Calm & Insight

April 14, 2025

It’s general knowledge that there are two kinds of meditation. Samatha, which means calm, and vipassana, which means insight. When you have two kinds of meditation, the question comes, how much do you need to do samatha first before you can do vipassana? In other words, how quiet does the mind have to be before you can develop insight? Or can you do vipassana totally without samatha? Those questions don’t come up in the text, though, which is because the Buddha never taught them as types of meditation. Calm, he said, is a quality of the mind. Insight is a quality of the mind. And you need them both. It’s not a case that you first do one and then the other, although most people will do it that way. They tend to have either more calm in their minds, or tend more towards insight. In which case, the Buddha says, work on the other one. In other words, if you’re already good at calm, try to develop insight. If you’ve already thought a lot about the Buddha’s teachings and understand them, in an abstract way, you’ve got to work on the calm. Ideally, he says, you develop the two together. Each of them depends on a different set of questions. To calm the mind, you want to find someone who’s good at calming his mind or her mind. And you ask, how can the mind remain steady? How can it be unified? Steady in the sense of being with one object, unified in the sense of actually becoming one with the object, as when you’re focusing on the breath. In the beginning, your mind is hovering around the breath, trying to adjust to the breath, trying to make it comfortable. And then when it becomes comfortable, then you can move in. It’s like a dog lying down to rest out in the open. It lies down. Well, there’s a rock here, or there’s a root there. So it gets up and it scratches, scratches, scratches. Circles around, then lies down again. So in the same way, you try to adjust the breath so it becomes a good place to stay. And then you settle into it. You’re surrounded by the breath. You’re in the breath. Because the breath is not the contact of the air at the nose. It’s the feeling of energy throughout the body. In some places it’s more prominent than others, and you want to focus your mind and your main attention there. But then eventually, as that area becomes more comfortable, you want to think of that comfort spreading throughout the body. Your awareness spreads throughout the body. So that you’re bathed in breath. As for insight, the questions are, how do you view fabrications? The word is sankara. And how do you understand them with insight? How do you deal with the different types of fabrications there are? There are two main sets. There’s what are called the five aggregates, the five khandhas. There’s the form of the body as you feel it from within. Feelings, which are feeling tones of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. Perceptions, the labels you put on things, either individual words or images. Thought fabrications, where you put things together and think in full sentences. Each is aware of all these things. And these are said to be fabricated because the way you experience them is that there’s a potential for each of these that comes from the past. And sometimes you have many potentials coming up in the present moment, and your mind focuses on some and not on others, and develops them into your actual experience of the present. For instance, you could be sitting right here, and you could be focusing on whatever potentials there are for pain in the body right now. And you can make yourself miserable. You can focus on whatever potentials there are for pleasure, and it becomes a lot easier to settle down. There’s an intentional element in all of your experience. That’s what the whole point of looking at things in terms of sankara is all about. Trying to figure out what is the intention. Is it a good intention or a bad intention that makes me shape things the way I do? And if I’ve got some bad intentions or some unskillful intentions, what can I do to change them? The other way of looking at fabrications is in terms of what the Buddha calls three fabrications–bodily, verbal, and mental. Some of the same territory, but dividing it up in a different way. Bodily fabrication is your in and out breath, sensations in the body, that correspond to breathing in, breathing out. Verbal fabrication is what’s called directed thought and evaluation. Very simply put, it’s how you talk to yourself. You focus on a topic–that’s the directed thought–and then you make comments on it, ask questions about it, try to come up with answers. That’s the evaluation. And then there’s mental fabrication, which are perceptions and feelings. So we try to divide these things up so you can see that they are individual actions that you do. The present moment is not just a given. It’s not a monolith. There are lots of activities going on right now. And the Buddha’s pointing to the fact that the way we engage in these activities is why we suffer. It’s an ignorance. And the whole point of insight is to do it with knowledge. So these factors that can lead to suffering instead can become part of the path to the end of suffering. So those are the questions for insight. How do I regard fabrications? How do I learn how to view them with insight? And the Buddha says you develop both of these qualities, calm and insight, by trying to get the mind into concentration. And you get the mind into concentration by working with these qualities. The two help each other along. In other words, you try to bring the mind to one object, like the breath, and then you try to understand how you’re relating to the breath so you can relate in a better way. Look at the way you’re breathing. Look at the way you talk to yourself about the breath. Or if you’re talking about something else, how you can stop talking about something else and come back and talk about the breath. And what perceptions are you holding in mind? Like the image of the breath as a whole body process. Or using the word bathing in the breath. Wearing the breath. What does that do to your experience of how you breathe in? How does it make it different from just thinking of the breath as a sensation at the nose? You begin to see how much your intentions really do shape things. And so you try to shape them into a state of concentration where you’re really settled here. When the Buddha discusses how to bring the mind into concentration through focusing on the breath, it involves both calming things, being sensitive to how you’re fabricating things, and then calming those fabrications. So you’re working on calm and insight together. That, for the Buddha, is the ideal way to meditate. And then as the mind settles down, things get calmer, the insights get sharper, more subtle, and the concentration goes deeper. All these processes help one another along. It’s simply a matter of, at any given moment, which is being emphasized, more than the other. The Buddha never recommends doing calm without insight or insight without calm. He wants you to work on both. So calm, of course, is what enables you to see. If you’re running around all the time, you’re not going to see very much. And the insight helps you get more calm as you begin to understand ways in which you are disturbing yourself by the way you fabricate your experience. Now you don’t have to do that. So focus on being with the breath. Try to notice how your intentions shape your experience of being with the breath. And then how you can calm that. Calm the body, calm the mind. When you do that, that answers all the questions about when to do calm, when to do insight. You’re doing them together. In John Lee’s image of a person walking, you can’t hop on one foot very far. But if you walk using both feet, you can go quite far. Sometimes you lean to the left, sometimes you lean to the right. But the leaning is what propels you forward. If you lean too far in one direction, of course, you fall down. So learn how to balance these two qualities. That’s how your meditation can make progress.

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