows the experience as exhibiting a quality of a universal truth, otherwise it could not be

³ Sayadaw, Mahasi (1971): pp. 8-16. Here the practice of noting (or labeling) is presented in great detail, with each and every physical movement strictly noted in the present continuous tense. The only exceptions to this form of noting are found regarding sensations, such as “painful,” “tired,” and “giddy.”

⁴ Pandita, Sayadaw U. (1992). In This Very Life. Somerville, MA, Wisdom Publications: pp. 5-6.

considered a necessary knowledge for the attainment of *sotāpanna*. What would be the value of having an experience and insight of “arising and passing away” (*udayabbayanupassanañāṇa*) if it did not connect up with the universal truth of “all constructed things are impermanent”?⁵

On the point of passing through stages, the system of stages of knowledge looks at a narrow range of a meditation student’s reported experiences in isolation and tries to create a comprehensive picture. The language someone uses to describe a person’s experiences when put into a stage is confined by the parameters of that stage. Anything in the student’s report that might disagree with the stage assessment is disregarded. In fact, what may occur is that the student has to learn the language of the stages in order to communicate her experience in such a way as to fit into the stages that the teacher is looking for.

A truly descriptive language of meditational experiences cannot co-exist with the demands of making experiences fit into certain molds without sacrificing its honesty and integrity. Noting, labeling, and otherwise categorizing one’s experiences *a priori* do not lead to descriptions of dynamic processes of an inter-dependent nature (dependent arising), but instead support notions of the substantial existence of mental elements. If one has ever wondered how essentialist thinking has managed to infiltrate vipassana meditation teaching and practice, here is one fairly common open doorway.

A Language of Becoming and a Descriptive Language of Meditational Experiences

To illustrate these points, I will explore two questions that might be asked a student to elicit a fuller description:

1. What happened in your meditation sitting that has been categorized in a particular way (e.g., as an experience of “arising and passing away”)?
2. Can you describe this meditative experience in your own words?

Here I will venture into a descriptive language of meditational experiences that is the other extreme from the language of existence, differing from the middle-way language of becoming proposed by Dr. Kalupahana in that it can “run into contradictions at the level of generality,” meaning that the descriptions need not conform to generalizations and may even contradict them. Honest descriptions of one’s experiences may include notions of “permanence, satisfaction, and self” that contradict the “three characteristics of existence” (*ti-lakkhaṇa*), for by being honest, they will provide a picture as how someone actually thinks rather than what they are supposed to believe when undertaking a *vipassanā* practice. The teacher may then be able to discuss the dependently arisen nature of such notions within the student’s experience, thus making the interpretation of experiences an area of developing awareness and discernment, rather than providing a “right” interpretation from the outset.

I contend that this way of describing meditative experiences in greater detail is absolutely necessary for our further understanding of what actually occurs within people’s meditation sittings. When specific meditative experiences are immediately categorized within an existing taxonomy or summarized by an interpretation, those generalizations become the description of an experience and no further efforts to describe such experiences are called for. This is an unsatisfactory situation when either the teacher or the student is trying to understand the causes and conditions for an experience.

⁵ Nanarama, M. S. (1983). *The Seven Stages of Purification and The Insight Knowledges*. Sri Lanka, Buddhist Publication Society: pp. 42-47. The thorough-going description of the stage of knowledge of “arising and passing away” found in this book includes the statement: “All the three characteristics of existence now become clear to him in a reasoned manner.”

The question, “What happened in your meditation sitting that has been categorized as an experience of arising and passing away?” fits into a language of becoming, since it requires a description that matches and does not contradict the generalization inherent in the statement “an experience of arising and passing away” (*udayabbaya*). An example of such a reply might be, “I noticed a quick succession of events - hearing a sound, feeling a sensation, a fleeting thought, all of which were arising and passing away quite rapidly. That is what places this experience into the category (stage of knowledge) of arising and passing away.” The words and phrases chosen in this description match what would be expected of it in order to be categorized as knowledge of arising and passing away. But is this an honest description of someone’s experience in meditation?

The question, “Can you describe this meditative experience in your own words?” will then most likely be answered with descriptions that don’t need to fit into a category. Such descriptions may also be more vague and personal than the definite and impersonal descriptions that *vipassanā* teachers traditionally request (as in the question in the preceding paragraph). An example of this might be, “Sometime during the meditation sitting I heard some birdsong that lasted for a moment, followed by an itch that went away without scratching it, though it lasted several seconds. I had some fleeting thoughts about work during this period, but nothing stuck. There was an overall feeling of ease throughout.”

