

# **Meditation and Insight II**

## **The Role of Insight in Buddhadharma**

**A Non-Residential Teaching Retreat  
with  
Upasaka Culadasa**

### ***Insight Experiences versus Insight***

Let's begin by distinguishing between *insight* and *insight experiences*. Any experience that challenges your current understanding of who and what you are and how the world works is a potential *insight experience*. Of course, it may turn out to be a simple misperception, like mistaking a snake for a rope. But if further investigation confirms it as a *valid perception*, then you have an insight problem on your hands – how to reconcile that experience with your working model of reality. If you *succeed in resolving the problem, then you've achieved insight*.

That reconciliation can take two courses. On the one hand, you may penetrate deeply enough into the cause and effect relationships behind the experience to be able to explain it in terms of your current understanding of everything else. When that happens, you've gained insight into the phenomenon. Figuring out how stage magicians achieve their seemingly "impossible" feats is an example. On the other hand, insight can change your worldview. Once you've figured out a few of these magic tricks, you don't bother anymore. Insight has changed your worldview, so it now includes the fact that people can create illusions that are ultimately explainable in terms of things you already understand. From then on, stage tricks aren't insight experiences anymore. We do something similar with the wizardry of modern technology. We take it for granted that if we took the time and trouble, we could explain it by learning a few new facts to add to our existing worldview, and so mostly we don't bother.

But sometimes insight involves more than just figuring things out in terms of what you already know, and then adding a few new facts to your worldview. Sometimes insight means *radically changing* some of the assumptions your worldview is based on. As a matter of fact, this happened continuously as you were growing up. Your worldview was constantly being refined, expanded, and sometime being turned completely upside down as you encountered new experiences. This last is what makes adolescence such a traumatic time for many of us. We're forced to assimilate all kinds of new insights into who we are and how the world works.

Insight experiences can lead to insight, but they don't always. We often dismiss or ignore the strange and unexpected, sometimes because we are more intent on something else, and sometimes because we just can't be bothered. We cling tightly to our established views, and so long as our comfort isn't threatened, we would rather not have to change them. We'd like to believe that at some point we've finally got life all figured out, although that isn't ever really true. To continue to grow means to remain open to insight, to learn to recognize insight experiences whenever they present themselves, and to appreciate them as opportunities.

### ***Buddhist Insight***

You will recall that the basic premise of Buddhadharma is that the ordinary way we view the world and ourselves is seriously flawed. That wrong view is at the root of all our suffering, and is

also what prevents us from realizing our full potential. If the Buddha's premise is true, then exactly what we would expect to find is that we keep doing what seems to make sense, over and over again, but never really get the results we had hoped for. Every single time we find ourselves frustrated, unhappy, hurt, and disappointed, it is an insight experience of sorts. If we were wise, it would motivate us to figure out what we're doing and thinking that isn't working. But mostly it doesn't. Clearly there is a mismatch between how we understand the world and what actually happens when we act on that understanding. But instead of trying to resolve that mismatch, most people just ignore it. Instead they seek some kind of comfort and distraction from their pain and disappointment, then proceed to do exactly the same thing next time, still hoping for a different result. All too often, they decide to try harder, but all they manage to do is make the same mistake on a bigger scale.

This describes most people. But there are some, like yourself, who are not satisfied to just keep doing the same things and seek some banal escape after every new pain and disappointment. Your frustrations have instead become insight experiences, and you've come to the Buddhadharmā, or at least to meditation, searching for the Insight that will liberate you from this rat race. You've come to the right place.

One of three kinds of Insight experience has probably brought you to the Dharma: impermanence, emptiness, or suffering. Some people are powerfully struck by the ceaseless change and inconstancy of absolutely everything, both internal and external. Always overwhelmed by change, no matter how hard they struggle, they still find themselves just treading water with no end in sight. The lack of anything reliable to cling to, having no certainty in life, is the Insight challenge that leads them to seek a greater truth. Impermanence becomes their gateway to the Dharma.

