

## **The Basic Principles of Insight Meditation**

By Oliver in Houston, 18 November 2020

This article will first discuss the principles of meditation, then the relationship between object and subject. Second, the article will cover the natural states of object and subject since they are closely related to the practice of insight meditation; according to its relational hierarchy from the top and down. Lastly, this article would explore insight meditation to be a journey of a new discovery to overcome sorrow and lamentations for the well being, happiness and peace.

You have to consider a quotation from the Satipatthna Sutra in order to grasp the principles of meditation. This quote explains clearly the framework of meditation. It says:

*"In the four postures of daily life, contemplate the observed Mind and Body (processes) or Five Aggregates (of grasping) ardently, mindfully and clearly comprehending; for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation."*

In the practice of meditation, each word of the Sutra expresses a profound meaning. To be more precise, the complete framework of the practice of meditation can be divided into three components as detailed below:

**The Object of Natural Phenomena-** The objects of meditation are the processes of mind and body. For beginners, the primary objects for the practice of insight meditation are usually the rising and falling of the abdomen in a sitting posture or the leg movement while walking. There is another technique that uses daily activities in slow motion (walking, eating, cleaning, washing, etc.) as an object of meditation. For advanced yogis, whatever they are aware of is the rightly Vipassana objects. In fact, it is not important what the object is, as any mental activity or bodily phenomena can be considered a potential object of meditation.

**The Subject of Mental Activity** - The noting mind is an invisible mental activity consisting of consciousness and its related mental states. The mental states of the noting mind include the intense effort or the energetic faculty of consciousness, mindfulness, and the wisdom of clear awareness. Please note that mindfulness is a wholesome mental state, and the clear awareness is a knowing function of noting mind from the act of Consciousness. Mindfulness is the cause and clear awareness is the final outcome. Therefore in insight meditation, the yogi should first practice mindfulness, then concentration and wisdom of clear awareness will come along naturally.

**Implementation-**境由心轉, the relation between the subject and the object  
The purification of the mind in daily life through the four postures and the exercise of Insight Meditation lead to well-being (in terms of health and longevity); happiness through the release of mental suffering; and, peace to surmount the daily challenges of life.

Natural phenomena must be selected as objects to be observed, but the chosen object does not know itself. It takes awareness (the knowing of noting mind) from the act of consciousness to know the selected object for what it is. In addition, the *Nature of the object selected* will determine the course of the meditation. A chosen object in a dynamic changing nature, such as the rising and falling of the abdomen will result in Vipassana or insight meditation. A selected object in a static

nature like kanisa of earth disk and Nimitta of countersign of mental image will result in Samatha, or Meditation of Tranquility.

What are the principles of meditation? To state it simply (相由心生), the fundamental principles of meditation are developed from a relationship between the noting mind (of the subject), and the object of the meditation. The direct experience of perceiving the object of meditation represents simply the mental state of an observer's noting mind. This mechanism is named the *Uncertainty Principle* (測不準原理); which is a well-known theory of Quantum Physics. It supposes that the skill of mental training acquired in mindfulness and concentration, or the wholesome mental states of the yogi's observing mind as an observer will determine what will be experienced from perceiving the chosen object of meditation (境由心轉). The proverb "Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder" is applied here. In the training process, mindfulness is the cause and awareness is the final outcome. Therefore, a Yogi must practice the skill of mindfulness to strengthen clear awareness of consciousness in order to reach wisdom.

**States of Object Phenomena:** 法相的相狀, 狀態

As cited above, the nature of the objects selected for meditation will dictate the course and direction of the meditation. In addition, the natural states of the phenomena of the chosen objects will determine the advancing level of depth of meditation; or the insight knowledges when applying mindfulness.

