

The Dynamics of Theravāda Insight Meditation

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Abstract

With the present paper, I intend to bring out key aspects of the practical dynamics that underlies insight meditation in the Theravāda tradition. I start with a brief survey of three modern day insight meditation traditions (I), followed by examining their common roots in the medieval scheme of insight knowledges (II), which in turn I trace back to the early discourses in the Pāli *Nikāyas* (III).

Keywords: Theravāda Buddhism, Vipassanā, Insight-Knowledges, Early Buddhism, Three Characteristics

(I) Three Insight Meditation Traditions

In modern days, the three probably most popular approaches to the development of liberating insight in the Theravāda tradition are taught by Mahāsi Sayādaw, S.N. Goenka and Pa Auk Sayādaw respectively.¹

Of these approaches to insight, the one that was the first to have a widespread impact on meditation practice in East Asia as well as in the West is the method taught by the Burmese monk Mahāsi Sayādaw (1904-1982). Characteristic for the Mahāsi method is that it dispenses with the formal development of mental tranquillity.² The main meditation technique in this tradition requires applying mental labels to what is experienced throughout meditation practice in order to sharpen clear recognition. The basic mode of practice during sitting meditation is to observe the ‘rising’ and ‘falling’ motion of the abdomen

¹ A survey of modern *vipassanā* meditation traditions that covers a broader range of teachers can be found in Kornfield (1988), King (1992, 123-44) and Solé-Leris (1992, 125-53); see also Cousins (1996, 35-57).

² This led to considerable criticism by those who affirm the need of attaining absorption before being able to develop insight successfully, see *Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā, Criticism and Replies*, Rangoon 1979. Perhaps in reaction to such criticism, the Mahāsi tradition has developed the idea of the so-called *vipassanā jhānas*, connoting deeper concentration developed through pure insight meditation, cf. e.g. Mahāsi (1981, 98), or in more detail U Paṇḍita (1993, 180ff).

caused by the process of breathing. The practitioner should make a mental label of these movements, or of anything else that may happen, such as noting the sitting position in terms of 'sitting', or the sensation of touch created by sitting on the cushion as 'touching'. During walking meditation the same mental labelling is used to develop distinct awareness of several parts of each step, such as 'lifting' of the foot, 'putting' it, etc. Sustained practice uncovers the mental intentions that precede any activity.

After the Mahāsi method had become known for some time, the insight meditation taught by the Indian S.N. Goenka (1924), a disciple of the Burmese meditation teacher U Ba Khin (1899-1971),³ began to spread around the globe and has by now become what probably is the most widely taught form of insight meditation world-wide. This meditation tradition centres on observation of bodily feelings. The practice of contemplating feelings is based on the previous development of a foundation in mental tranquillity through mindfulness of breathing, to which in a standard ten days retreat the first three days of practice are dedicated. Subsequently, feelings are observed through a continuous scanning of the body in the up and downward directions, leading to a penetrative awareness of their changing nature at increasingly subtler levels. Eventually, such practice leads to an awareness of the entire spectrum of body and mind in a constantly changing flux.

³ On the probably ancient roots of this tradition cf. Anālayo (2006).

A method that in recent years has been able to attract ever increasing numbers of practitioners is taught by the Burmese monk Pa Auk Sayādaw (1934). This mode of practice gives considerable room to the development of concentration, in fact ideally a practitioner should develop all four absorptions with the help of each of the meditation subjects listed in the Theravāda manual *Visuddhimagga*. The insight approach in this tradition is based on surveying the body from the perspective of the four elements (earth, water, fire and wind), recognizable by the experience of hardness, heaviness, warmth and motion. At first these qualities are identified in relation to particular parts of the body, but eventually are seen as existing in each particle of the body. The subtle analysis undertaken in this manner is then extended to the mind, directing awareness to each aspect of the cognitive process and to discerning the conditions operative at the twelve stages of the scheme of dependent arising.

As this brief survey shows, the meditative approaches to insight taught by Mahāsi Sayādaw, S.N. Goenka and Pa Auk Sayādaw vary in the actual techniques they employ. When considered from the perspective of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, which forms the commonly accepted reference point for insight meditation traditions,⁴ these three modes of developing insight

⁴ Sharf (1995, 260) explains that “most of the practices that go under the rubric of vipassanā today claim to be based on the two *Satipaṭṭhāna-suttas*.” Several other points made by Sharf, however, I find unconvincing,

could be considered as being based in particular on mindfulness of bodily postures (Mahāsi),⁵ on mindfulness of feelings (Goenka); and on mindfulness of the four elements (Pa Auk), as shown in figure 1.⁶

though this is not the place to engage in a detailed criticism of his paper.

