

First Intensive Retreat, Italy on April 1999 **By Oliver, October 2020**

This report is dedicated to a novice Insight Meditation practitioner who participated for the first time in a long and intensive retreat; and who wanted to share his experience in the practice of Insight Meditation. The international private retreat was held in small groups on 4/1999 in Italy, guided by the famous meditation teacher Bhante Sujiva. The article in Chinese was first published in the Wisdom Journal of the CYM Temple in New York in 1999 and then on the bilingual HMC website in 2015. Vipassana yogi readers, especially beginners, have benefited greatly from the Chinese article. In reading my article, many yogis have converted their practice from Samatha (Tranquility Meditation) to Vipassana (Insight Meditation).

Background

Jade Buddha Temple contemplated inviting an internationally renowned meditation teacher to guide its unprecedented 7-days intensive retreat on the Houston campus to celebrate its 10th anniversary in 1998. Jade Buddha Temple has commissioned me to lead the invitation to Bhante Sujiva; he was the best meditation teacher in Malaysia. At that time, Bhante was planning to move to Europe to extend his meditation teaching from Malaysia to Western countries. During the invitation process, unfortunately, Bhante has politely rejected my invitation three times for various reasons. But Upon my insistence and sincerity, Bhante had finally accepted the invitation; he could not refuse a student's request more than three times because he was following Buddhist traditions. Bhante would like to come to Houston to see in person who Oliver is.

On the first day after arrival Houston, Bhante surprised me. He was about to invite me to participate in his 30-day private international retreat in Italy on 4/1999. Bhante expressly told me of this privilege: Internationally, there were only seven yogis to be invited, only one quota available for the USA, and I was the one to fill up that spot. At that moment, I was very hesitant to accept the honor considering: never having participated in a long intensive retreat before, plus the fact of traveling alone from Houston to Italy. However, Bhante promised and guaranteed that I would obtain an experience of "impermanence" by attending this privileged retreat. The terminology of impermanence seemed fanciful to me; under Bhante's encouragement, I finally nodded my head.

In the beginning, I thought that the private retreat should be tough, struggling, challenging due to the lack of prior practice in a long retreat . Ultimately, it turned out to be a fantastic wonderland, located in the natural beauty of the mountains on the northern border of Italy, and the best vacation of my life.

A brief introduction to the teaching of Bhante Sujiva

Like any physical exercise, insight meditation (Vipassana) is a mental exercise aimed at acquiring the skills of mental training, from continuous uninterrupted practice, to develop wholesome mental states: such as mindfulness and concentration. The mental states developed will dictate what will be experienced, based on a perception of the chosen objects of observed phenomena. And any experience gained from practice simply reflects the mental states of the yogi as an observer. This is the principle of the practice of Insight Meditation which must be centered on mindfulness. After developing conscious mindfulness states of mind, the focused concentration state of mind would come along naturally.

Bhante's teaching on the Mahasi method of Insight Meditation begins with the observation of physical phenomena in our bodies as the basis for mindfulness. The chosen objects of observation comprise: the rising and falling movement of the abdomen in the sitting posture, the movement of the legs in the walking posture, and the slow movement in the activities of daily life.

Moreover, Bhante emphasizes the process of observation to concentrate particularly on the nature of object phenomena, rather than observing its shape and form: for shape and form are just concepts, and observing the nature of the object will take the process of observation into reality, the true essence of natural phenomena such as impermanence and non-self.

“Change” is the nature of the chosen Vipassana object; no matter what it be a physical or mental phenomenon. In the practice of mindfulness meditation, observe the change in the movement of the abdomen up and down, the change in the movement of the legs when walking, and the change in slow-motion of daily activity. This is the method of practice leading to the development of consciousness, a clear awareness: experiencing the motion of movement gradually in changing states, the flow and process in a sequential order of skillful mindfulness as you go along the path of practice, to acquire insightful knowledges: such as impermanence in a fast and ephemeral change from one moment to the next.