Others come to realize that nothing is as it appears, everyone sees everything differently, and conflicts are everywhere. Ultimate truth is impossibly elusive. Unable to find lasting faith in anything, life begins to appear as nothing more than a meaningless, ultimately hopeless struggle. In their desperation, they too become seekers. The experience of emptiness becomes their Insight challenge and gateway to the Dharma.

I was one of those, and myself might once have said:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.

(Macbeth Act 5, Scene 5, 19-28)

I turned first to science in search of answers, then later to the Buddhadharmā, and have since found they form a perfect pair.

For others it is suffering itself, their own and that of others, endless and overwhelming, that poses the Insight problem and challenge. The world can seem tainted by an unrelenting evil, spreading into every corner, and this is what leads them in search of answers. Whichever of these three has set you on the Path to liberation, Insights into the other two will soon follow, because they are all connected.

On the Buddha's Path, you will learn to *recognize* Insight experiences whenever they present themselves. You will learn to *cultivate* the kind of Insight that profoundly changes your personal reality. You will ultimately be *transformed* in a way that puts you beyond the reach of every kind of suffering, and makes your life a perfectly satisfying and meaningful experience.

Insight experiences are everywhere, happening all the time. As Buddhist sage and poet, Leonard Cohen, so beautifully puts it in his song, Anthem:

Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack in everything  
That's how the light gets in.

As you would expect, if you hold onto the idea that reality is one way, but in fact it's very different than you think, then discrepancies are bound to show up all the time. These are the cracks Leonard Cohen refers to, and the truth that lies on the other side of your delusion is the light that shines through these cracks. Meditation stabilizes your attention and enhances the power of your mindfulness, which allows you to become much more aware of what is really going on in every moment. One result is that you begin to see all the little cracks that were always there. When you recognize these Insight experiences as they arise, you have the opportunity, through the application of mindfulness, to solve the insight problems they pose for you. The result is genuine Insight. As Leonard Cohen continues:

We asked for signs  
the signs were sent:  
the birth betrayed  
the marriage spent  
Yeah the widowhood  
of every government –  
signs for all to see.

... That's how the light gets in.

In the beginning these Insights are going to be relatively minor, but quite important nevertheless. They will be Insights that show you new ways of acting and reacting that produce better results in daily life. As you continue along, you will begin to have more profound Insights into why you are the way you are and why you react to things the way you do. These later Insights will dramatically change your behavior, attitudes, and emotional reactions in very positive ways. You will become a happier and more resilient person as a result. But these are all still “mundane” Insights. They are mundane, first of all because their objects are the more superficial constructs your mind uses in creating its model of reality. Secondly, although your view of reality is becoming more refined and functionally effective, it is still just another version of the same reality view held by the world at large.

As valuable and important as these Insights are, they are comparatively insignificant compared to what is yet to come. These are just the results of the *little* “cracks in everything.” Your progress

in meditation is going to produce much more powerful and revealing Insight experiences – much bigger cracks that let much more light shine in. Once again, though, these can still be overlooked or ignored by the unwise and uninformed. An Insight experience, no matter how powerful, must be recognized and appreciated in order for it to lead to a correspondingly powerful Insight. Remember from the introduction, it is the conscious mind that must “set up” the problem before both the conscious and unconscious minds can begin to “incubate” it. That is why study of the Dharma is such an important part of the preparation that needs to accompany meditation practice.

Let’s look at the Eighteen Knowledges that make up the Progress of Insight. Knowledges 1 through 4a form a group:

1. Analytical Knowledge of Body and Mind
2. Knowledge by Discerning Conditionality
3. Knowledge by Comprehension by Groups  
(The Eighteen Great Insights)
- 4a. Knowledge of Arising and Passing Away (I)  
(The Ten Distractions from Insight)

We’ll explain each of these later on, but what joins them together in a group is that they begin with an intellectual understanding. This intellectual understanding later gets corroborated through direct experience in meditation. It’s not that someone who hasn’t studied and doesn’t already have an intellectual understanding won’t achieve these same Insights in meditation. It’s just that it can take them much, much longer before they recognize and appreciate what their meditation experience is actually showing them.