- 5 Here it needs to be noted that the Mahāsi tradition itself does not identify their practice of observing the rising and falling motion of the abdomen as an instance of mindfulness of breathing, in order to avoid conflict with the traditional explanation that such mindfulness is to be undertaken by directing attention to the nostril (cf. e.g. the gloss in Vibh 252,13 on the description of setting up mindfulness “in front” when directing awareness to the process of breathing: *ayaṃ sati upaṭṭhitā hoti supaṭṭhitā nāsikagge vā mukhanimittē vā, tena vuccati parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā ti*; for a more detailed discussion of this passage cf. Anālayo (2003, 128f). Thus according to Mahāsi (2006, 244), “to watch the rise and fall of the abdomen is to watch the *vāyo*-element that is in motion because of the pressure of the inhaled air”. Yet, the way contemplation of the four elements is described in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* entails an analysis of the body into four different aspects, not contemplating just one of these four elements on its own. Hence in my presentation I find it preferable to follow a suggestion in Ñāṇaponika (1992, 106) to understand the Mahāsi method of observing the abdominal movements as related to mindfulness of the bodily postures, which concords well with the considerable importance given to walking meditation in this tradition.
- 6 Of these exercises, contemplation of feelings and mindfulness of elements are found in all the extant canonical discourse versions, whereas mindfulness of postures is only found in the Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda versions of this discourse (cf. DN 22 at DN II 292,11; MN 10 at MN I 56,36; MĀ 98 at T 1, 582b20), being absent from another version found in the

Figure 1: Satipaṭṭhāna meditation objects

Mahāsi Sayādaw	postures
S.N. Goenka	feeling
Pa Auk Sayādaw	elements

Mahāsi Sayādaw, S.N. Goenka and Pa Auk Sayādaw also take quite divergent positions in regard to a much discussed issue among insight meditation practitioners, namely the degree to which the formal development of tranquillity is required for insight to issue in awakening.⁷ As figure 2 below shows, the three meditation traditions under discussion differ considerably in the amount of time they allot to formal training in mental tranquillity:

Figure 2: Time dedicated to the formal development of mental tranquillity

Mahāsi Sayādaw	none
S.N. Goenka	some
Pa Auk Sayādaw	much

The same three traditions agree, however, in employing the scheme of the insight-knowledges, *vipassana-ñāṇāni*, as the framework for evaluating the actual progress of insight.⁸

Ekottarika-āgama, (cf. EĀ 12.1 at T 2, 568a17). For a comparative study of these versions cf. Kuan 2008.

⁷ For recent discussions related to this topic cf. Bodhi (2002) & (2007), Brahmāli (2007) and Wen (2009).

⁸ The key position accorded to this scheme in each of these three meditation traditions is reflected in the detailed treatments of the insight knowledges in

(II) The Insight Knowledges

This scheme of insight knowledges refers to key experiences to be encountered during the progress of insight meditation.⁹ A listing of these key experiences can be found in the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, a treatise of central importance for the Theravāda tradition in general and Burmese Buddhism in particular, which was probably compiled at some time during the 11th to 12th century.¹⁰ Teaching the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* to lay people in Burma at wide was a central concern of Ledi

Maḥāsi (1994, 13-32) and Pa Auk (2003, 255-277). Goenka covers the same ground in detail in his talks during long courses, which have not been published. Nevertheless, a brief survey of the insight knowledges by another student of U Ba Khin can be found in Chit Tin (1989, 121f). Though there are undeniable differences in these theoretical descriptions, from several personal interviews with teachers of these three traditions I am under the impression that the insight knowledge of rise and fall is experienced by practitioners in each of these traditions in remarkably similar ways. This suggests to me that the consensus among these three traditions on employing the same scheme of insight knowledges goes beyond theoretical adherence to a key point of Theravāda meditation theory, in the sense that it appears to form a converging point of the experience of insight among them.

⁹ My presentation in this part of the present paper is based on Anālayo (2009c).

¹⁰ Malalasekera (1995, 90) indicates that Anuruddha, the “author of the *Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha* ... probably lived in the eleventh or twelfth century”; cf. also Bechert (1979, 26) and Norman (1983, 151).

