

## The Path of Insight

As discussed in the previous chapter, one's ability to progress on the path to true peace depends upon how one reacts to the characteristics of the objects of one's experience. Regardless of one's beliefs and opinions about the various kinds of experiential phenomena, they all share three characteristics in common:

1. They are all impermanent — whether inside ourselves or in the world around us, there is nothing we can hold on to as stable, lasting, or secure; all experiences are unstable, unpredictable, ephemeral, and undependable.
2. They are all insubstantial — whether inside ourselves or in the world around us, there is nothing we can hold onto as me, mine, or the self, as all experiential phenomena are transient, arising and ceasing based on causes and conditions; they are, as a result, also uncontrollable.
3. They are all unsatisfying — whether inside ourselves or in the world around us, there is no one thing that can truly satisfy us, since all experiences are impermanent, and likewise insubstantial and uncontrollable.

While these characteristics are easily understood intellectually as applying to the objects of experience, it is only through the practice of insight meditation up to this point that one comes to see, by extrapolating on one's meditation experience, that all of reality is made up entirely of that which is impermanent, insubstantial, and thus unsatisfying. For this reason, the meditator may begin to waver in their practice at this point, seeking desperately to return to the comfortable illusion of stability, substantiality, and satisfaction.

Some meditators may even consider quitting the practice as they discover that the experience of meditation exposes the chaos in their minds and the tension and pain in their bodies without offering any refuge from this stark view of reality as it is. They may feel that they are

inadequate, simply not up to the task of facing the true nature of their mind. Or, they may feel that the practice itself is the problem; having been touted from the beginning as “the path to peace”, it is understandable that the meditation practice may come under question at this point.

Regardless of their difficulties, most meditators who follow this technique of meditation will, either with the encouragement of a teacher or through their own determination, come to see the difference between what is and what is not the path, as their practice thus far has been based entirely on objectivity. Applying this objectivity to both the harsh reality of mundane experience as well as the more comfortable illusion presented by the various “special” states mentioned in the last chapter, one comes to the gradual realization that all of reality is merely a sequence of experiences that are worthy of neither desire nor aversion, and that true peace and happiness cannot depend on such experiences.

This gradual realization comprises the remainder of the path of insight, up until the final point where one realizes clearly and fully that nothing is worth clinging to and one’s mind lets go completely and realizes true peace, just as a bird that flies away only when it releases its hold on the tree. In this chapter, we will look at the gradual path to this goal; we will reserve our discussion of the realization of peace for the next and final chapter.

The path of insight leading up to final realization is gradated into a series of stages, delimiting various states of revelation as the mind gradually attains perfect understanding of reality. While it is generally thought to be unhelpful for a new meditator to know too much about these stages or to study them in depth, prior knowledge of an outline of the general path is arguably better than no knowledge at all, as it will help one incline oneself accordingly.

What is important to note is that one should use these stages not as a detailed road map, but as a general guide to the practice as a whole, for several reasons: first, each meditator’s path is unique and guessing where one is on the path is much better left up to a qualified teacher with the

experience of having guided many meditators along the path; second, regardless of one's ability to assess progress on the stages of insight, one's vision will always be clouded in regards to oneself as it is one's subjectivity that makes up the bulk of the challenge in meditation itself; and finally, most importantly, fixation on one's level of progress is most likely to bring about expectation and false affirmation of superficial insight in one's quest to progress to the next level.

For these reasons, caution is encouraged in relation to not only the individual stages of progress outlined below, but also in relation to the entire concept of progress in general. A true measure of one's practice can only be had in the present moment, in relation to whether one truly comprehends the experience of the present moment as it is without bias or extrapolation. Long term progress is actually a poor measure of one's success, both because of the complexity of the mind in terms of the conflict between one's old, unskillful habits and one's newer, more skillful habits of clarity of mind and because of the inherent difficulty in self-assessment in general.

That being said, without a close relationship with a teacher, a basic outline of the path will be indispensable to the aspiring meditator; it is with this in mind that the following outline is provided, though it must be well understood that these stages will arise by themselves through the practice of clear observation, and are not to be confused with intellectual reflection.