In a Dharma talk at a retreat @ California in 2016, Bhante Sujiva taught that: Yogis should focus on the changing states of the object rather than its form or its shape within the practice of Vipassana. Form and shape are only *concepts*, and it is the state of nature that is the true reality of natural phenomena: such as impermanence and no-self. Change is the Nature of any object phenomenon. In modern language, the word "change" has a broad and deep meaning. These meanings can be divided into three major categories which are faced in practice: *Change* in the gross states of phenomena, *Flow* in the subtle states of phenomena, and *Processes* in the true nature of phenomena, and this depends on the skill of mindfulness in the aspect of the power of observation.

**The changing States:** In Vipassana, Change is the Nature of all natural phenomena, and the observation of changes in object phenomena is the most important element in the practice of insight meditation. In the Mahasi's method of practicing insight meditation, devoting attention to the change in the movement of the abdomen during sitting meditation as it moves up and down is an example of noting change rather than form or shape. Likewise, in walking meditation, paying attention to the change in legs movement during walking is another example of observing change instead of form or shape.

When the basic skills of mental training are at Vittaka's initial application stage, wholesome mental states will begin to develop and strengthen through mindfulness and concentration. Observe the superficial appearance of movement of objects naturally turned into grossly changing states of bodily sensations involving the four primary elements: earth, fire, water, and wind. Examples of the physical phenomena in states of change are suction, lifting, whirling, nailing, and etching; just name a few.

Likewise, when practicing Cittanapassana for the foundation of mindfulness on the mind (citta), the yogi should observe the change of mental activity and discover mental states that flow and change from one moment to the next moment. The momentary changes of mental states / mental factors are a result of changing Consciousness; just like the state of water changes with waves and currents.

**Flowing States:** When the power of observation is at the Vicara level (sustained application) for the skill of mindfulness, the phenomena of the chosen objects will manifest a flow of the subtle states of nature. The gross changing states of physical phenomena of 4 primary elements cited above will be break up and decomposed into fluid subtle states such as superficial flow, turbulent flow, rising upward flow, and downward flow. The combination of the two faculties of consciousness which are energy and concentration construe mostly the subtle states of flow. The energetic capacity makes the object's superficial flow and the concentrating capacity is immersed in the object to cause the turbulent flow.

For instance: to distinguish between physical phenomena and mental ones in the first insight knowledge, the state of flow becomes "flow in the flow and flow with the flow" as the stream of noting-mind flows with the flow of object's phenomena.

**Transformation process:** The observation of object phenomena would become a process of change and flow when the power of observation advances to the state of seclusion of 5 hindrances. In this circumstance, the states of the process uncover the true nature, reality of all natural phenomena, such as impermanence and no-self. The fundamental definition of the process is the whole process of change of natural phenomena from appearance, birth, decay to dissolution, and disappearance.

In high-level of insight knowledge, for example, from 6 to 12, the reality of the changing nature of all natural phenomena will be lived as :

~ All things are not a thing, i.e., no single entity to be substantiated as no-self, but a mere process.

Whilst a mere process is a process of processes, it changes momentary and rapidly from one moment to the next to be impermanent.

#### **States of mind or mental factors:**

As discussed previously, the states of mind of yogis as observers will govern what will be perceived and witnessed as a part of practicing meditation. In short, mental states can be divided into two broad categories: wholesome mental states of consciousness, which are free of craving, aversion, and delusions; and, unwholesome mental states of consciousness, which are associated with the three mental toxins aforementioned.

In essence, Insight Meditation is based on mindfulness to acquire mental training skills for the purification of the mind as expressed in the Satipatthana Sutra for the Four Foundations of Mindfulness on Body, Feelings, Citta or Mind and Dhama. The skills of mental training centered on mindfulness consist mostly in developing and balancing five mental faculties of consciousness so as to surmount the defilements of sensory desires and 5 hindrances.

Concerning wholesome mental states, there are five mental faculties of consciousness: Faith, energy (effort), mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom (the level of knowing from the act of consciousness).