Sayadaw (1846-1923), and it is apparently as part of this mission of making the Abhidharma teachings available to a non-monastic audience that he also encouraged lay meditation. This soon enough became a mass-movement, the heirs of which, in one way or another, are the three teachers discussed above.¹¹ The *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* lists altogether ten such insight knowledges, surveyed below in figure 3.¹²

Figure 3: The ten insight knowledges in the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*

1	comprehension	<i>sammasana</i>
2	rise and fall	<i>udayabbaya</i>
3	dissolution	<i>bhaṅga</i>
4	fear	<i>bhaya</i>
5	disadvantage	<i>ādinava</i>
6	disenchantment	<i>nibbidā</i>
7	wish for deliverance	<i>muñcitukamyatā</i>
8	reflection	<i>paṭisaṅkhā</i>
9	equanimity towards formations	<i>saṅkhārupekkhā</i>
10	conformity	<i>anuloma</i>

Before the onset of these ten key experiences of insight, an experiential appreciation of the conditionality of subjective experience is required as a launching pad. Such experiential appreciation involves the realization that what is experienced as

¹¹ Cf. the study by Braun (2008).

¹² Abhs 9: 25 in Bodhi (1993, 346).

“I” and “mine” depends on a range of conditions, and out of this range of conditions the intentions, evaluations and reactions that take part in one’s own mind are the set of causes that need to be addressed in order to progress on the path to liberation. To formulate the same in terms of the four noble truths: the decisive contributing factor to the experience of suffering is one’s own craving. Decisive in so far as this is the one condition which, through gradual training of the mind, can be changed. From the perspective of the twelve-link exposition of dependent arising, this in particular requires becoming aware of the arising of craving in dependence on feeling, i.e. of the way mental reactions and evaluations are based on the affective tone of subjective experience. This basic realization and its constant practical implementation constitute a continuous theme at the background of the development depicted in the set of ten insight knowledges.

Based on the indications provided by manuals that have been compiled by modern day meditation teachers,¹³ progress through the insight knowledges can be understood to involve the following:

Knowledge of comprehension, *sammasana-ñāṇa*, stands for a basic appreciation of the three characteristics of all conditioned

¹³ In addition to the publications mentioned above in note 8, see especially the description offered by Ñāṇārāma (1993). For an exposition of the scheme of seven insight contemplations, which throws further light on the progress of insight from a related perspective, cf. Ñāṇārāma (1997).

existence-impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not self- acquired during the early stages of insight meditation. Based on such comprehension, a practitioner needs to focus contemplation on the characteristic of impermanence, which is experienced in terms of the rise and fall of any contemplated phenomena. This constitutes the onset of “knowledge of rise and fall”, *udayabbaya-ñāṇa*.¹⁴ A maturing of the penetrative experience of the momentary arising and passing away of all aspects of body and mind eventually culminates in an experience of total “dissolution”, *bhaṅga-ñāṇa*. That is, at this stage the disappearance aspect of all phenomena becomes particularly prominent, everything is experienced as passing away and dissolving.

At this stage, when the entire meditative experience is marked with constant dissolution and disintegration, “fear” arises, *bhaya-ñāṇa*. By now the very foundation of what is taken to be ‘I’ and ‘mine’, whether this be explicit as a rationalized self-notion or only implicit as a sub-conscious feeling of identity that lurks at the background of experience, is seen as unstable, breaking down

¹⁴ At this junction of progress, experiences can arise that are reckoned as “imperfections of insight”, *vipassanūpakkilesā* (see in detail Paṭis II 101,1 and Vism 633,11). Such imperfections of insight could involve the experience of, for example, deep tranquillity, or penetrative insight, or firm equanimity. Though being signs of progress, these experiences could be attached to and mistakenly grasped as attainments in themselves, whereby they become ‘imperfections’.

and disintegrating at every moment.¹⁵ In this way the inherent “disadvantage” of all phenomena becomes evident, *ādinava-nāṇa*, the whole world of experience loses its attraction and an all pervasive sense of “disenchantment” sets in, *nibbidā-nāṇa*. Such disenchantment then leads to a “wish for deliverance”, *muñcitukamyatā-nāṇa*.