1. Once the meditator has succeeded in discerning the difference between what is the path (objective observation) and what is not (avoiding reality or clinging to specific experiences), one will begin to appreciate the simple truth that all phenomena arise from nothing and cease without remainder. This important observation will provide a solid foundation for further realizations, and is considered the first of the insight knowledges.
2. Gradually, the mind will shift and focus more on the aspect of cessation; the meditator may feel like their practice is not progressing

as they no longer see the entirety of objects of observation, catching them only as they cease. It is at this stage that the meditator begins to realize that nothing exists outside of the experience of the present moment; some meditators will observe that the room around them and even their bodies seem to have “disappeared”, as they lose their fixation on conceptual reality, realizing that once an experience ceases, the entity it represents also ceases. This insight marks a decisive shift from conceptual to ultimate reality, and is equally as important as the last.

3. The mind’s fixation on the cessation of experience leads to several knowledges in succession. First, there comes the realization of the dangers in complacency and by extension clinging, since everything we hold dear could leave us at any moment. Indeed, this knowledge becomes so acute that some meditators will begin to actually feel afraid of ordinary objects, as they cope with the bare awareness of the insubstantiality and undependability of all things in the world. This fear is not useful, however, and should be noted systematically as “afraid, afraid”, without letting it take control of one’s mind.
4. Next, one begins to lose one’s infatuation with objects of the senses; initially, this can lead to feelings of revulsion and symptoms of minor physical sickness and mental malaise as one uncovers previously unrealized negative aspects of the objects of one’s desire.
5. Eventually, one will come to the point where all of experience will appear as insipid and undesirable. While this realization will ultimately lead to great peace and happiness once one’s insight has matured, at this point it often brings about boredom and anxiety as the mind continues to seek for an experience that is stable, satisfying, and substantial. Nonetheless, this knowledge is a turning point whereat the mind, previously inclined strongly towards the pursuit of sensual gratification, begins to turn away from sensual pleasure as the evidence begins to show undeniably that its pursuit is ultimately futile and based on flawed assumptions and beliefs.

6. At some point in this process, the meditator will generally come to another crossroad, where the conflict between one's desire to be free and one's desire to cling to sensuality will come to a head. Without proper guidance, a meditator may at this point decide to quit the meditation practice as the desire to be free is misdirected by one's habitual desires, leading one to believe that a return to sensual pleasure will free one from one's current predicament. For the most part, however, such thoughts do not last long, as one's insight is generally strong enough to see the fault in such reasoning. Eventually, either through guidance from a teacher, or through one's own fortitude of mind, one will reaffirm the truth that freedom from clinging is the only way to be truly happy and continue on one's path.
7. At this point, the practice will begin in earnest. Whereas before this point the meditator was most likely conflicted about the practice, they now have a clear and unobstructed vision of the path, having finally dealt with their doubts and reservations about the practice entirely. The next stage of practice is at once more difficult and far easier than the last, as one begins to face reality head on without any uncertainty or misgivings. At this stage, the three characteristics of experience should become exceedingly clear to the meditator. It may appear that one's practice has become more difficult or that one has regressed in one's practice; in reality, the mind is simply going over everything that it previously avoided dealing with and replacing unskillful habits with more skillful ones.
8. Eventually the efficiency of mind cultivated in the previous knowledge will bear fruit and the meditator will begin to feel the practice becoming progressively easier, while at the same time becoming progressively more effective as well. One will know that one has reached the pinnacle of insight practice when one's practice becomes effortless and unimpeded and one's tendency to judge or react to experience fades away entirely. At this stage, the meditator will become completely equanimous about all phenomena, seeing them all clearly for the first time simply as they truly are.

Having gone through each of the above stages in succession, the meditator comes to the point where they are finally able to truly let go and be free from clinging. It can be said that at this point the meditator has reached the pinnacle of existence, a state that is excelled only by its fruit, which will be the object of discussion in the next chapter.

Again, it can not be stressed enough that the above description is only useful as a general guide, and not suitable for detailed comparison to or analysis of one's own practice. In depth knowledge of the stages of insight is best used by a teacher to assess a student's progress on the path, but a general knowledge of the path is useful for a student as well, provided it doesn't give rise to expectation or intellectualization of one's practice. Meditators should be encouraged to see progress in the clarity of the present moment alone, and focus their attention on cultivating that clarity as a habit. All insight into reality depends on this, and has it as a sufficient cause for its arising. May all beings be able to practice and realize these insights for themselves.