

The Mandala of Insight Group 7 Points for Approaching Insight

We are an informal gathering of invited Order members. Some of us get together weekly; others have wider orbits. Currently participating are Padmayogini, Tejananda, Kamalashila, Aparimana, Tejapushpa and Bodhiketu.

Our activity dates back quite a few years now. What originally sparked it was a meeting in Kings Cross, London, between Dhammarati, Saddhaloka, Lokeshvara, the then Satyadhana, Aparimana and Padmayogini. They discussed how we could best explain and practice the wisdom teachings within our community. Some were concerned about misleading and counterproductive elements in the way Triratna teaches insight - at all levels. So out of this discussion the MIG Group was formed, with an aspiration to explore where within our common literature we find those unhelpful elements, and what corrections are needed to present the wisdom teachings more effectively.

What we have come up with is a discussion document. It's unfinished and imperfect as yet, and we need you to take the discussion further. We'd like you to look at seven key examples, all teachings to be found within Triratna, that in some way misrepresent Buddhist wisdom – even though they may be valuable as part of an introduction to śīla, or samādhi, or the Dharma generally.

In these points we show what the difficulties are, then suggest ways forward. Each starts with a well-known phrase that in a general way encapsulates a teaching or a common view the reader will recognise. We note how originally it arose as a helpful response to a particular need. Then we point out how problems arise when it is applied in relation to insight practice. We suggest some improvements and, where possible, give supportive extracts from Sangharakshita's writings..

The first is the primary point of which the other six are examples.

1. No Higher Teaching, only deeper understanding.

The intention behind this teaching

It is easy to take apparently simple teachings for granted, and to think that we need more advanced teachings to make progress ("ultraism"). However, as our practice deepens, we tend to find ever greater significance in teachings that we might have known about for years.

How this presents difficulties for insight

However, this doesn't mean that a single perspective on spiritual life is sufficient to approach all aspects of practice. The attitudes, worldviews, motivations and teachings that best support sila and samadhi are not the best for approaching prajna. When taken at face value, some teachings helpful for insight practice may contradict teachings oriented to ethics and concentration. This can be a barrier to insight practice.

A more useful approach for insight is

We are familiar with the idea that literalism is a problem, and that the Dharma is a raft. Building on these ideas, we can say that there is no single worldview that applies equally well to all aspects of the path, and that it is necessary to work with different, even contradictory, worldviews at different times,

without ultimately “believing” in any of them. Subhuti's exploration of the "myths" of practice is an exploration of the way that different worldviews may be needed to explore different aspects of the path.

2. Anatta as philosophical doctrine (challenging Hindu soul theory)

The intention behind this teaching

In the absence of insight, most people will initially approach and understand anatta intellectually or as a philosophical view. Some newcomers may have heard about this view, and may need to approach and understand it in this way at first.

How this presents difficulties for insight

The Buddha discouraged philosophical speculation, and did not teach anatta as a philosophical view, but an observation or discovery that challenges an everyday assumption.

A more useful approach for insight is

For insight practice to work, people need to be directed away from views and towards experience. Discuss anatta and the other laksanas in purely experiential terms - nothing can be found in experience that is 'self', unchanging or completely satisfying.

Quotes

"The Buddha maintained that there was no such entity [as atman] - and he did so by appealing to experience. He said that if you look within, at yourself, at your own mental life, you can account for everything you observe under just five headings [...] Nothing discovered in these categories can be observed to be permanent. There is nothing sovereign or ultimately blissful amongst them. [They] are anatman." ¹

3. No “fixed” self (first fetter is “fixed” self view - but there is an "empirical self")

The intention behind this teaching

Comprehensible to beginners, and inspiring to learn that “you can change”. The view of self as fixed is indeed a delusion that needs to be overcome. This approach avoids the risk of anatta appealing to self-hating people who like the idea of destroying their “self”.

How this presents difficulties for insight

This view is not deep enough to help breaking 1st fetter, because it supports the delusion that there is a self that can be developed. To break the first fetter, we need to challenge the idea that there is any self either within or outside of the skandhas, regardless of whether this self is fixed or changeable.

A more useful approach for insight is

Use the traditional definitions of 1st fetter. Point out that path involves elimination of all conceit "I am". Tackle nihilism on its own level, as an emotional issue, or by pointing out that there is no question of getting rid of a self, because there has never been one there to begin with.

Quotes

¹ “The Texture of Reality”, talk given in 1966 and published in 1993 in “What is the Dharma”

“The ego [...] is not a thing, but a faulty interpretation. One is seeing something that just isn't there [...] it never was, and it never will be. [...] And because it isn't there, one can't do anything with it - get rid of it, go beyond it, or whatever.”² “If the ego is shown to be an illusion, one's fears on its behalf are extinguished. You see that there is no one to lose anything, and so you have nothing to lose”³.

4. The Dharma is about seeing Reality

The intention behind this teaching

This is a very intuitive approach to the goal, which readily makes sense to beginners.

How this presents difficulties for insight

It is easy for teachings about "reality" to create the idea that the common sense world is "an illusion", and therefore to develop the expectation that insight will reveal a "hidden reality" that will augment or replace ordinary experience.

