

## Insight (6) Personal Insights

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So hello and welcome to our series on insight. And now for the second week, I'm going to introduce to you five areas of insight that might be significant for people who do insight meditation. And somehow understanding that there are different forms of insight, different objects of insight, can help us put each into context. And so maybe we better understand what the classic Buddhist idea of insight, insight meditation, is aiming towards. And all these forms of insight are valuable. But we don't want to be limited by any one of them.

We want to be able to appreciate each one in its own way. But not think that this is what insight is by itself. So the word insight, as I've said, comes from the word *vipassanā*, which means either to see clearly or to see distinctively. To see each thing that occurs in a distinctive kind of way in its own right. And so what that means is we don't use a discursive mind. To start creating, lumping everything together in some kind of way.

But rather we are letting each thing stand for itself so we know it well. And so that the thinking, conceptual mind, is not so busy analyzing, conceptualizing about our experience. Taking us away from it in a certain way. So the word insight is, sometimes I've used it in a kind of evocative way. I like to think of it as, the synonym is being revelation. And why I like that as a synonym is that revelation is not something that we are searching for, necessarily, or that we're responsible for.

It's something that just suddenly seems to appear that's a meaningful understanding, a meaningful experience. But that we didn't make happen. We didn't feel like we constructed it or thought it out or analyzed something. It just appeared somehow in a way that was surprising and gratifying, meaningful. And so insight has that quality that we're not trying

to construct insight or figure something out with a figuring out mind. We're using that meditative mind to become quiet and still so that we're not distracted.

We're not caught up in the world of concepts. And instead can kind of see things directly. Our life comes into view. It might be less grand than the idea of revelation. Our experience comes into view. And so it comes into sight.

And rather than looking, we're seeing. Looking being this active effort to kind of zero in on something. Seeing means a kind of relaxed, receptive awareness of the present moment here. And so there are five different areas in which insight can occur. Where there's some new understanding, some new clarity, some new meaningful way of experiencing our life can come into view. So the first is personal insight.

And that means we understand something new about ourselves that's fairly unique to us. We understand something about our history, what happened to us, how we were conditioned and shaped by things. We have a new insight into what happened to us in the past. We have insight into the kind of thoughts we have, the biases we have, the orientations we have, the beliefs we have that might be operating unbeknownst to us. But they are in the background. And sometimes it's mystifying why certain things happen.

But then we kind of at some point get quiet enough in meditation that the quiet mind is seen. And we say, "Oh, that's what I'm believing. That's why everywhere I go things look dangerous. Because I'm always thinking thoughts of catastrophe. I'm always imagining that the worst will come. And no wonder every place I go seems dangerous because I'm constantly projecting or seeing through this catastrophizing kind of mind."

Or for me, I saw at one point in meditation that in the back of my mind very, very quietly—but quietly doesn't mean unimportant. It's kind of like the lens through which everything else was seen—was I had this strange belief that if any meditative experience was happening to me, it was not the real thing. I didn't know what the real thing should be, but I had this deep doubt about whatever myself and my own experience that I could never feel settled or at ease with whatever experience I had. There was a very subtle anxiety, a very subtle agitation, very subtle kind of like holding myself back from experiences in meditation because of this very background thing. So other people might have something like that as well, but it might not be the prominent kind of background belief that many people have. But to me it's a personal insight.

I say, "Oh, it made a huge difference to see that. It's almost like as soon as I saw that, the

veils were cleared and now I could just be with my direct experience in meditation in a much simpler, more easy way, content to just let it be what it is without having some idea that it's not quite up to snuff." And so there's a whole slew of personal insights like that that become available when the mind starts getting quieter and quieter. Sometimes if we're very concerned about something, the mind is operating sometimes offline and we're sitting quietly. We have enough space in the thinking mind, it gets quiet enough that some of the offline insights, revelations, understandings will pop up.