With this level of practice, insight into the true nature of reality becomes markedly clear with knowledge of “reflection”, *paṭisaṅkhā-nāṇa*, a knowledge similar in type to the knowledge of “comprehension”, *sammasana-nāṇa*, mentioned at the outset, but differing from the latter in intensity and clarity. Knowledge of reflection gains its momentum from having passed through the previous insight experiences, in particular through the experiences of dissolution, fear and disenchantment. Eventually a profound sense of “equanimity” in regard to any formation sets in, *saṅkhārupekkhā-nāṇa*, during which the self-less nature of reality

¹⁵ Griffith (1981, 613) speaks of experiencing the universe (in the sense of the ‘whole world of subjective experience’) “as a causally conditioned flux of point-instants in which there is no continuing principle of individuality”. The main purpose of the paper by Griffith (1981) is to argue the theory that, simply said, tranquillity and insight are two separate ways of meditative development that lead to two different types of awakening, similar to the position taken by de La Vallée Poussin (1936), Gombrich (1996) and Wynne (2007, 117-25). For critical examinations of this theory, or of aspects of it, cf. Anālayo (2009a: 165f), Bergonzi (1980, 332-335), Gethin (1997, 221), Keown (1992, 77-82) and Swearer (1972, 369-71).

becomes evident with outstanding clarity. Meditation practice continues effortlessly at this point, the mind is concentrated and well balanced. Full maturity of the development of insight comes with knowledge of conformity, *anuloma-ñāṇa*, which heralds the break-through to the supramundane experience.

At this point the series of ten insight knowledges reaches its completion point. The mind momentarily withdraws from all hitherto known aspects and forms of experiences, with which the practitioner leaves the stage of being a worldling. Immediately thereon follows the experience of path and fruition,¹⁶ being equivalent to liberating insight into the four noble truths through realization of the third truth, i.e. realization of Nirvāṇa. On emerging from the experience of the supramundane, the mind naturally looks back on what has just happened and reviews what has taken place.

A detailed exposition of these experiences is also available in the *Visuddhimagga*, a 5th century treatise of paradigmatic importance in the Theravāda tradition, where this set of ten is put within a broader context that also covers the insights to be

¹⁶ In the present context I use “path” in the sense in which it is employed in commentarial literature as a referent to the actual break-through to one of the four stages of awakening. In the discourses, the idea of the “path” covers a temporally extended period of preparation for this break-through, for a discussion of these different, yet complementary perspectives, cf. Gethin (1992, 131-33).

developed previously as well as the actual break-through to liberation.¹⁷

A more abbreviated presentation of this series of experiences can be found in the Treatise on the Path to Liberation, 解脫道論, a meditation manual said to have been compiled by the arhat 優波底沙 (Upaṭiṣya/Upatissa), and preserved in Chinese translation by 僧伽婆羅, a translator active in the early sixth century. There is a tendency among modern scholars to associate this manual with the Abhayagiri tradition,¹⁸ though closer inspection suggests that the arguments raised in support of this school affiliation are not conclusive.¹⁹ Another uncertainty involves its place of origin,

17 Thus the ten insight knowledges set in after the “knowledge of delimitating name-and-form” and the “knowledge of discerning conditions”, *nāmarūpapariccheda-ñāṇa* and *paccayapariggaha-ñāṇa*, have been developed, cf. the detailed description in Vism 587-605. Once the experience of the ten insight knowledges leads up to the brink of stream-entry attainment, “change-of-lineage”, *gotrabbū-ñāṇa*, from worldling to a noble person takes place and the “path” as well as the “fruit” of stream-entry are experienced, *magga-ñāṇa* and *phala-ñāṇa*, cf. Vism 672-75. These in turn are followed by “reviewing”, *paccavekkhaṇa-ñāṇa*. Taking into account these aspects results in an overall account of sixteen knowledges.

18 Cf. esp. the detailed arguments put forth by Bapat (1936, 38-40).

19 Cf. Anālayo (2009b), Crosby (1999) and Norman (1991).

as some scholars have argued for it to stem from Sri Lanka, while others have pointed to what they feel suggests Indian origins.²⁰

It is, however, fairly clear that the Treatise on the Path to Liberation – generally known under the Pāli title *Vimuttimaggā* – predates the *Visuddhimagga*. In fact it seems quite probable that Buddhaghosa, the compiler of the *Visuddhimagga*, was aware of a version of the Treatise on the Path to Liberation.²¹ Hence, whatever maybe the final word on the school affiliation or the geographical origins of this work, it does provide us with a

²⁰ Cf. Bapat (1937, liv), Crosby (1999, 510), Kheminda in Ehara (1995, xxxviii) and Nagai (1919, 70).

