

13 The stages of insight knowledge

Dhamma talk by Venerable Chanmay Sayadaw Ashin
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We should deal very briefly with how a meditator goes through all the thirteen stages of insight knowledge and so attains enlightenment, so that the meditator knows their way to the cessation of suffering.

There are seven kinds of purification that a meditator has to go through in the course of his meditation and also thirteen stages of insight knowledge and four stages of enlightenment. Nine stages of insight knowledge are mundane and four stages of enlightenment are supramundane.

When a meditator is about to practise meditation, they first of all need to purify their morality. Purification of morality is the basic requirement for every meditator, either *samatha* meditation or *vipassanā* meditation. Only when morality is purified does the meditator feel a clear conscience and happiness with his deeds and speech which is very conducive to meditation and insight knowledge that the meditator is to attain. To purify one's morality one has to observe either five or eight precepts. For Buddhist monks and there are 227 rules of the monastic code which are known as the *Pāṭimokha saṣṣvarasīla*. For laity, at least five precepts should be observed and if it is possible, eight precepts. By observing the precepts, meditators have wholesome deeds and speech and morality is purified.

Then they may begin to practise *vipassanā* or insight meditation, being mindful of whatever arises in body and mind as it really occurs. When mindfulness becomes sharp and powerful, gradually concentration becomes deeper, thoughts lessen and when the mind is able to be concentrated on any mental state or physical process, then gradually the five kinds of hindrances, *pañcanīvaraṇa*, become weaker. With deeper concentration, none of the hindrances can enter the mind. The concentrated mind expels all of the hindrances for the time being, for so long as the mind is well concentrated on the object of meditation. This state is called *purification of mind* because the mind is well absorbed into the object. There may be some thoughts but the meditator realises and notes any thought quickly and it passes away. In this

hindrances end defilements. This is called purification of mind, *citta visuddhi*, and the first stage, purification of morality is called *sīla visuddhi*.

Purified from hindrances and from defilements, the concentrated mind becomes penetrating and sharp so it begins to realise *nāma* and *rūpa*, mental phenomena and physical phenomena. It begins to differentiate between mentality and physicality, between the noting mind and the object, between subject and object. When the meditator's mind is well concentrated on the rising and falling movement of the abdomen, he comes to differentiate the process of the rising movement and the process of the falling movement. At the beginning of the practice, before the mind is well concentrated, it cannot differentiate between the rising and the falling, they appear to be one and the same.

When the concentration is deep enough the meditator comes to realise the abdomen rises and then disappears, then immediately after it has disappeared the abdomen falls and then disappears. In this way, the beginning and the end of the rising process and the beginning and the end of the falling process is perceived very clearly, so the meditator comes to realise the rising and falling processes are different processes. At this stage of meditation, he realises the noting mind and the rising movement and the noting mind and the falling movement. He comes to realise that the rising movement is one process and the noting mind is another process, that the falling movement is one process and the noting mind another. In this way he comes to differentiate the process of the rising and falling movement, physical phenomena, from the process of the noting mind, mental phenomena. When the concentration becomes deeper, the meditator comes to realise the specific and individual characteristics of the rising movement and of falling movement and the individual characteristics of the noting mind.

I had better explain to you how the meditator realises the specific or individual characteristics of *vāyodhātu*, the air element which is the rising and falling movement. This stage of insight knowledge is called *nāmarūpa pariccheda ñāṇa*, the insight knowledge discerning *nāma* and *rūpa*, mental phenomena and physical phenomena. In the same way, when you observe a painful sensation, the mind gradually becomes more and more concentrated on the pain. You are patient with the pain and continue to observe it more attentively and the more you do so, the deeper concentration becomes. Then you come to realise the pain is one process and the mind that notes the pain is another process.

Here the meditator can differentiate between the two types of *nāma* - one is the noting mind, and the other, the unpleasant sensation. Then he comes to realise the pain is just unpleasant sensation. Sometimes he realises the pain as separate from his body, outside his body. Sometimes he is not aware of the location of the pain and sometimes he is not aware of his whole body or person. What he realises at that moment is just the unpleasant sensation of pain. There also he realises that the pain is just unpleasant sensation. Here the mind that notes it, mental phenomena, is also a separate process. Then again he comes to realise that the pain is neither a person nor a being, but just an unpleasant sensation. This stage of insight knowledge is

concentration is good enough, you come to realise that it's intention that causes the action, and you come to realise cause and effect, causal relation or conditionality. This is called insight knowledge of causal relations, or insight knowledge of conditionality, or *paccaya pariggaha ñāṇa*.

