

Guidance for Yogis at Interview

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Despite instructions given on how to meditate, there are yogis (meditators or retreatants) who are unable to practice properly and to report back on their experiences at interview with the teacher. Some can practice well but cannot describe properly how they have meditated and what they have experienced. This talk is intended to help such yogis report back properly on how they have meditated, on what they have observed and experienced in the course of their meditative practice or exercise.

As to the mode of meditation, the late venerable

Mahasi Sayadaw's recorded introduction talk (for new yogis) gives the essential instructions, beginning with noticing or observing the primary object of attention in the mindfulness meditation (Satipatthana), namely, the rising and falling of the abdomen.

In terms of scriptural explanation, we are made up of psycho-physical phenomena, which are arising and passing away all the time. A yogi is expected to experience them at the six sense-doors through the mindfulness. When a sight is seen, for instance, the eye and the sight are physical phenomena, while the resultant consciousness of seeing is a mental phenomenon. Similarly, with the experiencing with sound, smell, taste, touch and mental objects, and several movements of the body such as folding and stretching of the arms, turning or leaning (inclining) of the body and the taking of steps in walking, Mahasi Sayadaw has instructed that all kinds of happenings should be closely noticed the moment they become obvious to us, with no exception of even trifling incidents.

Although Mahasi Sayadaw's instructions are given in very clear and simple language, yogis encounter some difficulties when they come to follow them in actual practice. To help yogis to overcome such difficulties, meditation teachers of this Centre explain and demonstrate to beginners how to notice or observe the primary objects of attention; i.e., rising falling of the abdomen, and secondary objects of attention like thoughts or reflections, feelings or sensation, and external stimuli like sights and sound or other acts of behavior the moment they take place. Yet, some beginners find it difficult to put them into practice properly and to report their experiences clearly to the teachers. To obviate such difficulties, the meditation teachers have devised maxims or aphorisms that are easy to remember and helpful to the better understanding. They are as follows:

The First Aphorism

“Say how you observe the primary object And what sensation you experience of it.”

The primary object of attention, to which the mind should be tethered as it were, is the rising and falling of the abdomen as the yogis breathes during sitting practice. In the absence of any other noticeable object of attention, the yogi should keep on watching or observing it. The mind should also revert to it when a secondary object of attention has been noticed and fallen away.

The yogi is expected to report whether he is able to observe the movement of the rising abdomen from the beginning to the end. As he inhales, the abdomen begins to rise somewhat rapidly and goes on rising as he continues to inhale. When the yogi ceases to inhale, the rising movement comes to an end.

When observing the rising movement of the abdomen, the entire movement should be experienced and known. The scripture texts say: “sabba-kāya patisamvedii” -- that means all the physical phenomena involved in the entire process of the rising abdomen should be noticed as continuously as possible (i.e., without a break).

The observing or noticing mind should be focused on the physical process of the rising abdomen through all the successive stages from the beginning to the end. The beginner would not, of course, be able to notice all the stages of the movement but he should strive to be able to do so. He is urged to strive, thus, to ensure serious and sufficient concentration of the mind on the object.

The yogi should be able to report if he is able to notice the object with enough concentrative attention, if there is enough concurrence between the object and the noticing mind, if he is able to notice the movement (of the abdomen) through its successive phases. If he is able to notice the object properly, then what does he “see,” that is, what does he experience? Not that he should concern himself with other (irrelevant) objects of attention, but that he should be able to report (accurately) on the object he observes and what (exactly) he experiences of the rising movement.

There are two factors involved in this kind of meditative practice. The first is the object of attention. The second is the awareness of it. Only on the basis of these two factors, will the yogi be able to say what he has “seen” or experienced.

Here, with regard to the primary object, the yogi is expected to report clearly if his awareness is concurrent or consistent with the meditative object (the rising abdomen) along with its progressive movement. If so, what does he “see” (become aware of)? Is it the abdomen itself, the manner or mode of its arising, or the tension and the movement involved in the rising of the abdomen.

Three Aspects of a Physical Object

When a yogi observes a physical object like the rising abdomen, he is likely to see or experience one of three aspects of it. They are classified into:

1. Form or shape of the meditative object (santhāna)
2. Manner or mode of it (ākāra)
3. Essential characteristic or quality of it (sabhāva)

When a yogi observes the rising abdomen, its form or shape may become obvious to him. Or he may see its manner or mode, in which the abdomen rises up from the state of being flat to gradual inflation until it stops to deflate. He is likely to see these two aspects before he “sees” the physical characteristic or quality of the object.

Actually, “seeing” the form and manner is not vipassanic insight. The yogi must “see” the physical characteristics or qualities of the object beyond the form and manner of it, namely, tension and motion or movement manifested during the rising of the abdomen. If the yogi observes intently, he will “see” these physical characteristics or qualities. He is expected to relate it at interview. Of course, he must say so as he actually sees it, not as he thinks he sees it thus. The report must be based on his actual own experience.