²¹ Particularly revealing in this context is Buddhaghosa's reference to the opinion of "some", who propose that character types are the outcome of previous habits, the elements and humours, *Vism* 102,30: *tisso cariyā pubbācīṇṇanidānā dbātudosanidānā cā ti ekacce vadanti*. Dhammapāla in his commentary on the *Visuddhimagga* explains that the reference to "some" intends Upatissa, the author of the *Vimuttimaggā*, and that this position is adopted in the *Vimuttimaggā*, *Vism*-mhṭ I 123 (Burm. ed): *ekacce ti Upatissatheraṃ sandbāyāba, tena hi Vimuttimagge tatbā vuttam*. This indication concords with the position taken in the Treatise on the Path to Liberation (解脫道論), no. 1648 at T 32, 410a12: 答初所造因緣，諸行界為因緣，過患為因緣, a correspondence first noted by Ñāṇatiloka (1931, viii). Thus, as noted by von Hinüber (1997, 124), "contrary to the tradition, however, *Vism* had a predecessor, which is extant only in Chinese ... the *Vimuttimaggā* by an otherwise unknown Upatissa". Norman (1983, 120) concludes that "there seems no doubt that Buddhaghosa made use of this earlier text [i.e. the Path to Liberation] when writing his own work". For a more detailed discussion cf. Anālayo (2009b).

perspective previous to the systematization of Theravāda thought by Buddhaghosa, undertaken under the aegis of the Mahāvihāra. The scheme of insight knowledges in the Treatise on the Path to Liberation involves six main stages, as can be seen in figure 4.

The Treatise on the Path to Liberation begins with the three stages of comprehension, insight into rise and fall, and dissolution.²² The next stage sets in with the experience of fear, which involves also the experience of disadvantageousness and disenchantment.²³ Then comes delight in deliverance,²⁴ a stage in the development of insight that also mentions equanimity. This is followed by knowledge of conformity.²⁵

²² Comprehension, no. 1648 at T 32, 454b1, covers: 以無常廣觀，以廣觀苦，以廣觀無我。Realisation of rise and fall is first mentioned at T 32, 454c3: 通達起滅, alternatively also referred to as 通達生滅, cf. e.g. T 32, 455a2: 通達生滅者，有起有滅，有起滅通達。The experience of dissolution is taken up at T 32, 455c16: 彼坐禪人如是正見生滅相。

²³ No. 1648 at T 32, 456c11: 彼坐禪人如是現觀滅, which at T 32, 456c18 covers also: 觀過患觀厭離。

²⁴ Stirred by fear, the knowledge of delight in deliverance arises, no. 1648 at T 32, 456c20: 彼坐禪人，以怖現修行令起智，樂解脫智生。

²⁵ No. 1648 at T 32, 457a5: 解脫門相似智起。The Treatise on the Path to Liberation then completes its account with change of lineage, T 32, 457a18, knowledge of the path, T 32, 457a25, and the fruit, T 32, 458a1.

Figure 4: The stages of insight in the Treatise on the Path to Liberation

1	comprehension	廣觀
2	rise and fall	起滅
3	dissolution	滅
4	fear & disadvantage & disenchantment	畏 & 過患 & 厭離
5	delight in deliverance & equanimity	樂解脫 & 捨
6	conformity	相似

A similar summary presentation of these experiences can be found in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, a treatise of *Abhidharmic* nature included in the fifth *Nikāya* of the Pāli Canon. Scholars have dated the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* to somewhere between the 3rd century B.C. and the 2nd century A.C.²⁶ This work depicts the

²⁶ Von Hinüber (1997, 59) explains that the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* “is the only Abhidhamma text that has found its way into the Khuddakanikāya, probably because it was composed too late (perhaps 2nd century AD) to be included into the Abhidhammapiṭaka, which was already closed, while the end of the Khuddakanikāya always remained open for additions”. For the dating, von Hinüber bases himself on Frauwallner (1971, 106), who indicates that the Pāli Abhidharma texts stem from the period 200 B.C. to 200 A.C. of which the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* is the youngest, cf. also Frauwallner (1972, 124), who states that the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* is the last Abhidharma work to be included in the canon. Norman 1983: 88 explains that the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* “is included among the list of those [works] which the Dipavaṃsa states were rejected by the Mahāsāṅghikas,

progress of insight knowledge in five main stages,²⁷ as can be seen in figure 5.

which probably means that, if it existed in any form at the time of the schism, it had not yet been accepted as canonical”; but then the same *Paṭisambhidāmagga* “is not included among those texts which Buddhaghosa informs us were not accepted by the Dīgha-*bhāṅakas*, so it may be deduced that it was recognised as canonical before the composition of the Apadāna, Buddhavaṃsa, Cariyāpiṭaka and Khuddakapāṭha”. Warder (1982, xxxiv) comments that the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*’s “main theme, the sudden attainment of enlightenment, appears to be a response to the controversies of the schisms”, based on which he concludes that “the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* ... may then have been composed about the time of the Sabbatthivāda schism (c. B.C. 237?), since the Sabbatthivādins (among others) maintained that insight comes gradually”.

