

Motivation

Insight practices lead to two basic kinds of insight: relative and ultimate. Relative insights are what comes from getting to know our emotions, bodies, thoughts and hearts at the level of content: the stories, the specific qualities, the causes, the effects. These insights can be of great value but are only part of the story.

Ultimate insights refer to the stages of awakening, realization, enlightenment, or whatever you want to call it. These insights are not dependent upon the content, stories, dramas, pains, successes or failures of our lives. Instead, they are about some other aspect of awareness, of being, of consciousness itself.

Ultimate insights cause permanent changes in the relationship to reality and eliminate fundamental levels of suffering forever. Discussing ultimate insights is a very difficult thing to do. It tends to lead to descriptions that sound like paradoxes, fantasies, or nonsense. However, attaining the stages of awakening is highly recommended even if they are hard to describe. This is definitely possible with sufficient effort and skill. The insight practice presented here are one effective technique for awakening.

The attainment of both relative and ultimate insights is the motivation to do insight practices.

Theory and Practice

Concept 1: Our sensate reality is the basis of insight practices. Reality is made of six kinds of sensations: physical sensations, sounds, sights, tastes, smells, and thoughts. These experiences are all we can know directly. When doing insight practice, reality is defined solely by what can be experienced in that moment. Corollary: Everything not experienced in that moment is assumed to not exist at that moment.

Practice: our first goal in insight practice is to identify the sensations that make up our life with attention that is steady and precise enough to get to know them very well.

In order to do this formally, clearly and consistently, we do a practice called “noting”. We make a quiet mental note of whatever we experience. We also try to stay with the sensations of breathing, either in the abdomen or at the tip of the nose when possible. If we notice the breath rising, we note “rising”. If we notice the breath falling, we note, “falling”. Similarly, we may note “thinking”, “wandering”, “feeling”, “hearing”, “seeing”, “smelling”, and “tasting”. When walking, we may note the “lifting”, “moving” and “placing” of our feet.

We may also note such experiences as “fear”, “happiness”, “pain”, “boredom”, “restlessness”, “doubt”, “wanting”, “hunger”, “confusion”, returning after these to the noting of the rising and falling of the breath.

Concept 2: The Three Characteristics of **Impermanence**, **Suffering** and **No-self**, are the key to deep insights. Impermanence means that many sensations arise and vanish completely during every second of awareness. Suffering means that the illusion of a watcher, observer, or doer, commonly called the “self”, is inherently painful. No-self means that all sensations arise on their own in a natural causal fashion and are aware where they are, requiring no separate agent or observer at all.

Practice: Once we have applied the first concept and gotten to know sensations as they are, then we can perceive them come and go, feel the painful tension inherent in the illusion of an observer or agent, and notice that sensations arise over there quite on their own, not requiring any observer or constituting either a self or other. They are merely part of the transient and causal nature of things.

The simple process of noting clearly and consistently, say at the rate of at least once per second, can stabilize attention enough that direct insight into the Three Characteristics arises. The corollary of this is that while we are lost in the content of our stories, dramas, thoughts, and concern for the specifics of what arises, we will not make good progress in insight. When we focus instead on the Three

Characteristics of whatever arises, we will make progress in insight. Staying with the sensations of breathing is very helpful in this.

Practical Sitting Instructions

Set aside a defined period of time for practice, say 20 minutes to an hour. Find a place that is relatively quiet and free from distractions. Choose a sitting posture that you can sustain for the practice period, is not damaging to your body, is stable, allows your back to be relatively straight, and allows you to breathe easily.

You may wish to sit on a cushion (zafu) in one of the following positions: cross-legged, in the Burmese or friendly position (like cross-legged except that both legs are on the floor with one foot in front of the other), or in half-lotus or full-lotus. You may also sit on a meditation bench or even a chair.

Set a timing device to activate when your sit is done. Close your eyes. Dedicate your practice to the wisdom and benefit of yourself and all beings.

Note carefully and consistently for the duration of the meditation period, focusing on the breath but noting other things when these catch your attention. Be sure to carefully note “wandering” when the mind wanders and “thinking” when thoughts distract your attention from the sensations of breathing. Return your attention gently but firmly to the sensations of breathing.

Try to practice every day. Make time for retreats: see www.interactivebuddha.com for a list of retreat centers.

Insight Practice Instructions #1

Noting

by
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Insight practices lead to a deeper understanding of life as it is.

Presented here are the basic theory and practice of Buddhist insight practice as found in the original texts, specifically Sutta #111, One by One as They Occurred, in the Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha. This style of practice is given particular emphasis in the Burmese tradition of Mahasi Sayadaw and has had a profound impact on Western Buddhism. It is one of the most popular styles of insight practice in the world today.

This technique is very practical, effective, reality-based, non-dogmatic, non-ritualistic and straightforward.

More information about insight practices may be found at: www.interactivebuddha.com. This site includes the free on-line book Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha, by Daniel Ingram. It can be printed directly at any copy center with internet access, as there is are .pdf and .doc formats there. There you will also find a reading list, links to other useful websites including retreat centers and archives of useful writings, a schedule of classes on meditation, as well as other meditation groups and supporters in the Louisville area. Enjoy!

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Walking Meditation Instructions

Set aside a defined period for your practice, say 20 minutes to an hour. Pick a place to walk that is at least 10 feet long, safe and relatively free from distractions. Dedicate your practice to the wisdom and benefit of yourself and all beings. Set a timing device.

With your eyes open, walk at a normal to slow pace back and forth, paying careful attention to the rising, moving, and placing of the feet, noting them as that. Notice the exact sensations that make up this process just as they are. Also note the other sensations that you notice, returning your attention gently but firmly to the sensations of walking. Continue this as consistently as possible for the duration of the walking period.

Pay extra attention when turning around, noting “turning” and to noting the first step in the new direction. This is a common time for the mind to wander.

Some people think of walking meditation as secondary to sitting meditation, but I have found that walking meditation can be extremely powerful and should not be underestimated. It deserves at least as much attention and respect as sitting meditation.

Pay particular attention when possible to the intentions that proceed every motion of the body.

Odds and Ends

A common obstacle in sitting practice is pain. Carefully notice pain when it arises, noticing exactly where it is, where its edges are, what kind of pain it is, and how it changes moment to moment. Make sure to carefully and consistently note pain when it arises, moving mindfully only when necessary. Other sensations, such as the feeling of itching skin, neck and jaw tension, bright lights, visions, odd distortions of bodily perception, and a wide variety of other strange sensations and experiences may arise. Very strong emotions may also come and go. These should simply be noted consistently. Maintain a balanced interest in precise and impartial noting with a focus on the Three Characteristics. Should vibrations arise, even very subtle ones, these are a great opportunity to notice impermanence. Give careful and quick attention to the rising and passing of each pulse of any vibrations that arises. Many “problems” that arise in practice simply require patience, allowing that particular dance of life to play itself out. When in doubt, **note it**.

Some people will find themselves in stable states that are very pleasant or peaceful. These deserve aggressive noting, so that we do not artificially solidify reality and get lost in temporary bliss states. Good luck.