At this stage, you may come to realise that sometimes your rising or falling movement is a very distinct and you can note it very well and very clearly, but sometimes the rising and falling disappears and you can't note it because you can't find it. At that moment you become puzzled. What should you note? Later on, you come to note the sound of a voice and note `hearing, hearing, and you come to know that your mind is thinking about the disappearance of the rising and falling, and note `thinking, thinking, thinking'. After you have noted the thought process you may find the rising-falling again, it appears again and you note `rising-falling, rising-falling'. He also you come to realise vaguely that only when we have the rising movement can we note rising, and only when we have the failing movement can we note falling. It means that when there is the object of the rising movement and the falling movement, there arises the mind that notes it, so the object of the rising or falling movement is the cause, the noting mind is the effect. In this way, we come to realise causal relations or conditionality, *paccaya pariggaha ñāṇa*.

When you proceed with your practice with deeper concentration, and you come to have some painful sensation, and you note `pain, pain, pain'. But this painful sensation you had at first and second insight knowledge, you could not observe very well. Now when the painful sensation becomes very distinct, your concentration is also a deeper because you have gone through two stages of insight. So you observe the pain, being patient with it, noting `pain, pain, pain'. But your mind goes out and thinks about mental pictures such as flowers trees, human beings or ghosts, or devas, or monks. Any mental image arising in your mind is created by your thought. You think these mental images come into your mind of their own accord, but actually it is not so. When the mind goes out and that thought brings these mental images into the mind so have to note `seeing, seeing' because you see them, until they have disappeared. If you realise the thought before it creates these mental pictures, if you note `wandering wandering' or `thinking, thinking' until that thought has disappeared. After it has disappeared you return to the primary object `rising, falling' or when you feel pain note pain, pain' and so on.

So with great patience you have to observe the pain, you have to be mindful of the pain, attentively, then sometimes gradually the pain decreases, and after some time the pain disappears. Here you come to realise the beginning, the middle and the end of the pain. Sometimes, before one painful sensation has disappeared, another painful sensation arises. At that time, you have to know another pain which is more predominant. Later on, with deeper and deeper concentration, the painful sensation disappears when it is noted attentively, and here you come to realise the arising of the pain and its disappearance, the arising of the itching sensation and its disappearance. In this way, you come to judge that though the pain arises and becomes more severe, it eventually passes away, so it is impermanent. In the same way, when you observe the rising and falling movement of the abdomen, you come

rising, rising' and in the process of falling, there are two or of three movements, 'falling, falling, falling'. So you come to realise that the rising and falling movements are not one and the same, not a single process, but one composed of three or four or movements. In the same way, when you observe the movement of the foot in the walking meditation, you come to realise in lifting there are about two or three movements, 'lifting lifting, lifting'. When you observe the pushing movement you realise there are two or three movements 'pushing, pushing, pushing' and so on. Here you realise, though only vaguely, that the movements are not permanent, as one movement after another arises and passes away.

At this stage of insight knowledge, in whatever object you note, you come to realise it has a beginning, middle and final phase. You come to clearly realise the disappearance of the object, either mental state or physical process. You come to realise the impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and impersonal nature of mental and physical phenomena. This is called the insight knowledge of comprehension, *sammasana ñāṇa*, meaning the insight knowledge that comprehends all three characteristics of phenomena, *anicca, dukkha and anattā*.

With deeper concentration you proceed with your practice, and gradually painful sensations subside and decrease. You have little pain and your concentration becomes better and deeper. Your mindfulness is also a sharp and powerful and your effort is also consistent and strong enough. Then, at this stage of insight knowledge, the mind it is more deeply concentrated on any mental phenomenon, mental state or physical process. When the mind becomes concentrated, you feel tranquillity, rapture and happy because the mind is concentrated on the mental state or physical processes being observed. The mind becomes clearer and clearer. We can say the mind becomes, as it were, transparent. Then we see some kind of light which is associated with insight - sometimes fluorescent, or like car headlights or like the stars or the radiance of the moon. Sometimes when you are sitting and practising meditation you feel bathed by the beams of the Moon and so on. In this way, you find that might end note that 'seeing, seeing, seeing' and when you feel happy you note 'happy, happy, happy', when you feel tranquil note 'tranquil, tranquil, tranquil' and when you feel rapture at you note 'rapture, rapture, rapture' and so on. You feel very subtle and sublime happiness, rapture and thrilling sensations felt at this stage of insight knowledge. Your mindfulness is also very good and is ready to observe any object arising. Energy is also strong and consistent.