- 27 The first of these stages covers the knowledge of comprehension and the wisdom of analysing in a general manner phenomena of past, present and future times, *Paṭis* I 53,1: *aññānāgatapaccuppannānaṃ dhammānaṃ saṅkhipitvā vavatthāne paññā sammāsane nāṇa*. The second stage involves the knowledge of contemplating rise and fall and the wisdom of contemplating the change of presently arisen phenomena, *Paṭis* I 54,21: *pacuppannānaṃ dhammānaṃ vipariṇāmanupassane paññā udayabbayānupassane nāṇa*. The third stage is the insight knowledge and wisdom of contemplating dissolution after reflecting on an object, *Paṭis* I 57,27: *ārammaṇaṃ paṭisaṅkhā bhāṅgānupassane paññā vipassane nāṇa*. The fourth stage is the knowledge of disadvantageousness and the wisdom of looking on at fear, *Paṭis* I 59,1: *bbayatupaṭṭhāne paññā ādīnave nāṇa*. The fifth stage then is the knowledge that involves equanimity towards formations and the wisdom of wishing for deliverance, reflection and composure *Paṭis* I 60,23: *muñcitukamyatā paṭisaṅkhā santittṭhanā paññā saṅkhārupekkhāsu nāṇa*. Compared to the tenfold scheme, the fourth

Figure 5: The stages of insight in the *Paṭisambhidhāmaggā*

1	comprehension	<i>sammasana</i>
2	rise and fall	<i>udayabbaya</i>
3	dissolution	<i>bhaṅga</i>
4	fear & disadvantage	<i>bhaya & ādinava</i>
5	wish for deliverance & equanimity towards formations	<i>muñcitukamyatā & saṅkhārupekkhā</i>

The fact that the listings in the Treatise on the Path to Liberation and in the *Paṭisambhidhāmaggā* combine several insight knowledges that are treated separately in the tenfold scheme does not entail a substantial difference, but is merely a matter of presentation. In fact the *Visuddhimagga* explicitly indicates that e.g. the “wish for deliverance” (*muñcitukamyatā*) and “reflection” (*paṭisaṅkhā*) are but two early stages of equanimity towards formations.²⁸ In other words, the more detailed scheme found in

stage comprehends two insight knowledges, namely knowledge of fearfulness and of disadvantageousness; while the fifth stage covers altogether three insights, namely knowledge of wishing for deliverance, of reflection, and of equanimity towards formations.

²⁸ Vism 660, 18: *saṅkhārupekkhāñāṇaṃ ekam eva tīṇi nāmāni labhati; heṭṭhā muñcitukamyatāñāṇaṃ nāma jātaṃ, majjhe paṭisaṅkhānupassanā ñāṇaṃ nāma, ante ca sikkhāppattaṃ saṅkhārupekkhāñāṇaṃ nāma.*

the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* and in the *Visuddhimagga* allows for summarization.

(III) Insight in the Early Discourses

Following up this indication and attempting to get at the essentials described in these schemes, the insight-knowledges can be understood to reflect in a more detailed form a basic three-fold pattern described in the Pāli discourses, where a penetrative awareness of impermanence leads over to insight into unsatisfactoriness, which in turn issues in realization of not-self, thereby paving the way for progress towards liberation. That is, the basic dynamics that stands behind these schemes of insight knowledges could be reduced to progress through the three characteristics, as depicted in figure 6, which takes the most widely known scheme of ten insight knowledges as its point of departure.

With knowledge 1 as the foundation, during the development of knowledges 2 and 3 the characteristic of impermanence is clearly predominant in the form of contemplation of rise and fall and with the experience of dissolution. This leads to knowledges 4 to 7, from the onset of fear via seeing disadvantage and developing disenchantment to arousing the wish for deliverance, with which the unsatisfactory nature of reality becomes fully apparent. Once the affective transformation brought about through this deepening

appreciation of unsatisfactoriness has matured, the characteristic of not-self becomes increasingly evident in the detachment of equanimity and reaches its culmination with the attainment of path and fruit, an experience wherein any sense of selfhood is completely annihilated.