Basically, mindfulness is described as a state of being totally at the present, having clear awareness and the power of observation. When you are aware of being not mindful, that awareness is in fact mindfulness itself. At any time that you become aware of mental activities, it is critical to immediately note the object of conscious awareness. The perceived mental activities will immediately disappear, whether they have already become defilement or not. This is the true power of observation which is developed from the exercise of mindfulness to surmount sorrow and lamentation.

The mental activities noted will not immediately disappear if the power of mindfulness is not sufficiently strong. The appropriate mental attitude of meditation in the practice of the skill of mindfulness is just to learn to let it be as it is and to let it go of attachments, for the Noting mind would not be carried away by the object of awareness. Otherwise, you will only add fuels to the fire of defilement.

The aforementioned skills of mental training for mindfulness can be summarized as follows: Treat all objects as equal" - in other words, the four grounds rules of practice :

No expectations,

No judgments,

No comparisons, and

No complaints.

Simply expressed, unwholesome mental states are the states of consciousness associated with craving, aversion, and delusions. So what are they? They are the five bodily senses of desire, aversions, restlessness of the mind, laziness, torpor; and Dharma's skepticism. These five unhealthy mental states are on the path of insight and are also known as the five hindrances.

### **A shortcut in the practice of insight meditation to overcome defilement**

There are 6 sensors in our body to detect all physical and mental phenomena. But beware, all defilements take place only at the door of the mind or Bhavanga (life continuum of consciousness). According to the Satipatthana Sutra, to guard 6 senses in reality to arrest the flow of thought processes of sensory desires and defilements is a way of practicing Dharmanaupassana for the foundation of mindfulness on mental objects or Dharma.

In order to get over the sorrow and lamentations, quotes Sayadaw Mahasi in his Dharma talk as follows:

"Wherever you fall, that is exactly where you have to work very hard to learn how to stand up and overcome defilement. "

For instance, while the yogi performs the foundation of mindfulness on the body by observing abdominal movements as the main object, there is an internal disturbance or external distraction that occurs. The resulting defilement of the internal disturbance such as thinking continuously is a mind door process. The onset of the external distraction such as hearing noise is an ear-door process. All of the above-mentioned defilements that have crept into the mind are due to the skill of mindfulness's lack of continuity. Whenever the practitioner is conscious of the defilements that are occurring; he must move quickly from the primary object, namely the rising and falling of the abdomen to the secondary object, namely the awareness of the defilements. Once again, this awareness is in itself a full mindfulness.

If the mindfulness is sufficiently strong, the defilements will disappear as soon as the note is made. On the other hand, if the mindfulness is not sufficiently strong, the defilements will not disappear directly after being noted. At this stage, the yogi must adopt a correct mental attitude such as total acceptance, whatever it may be, to observe the phenomena of defilements as a passing show; without allowing the noting mind to be possessed by the observed phenomena of defilements.

In case the clear awareness or full mindfulness is not sufficiently strong, Sayadaw Mahasi suggests to beginners a shortcut method as an alternative to deal with defilements by labeling techniques to

increase awareness or mindfulness. In fact, the labeling technique is just a practical tool to label the whole process of hearing a noise as a single moment of acting by inner saying: "hearing, hearing ". The sound of the noise will be blocked at the doorway of the ear in case of a strong presence of mindfulness and good concentration. However, the labeling tool will no longer work on this occasion if the observed phenomena occur too quickly.

Once again, focus on all the defilement that has happened only at the mind's door. To overcome suffering and lament, a renowned Buddha teaching states that:

"Just block out the 5 sensors of the body, concentrate only on the mind door, and observe the mental objects ardently".

