

Seven Points for Approaching Insight

v. 2.2 July 2025

In 2019, six Order Members met to discuss how to approach the wisdom teachings within our community. The issue in question was potentially misleading and counterproductive elements in the way Triratna teaches insight - at all levels. The meeting was held in Kings Cross, London, and was attended by Dhammarati, Saddhaloka, Lokesvara, the then Satyadhana, Aparimana and Padmayogini.

The MIG Group was formed as a follow up to this meeting, with the aspiration to identify where within our common literature we find unhelpful elements and suggest ways to present them more effectively.

This document is an attempt to summarize these points, as best we see them now, with seven key examples. These points are all teachings found within Triratna that in some way we feel misrepresent Buddhist wisdom – even though they may be valuable as part of an introduction to śīla, samādhī, or the Dharma generally.

In each, we show what we feel are the difficulties, then suggest alternative approaches. Each starts with a well-known phrase that in a general way encapsulates a teaching or a common view the reader will recognise. We note how each originated as a helpful response to a particular need. Then we point out what problems can arise when it is applied in relation to insight practice. We suggest some other ways forward and, where possible, give supportive quotes from Sangharakshita's writings.

Please note this document represents a fluid and ongoing discussion and therefore is considered a work-in-progress.

The current members of the MIG Group in 2025 are Padmayogini, Tejananda, Aparimana, Tejamitra, and Sunada.

1. No Higher Teaching, only deeper understanding

The intention behind this teaching

This first point is the primary one, of which the subsequent six are examples.

It is easy to take apparently simple teachings for granted, and to think that we need more advanced teachings to make progress. The truth is, as our practice deepens, we tend to find ever greater significance in teachings that we might have known for years.

How this presents difficulties for insight

The attitudes, worldviews, motivations, and teachings that best support śīla and samādhi are typically not the best for approaching prajna. When taken at face value, some teachings helpful for insight practice may contradict teachings oriented to ethics and concentration. This can present a barrier to insight.

A potentially more helpful approach

We are familiar with the idea that literalism is a problem, and that the Dharma is a raft. Building on these notions, we can say that there is no single worldview that applies equally well to all aspects of the path. It is necessary to work with different, even contradictory, worldviews at different times, without holding any of them as ultimate truth.

Subhuti's *Three Myths* (now expanded to Four) is a good exposition of the value and limitations of different worldviews.

2. Anatta as philosophical doctrine

The intention behind this teaching

In the absence of insight, most people will initially understand anatta intellectually or as a philosophical view. Many find this approach helpful as a first step.

How this presents difficulties for insight

The Buddha discouraged philosophical speculation and did not teach anatta as a philosophical view. He taught it as an observation that challenges a common everyday assumption.

A potentially more helpful approach

For insight practice to be effective, people need to be directed away from views and towards experience. We propose discussing anatta and the other laksanas in purely experiential terms, i.e. that nothing can be found in experience that is 'self', unchanging, or completely satisfying.

Sangharakshita Quotes:

"The Buddha maintained that there was no such entity [as atman] - and he did so by appealing to experience. He said that if you look within, at yourself, at your own mental life, you can account for everything you observe under just five headings [...] Nothing discovered in these categories can be observed to be permanent. There is nothing sovereign or ultimately blissful amongst them. [They] are anatman." ¹

3. There is no “fixed” self

The intention behind this teaching

This notion is comprehensible to beginners, and inspiring in that it says that one can change. The view of self as fixed is indeed a delusion that needs to be overcome. This approach avoids the risk of anatta appealing to self-hating people who like the idea of destroying their ‘self.’

How this presents difficulties for insight

This view does not go deep enough to break the first fetter because it supports the delusion that there is a self that can be developed. We need to challenge the idea that there is any self at all -- whether within or outside of the skandhas, regardless of whether this self is fixed or changeable.

A potentially more helpful approach

We propose using the traditional definitions of the first fetter. Point out that the path involves elimination of all conceits of ‘I am.’ Tackle nihilism on its own level, as an emotional issue, or by pointing out that there is no question of getting rid of a self, because there never was one there to begin with.

Sangharakshita Quotes:

“The ego [...] is not a thing, but a faulty interpretation. One is seeing something that just isn’t there [...] it never was, and it never will be. [...] And because it isn’t there, one can’t do anything with it - get rid of it, go beyond it, or whatever.” ²

"If the ego is shown to be an illusion, one's fears on its behalf are extinguished. You see that there is no one to lose anything, and so you have nothing to lose." ³

4. The Dharma is about seeing Reality

The intention behind this teaching

This is a very intuitive approach to the goal, which readily makes sense to beginners.

How this presents difficulties for insight

Teaching about ‘reality’ in this way can create the misconception that the commonsense world is an illusion. This can lead to an expectation that insight will reveal a hidden reality that will augment or replace ordinary experience. This is misleading and can lead to the pursuit of altered states that are believed to be ‘more real.’

The key to many insight practices is dropping the various delusions one adds on to experience. Practitioners who presuppose they must seek a 'hidden reality' will find it difficult to engage with insight practices in the right spirit.