The first report on Intensive Retreat

Before taking part in this intensive retreat, the author, in a daily and regular practice at home, has already observed the change of primary object into sensations from the rising and falling of the abdomen in the sitting position and the movement of the legs in the walking position. The physical pain due to a prolonged sitting position is no longer an pain but a surging flow of energy.

In such a scenario, the student asked Bhante, in the first interview, under what circumstances the practitioner can switch the observation of the primary object of the change of movement to physical sensations. The instructor responded simply: Sati (in Pali) or Mindfulness. Mindfulness is therefore a wholesome mental state associated with clear consciousness and momentary concentration.

The observation of physical phenomena as 4 primary elements of sensation allows observing 12 states of changing sensations:

1. The Earth element - hardness versus softness, heavy versus light, roughness versus suppleness
2. The Fire element - hot and cold ;
3. Wind element - supporting and pushing ;
4. Water Element - fluid and adhesive

Please note that the wind elements are the most perceptible changing states for most yogis. The water element is the last changing state of sensations to be aware of as it is a doorway process of the mind. On the other hand, the earth/fire/wind elements are a doorway process of the body.

Within the first 10 days of retreat

Vittaka - Initial application; the nature of the object in changing states
"Pursue" the object of observation is the term so often used by Bhante. Whenever you are aware of the wandering mind of the observer, there is a thought to bring the wandering mind back to the observed object. This awareness is in fact a conscious mindfulness and the thought of returning attention to the object is Vittaka or initial application.

During the sitting posture in the first two days of the retreat, the field of object working area focus on two main areas of the object of sensation:

The first domain of object functioning as the field of working area involves the abdomen, bottom and both legs. This domain assigns four primary elements of sensation to the impacts of the concentration power from walking meditation. In this working zone of object phenomena, the experience of witnessing the sensations looks very powerful "suctioning and pulling down". And both legs are almost as if broken by nailing, pulling down at the point of contact.

The second area of the object's work zone involves the breathing part of the abdomen and the upper part, as well as the large area of the chest, where the sensation is the outcome of the observational power of sitting meditation. The sensation observed in this area of the object seems like a very soft but firm supporting and lifting upwards.

Bhante instructed during the interviews: "If the object's field of work gets too large, it will be difficult for the mental power to maintain concentration, it will be easy to get tired and exhausted; moreover, it will be dispersed in the power of concentration. It should be good enough just simply to concentrate the foundation of mindfulness on abdominal breathing".

Bhante's tip of advice functions well and addresses the heart of the matter. From this point on, the object's field has been shrinking into half and turns into a one pointed concentration in the ash hole at the bottom, from where one pointed object would migrate quickly to the point of contact between the two legs.

Moreover, Bhante added: "Due to the increased power of concentration, the object's domain would shrink, migrate, or even disappear at lightning speed. But all the above experiences are attributed to our noting mind makes it happen out of mental formation".

From the 11th to the 14th day

Vicara - Sustained Applications , The Nature of Object phenomena in flowing States
Vicara is a wholesome mental state because the noting mind begins to touch the object of observation, like a hummingbird hanging from the trunk of a tree up and down repeatedly. Bhante likes to use the phrase "impingement to enter into", which means: begin to enter into the object phenomena and look around joyfully at the scenes.

On the 11th day of retreat, at 4:30 am, during the morning sitting session, the sensation of ashes hole at the bottom suddenly from suctioning & pulling turned into electric current flowing around both legs and both hands; then expanding to the entire area under the chest. Whereas, the domain of objects looked like semi-transparent, and standing at an intersection to observe the traffic flow in an underground tunnel. Moreover, the abdominal breathing resembled the breathing of an octopus in the alternation of expansion and contraction. The flow of electric current then extended to the chest, head and the whole body. During this time, the electric current was transformed into a rapid vibration throughout the body. In addition, there was a lifting plume in a sectional flow that rose from the bottom to the top of the head. The body was felt like a leaf floating on the surface of the water. It was a very refreshing sensation. It was a fluid state of feeling from relaxation of the body and softness of the mind.