On a technical aspect in the practice of Insight meditation, Bhante Sujiva teachings on how to block out the 5 body senses doorways and leave only the mind door open are cited as follow:

In 2000, during a long retreat in Australia, Bhante taught me for the first time: how to develop the eyes of the mind (\*\* note 1) so that it can observe the mental objects at the mind door. The Observing of mental objects works as a shortcut method of practicing Dharmanupassana for the foundation of mindfulness, on Dharma or mental objects. The shortcut method is primarily designed to quickly acquire insight knowledges and to experience the reality of natural phenomena as:

“All things are not a thing, but a mere process. “

Whereas the mere process (of conditioning in meditation) is a process of processes in the moment to the next moment (\*\*note 2). In short, it is a shortcut method in the practice of Dharmanupassana: how to observe 6 body sensors to well guard 6 senses, in order to overcome suffering and laments.

While the ability of mindfulness and momentary concentration is at the Vicara level (in sustained application), the mind's eyes (\*\*note 1) begin to perceive mental objects at the mind-door as mental images. The mental object is like a mirror image reflection of a real object or the image of the moon in the water. The mind's eyes are developed from the function of Bhavanga or the mind-door. Use the mind's eye to visualize the mental object; this latter, functions as the object observed at the mind-door.

Bhante Sujiva likes to refer to an analogy to explain the deep and true meaning of Dharma, or natural phenomena. It is like a person who stands inside a house to observe things of the outside world through different windows. In this analogy, these different windows refer to 5 body senses' doors; and, the worldly things of the outside world represent the objects of 5 body sensors. The person standing inside the house is like a spiritual mind door; it knows the outside world by observing objects through the different senses' doors.

Moreover, according to the analogy described above, the mental objects at the mind door naturally reflect all the natural phenomena that take place at the doorways of 5 body senses and for everything that is in our mind (\*\* footnote 2). The observation of mental objects functions as the primary object of meditation in the Dharmanupassi for the foundation of mindfulness on the Dharma. One of the wonders of observing the mental object through the mind's eyes is to monitor the mental state of the yogi in the form of images on the radar screen. From there, the yogi's observed mental states will dictate the immediate meditative experience and perception from observing the object of meditation.

## **Conclusion:**

To suit all beings with different personality tendencies, there are many different approaches to practicing Insight Meditation. The most basic approach is to let the teacher hold the students' hand in hand, to teach them to walk, step by step, with their feet on the ground. Fortunately, there are shortcut methods in practice to undergo all the same stages mentioned above. However, there is a trap in "catch 22" syndrome:

"Something simpler would be much harder to learn. "

Sadhu, Sadhu, Sadhu

## **Footnotes:**

- 1) **Eyes of the mind:** This is a function in Bhavanga or the mind door; and, the mind's eyes rely on the vision of the physical eyes to observe the mental object. In Dharma (Paramattha), the process of seeing mental objects by the mind's eyes is actually the mind-door process associated with the eyes-door process.
- 2) **Process of Processes:** According to Bhante Sujiva's teaching, the use of the mind's eyes to observe mental objects is a shortcut to the practice of Dharmanupassana. In the reality of Dharma, this observation process is a complex process of processes as follow :

*Physical sensations* are a bodily process that operates as the object at the body door.

*Mental objects* are a mind-door process to reflect the objects at the body door in the form of mental images.

*The eyes of the mind*, as mentioned in footnote 1, are a mixture of eyes and mind door processes in a relatively simple process of processes.

To put all the above parts together, the above observation process is composed of the body-door process, the eyes-door process, and many mind-door processes.

Pay attention to the key point in the practice of Insight meditation:

Whenever phenomena are being aware of occurring at the doorways of six body senses, the practitioner must immediately observe them with great attention to stop the flow of the mind in a shortened process of processes; to perceive the reality of the Dharma; and, to prevent sequential defilements from occurring *out of the mental formation from the mind makes it happen.*

Therefore, the simple observation of mental objects at the mind's door would encompass all 5 sensor objects in the body and all natural phenomena that occur at 5 sensors. Moreover, the shortcut method of practicing Dharmanupassana described above is in accordance with the teaching of the Buddha:

"To overcome the defilements, simply block out the 5 body sensors and let the mind door open"

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