The yogi is similarly expected to observe, “see” the abdomen falling progressively, and report his experience.

So also when he is doing the walking (cankama) meditation. As he lifts his foot, is he able to observe concurrently the lifting movement progressively from the beginning to the end of it? If he is so able, what does he “see?” Does he “see” the foot or the manner or mode of its lifting, or does he feel the foot becoming light and rising upward, or the foot becoming tense and being pushed?

He is expected to report on any of these three aspects from his own experience. When he thrusts his foot forward (in the course of his step-taking), is his mind observing or noticing concurrently with the thrusting movement of the foot? Here also, what does he “see?” Does he “see” the foot or the manner or mode of its thrusting, or some physical characteristics or qualities of it, like the foot being pushed from behind and pulled from before?

Similarly, when he drops the foot, is he able to observe or notice the dropping movement progressively from the beginning to the end until it touches the floor or the ground? If he is, what does he come to know? Does he know the foot, or the manner of its dropping, or some physical characteristics or qualities of it like the foot becoming light and soft?

Similarly, he should observe or notice other meditative objects such as folding and stretching of the limbs, turning or inclining (leaning) of the body, assuming the sitting posture or the standing posture. With regard to these phenomena also, is the yogi able to observe or notice the phenomena concurrently with its appearance from the beginning to the end of its manifestation? It is important for the yogi to confine his reporting to the three

aspects of the meditative object, as mentioned above, and not to wander off into reporting on stray and random occurrences.

Three Kinds Of Characteristic

It is good for a yogi to understand what is meant by the following three kinds of characteristic of psychophysical phenomena:

1. sabhāva lakkhana (Individual Characteristic)
2. sankhata lakkhana (Conditional Characteristic)
3. sāmāñña lakkhana (Common Characteristic)

1. Sabhāva Lakkhana

Sabhāva Lakkhana means the individual characteristic of mental or physical phenomena. Regarding physical phenomena of 28 kinds, hardness or softness, for instance, belongs to only the earth element (pathavī dhātu) and not to any other elements. Heat or cold is the particular characteristic of the fire element (tejo dhātu). Cohesion and fluidity is that of water element (Apo dhātu) and the tension, pressure or motion is that of wind element (vayo dhātu), and so on.

Regarding mental phenomena, the particular characteristic of mind is to be conscious of sense-objects. Out of the 52 mental components, the characteristic of Phassa (contact) is to bring the mind into contact with sense-objects, Vedana (feeling) is to feel the sense-objects, and so on.

2. Sankhata Lakkhana

Each and every individual characteristic of all psycho-physical phenomena has three phases, arising, lasting and disappearing, which are respectively termed in Pali uppāda, thiti and bhanga. Uppāda means arising of a phenomenon. Thiti is a duration or continuance or proceeding towards dissolution. Bhanga is breaking up or dissolution. These three phases are called Sankhata lakkhana (conditional characteristics).

3. Sāmāñña Lakkhana

The third characteristic of all psycho-physical phenomena is called sāmāñña lakkhana (common characteristic) such as the impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and impersonality. In Pali, these three characteristics are termed annica lakkhana (characteristic of impermanence), dukkha lakkhana (characteristic of ill, suffering or unsatisfactoriness) and anatta lakkhana (characteristic of egolessness or impersonality). These characteristics are common to all physical and mental phenomena that are conditioned. They are, therefore, designated as sāmāñña lakkhana (common characteristics).

Of these three characteristics, our meditative practice is directed towards realization of the common characteristic of the phenomena. How do we make our meditative effort to realize the characteristic of the phenomena? We should observe or notice them the moment they arise. Only then, will we realize their characteristics, but not otherwise.

As the yogi inhales, the abdomen rises. Before inhalation, there was no rising of the abdomen. The yogi's mind should go on observing the rising movement of the abdomen from its beginning to its end. Only then would the yogi be able to "see" the real nature of this movement. What is its real nature (characteristic or quality)? With the in-breath, the wind goes in. And what is wind? It is the wind element with the characteristic of tension, pressure or motion. It is this real nature of the wind element that the yogi comes to "see." He will "see" it only when he observes it the moment it arises and continues until it passes away. Otherwise, he won't even see its form or shape or mode or manner, not to speak of its true characteristic; far less he will "see" it. Continuing to pay concentrated and concurrent attention to the meditative object, that is, the rising and falling of his abdomen, he will progressively strengthen his concentrative power.

As his concentration strengthens, he will no longer "see" the form or shape of his abdomen, or the mode or manner of its rising or falling. His insight will go beyond them by seeing the individual characteristics, such as tension, pressure and movement involved in the movement of the abdomen.

As he breathes out, he will feel the tension subsiding and the falling movement of the abdomen coming to an end as he comes to the end of his exhalation. He also has similar experiences with the movements involved in walking meditation including the lifting of the foot, pushing it forward, dropping and placing it on the floor or the ground.