Figure 6: The ten insight-knowledges and the three characteristics

(1) comprehension	all three
(2) rise and fall (3) dissolution	impermanence
(4) fear (5) disadvantage (6) disenchantment (7) wish for deliverance	unsatisfactoriness
(8) reflection (9) equanimity (10) conformity	not-self

With the above suggested correlation I do not intend to suggest that one or the other of three characteristics is not relevant at some stages in the progress of insight. Insight into all three is required already with “comprehension”, the starting point and foundation of the series, and all three need to be contemplated throughout. There is, however, an emphasis on one out of them clearly discernible in the progression of insight.

This basic dynamics is already described in a number of Pāli discourses. These depict a progression from perception of impermanence, *aniccasaññā*, via perception of the unsatisfactory

in what is impermanent, *anicce dukkhasaññā*, to perception of not-self in what is unsatisfactory, *dukkhe anattasaññā*,²⁹ see figure 7.

Figure 7: The basic dynamics of insight

- | |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">(1) all contemplated phenomena are impermanent(2) what is impermanent is unsatisfactory(3) what is unsatisfactory is not-self |
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The foundation for this progression is awareness of impermanence. According to a discourse in the *Samyutta-nikāya*, contemplating arising and passing away is in fact of such importance for the development of *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation that it marks the difference between mere *satipaṭṭhāna* and its

²⁹ e.g. AN 7.46 at AN IV 51-53. This basic progression of insight is not confined to the Theravāda tradition, as references to the same pattern of proceeding from an apperception of impermanence to seeing what is impermanent as unsatisfactory and then comprehending that what is unsatisfactory cannot be taken as self can be found in each of the four main Chinese *Āgamas*, cf. e.g. DĀ 2 at T 1, 11c28, MĀ 86 at T 1, 563c17, SĀ 747 at T 2, 198a20, and EĀ 37.10 at T 2, 715b4; in the (Mūla-) Sarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, no. 1453 at T 24, 481c20, with its Sanskrit and Tibetan counterparts in Yamagiwa (2001, 132,1 and 133,1); and in various treatises, such as the 大智度論, no. 1509 at T 25, 217c29; the 阿毘達磨發智論, no. 1544 at T 26, 1013c21; the 阿毘達磨大毘婆沙論, no. 1545 at T 27, 836c23; the 舍利弗阿毘曇論, no. 1548 at T 28, 637b3; the 瑜伽師地論, no. 1579 at T 30, 534b27; and the 成實論, no. 1646 at T 32, 347c12.

‘development’, *satipaṭṭhānabhāvanā*.³⁰ The same mode of contemplation is also highlighted in a passage that the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* repeats after each of its individual exercises. This passage indicates that mindful contemplation requires observing the arising and the passing away of the contemplated phenomena.³¹ The detachment and equanimity that result from such contemplation are also reflected in this passage in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, according to which during contemplation undertaken properly one dwells independently, without clinging to anything.³²

The chief task of insight meditation is the development of wisdom, which in turn leads to the eradication of ignorance.³³ According to the standard definition in the discourses, to be wise requires being “endowed with wisdom regarding the arising and disappearance [of phenomena], which is noble and penetrative, leading to the complete destruction of *dukkha*”.³⁴ This passage sets the parameters for the development of wisdom and insight, clearly emphasizing the importance of wisely knowing the arising

30 SN 47.40 at SN V 183,15.

31 MN 10 at MN I 56,30: *samudayadhammānupassī vā ... vāyadhammānupassī vā ... samudayavāyadhammānupassī vā ... viharati.*

32 MN 10 at MN I 56,33: *anissito ca viharati, na ca kiñci loke upādiyati.*

33 AN 2.3.10 at AN I 61,9: *vipassanā bhāvitā ... paññā bhāvīyati, paññā bhāvitā ... yā avijjā sā pabīyati.*

34 MN 53 at MN I 356,19: *udayatthagāminiyā paññāya samannāgato ariyāya nibbedhikāya sammādukkhakkhayagāminiyā.*

and disappearance of what is experienced. Based on such awareness of impermanence, the growth of true insight and wisdom manifests in a gradual ennobling of the practitioner through increasing detachment, and eventually culminates in total liberation from *dukkha*.

As a basis for growing insight into the true nature of existence, awareness of impermanence needs to be penetrative, in the sense that it quite literally needs to penetrate into every aspect of personal experience.³⁵ Such comprehensive seeing with insight will ensure that the entire gamut of what is usually experienced as ‘I’ and ‘mine’ is seen with wisdom as subject to change and alteration.

