

The Insight (Vipassana) Meditation Process

Working With Thinking (A Non-Comprehensive List)

Alternative Options To Investigate and Explore

- Purpose:** To experience spontaneous, non-conceptual Liberating Insight that releases the mind, body and heart from suffering and leads to abiding in deep peace and satisfaction.
- Method:** To establish and maintain the dynamic conditions that allow us to directly and mindfully experience and investigate the Qualities ⁽¹⁾ and Characteristics ⁽²⁾ of present moment experience as they continuously arise and disappear. ⁽³⁾ This process is primarily somatic, sensory and kinetic.
- Focus:** To maintain attention on, and mindfully attend to, a primary object of meditation, usually the sensations of the breath or sensations of the body. In more advanced practice, attention and mindfulness “choicelessly” focuses on the most dominate experience present at any one of the senses.
- Thought, and other experiences like emotions, become the primary focus of attention and mindfulness, for a period of time, if they are more dominate, present moment experiences than the primary object.
- Thought:** As a general rule, refrain from going into the content or narrative of thought because it undermines the ability to directly and mindfully investigate experience at the somatic, sensory and kinetic levels. This is the case because thought is conceptual, tends to disconnect us from experience in the body, and quickly leads to personalization.
- Specifics:** When attention shifts from the primary object to thought, clearly acknowledge that attention is no longer on the primary object. Return attention smoothly to the primary object. Do this with as little judgment, resistance or negativity as possible.
- Effort:** Diligent but relaxed, patient, kind and accepting. Fully focused in present moment experience without rushing.

Alternative Options For Working With Thought

When attention shifts to thought

Make a soft mental note of “thinking” or “thought,” if helpful

Maintain focus on the primary object in the “foreground” of attention and allow thinking to continue without resistance in the “background” of attention. Do this without giving thought sufficient attention or energy to significantly interfere with mindfulness of the primary object or allowing thought to become an annoyance or irritation.

When attention repeatedly shifts to thought

Investigate and Adjust

Whether intention is clearly connected with **Purpose, Method** and **Focus** (above), and adjust to clarify and strengthen as necessary

Whether the energy present in body and mind supports balanced attention & mindfulness, and adjust as necessary

Whether amount and quality of effort being used supports balanced attention & mindfulness, and adjust as necessary.

Whether one of the Five Hindrances (4) is present. If so, intervene to bring the mind back into balance through the use of a recognized “antidote” unless the Hindrances is made the object of meditation.

Make a soft mental note of

Time Relationship

Past, Present or Future or

Remembering, Thinking, Planning

Feeling Tone

Pleasant, unpleasant or neutral (vs numb)

*Refocus attention and mindfulness into the sensations in the body, including the quality and flow of energy, and use these as the objects of meditation

When attention continues to repeatedly shift to thought

Strengthen the level of interest and curiosity in the primary object

Look for something not seen or experienced before

Focus on the primary object's conditionality and causation (5)

Focus on the primary object's Qualities (1)

Focus on the primary object's Characteristics (2)

Notice, and note if helpful, that thoughts are each

Temporary and constantly changing

Appear and disappear spontaneously on their own

Resisting thoughts causes struggle, tension and suffering

When none of the above options restores balanced attention and mindfulness

Switch to a different form of meditation or mindfulness

Metta / Lovingkindness meditation (6) or

Compassion Meditation (7) or

Walking meditation or mindfulness movement (8)

Switch to one of the Buddha's five strategies for dealing with Distracting or Unskillful Thoughts (9)

Replacing unskillful thought with its opposite

Reflecting on the negative consequences of unskillful thought

Redirecting attention away from unskillful thinking

Reflecting on the causes of unskillful thought and alternatives

Subduing or overpowering unskillful thought through effort

Notes

(1) The Qualities of an experience in our body include, but are not limited to, Location, Size, Length, Depth, Intensity, Temperature, Movement, Rhythm and Fluidity. See more in “Going Home: Starting Out On The Path of Insight (Vipassana) Meditations by Dennis Warren at <http://sactoinsight.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Going-Home-Starting-Out-on-The-Path-of-Insight-Vipassana-Meditation.pdf> .

(2) The inherent Characteristics of a primary object, such as the sensations of the breath, include:

The breath is a process of sensations which are in constant and on-going change rather than permanent.

The Qualities of the sensations of the breath flow from one into another, rather than remaining separate, stable and independent.

The sensations of the breath continue to happen on their own without the direction of the conscious mind and continue on their own regardless of our attention to them.

(3) Mindful investigation is de-constructural in nature. It experientially takes apart and examines each of the many elements of an experience rather than focusing on the cumulative impression results from the element. For example, rather than putting attention on a “painful” sensation, the actual experience in the body of size, shape, depth, intensity, temperature, movement and continuous change are explored. This focus on elements, and the relationship between elements, depersonalizes the experience as long as this de-constructural, relationship, cause and effect focus is maintained.

(4) From the viewpoint of Buddhist psychology, the origin of all aversion based experiences can be traced back to one, or a combination of, of the Five Hindrances or Obstacles. They are (1) Desire; (2) Aversion (3) Sloth – low energy in and slowness of the body & Torpor – low energy in and slowness of the mind; (4) Restlessness – inability of the mind and body to settle and focus including worry and anxiety; and (5) Doubt & Uncertainty.

Each of the Five Hindrances or Obstacles has an “antidote” or “remedy” that can be used to (a) to help restore balance of the mind in a particular moment and (b) to transform and eventually abandon the reactive cause and effect process. An antidote becomes an obstacle in itself when it is used to cut off, stop, not experience or deny an aversive experience, rather than experience and understanding it deeply leading to liberating insight.

The antidotes are:

Hindrance

Desire
Aversion
Sloth & Torpor
Restlessness / Worry & Anxiety
Doubt & Uncertainty

Antidote

Investigation
Investigation & Metta
Investigation & Effort/Energy
Investigation & Concentration
Investigation, Faith

- (5) Joseph Goldstein in **Mindfulness – A Practical Guide to Awakening** summarizes the experiential approach the historical Buddha recommended for investigating the cause and effect and conditional nature of conditions that come together for form experiences:

Know when a particular state of mind is present and when it is absent;

Know the conditions leading to the arising and removal of the state of mind; and

Know the conditions that prevent future arising of the state of mind.

- (6) See “The Practice of Lovingkindness – Extending Kindness and Care to Ourselves and Others” by Dennis Warren at <http://sactoinsight.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/The-Practice-of-Lovingkindness-Extending-Kindness-and-Care-to-Ourselves-and-Others.pdf> .
- (7) See “The Practice of Compassion – The Heart’s Wise Response to Suffering” by Dennis Warren at <http://sactoinsight.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/The-Practice-of-Compassion-The-Hearts-Wise-Response-to-Suffering.pdf> .
- (8) See “Movement As Meditation – Part One and Part Two” by Dennis Warren at <http://sactoinsight.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Movement-As-Meditation-Part-One.pdf> and <http://sactoinsight.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Movement-As-Meditation-Part-Two.pdf> .
- (9) See **The Removal of Distracting Thoughts, The Vitakkasanthana Sutta**, The Middle Length Discourse of the Buddha, Majjhima Nikaya, Number 20

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