Let us now suppose that these two replies are in fact referring to the same experience in meditation. The first reply contains a view of linearity, of one isolated event following another, and must be a definitive description of the concept of “arising and passing away” as found in the Mahasi Method of *Satipaṭṭhanā Vipassanā*. Since the meditator was instructed to note the sense door at which the experience occurred but not the sense object of the experience, it is a description that excludes a necessary dependently arisen aspect of the experience it is describing, which is the content of the experience. The second reply supports a view that apparently separate events can arise together (fleeting thoughts about work arising along with hearing birdsong and accompanied by an overall feeling of ease) and does not need to match a definitive description of the concept of arising and passing away, though it may be a specific instance of noticing the interplay of mental phenomena. Without the concept of arising and passing away operating as a generalization of this experience, the meditator’s task becomes less about having definitive experiences that prove the concept of arising and passing away (language of existence) and more about noticing what is truly occurring within her experience (a descriptive language of meditational experiences).

This brings me back to a point I made in the first paragraph: “Those experiences perished with the Buddha.” Since we no longer have access to the person who had the experiences upon which the generalizations have been made, what we have are empty generalizations that have to be supported by the experiences of meditators. What I am doing here is working in the direction of more honest and authentic descriptions of meditative states and experiences, and thereby more awareness of what goes on in meditation and more skill in describing what many may have considered to be ineffable experiences (but perhaps the meditators merely lacked the motivation and training to describe them). These descriptions can be used to support the generalizations, but not because they were generated for that purpose, but rather because what they describe is what may have originally been meant by the generalizations. Here we find a descriptive language of meditational experiences being cultivated through investigation and learning into “a language of wise and skillful becoming.”

Meditative Experiences in One's Own Words

When someone tries to describe things using a foreign language she is just beginning to learn, it is likely that those descriptions will contain several errors due to the person's lack of knowledge of that language. She may use a word where one of its synonyms would be better suited. She may have difficulty translating some of the concepts from her native tongue to the new language and make faulty assumptions thereby. She may have not been exposed to the use of a word in a variety of contexts, and so holds onto a single definition in all situations. She will be tongue-tied and will fumble with the new language when asked to explain something in depth or to describe things in more detail. This is situation for most Western students of Buddhism who are learning Pali terms and their English equivalents on *vipassanā* retreats and are asked to use this terminology when reporting their meditation experiences.

On top of that most *vipassanā* students are asked about only a small fraction of their meditation experiences—the ones that more neatly fit into the concepts they are learning and can be succinctly expressed in the terminology. So not only is the student trying to learn a new vocabulary to talk about her meditation sittings, she is usually asked pointed questions about specific areas of experience and is discouraged from providing too much “content” in her replies.⁶ By content is often meant, personal narratives.

The approach to teaching meditation I have used for the past two decades asks the student to express her meditative experiences in her own words. The student begins with an opening narrative about her meditation sitting, relating anything that she remembers about it and is comfortable sharing with me. The narrative will generally consist of a great deal of personal content, such as what she was thinking about while meditating, not just that she had thoughts and how those thoughts came and went (the common way of describing experiences in *vipassanā* meditation). Thus right from the beginning of the student's report, no area of her experience is excluded and her language is her own. Without personal narratives being included in the report, a good deal of what occurs in meditation would be missing or glossed over by the use of an acceptable term or phrase.

When a customary *vipassanā* term or phrase is used by a student, I often ask the student to relate what she meant to describe by using that term. After the experience has been described in her own words, it can be compared with the term, if one so chooses, creating a link between the experience and term. The movement towards understanding vital concepts found in Dhamma teachings is thus beginning from a more detailed and authentic description of an experience towards an interpretation of the experience in terms of the Dhamma. This requires the teacher to listen carefully and empathically to the student's reports in an attempt to understand the student's way of putting words to her experience; the teacher must learn the student's language, not the other way around. If the teacher fails to comprehend the student's narratives, then any correlation with an interpretation will be subject to question. At this point in an interview, a dialog with the student to clarify what she is describing is often necessary, so that the teacher does not jump to any premature conclusions. It is critical in this kind of dialog to use the student's words instead of one's own, for one's own words carry with them an interpretation. Let me give you an example of how this kind of interview works.⁷

⁶ Pandita, pp. 15-18

⁷ I do not record interviews with students and so have had to put one together for the purpose of this paper. It is a highly probable interview with a student, faithfully based on the text of one meditation sitting, with my questions added after the fact.

Student: Half of the sit was deliberately letting go - resting again and again.

Teacher: What were you doing that you refer to as “letting go”?