Then you are happy with this experience at this stage and you become attached to these good experiences. That attachment is called *nikkhānti*, though not a strong attachment. It is a sublime, subtle and weaker attachment than you have been experiencing in this state. And also you feel equanimity, you need not put in any effort to observe or realise the nature of mental states or physical process. It is as if your noting mind is effortless, neither tense nor relaxed. This state of equanimity is very clearly felt, and you are attached to this equanimity. Whenever you have this attachment you should note it, 'attachment attachment attachment' until that attachment has disappeared. Sometimes this stage of insight knowledge is very

sometimes think they have attained *nibbāna*. So they enjoy it and then they are attached to it, and they are not able to observe phenomena and sometimes they may forget to note.

Then because of knowledge of dhamma or the instruction given by the teacher, the meditator comes to realise this is not the final goal of meditation, it is the corruption of insight meditation. He reflects 'unless I am unable to note attachment, I won't be able to proceed with a higher stages of insight'. Rightly understanding in this way, the meditator has to note whatever attachment they may have to happiness or rapture. Then you pass through this stage and your mind becomes stable, calm and tranquil. Concentration becomes better and insight becomes sharper and more penetrating and it realises the rising and falling movement very clearly, one movement after another. Sometimes you come to realise a series of movements in the process of rising and falling, arising and passing away one after another. In this same way, in the walking meditation, you come to realise a series of tiny broken movements, separate movements of the foot but actually you are not aware of the form of the foot. What you are realising is just a series of movements as arising and passing away one after another. Here, you come to realise arising and passing away of physical phenomena. In the same way you come to realise the mind notes one object and ceases, then notes another object and ceases, and so on. [break]

Early in this stage you experience the ten corruptions of insight such as lights, rapture, happiness, tranquillity, equanimity and so on. Later you come to clearly see the arising and passing away of mental and physical phenomena.

With deeper concentration you proceed with your practice and the concentration becomes stronger and stronger. Mindfulness is also very sharp and powerful. Then you come to realise the disappearance of each individual rising and falling movement, and in the same way the disappearance of the noting mind. You note one object, the mind notes it and disappears. Whatever you note, it disappears. In this way you come to realise the dissolution of the object very quickly, rapidly and clearly. What you are realising is dissolution, vanishing and disappearance. Most of the time you have lost the form or the shape of the object and sometimes you are very dissatisfied with your experience because you do not find the shape or form of the phenomena. Sometimes what you observe is limited to just consciousness and you have to note 'knowing, knowing, knowing' but that consciousness also arises and vanishes. This is called the insight knowledge of dissolution, *bhaṅgañāna*, the fifth stage of insight knowledge.

After that you have to observe mostly the disappearance and dissolution of the object, so you feel these things are fearful because they are always and instantly vanishing, vanishing, disappearing, disappearing and so on. That feeling of fear, that awareness of fearfulness is called *bhayata ñāṇa*, the insight knowledge of fearfulness. Because you constantly experience the vanishing or dissolving of phenomena, you feel they are not good and you are not satisfied with this state, you feel these things are miserable. Your mind is not bright and active but becomes reluctant and you feel dismay. This is called the insight knowledge of misery.

Then after that, because you experience the disappearance of these mental and physical phenomena, you find fault with them and you want to get rid of them. You feel a desire to be liberated from these mental and physical phenomena that are always vanishing. At this stage of insight, though, you have good experiences, deep concentration and sharp mindfulness. But you can't sit for any length of time, say you sit about fifty minutes, then you want to change position, or you want to get up and practise walking meditation. In the walking meditation you can't stay long, say about twenty minutes or so, and then you want to sit again, and so on. That means you are not satisfied with the experience of this disappearance and vanishing of phenomena. You want to get rid of it. This is called *muccitukamyatā ñāṇa*, the insight knowledge of desire for deliverance.

