

Imperfections of Insight

It is at this point in one's practice that true insight into the nature of reality begins. Upon seeing the causal relationships between the body and the mind, one begins to naturally resist some habitual tendencies, realizing often for the first time that certain built-up habits are a cause of great suffering to oneself and others.

Through continued practice, one begins to favour objective, non-reactive observation, fueled by the constant reminding oneself of the nature of each experience free from bias or interpretation. It is at this stage that the meditator begins to truly develop skills like patience, equanimity, and wisdom. Rather than simply acquiescing to one's desires and aversions, one begins to bear with unpleasant sensations and forebear against the immediate inclination towards gratification of desire, due mainly to the realization that such reactivity is a real cause for stress and suffering.

It is this sort of realization that leads to the next stage of knowledge, which is based on a deepening understanding that the objects of experience are unworthy of the obsession we normally give to them. Seeing the suffering caused by clinging to transient objects of desire, one begins to realize that it is the very transience that makes them unworthy of desire; seeing the suffering caused by aversion to likewise transient unpleasant experiences, one begins to realize that they too are unworthy of such aversion, as they too will pass in their own time and on their own schedule.

Before this understanding comes to fruition, however, it is common for the mind to rebel, recoiling from the sudden onslaught of instability, insipidness, and chaos that arises from no longer chasing after pleasantness nor running away from unpleasantness. In the beginning, the experience of reality is more likely to lead one to seek out an alternative to that which is impermanent, stressful, and uncontrollable. As a result, a new meditator will tend to cling to anything that appears at first glance even remotely stable, satisfying, or controllable. Such objects

of clinging are called the “imperfections of insight”, of which ten are enumerated in the texts.

1. **obhāsa (“illumination”)** — Some meditators experience extraordinary concentration-based visions during their practice that can distract them from the object of clear comprehension and mindfulness. Some meditators see bright lights, or feel like the room is brighter even with their eyes closed. Some meditators see colours or shapes dancing behind their eyelids. Some meditators see visions of religious symbols or natural landscapes. All of these are ordinary byproducts of meditation practice, but any of them can become obstacles if one clings to them as stable, satisfying, or controllable, since they in fact are none of these things.

Visions of any sort should be noted as detailed in the first volume, as “seeing, seeing...” until they disappear or are no longer an object of interest for the mind. Any attachment to the vision should likewise be noted as “liking, liking...”.

2. **ñāṇa (“knowledge”)** — In the course of meditating on one’s thoughts and emotions, one may slip into the mode of trying to solve the various mundane problems in one’s life, giving up the practice of mental development for that of physical success and prosperity. One might begin to speculate on business dealings or personal relationships, trying to find solutions to these and other worldly dilemmas.

Due to the heightened clarity of mind it brings, meditation is well-suited to providing such knowledge. Indeed, the power of the meditative mind is said to have few real boundaries in the mundane realm. A meditator might find themselves giving rise to profound insights into their mundane affairs, or even having visions or empathic realizations of the physical and mental states of other beings. While such knowledge and insight is of value in a mundane sphere, it is useless in the practice of mental development and should,

after a firm self-reminder of the true purpose of meditation, be noted objectively as “thinking, thinking...” or “knowing, knowing...”

3. **Pīti (“rapture”)** — During meditation, one may slip into one of many ecstatic states, which likewise become a distraction from the practice. Some meditators will begin to rock back and forth seemingly unintentionally; some meditators will feel light as though they were floating; some meditators will begin to laugh or cry uncontrollably; some meditators will feel energy flowing through their bodies or striking them like a bolt of lightning. There are many types of experience that could be classified as “rapture” in this sense. The important point is that none of these experiences are intrinsically beneficial; they are all impermanent, unsatisfying, and uncontrollable, no matter how much to the contrary they may appear. It is only by noting them objectively as “swaying, swaying...” etc., that one begins to see them for what they are.

If, even upon noting an ecstatic experience at length, one finds that it refuses to cease, it is recommended that one jog one’s mind back to reality by reaffirming one’s commitment to objective observation, for which such experiences are ill-suited. Often it will take an actual self-rebuke, as in telling oneself “Stop!” to pull the mind out of its absorption in the generally pleasant sensation of ecstatic experience.