Comprehensive insight into impermanence on its own is, however, not sufficient, as it needs to lead on to insight into unsatisfactoriness and not-self.³⁶ That is, once a clear perception of impermanence has been established, the progress of insight requires viewing what is impermanent as unsatisfactory, and that which is unsatisfactory has in turn to be seen as devoid of a self.

The locative forms *anicce* and *dukkhe* indicate that the progression from one of these three characteristics to the next does not involve a change of object, but a change of perspective. What has been seen with insight as impermanent, is now seen as unsatisfactory, in fact it is precisely because it is impermanent that

³⁵ Th 1091: *aniccato sabbabhavaṃ vipassam*.

³⁶ Th 1117: *aniccam dukkan ti vipassa yoniso, suññam anattā ti*.

it is unsatisfactory. This is reflected in a standard teaching on the three characteristics, found regularly in the Pāli discourses, where the inquiry “what is impermanent – it is unsatisfactory or agreeable?”, leads to the conclusion that it can only be unsatisfactory.³⁷ That is, anything that is of a changing nature cannot provide lasting satisfaction.

The same teaching then continues by querying if it is appropriate to regard what is impermanent, unsatisfactory and subject to change as “this is mine, this I am, this is my self”.³⁸ The inevitable conclusion is that this would indeed be inappropriate. That is, what cannot provide true and lasting satisfaction is not worth being appropriated as “mine” or being identified as “I”. The detachment that sets in with true insight into unsatisfactoriness is the key for a genuine arrival at not-self, which is a natural outcome of the preceding progress of insight. In other words, once what is impermanent has been seen as unsatisfactory, it will naturally be experienced as devoid of anything that could justify the conceit ‘I am’ or any appropriation in terms of ‘this is mine’. It is this inner sense of distance from such appropriation which expresses itself in ever increasing equanimity. This progression of

³⁷ MN 22 at MN I 138,12: *yaṃ paṇaniccaṃ dukkhaṃ vā taṃ sukhaṃ vā ti?*

³⁸ MN 22 at MN I 138,13: *yaṃ paṇāniccaṃ dukkhaṃ vipariṇāmadhammaṃ kallaṃ nu taṃ samanupassituṃ: etaṃ mama, eso ’ham asmi, eso me attā ti?* Gethin 2004: 215 explains that “the normally unseen processes whereby we construct our personalities and identities on the basis of countless fleeting experiences are seen and reversed”.

insight reaches its culmination in the direct vision of not-self with the break-through to stream-entry.

The dynamics of insight resulting from such meditative development is diametrically opposed to the four perversions of perception, of the mind and of views, *vipallāsa*, which according to the discourses ‘mis’-take what is impermanent, unsatisfactory, not-self and unattractive for being the opposite.³⁹ Undermining the force of these perversions through insight is what gradually eradicates the defilements in the mind and thereby leads to increasing degrees of dispassion.

Instead of succumbing to the perverting force of these four perversions, insight reveals an ever more correct vision of the world that is in accordance with reality. Such a vision is a necessary requirement for progress to liberation, as according to the discourses all “those who have been quenched in this world, had insight in accordance with reality”.⁴⁰

In sum, then, it seems that in spite of considerable variety found among modern day insight meditation techniques – as exemplified in the approaches to insight taught by Mahāsi Sayādaw, S.N. Goenka and Pa Auk Sayādaw – a common reference point for Theravāda insight meditation can be found in the scheme of insight knowledges. This, in turn, can be

³⁹ AN 4.49 at AN II 52,3: *anicce niccan ti ... adukkhe dukkhan ti ... anattani attā ti asubbe subban ti saññāvipallāso cittavipallāso dīṭṭhivipallāso.*

⁴⁰ DN 32 at DN III 196,11: *ye cāpi nibbutā loke, yathābbūtaṃ vipassisum.*

understood as a detailed elaboration of a basic dynamics of insight already found in the early discourses.

Abbreviations

Abhs	<i>Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha</i>
AN	<i>Aṅguttara-nikāya</i>
DĀ	<i>Dīrgha-āgama</i>
DN	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>
EĀ	<i>Ekottarika-āgama</i>
MĀ	<i>Madhyama-āgama</i>
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
Paṭis	<i>Paṭisambhidāmagga</i>
SĀ	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i>
SN	<i>Samyutta-nikāya</i>
Th	<i>Theragāthā</i>
Vibh	<i>Vibhaṅga</i>
Vism	<i>Visuddhimagga</i>

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