This sets up misleading expectations for insight practice, and can lead to the pursuit of altered states that are believed to be “more real”.

Key to many insight practice is dropping the various delusions one adds on to experience. Practitioners who presuppose they must seek "a hidden reality" will find it impossible to engage with insight practices in the right spirit.

A more useful approach for insight is

Treat the notion of discovering reality as a provisional teaching/framework. Shift attention to uprooting delusions, wrong views and mistaken understandings. Point out that delusion creates additions to experience, it is not a veil behind which an undiscovered reality can be found.

Make it clear that “consensus reality”, as well as all altered and “higher” states, are equally just conditioned states. As the teaching of the Two Truths makes clear, such conditioned states are not "unreal" - they have a consistent reality that checks out well enough in experience, while absolute truth is not 'experienced' in any conventional sense, since the construction seer/seen has dissolved.

Quotes

"The only way you can get to reality is by destroying your ideas about reality, however subtle, however sophisticated, however convincing they may be." ⁴

5. Insight arises through changes in behaviour

The intention behind this teaching

A foundation in ethics is indispensable, as is the accumulation of punya. Changes in behaviour are therefore crucial to the path as a whole, and as preparation for the path of insight.

² “Mind in Buddhist Psychology” seminar, 1976, published in 1993 in “Know Your Mind”

³ “Precious Garland” seminar, 1976, published in 2012 in “Living Wisely”

⁴ “Wisdom Beyond Words”, p26

How this presents difficulties for insight

Ethics and punya are necessary but not sufficient. Sila needs work on the level of sila; insight needs a different kind of work, on the basis of sila. If people believe that ethical purification is sufficient, they are likely to become discouraged over time, since years of practice may not yield any insight.

A more useful approach for insight is

Make it clear that sila, samadhi and prajna all need to be worked with in their own way. They are three interrelated strands of practice, rather than each arising inevitably from the “preceding” one. Insight and enlightenment do not follow inevitably from self development - prajna requires its own particular kind of views and work.

Quotes

“one cannot refine oneself out of the mundane world altogether; there always has to be something that is being refined [...] One has to make an existential leap” “on its own, without transcendental insight, samadhi cannot produce Enlightenment”⁵

6. Tathagatagarbha is just a potential

The intention behind this teaching

There is a risk of confusion (at a fairly preliminary level) between “having Buddha nature” and “being enlightened already”, which could short-circuit the entire path.

How this presents difficulties for insight

For insight practice to deepen, it becomes essential to drop the duality between 'where I am' and 'where I am trying to get to'. Experientially, one recognises that 'the unconditioned' has always been present and cannot be 'attained'. It is impossible to fully recognise this so long as the goal is always presented as distant/potential rather than immanent.

A more useful approach for insight is

Emphasise that unconditioned is already present: if the kleshas were inherent, enlightenment would be impossible. Explore Vajrasattva symbolism in this light. Clarify that recognising this is not the end of the path, but the start of a deeper kind of practice.

Quotes

“behind the five skandhas is Nirvana, which you can realise”⁶ “If you really do see the conditioned-ness of the mind, the mind that sees that is a non-conditioned mind”⁷ “According to the Mahayana - even according to at least a few verses in the Pali canon - there is a level - again, in metaphorical language - in the human being, of which we are not normally conscious, and with which we are not normally in contact. The Pali canon even speaks of the pure jnana, which is obscured by adventitious defilements. Some Mahayana sutras speak of the Buddha-nature which is within and is covered over.”⁸ See also Subhuti’s Three Myths (now elaborated to four) which explores the value and limitations of different world-views.

⁵ Both from “Mind in Buddhist Psychology” seminar, 1976, published in 1993 in “Know Your Mind”

⁶ “Sutra of 42 Sections” seminar, New Zealand, 1979

⁷ Ditto

⁸ From the 1986 Study Group Leaders’ Q&A on “Aspects of Buddhist Psychology”, specifically “Depth Psychology of the Yogacara”

7. Progress always requires working on yourself

The intention behind this teaching

This is a useful framework in the early stages of the path, particularly when addressing sila and samadhi, and particularly to counter any tendency to assume that mere belief is sufficient.

How this presents difficulties for insight

More advanced practitioners need to discover how nonjudgmental, mindful, discerning awareness is a powerful liberative practice in its own right, not just to "identify issues to work on".

A more useful approach for insight is

"Awareness is revolutionary" in its own right. Insight is not different from being aware of what is going on right now without bias. In the field of insight practice, simply bringing awareness to some area of experience can be enough to effect an avalanche of successive realisation and physical and energetic transfiguration.

Quotes

"If you really see yourself reacting, you cease to react. There has to be a real seeing, not just a theoretical, mental knowing. You can stop in any instant, as it were, stop your reactivity by seeing it, and you see how ridiculous and how absurd it is, and how unnecessary, and how you just go round and round in the same old circle. [...] the transcendental element comes in, as it were, automatically [...] It's instantaneous, in a sense, it's simultaneous, so 'he awakens to the non-phenomenal (that is to say 'the unconditioned') clinging to nothing within and seeking for nothing from without'"⁹

⁹ "Sutra of 42 Sections" seminar, New Zealand, 1979