Student: A few times experiencing delicious rest from that tension, a different space that was not filled with fear for my kids. Then I had a bit of a battle between wanting to release the tension and feeling I shouldn't direct anything. Went with not directing after a while and used patience to be with what was, felt more grounded.

Teacher: So the deliberate “letting go” was you wanting to release the tension?

Student: Yes, and that worked for a while, but there was also a feeling that I shouldn't direct anything. When I went with not directing my attention and just let the feelings of fear arise and patiently sat with them, I felt more grounded.

Teacher: What was it like feeling more grounded?

Student: Grounded. It literally started with a sensation of the lower body contact with the ground. This came by itself without my willing it. I became more grounded in myself and balanced as I stayed with what was without bias.

Teacher: So feeling grounded was an awareness that came of its own of a sensation of sitting on the ground. And this led you to feeling more grounded and balanced. What do you mean by staying with what was without bias?

Student: It is paradoxical. My desire became stronger once I had experienced the deep peace and I saw a dislike for what was there and a wish for the peace to last. Interesting. I can have both. It doesn't have to be either peace or not.

Teacher: So being without bias in this context refers to being okay with two types of experience that seem to contradict each other and do not normally arise together?

Student: It would be more accurate to say that I was with my dislike for my fears while at the same time experiencing a deep peace that I desired. So I had desire for one thing and aversion for another going on at the same time.

Teacher: The bias that was absent had to do with a view of only experiencing one thing at a time?

Student: Yes, that's it. That's something I understand better now.

As you can see in this type of interview, key terms that would be used to generalize experience are further elaborated on by the student, being filled in by the student's recall of her experiences and expressed in her own words. Such terms as “letting go,” “feeling grounded” (though not found in *vipassanā* meditation per se, it is a term of the common discourse on meditation), “being without bias” (in this case, not having a biased view as to how experience functions) are questioned by the teacher instead of being accepted as adequate and final communication about the experiences they refer to. In this procedure of interviewing, the student comes to a more nuanced understanding of her experience with the fuller description and can move towards generalizations or interpretations of her descriptions, accepting them if they fit, rejecting them if their

wrong, and modifying them if necessary. The final say on whether the student's experience fits in with a generality of the Dhamma rests with the student, though she may get there with the help of the teacher's knowledge of meditation and the Dhamma.

When it comes to whether a meditation student knows for herself an experience of "letting go" or has a misguided notion regarding it, a teacher's own understanding of such terms and experiences can help resolve confusion without having to resort to a definitive experience of "letting go." This depends on how broad or narrow the teacher is willing to define "letting go," and what examples or references he has for his definition. He could define "letting go" as "abandoning" (*pahāna*), "renunciation" (*cāga*), "non-grasping" (*anupādāna*), or with a more modern concept of "flow." There is also the question as to whether "letting go" is short for "letting go of (something)." This distinction is helpful in looking at the example from the interview with the student above, for she states two kinds of "letting go": 1) releasing the tension and, 2) not directing anything. "Releasing the tension" is a letting go of the tension, while "not directing anything" is simply "letting go." As a meditation teacher, I would define an experience of "letting go" as being closer to "not directing anything," which lines up more with all of the definitions mentioned above.

Working in the procedure I have outlined above, broad definitions of terms that relate to experiences are more useful than narrow ones. But one can always run into the danger of being too broad, too inclusive in one's categories, and thereby lose the definiteness we may require from such terms. So how much wiggle-room within the terms is permissible? If there is none, then we have a language of existence dominating the teaching of meditation and our contemporary discourse on it. My tentative solution presented in the preceding paragraph is to do some kind of analysis of the terms found in Buddhist meditation teaching as they pertain to students' reports on meditative experiences. This analysis includes the students' use of the terms (or related concepts) in describing her experiences and requires a matching of terms to experiences only after the experiences have been also described in the students' own language.

Language And Narrative In Regard To Attainments

The problem of rigid definitions of terms and definitive experiences operates at one level when we are talking about a particular experience, such as "letting go," and at another level when we are talking about a particular attainment, such as *sotāpanna*. There is not so much at stake in being right or wrong about an experience of "letting go," and as we can see, we can always explore it; however, there is a great deal at stake in being right or wrong about someone attaining a Noble Path and Fruit (*magga-phala*), which is supposed to be something "irreversible" and without question.

Since this topic can bring up a host of controversial subjects, I will try to restrict my discussion to the language used in modern-day *vipassanā* texts, predominately of the Mahasi Sayadaw method, when referring to the attainment of *sotāpanna*. The progression of insight involves passing through one *ñāṇa* (stage of knowledge) after another. Each stage is known by its particular quality and/or by what is realized and known within it. For instance, one would come to understand "there is no being or person, that there are only mere formations always disintegrating"⁸ and then sometime later experience "fearfulness...now that one knows the truth of continuous dissolution."⁹ These are the

⁸ Nanarama, M. S. (1983). *The Seven Stages of Purification and The Insight Knowledges*. Sri Lanka, Buddhist Publication Society: p. 47.