A potentially more helpful approach

We propose treating the notion of discovering reality as a provisional teaching. Then shift attention to uprooting delusions, wrong views, and mistaken understandings. Point out that delusion creates additions to experience. It is not a veil behind which an undiscovered reality can be found.

Make it clear that 'consensus reality,' as well as all altered and 'higher' states, are equally just conditioned states. As the teaching of the Two Truths makes clear, such conditioned states are not 'unreal.' They have a consistent reality that checks out well enough in experience. But absolute truth is not 'experienced' in any conventional sense, since the construction of the seer and seen has dissolved.

Sangharakshita Quotes:

"The only way you can get to reality is by destroying your ideas about reality, however subtle, however sophisticated, however convincing they may be." ⁴

5. Insight arises through changes in behaviour

The intention behind this teaching

A foundation in ethics is indispensable, as is the accumulation of punya. Changes in behaviour are therefore crucial to the path as a whole, and as preparation for the path of insight.

How this presents difficulties for insight

Ethics and punya are necessary but not sufficient. Śīla needs work on the level of śīla. But insight needs a different kind of work, on the basis of śīla. If people believe that continual ethical purification is sufficient, they are likely to become discouraged over time, since years of practice may not yield true insight.

A potentially more helpful approach

Make it clear that śīla, samādhi, and prajna each need to be worked in different ways. They are three interrelated but separate strands of practice. Insight and enlightenment do not naturally follow from self-development. Prajna is a separate path with its own particular views and practices.

Sangharakshita Quotes:

“One cannot refine oneself out of the mundane world altogether; there always has to be something that is being refined [...] One has to make an existential leap” ... “on its own, without transcendental insight, samādhī cannot produce Enlightenment” ⁵

6. Tathagatagarbha is just a potential

The intention behind this teaching

At earlier stages of practice, there is a risk of conflating having Buddha nature with being already enlightened. This is a wrong view that could short-circuit the entire path.

How this presents difficulties for insight

For insight practice to deepen, it becomes essential to drop the duality between 'where I am' and 'where I am trying to get to.' Experientially, one needs to recognise that the unconditioned has always been present and cannot be attained. It is impossible to fully grasp this so long as the goal is always viewed as a distant potential rather than immanent.

A potentially more helpful approach

We propose emphasising that the unconditioned is already present. If the kleshas were inherent, enlightenment would be impossible. Explore Vajrasattva symbolism in this light. Clarify that recognising this is not the end of the path, but the start of a deeper kind of practice.

Sangharakshita Quotes:

"behind the five skandhas is Nirvana, which you can realise" ⁶

"If you really do see the conditioned-ness of the mind, the mind that sees that is a non-conditioned mind" ⁷

“According to the Mahayana - even according to at least a few verses in the Pali canon - there is a level - again, in metaphorical language - in the human being, of which we are not normally conscious, and with which we are not normally in contact. The Pali canon even speaks of the pure jñāna, which is obscured by adventitious defilements. Some Mahayana sutras speak of the Buddha-nature which is within and is covered over.” ⁸

7. Progress always requires working on yourself

The intention behind this teaching

This is a useful framework in the early stages of the path, particularly when addressing śīla and samādhi. It's particularly helpful in countering any tendency to assume that mere belief is sufficient.

How this presents difficulties for insight

More advanced practitioners need to understand that nonjudgmental, mindful, discerning awareness is a powerful liberative practice in its own right, not just a way to identify issues to work on.

A potentially more helpful approach

Awareness is revolutionary in its own right. Insight is not different from being aware of what is going on right now without bias. In the field of insight practice, simply bringing awareness to some area of experience can be enough to effect an avalanche of successive realization, as well as physical and energetic transfiguration.

Sangharakshita Quotes:

"If you really see yourself reacting, you cease to react. There has to be a real seeing, not just a theoretical, mental knowing. You can stop in any instant, as it were, stop your reactivity by seeing it, and you see how ridiculous and how absurd it is, and how unnecessary, and how you just go round and round in the same old circle. [...] the transcendental element comes in, as it were, automatically [...] It's instantaneous, in a sense, it's simultaneous, so 'he awakens to the non-phenomenal (that is to say 'the unconditioned') clinging to nothing within and seeking for nothing from without'" ⁹

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1. "The Texture of Reality", talk (1966), published in *What is the Dharma*, 1993,
 2. "Mind in Buddhist Psychology" seminar (1976), published *Know Your Mind*, 1993,
 3. "Precious Garland" seminar (1976), published in *Living Wisely: Further Advice from Nagarjuna's Precious Garland*, 2012,
 4. *Wisdom Beyond Words: Sense and Non-Sense in the Buddhist Prajnaparamita Tradition*, 1993, p 26.
 5. Both from "Mind in Buddhist Psychology" seminar (1976), published in *Know Your Mind*, 1993,
 6. "Sutra of 42 Sections" seminar, New Zealand, 1979
 7. *ibid*
 8. From the 1986 Study Group Leaders' Q&A on "Aspects of Buddhist Psychology", specifically "Depth Psychology of the Yogacara."
 9. "Sutra of 42 Sections" seminar, New Zealand (1979).