4. **passaddhi (“quietude”)** — Tranquility of mind is considered a positive outcome of meditation practice; in fact, most of the items on this list are not intrinsically harmful. Like the others, however, a quiet mind can become a cause for complacency. Many meditators who have previously practiced without a teacher will come to us asking what they should do when they find their minds have become so quiet they have nothing left to be mindful of. The answer, of course, is that one should be mindful of the quietude itself as “quiet, quiet...” or “calm, calm...” If there is an enjoyment of the experience, that too should be noted as “liking, liking...”

5. **sukha (“happiness”)** — Though this has been discussed previously, it bears mentioning again, simply because of the seductive quality of pleasant feelings; they should not be shunned or avoided, but neither should they be clung to or obsessed over. They *must* be observed objectively by reminding oneself “happy, happy...” or they will invariably lead to attachment, complacency, and disappointment when they are later unobtainable.
6. **adhimokkha (“resolve”)** — This refers to the confidence that comes from successful meditation practice. Obviously, such confidence is important but, as mentioned earlier, when it is dissociated from wisdom, it can lead to distraction and diversion. Often new meditators will let their confidence overtake their meditation practice, as they reflect on their success and attainment. They might begin to plan ways of encouraging others to practice, or think of ways to repay their teachers and supporters. Or they might simply wallow in their self-assurance, thinking they have attained some supramundane state of being. These various states should be noted, reminding oneself of their various natures as previously instructed.
7. **paggaha (“exertion”)** — Some meditators will become hyper-energetic, feeling like they can practice all day and night without stopping. One meditator might feel the need to walk quickly back and forth to release their energy; another might be inclined to engage in physical exercise. While effort is important in meditation practice, it must be tempered by concentration. One should note energy when it becomes apparent, not succumbing to the desire to provide it with an outlet outside of the meditation practice.
8. **upaṭṭhāna (“attention”)** — This refers to the state of attentiveness brought about by the constant practice of mindfulness. As a result of the practice, one is able to attend to any subject — past, present, or future — without obstruction or difficulty. This becomes an obstacle when one takes up as an object of observation something that is outside the present moment. Some meditators will fixate on past memories; others on plans for the future; some will create stories or

fantasies with such clarity and detail that they become completely absorbed in their machinations. All of these activities should be seen as distractions from the path and noted with appropriate remembrance and clarity of thought directed to the base experience that gave rise to them.

9. **upekkhā (“equanimity”)** – Like happiness, calm can be seductive in its pull, leading a meditator to forget about their practice in favour of simply wallowing in the state of neutrality. Further, equanimity can lead to delusions of enlightenment, as one reflects that one is no longer plagued by likes or dislikes. Such thoughts should be noted as they arise, and one should remind oneself “calm, calm...” as previously instructed in order to avoid making more out of the temporary state of calm than is warranted.

10. **nikanti (“desire”)** – For many meditators, there will arise a yearning for the other items on this list. For others, desire will arise for sense pleasure, towards either past or present experiences. Yet others might cling to a desire for insight itself, wishing or wondering when positive results as yet unrealized will come to them. All of these should be recognized as harmful obstacles to true understanding of reality and noted accordingly.

Only once these sort of experiences are discarded and one is able to fully comprehend what is the true and proper path to mental development, (i.e. clear and objective recognition of reality as it is without any sort of partiality or extrapolation), will one be able to appreciate the simple fact that no experience is worth clinging to. This simple truth makes up most of the remainder of the path and will be dealt with in the next chapter.

To this end, meditators should take note of the many ways in which one can become distracted from the path, enticed into false conception of stability, satisfaction, and control by the many pleasant and even positive byproducts of the meditation practice. Meditators must stand ready to observe such experiences with a clear mind, reminding themselves of the true essence of these experiences using simple mantras that capture their

nature clearly and succinctly according to the practice described in the first volume in this series. Once they are able to do this, they will be ready to enter the realm of true and profound insight into the nature of reality.