⁹ Sayadaw, M. (1971). *Practical Insight Meditation*. Sri Lanka, Buddhist Publication Society: p. 32.

teacher's interpretations of the student's reports, which can be based on astute and careful observations made by the student. The interpretations and observations can be questioned at a later time, though, to my knowledge, this is rarely done. At least, if there is some recollection of the experiences the student has, then each interpretation regarding stages can be questioned as to whether the experience of student actually matches up to the description of the stage. What then about the stages leading up to the attainment of Path and Fruit (*magga-phala*)? These are said to occur within mind-moments, and mind-moments are believed to happen so fast that they are imperceptible to the mind-body functioning of a human being (though not to a Buddha). So from the launching stage of "Equanimity about Formations" (*sankhār'upekkhāñāṇa*) through to "Fruition" (*phala*) stages of knowledge (*ñāṇa*) occur that one would have no awareness of. Literally, in no time, the three fetters (*tīṇi saṃyojanāni*) would be dropped, *nibbāna* would be known, and one would become a *sotapanna*. Fortunately in that system there is a "Reviewing Knowledge" (*paccavekkhanañāṇa*) that arises sometime afterwards that enables one to see the defilements that have been abandoned. There is an additional practice that meditators are told to do, which is to practice *nirodha samāpatti* by setting their intention to enter that state for a certain length of time in their meditation sittings.

These stages and the experiences accompanying them are rigidly defined. There can be no other way for anyone to attain *sotāpanna* than to have these experiences exactly as stated in the proper order at a fortuitous time in one's journey in *samsāra*. It is so precise that it can masquerade as a science, but yet at its core is a language of existence. The *ñāṇa* exist objectively for each meditator to go through them in precisely the same order: they are an abstract template to plot someone's course to *nibbāna*. Furthermore, within this model of meditative development, the goal, *nibbāna*, is also turned into something substantial.

What happens when you ask somebody who has been told by his teacher that he is a *sotāpanna* to describe his experience of attaining? First of all, you run into the problem of the actual experience happening so fast that it is essentially imperceptible and incapable of being recollected. Secondly, having the experience already identified before one has described it to one's self in one's own words makes any new description suspect. The full description will have to corroborate the interpretation. If not, the interpretation is wrong. The stakes are very high here for any fuller description to match up, for if it doesn't, one is not a *sotāpanna* (according the rigid definitions and definitive experiences of the tradition). This is a strong disincentive to take a closer look at such attainments. Many such attainments thus become narratives that remain fixed and certain over time.

This brings me to my own theory of an alternative process by which knowledge of the Four Noble Truths arises. I call this process, "Transformative Conceptualization," and write about it my book "Unlearning Meditation: What to do when the instructions get in the way."¹⁰ This theory addresses how narratives are built around our experiences and how a significant aspect of our meditation practice is seeing into these narratives, abandoning one's that are faulty, and creating new ones that more closely match what we now know from our investigations. What is transformed in meditation practice, at the level of wisdom, is one's conceptualization of meditation experiences: they become seen less as self and more as dependently arisen.

¹⁰ Siff, J. (2010). *Unlearning Meditation: What to do when the instructions get in the way*. Boston, MA, Shambhala Publications, Inc.

The more traditional proponents of *vipassanā* meditation would probably state the position that once one has realized “the truth of impermanence,” it is no longer a concept. The purpose of the whole enterprise of *vipassanā* meditation is to know things as they are and not as ideas of them. This is noble, but unrealistic. The methodology, as can be seen in some of my earlier arguments, is one of learning concepts, practicing them conscientiously, applying them to one’s experiences, interpreting one’s experiences through them, and then one day realizing that the truth of one’s experience indeed matches the concept. Besides my doubts as to this process actually working as planned, this methodology is guaranteed to produce new narratives about the nature of one’s experiences that will replace the old ones. We are essentially dealing with the products of experiences and understandings over time, which are the narratives that are built upon them, rather than raw un-narrated (non-conceptual) experiences that have transformed us deeply. Those experiences, like the Buddha’s, have perished within us and are only accessible through recall and expressible through narration (usually by way of language rather than art).