Then when you proceed with your practice, you have many varieties of painful sensation again. The painful sensation arises very severely, it is very strong, and you have to make some effort to observe it. Sometimes you can't bear it, you want to change your position or get up. You should not change or get up but observe the pain with persistence and with perseverance. Later on the pain disappears abruptly, suddenly. Another pain comes and you note it and it disappears instantly and again, another pain comes and you note it and it disappears instantly and so on. At this stage you have to review the impermanence, suffering and impersonal nature of phenomena which you experienced at the third stage of insight knowledge of comprehension. Now you have to re-observe it, re-note it, re-contemplate on it so that you come to realise that these mental states and physical processes are actually not everlasting or permanent. They arise then instantly pass away. This stage is called the insight knowledge of re-observation, *paccavekkhāṇa ñāṇa*.

After this stage you come to the best stage of insight knowledge, where you have no pain at all. There may be a little pain but your mindfulness is very sharp, concentration is deep, and it is strong and consistent by itself so that you need not put forth any effort to observe an object, the mind observes phenomena by itself. Whatever the object may be, you note it. Then you come to realise it has disappeared, and this arising and passing away of an object, mental or physical process, now becomes very rapid. Sometimes you have to look at it, neither labelling it or noting it, just observing it, perceiving it arising and passing away as phenomenon. Here your concentration is very deep. Sometimes, some meditators send out their minds to an external object but the mind doesn't go to the object, it is like an elastic band, it springs back to the object, to whatever mental state or physical process is observed. At this stage you feel neither happy or unhappy, even though you find an object which is pleasant and inviting you are not attached to it, you are not happy with it, but what you do is just observe it, then that object disappears. So in this way your mind is centred between happiness and unhappiness. This is called insight knowledge of equanimity, or *saṅkhāra upekkhā ñāṇa*.

When this knowledge becomes mature, you come to attain the insight knowledge of adaptation and maturity, *anuloma ñāṇa* and *gotrabhū ñāṇa*. Then you attain to the path knowledge. You realise that you are tired of suffering. Then you attain to the

entry. That enlightenment uproots the wrong view of personality, *sakkaya ditthi*, individuality, self or soul, and the wrong view of attachment to rites and rituals, *silāpatta brahmasa*, and also that enlightenment uproots sceptical doubt about the Triple Gem. Because this sceptical doubt has been uprooted by the first enlightenment stage, your faith, *saddhā*, is firm and strong, and can never be shaken and put in doubt by anyone because you have experienced the insight knowledge of the four noble truths. This is called stream entry knowledge or the first stage of enlightenment, *sotāpatti magga ñāṇa*.

When you proceed with your practice you may be able to obtain the higher stages of enlightenment. When you have attained the second stage of enlightenment, *sakadāgāmīmagga*, you become a once-returner, meaning that once you have attained the second enlightenment, you will be reborn in the higher world such as the *Brahma* world or *deva* world but you will come only once more to the sensuous world and karma existence. That second enlightenment stage weakens the sensuous desire of craving and ill-will, *kama*, *rāga* and *dosa*. When you have attained the third enlightenment, *anāgāmīmagga*, non-returner, you will never again come to this sensuous existence. This third enlightenment uproots sensuous desire, craving and ill-will, completely. Then when you attain the final enlightenment, *arahattamagga*, all mental defilements are completely uprooted, eradicated and eliminated by this final enlightenment. Then you become an arahat and your mind is completely purified from all mental defilements, hindrances and negative mental states, so you live at peace and in happiness. This is the final goal of a meditator.

At least you should aim at the attainment of the first stage of enlightenment, *sotāpatti magga ñāṇa*. When that enlightenment is in mind and you should strive your best, but you need enough effort and enough time. Ten days meditation, two weeks meditation, three weeks meditation is not enough time to attain at least the lower stage of enlightenment. When your insight knowledge becomes mature you have to stop and go back home. Then again you come to another ten day retreat or two weeks retreat and you start from the beginning and progress gradually. When the concentration is deep enough, you have some experiences and gain some insight knowledge then again you have to stop and again return home. So you need enough effort and enough time for attainment of these four stages of enlightenment, at least the lower stage of enlightenment.

I have very briefly explained to you the thirteen insight knowledges and the four stages of enlightenment. You may find some experiences that you have in your meditation are in conformity with the points I have mentioned in this discourse, and you can know where you are. You have to proceed with your practice for a long journey.

May you all strive your best and attain the final stage of Enlightenment, arahatship.