Many years ago when I was a new Zen student, I worked at a bakery and my job was to prepare the wets and the dry ingredients for the bakers that came in early in the morning to make bread and different things. So I'd have these two bowls, all the wet stuff, all the dry stuff, the eggs, whatever was needed that was wet, and they would just mix it in together in the morning when they came. So one day I was sitting meditating and my mind was fairly quiet and peaceful. I was minding my own business and suddenly there was like a little explosion in my mind. My mind said, "The salt!" And something inside of me, maybe because I'd been doing this work for some time, it was deeply in my body. Something inside of me knew that I'd left the salt out of one of the bread preparations that I was doing.

So as soon as I could I called the bakery and told them. And so they were very happy with the results because they put a sign up, "Salt-free bread," and it was snapped up. People bought it. So there's a way in which personal insights of different kinds can appear when we're doing meditation. And I don't want to dismiss the value of these at all, but what I'd like to suggest is that for the purposes of mindfulness meditation, we don't want to get too involved in these personal insights.

If they're impactful and you want to spend time to reflect and think about them, the recommendation is do it afterwards. Go for a walk with a friend, journal about it. Spend other time so that you don't condition yourself to think that meditation is about thinking about things. That that's where you're going to kind of have all these "aha" moments. And the reason for this is I like to present this analogy that if you go into an apartment building, a tall building, a skyscraper, because you've been told that there's a fantastic and very important view from high up.

And so you get into the elevator and it takes you up to the second floor. And the second floor opens and there's an amazing party show going on that just seems so made for you and all your interests. So you leave the elevator to go see this party, this show. And you're there for many weeks before you realize, "Hey, wait a minute. I was supposed to be going up in the

elevator.” And so you get back in the elevator and you go up and it opens at the fourth floor. And there’s World War III.

And you see the good cause and who’s the good guys and bad guys. And you’re ready to, you feel like you have to be responsible to join the good cause. And you’re out there on the fourth floor fighting the war. And then it takes you many months to realize, “Hey, wait a minute. I was in the elevator going up.” And so then you go back in the elevator and now you go up and the elevator opens in the seventh floor. And there’s this person that you can’t believe, the person standing there ready to greet you.

It’s the person of your dreams. You’ve been dreaming about this person for years. And here’s the person who is clearly going to be your life partner, clearly going to provide everything you need. And you can’t believe your good luck. And so you get off the elevator and it takes you some years before you realize, “Wait a minute. I’m going up the elevator.” So in this way, when meditation is working, it’s like you’re in the elevator.

And then when you have certain revelations, certain insights, certain thoughts, certain fantasies, certain things that you can’t believe how good they are or how important the right cause is, we get off the elevator in order to engage in those and plan and work and fight the good fight. But the idea when you’re doing meditation is, don’t get off the elevator. Trust the process. It’s working. If these different insights, these different self-understandings come up, different topics that are important for you come up, appreciate that, but don’t get off the elevator.

Sometimes when I meditate, there will be things more than just salt. Things will arise and say, “Oh, that’s actually important to address. Thank you.” And I’ll say, “Thank you.” And they’ll say it later, not during meditation. And if you’re worried, really worried, about forgetting something so important, you could have a pad next to you and just write it down so that you can put it aside. But the idea is here, if you’re doing mindfulness meditation, the personal insights, self-understanding that comes along is invaluable and very supportive.

But the idea is, don’t get sidetracked by those in meditation itself. Or at least don’t take them as being the only reason we’re doing meditation. Some people, when they hear the idea of insight, then will assume that, “Oh, now I’ve gotten an insight. Now I know what insight is. I understand something very important about myself that’s going to change my whole life for the better. So thank you, insight, that I got my insight.” I also appreciate that various different forms of personal insight can happen.

And the idea is, remember, there's actually many more important insights that are going to come that are part of this phenomenal path to a deep liberation of the heart. A deep freedom from some of the deepest, challenging operating systems by which our whole psychophysical system is operating. And to really drop down to see that in a deep, quiet way. That we want to go into, have a deep loving insight into things which are more universal. Things that are shared by all people, and not just personal for myself. And that'll be the topic now for the next four days. So I appreciate very much this opportunity, and we'll continue tomorrow.