That is not to say that I don’t believe in deeply transformative understandings arising in meditation, but I would prefer to be realistic about meditation practice and what it can accomplish, so I take the position that knowledge of the Dhamma arises through the awareness and discernment of all one’s states of mind and is not dependent on a singular definitive experience of realization. From that point of view, a meditation practice that includes all of one’s experience, on and off the cushion, and is willing to examine each and every narrative that one holds, makes sense. This is not to say that we need to know each and every state of mind and its accompanying narratives to understand dependent arising, but that dependent arising is found in every aspect of experience and that we just need to learn how to see it, not seek a realization of it.

This involves a simple training that is done over time, during retreats and at home. When one sits in meditation, one can do one’s customary practice, or not do it, at any time during the sitting. One may also decide to sit with what comes up in one’s meditation sittings and not be wed to any particular technique. This kind of freedom allows for individual choice in one’s meditation practice, which I believe is an essential element for developing wisdom that is not dependent on another’s knowledge.

Since students are not all doing the same practices, nor do they have the same meditation history and psychological make-up, there is a good deal of variety in their descriptions of what goes on their meditation sittings. Their descriptions will most likely have instances of their views on self and causality; of their desires, hopes, and fears; of their memories and current life situations; of their imaginations and their sense impressions; all of which can be examined in the context of learning the Dhamma. But in this way one learns about the truth of the Dhamma first by speaking honestly about one’s experiences and the willingness to look into the conditions that bring about one’s experiences, sustain them, and allow for them to be let go of.

In this method of *vipassanā* meditation, the meditation student directly knows her views on self, on causality, and her beliefs in the adherence to rites and rituals. Instead of adopting a view of no-self and practicing it so as to realize it, the student explores how her experiences of self are constructed and is able to question the narratives of self (and other) as agent, identity, and recipient. This is not a rote method of inquiry to come up with the right answers—it is an open-ended exploration. If someone is trying to prove a hypothesis, such as there is no self, then one’s method moves in a straight line to accomplish it; if, on the other hand, someone is learning to observe something in a different way (such as dependent arising), then one’s method may be highly inclusive,

and lead one all over the place, in order to fully comprehend and eventually integrate that new way of seeing.

One may then ask, “Does this method led to the attainment of *sotāpanna*?” In reply, I would have to say that the term “*sotāpanna*” is so bound up in a language of existence that I would hesitate to use it in this context. The Buddha did offer other terms to denote someone’s development on the path to full awakening, such as the notion of “*sappurisa*,” which has a broad meaning of a “good, honest, and worthy person.” In the *Cūlapunṇama Sutta*,¹¹ the Buddha says of the *sappurisa*, “And how is a true man (Bhikkhu Nyānamoli’s translation of *sappurisa*) possessed of good qualities? Here a true man has faith, shame, and fear of wrongdoing; he is learned, energetic, mindful, and wise.”¹² This is not an attainment. When one reads further about the qualities of a *sappurisa*, one not only finds the qualities of a *sotāpanna*, but also what would sustain an ongoing practice of cultivation of wholesome qualities and states of mind found within the Buddha’s teaching. Here we have a term that fits into a language of becoming, free of rigid definitions, definitive experiences, and notions of transcendence. It points to a worthwhile and wholesome development in a person’s meditation practice that is not dependent on a progression of stages leading to a particular attainment. A meditator could know from his own honest self-observation that he is a “*sappurisa*” and would not need to have a teacher confirm it. The descriptions of his meditation experiences would not have to be interpreted to fit into any system—they would just have to exhibit his trust in the process of meditation (or faith in the Dhamma) and his fear of wrongdoing in his life, and indicate that he is becoming learned, interested, aware, and wise. I believe the method of meditation I have outlined in this paper, which I have developed and taught over the past twenty-two years, does lead to this worthy and noble way of being, known as a *sappurisa*.

Concluding this paper with a recapitulation of key points:

A language of existence and a descriptive language of meditational experiences operate at two extremes. A language of becoming is the middle way between these extremes, utilizing the strengths of both and questioning their weaknesses. In questioning the use of terms and concepts that lend themselves to a language of existence in meditation teaching and practice, this paper steers clear of assessments on the validity or verifiability of the meditation experiences denoted by the terms and concepts used. It is my contention that the process of matching meditative states and realizations with set terminology and a system of stages is made less reliable by relying on a “language of existence” divorced from a descriptive language of meditational experiences. We need honest descriptions of meditator’s experiences, which may contain contradictions to general terms, in order to both counteract the tendency to lump disparate experiences into the same general category and to further our exploration into the dependently arisen nature of those experiences.

¹¹ Majjhima Nikāya, III.23

¹² Nanamoli, Bhikkhu (1995). *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*. Boston, MA, Wisdom Publications: p. 894.

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