The meditation teacher will not tell the yogi what he is going to "see" but will instruct him how to observe or notice. It is the same as in the doing of arithmetical sum. The teacher will not give the answer but will teach the working out of the sum.

The same instructions apply in the case of different kinds of bodily movement, sensations and thoughts. All these should be noticed the moment they arise in order to ensure that their true nature may be "seen." We have dealt with the first aphorism. True characteristics of phenomena will be revealed only when they are observed the moment they arise. The last two characteristics will manifest themselves as a matter of course, once the first one has been grasped by concentrated and concurrent awareness of the meditative object.

The Second Aphorism

The second aphorism says, "Only when the individual characteristics of phenomena are "seen," will the conditional characteristics of phenomena become manifest," meaning the phenomena will be seen in three sequences, arising, lasting and passing away.

The Third & Fourth Aphorism

So, the third aphorism is: “only when sankhata conditional characteristic) becomes apparent, will sāmāñña (common characteristic) be ‘seen’. “ This will be followed by the fourth aphorism which says “when sāmāñña (common characteristic) is “seen,” vipassana-ñāna (insight knowledge) emerged.”

After its emergence, vipassana insight will gradually mature and ripen and form the preliminary path knowledge called pubbabhāga-agganana which, in turn, will be succeeded by the noble, full-fledged path knowledge (ariyamagganana), which will enable the yogi to realize Nibbāna with the cessation of the psycho-physical phenomena, which represent suffering.

It should be repeated that, in reporting, the yogi should relate what he has actually “seen,” not what he thinks he has “seen.” Only what he has “seen” is his own insight, not what he thinks he has, which at best is borrowed (second-hand) knowledge. This is not in conformity with the real nature or character of the phenomenon which he has observed or noticed.

The Fifth Aphorism

The next aphorism is: “All thoughts observed and known should be related.”

While the yogi is sitting in meditation, observing or noticing the primary object of attention, namely, the rising and falling movement of the abdomen, various thoughts may occur to him -- this being in the very nature of mind which is not subject to control. The mind has a tendency to wander, leaving the primary object and go on to all kinds of ideas, some wholesome, others not. What should the yogi do then, just notice whatever comes into the mind? Are you able to do so or not? You should be. If you do, does the thinking go on, or is it arrested, or does it vanish all together? Or does your attention revert to the regular (primary) object of attention? You are expected to report all that takes place in these respects.

For the novice in meditation, feelings or sensations do not arise yet while he is focusing his attention on the primary object. But thoughts are likely to occur. Even then, the novice is not able to notice all thoughts that arise. In order to minimize such (stray) thoughts, the beginning yogi should focus his attention as closely as possible on the primary object.

The Sixth Aphorism

However, when the novice has sat in meditation for 5, 10, or 15 minutes, certain unpleasant sensations in the body are apt to arise with corresponding effects on the mind. When feelings or sensations arise, they should be noticed. When reporting, it is better to describe them in plain everyday language as “itching,” “aching,” “numbing” or “tingling” and so on, rather than in scriptural language as just “vedanā” (feeling). These feelings, which arise spontaneously, should be noticed in the same manner as above, whether they are intensifying, weakening, stabilizing or disappearing.

So the aphorism is: “All feelings (sensations) should be observed, known and related at interviews.”

The Last Aphorism

Next, what other phenomena are there to be noticed and known? They are sights seen, sounds heard, odors smelled, food tasted; and then mental objects such as liking, transgressing, sloth and torpor, distractedness, anxiety, doubt, remembrance, clear comprehension, attention, satisfaction, delight, tranquility, serenity or calm, ease of meditation and so on.

The Buddha has collectively termed them as dhammarammana (mind-object). Suppose a liking arises and is noticed, then what happens? Liking is followed by craving. The yogi is expected to report this. Take another example. The yogi is experiencing sloth and torpor and feebleness of mind. When he notices these states of mind, distractedness arises. What happens when these are observed or noticed in turn? Whenever these mind-objects arise, they should be observed.

In summary, the following are the four objects of attention in satipatthana vipassana bhavana (insight meditation through mindfulness):

1. Acts of bodily behavior;
2. Feelings or sensations;
3. Acts of consciousness; and
4. Mind-objects.

Three events occur in such meditation in successive order:

- a. Arising of the phenomenon
- b. Observing or noticing of the phenomenon that arises
- c. What the yogi comes to know and “see.”

The last aphorism requires all that happens thus to be understood. For every meditative object (belonging to the four categories listed above), it is important to understand the three successive events mentioned above. The yogi’s main concerns are the events (b) and (c) above, i.e., to observe or notice the phenomenon that occurs to him and to report it. The aphorism for this is:

“What arises, what is observed and what comes to be known and “seen,” should be understood completely and related at interview.”