I’ll illustrate how this works with a familiar example. You may not remember it, but when you were first taught that the world was round, that was, in fact, an Insight experience. It certainly didn’t fit with your reality. Eventually you satisfied yourself that a round world could be incorporated into your worldview, and so you’ve been comfortable with that idea ever since. But the truth is, unless you are an astronaut, an astronomer, or fly high altitude jet airplanes, that Insight probably hasn’t penetrated much beyond the intellectual level. Your intuitive view of reality still assumes a flat world. Until you think about it a bit, flying over Greenland to get from London to New York seems a like the long way to go. When you get up in the morning, you see the sun “rising over the horizon.” It’s a big step that you probably don’t often make to experience “the earth turning to face the sun” while you do your morning stretches. But for astronomers and airline pilots and astronauts, this is a truth that has been corroborated by direct experience many times. Their Insight about the shape of the earth has penetrated to a much deeper, more intuitive level than it has for the rest of us.

In a similar way, this first group of Insight Knowledges, which begin as a comfortable intellectual understanding, matures through direct experience in meditation to become a much deeper kind of Insight Knowledge.

The second group of Insight Knowledges is 4b through 14:

- 4b. Knowledge of Contemplation of Arising and Passing Away (II)
5. Knowledge of Contemplation of Dissolution
6. Knowledge of Appearance as Fearful

7. Knowledge of Contemplation of Danger/Knowledge of Misery
8. Knowledge of Contemplation of Disenchantment/Knowledge of Disgust
9. Knowledge of Desire for Deliverance
10. Knowledge of Contemplation of Reflection/Knowledge of Re-observation
11. Knowledge of Equanimity About Formations
12. Insight Knowledge Leading to Emergence
13. Conformity Knowledge/Knowledge of Adaptation
14. Maturity Knowledge/Change of Lineage Knowledge

The first of these, Knowledge of Contemplation of Arising and Passing Away (II), is traditionally considered to be the true beginning of Insight. This group differs from the first in that each of these involves an Insight *initiated by direct experience*. The knowledge achieved is not even comprehensible intellectually, except in a very superficial sense, without the Insight brought on by direct experience. All of these second group of Insight Knowledges do, in fact, build on the earlier ones, but the depth of understanding achieved goes far beyond those earlier Insights.

Even so, all of the Insights to this point are still considered mundane. The meditator's worldview is being changed at a much deeper level of the psyche. But at the deepest level of all, the common view of reality shared by the world at large has not yet been transcended. At heart, the meditator still believes in his or her own ego-Self as a separate entity in a world of other entities.

The final group of Knowledges, 15 through 18, belongs to the category of Supramundane Insight:

15. Path Knowledge
16. Fruition Knowledge
17. Knowledge of Reviewing
18. Attainment of Fruition

The difference here is that Supramundane Insight no longer takes the world of conditioned formations as its object. The Insight knowledge it produces directly eradicates certain delusions. This last group of Insights will be repeated until the mind has been cleansed of every last defilement, and the unobscured Buddha Nature shines through.

We'll spend the rest of this weekend exploring the how the Progress of Insight unfolds through these Eighteen Knowledges, explaining each in turn, and why they occur in the order they do. The specific Insight experiences that arise in meditation will be described, and we'll use guided meditations to help you understand them. We'll also discuss how to use these Insight experiences, both on and off the cushion, to bring about genuine Insight. Finally, we will discuss some of the perils of the Insight journey, and how they can be avoided, or if not avoided entirely, at least mitigated. In discussing the final four Knowledges, if there is time, we'll address the different forms the culminating Insight and Awakening can take.