Bhante's advice in the interview: "the experience of observing natural phenomena like sensations will be the same, regardless of the point in the body from which one gets into the observation process. Therefore, in the process of observation, a yogi should not consider concepts such as location or direction. The practice of insight meditation must go beyond concepts in order to perceive the truthful nature and reality of the observed phenomena".

From the 15th to the 20th day

Viveka - Seclusion of Hindrances, one pointed momentary concentration.

Viveka is not a Jhana factor, but a mental state called seclusion of 5 senses, desires and 5 hindrances. When all the unwholesome mental states of the hindrances are temporarily kept away in the bay, the mind that notes would be unifying and penetrating the phenomena of the object; this is called one-point concentration. Please note that momentary concentration is a salient feature of insight meditation. By analogy, at one-pointed concentration, it is just like the needle of a sewing machine, kept shuffling up and down rapidly. Whereas, the noting mind would penetrate into the object of observation to observe the true nature of the object-phenomena in its rapid arising and disappearance as a process from one moment to the next.

In a walking meditation on the 15th day of the retreat, observe the water element of sensation as the adhesive, the fluid states. And feel the heavy sensations in a few pounds of weight. It grows so heavy that it is almost impossible to move the leg. Bhante advises: "In this state, you should immediately stop walking meditation and switch to a seated posture".

Upon entering the sitting position, the momentary one-pointed concentration slowed down the speed of abdominal rising and falling into an almost stalled speed. The continuity of the abdominal movement from rising and falling is broken down into discrete vibrations, like so many ants crawling out of a disturbed ant pile. The above impermanency nature of observed sensations spread and expanded gradually into the chest and lower parts, changing quickly from moment to another.

During this time the sensations are decomposed into subtle Dharma particles (Rupa Kalapa) associated with a free flow of energy as a derivative of the 4 primary elements of the sensations (四大所)。The substance of the physical sensations is transformed and converted into a free flow of energy.

Bhante instructed that the empirical experience of mature impermanence described above should allow us to extend the true nature of object-related phenomena to the whole body. In particular, he emphasizes on the mental attitude to adopt towards the observation of impermanence:
"If you are looking for something to happen, it won't happen because there is a craving. But if you have learned to free yourself from attachment, then it will happen".

In the closing two days of the retreat, the mental habit of expectations stands on the way to realize impermanence of maturity, no matter how hard I try. At the completion of retreat, I had no other choice but disappointed to fly back from Italy to Houston.

While flying over an alpine mountainous area on the border between Italy and Switzerland, I woke up after a short nap after lunch; suddenly I realized the physical phenomena of mature sensations of impermanence like :

"The arising and disappearance of physical sensations in tiny vibrations, in quickly varying states from one moment to the next, flow throughout the entire body from the bottom to the top of the head for 90 minutes".

It should be noted that the above spontaneous experience originates from the function of Bhavanga (life continuum of consciousness or the mind door), as stated by one of the Dharma Teachers:

"Knowledge about the conditioning process coming from the practice of meditation would be stored in Bhavanga. This information can be retrieved when the opportunity for conditioning is ripen."

Conclusion

There are 2 takeaways from the above article :

- 1) By the end of the retreat, I began to realize that Bhante has foresight for at least six months in advance thanks to the practice of Insight Meditation. From the first interview, Bhante has already predicted what I will be at the end of the retreat. Naturally, Bhante would provide me with a tip of advice, indirectly and wisely on how to focus attention on the skills of mental training for mindfulness, clear awareness and concentration. No surprise that Bhante's foresight can promise and ensure that I will have good potential to experience the true nature of impermanence at the end of retreat.
- 2) Bhante mentions several times that it is crucial for students to regularly participate in a long retreat supervised by a renowned teacher, especially from a senior master of meditation teacher. Thanks to Bhante's encouragement, this long retreat marks the beginning of my journey of new discovery. From that time on, I have participated in Bhante's private international retreat, which started once a year and has grown to twice a year, and I have flown to wherever Bhante stays, flying from Houston to various European countries , and Australia over the last 15 years.

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