



Meditation Maps, Attainment Claims, and the Adversities of Mindfulness

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Abstract

A case study of the descriptions of the progress of Buddhist insight meditation provided by Daniel Ingram shows how a forceful form of mindfulness combined with high-speed mental noting can result in the construction of meditative experiences to accord with expectations created by maps of the progress of insight, culminating in claims to having reached levels of awakening. The potential impact of personal bias evident in this way reveals challenges faced by those researching meditative practices and cautions against overvaluing subjective reports by yogis. In particular, potentially adverse effects of mindfulness practices in the health care setting need to be placed into proper perspective, as the contention that even those who do not engage in deep and intensive insight meditation can suffer from repercussions potentially resulting from undergoing the insight knowledges is not accurate. Progress in research on mindfulness requires the sobriety of evaluating meditative experiences within their context, be it psychological, doctrinal, cultural, or social, in order to arrive at balanced assessments that avoid the two extremes of uncritical enthusiasm and exaggerated apprehensions.

Keywords Adversities of mindfulness · Arahant · Awakening · Daniel Ingram · Insight knowledges · Meditation maps · *vipassanā*

A point of convergence between early Buddhist thought and contemporary psychology is a recognition of the constructed nature of experience. In order to counter the mind's ingrained tendency to make experience conform to subjective biases and expectations, from the viewpoint of early Buddhist thought, the cultivation of "bare awareness" can offer substantial support (Anālayo 2019b). This requires in particular a non-interfering type of mindfulness.

Mindfulness as such can collaborate with a range of different mental factors and qualities. For this reason, it can also be employed in ways that rather lead to a construction of experience. This possibility can be conveniently illustrated with the help of a case study of the progress of insight meditation described in Ingram (2008/2018).

Historical Background

Before embarking on the actual case study, a brief look at four developments in the Theravāda tradition is required to set the historical background. The first of these four has its beginnings already during the period of the formation of the canonical Abhidharma collection and thus at a time not too far removed from early Buddhism. The development in question concerns a redefinition of mindfulness in the Theravāda tradition, involving a shift from a more openly receptive type of quality, described in the early discourses, to the idea that mindfulness is much rather a quality that plunges into its objects (Anālayo 2019a). This notion can invest the cultivation of mindfulness in some strands of Theravāda insight meditation with confrontational and at times even quite forceful nuances.

Another relevant development emerged subsequent to the closure of the canonical Abhidharma collections. This is the theory of momentariness, according to which anything will disappear as soon as it has arisen (von Rospatt 1995). This idea, held by a range of Buddhist traditions, acquired particular prominence in Theravāda conceptualizations of insight meditation. The spread of such insight meditation originated

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in the last century from attempts to inculcate Abhidharma ideology among Burmese lay people in order to counter the disintegrating influence of the British colonial rule and its Christian missionaries (Braun 2013).

The period subsequent to the closure of the canonical Abhidharma also saw the full evolution of the scheme of insight knowledges, presenting a map of a meditator's progress in liberating insight. This map basically builds on a progression through insight into the three characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not self, already found in the early discourses (Anālayo 2012). The scheme of insight knowledges gives particular prominence to the disappearance and dissolution of phenomena. Telling in this respect is the designation of fear and dread as one of these insight knowledges (Anālayo 2019c). Unsettling and even terrifying experiences can thereby easily come to be viewed as necessary ordeals to be endured in order to progress to awakening.

A notion of comparatively more recent origin concerns the so-called *vipassanā-jhānas*, “insight absorptions,” which refer to stages of insight meditation. The basic idea behind this usage appears to have had its origin in the last century in a polemic move by Mahāsi Sayādaw, a chief proponent of insight meditation. This usage seems to have been intended to counter criticism of the Mahāsi tradition's approach to insight meditation for not according importance to the cultivation of concentrative absorption (Anālayo 2020). The success of this polemic move appears to have triggered a widespread redefinition of the very notion of absorption in a such way that the term can be applied to states of relatively shallow concentration.

These four developments are to some degree interrelated. It seems fair to assume that understanding mindfulness as a plunging into the objects of the mind naturally relates to an interest in more precise maps of the progress of insight, rather than emphasizing that practitioners should just watch a natural unfolding.

The theory of momentariness would have led to an emphasis on the disappearance of phenomena and its result in arousing fear in the scheme of insight knowledges. The idea of the insight absorptions in turn would have supported a tendency to consider this scheme as an exhaustive account of the meditative cultivation required for progress to awakening.

The combined result of these four developments needs to be kept in mind as the background against which the case study unfolds.

The First Insight Knowledge

The description of insight meditation by Ingram (2008/2018), the case taken up for study in this article, gives considerable room to the scheme of the insight knowledges as an exhaustive account of progress to awakening. For the Theravāda

tradition in general, the authoritative exposition of the insight knowledges can be found in Buddhaghosa's fifth-century manual of meditation theory, the *Visuddhimagga*.

The first of the insight knowledges concerns the “knowledge of delimitating mind and matter” (*nāmarūpaparicchedañña*; literally “knowledge of name and form”), whose central purpose is to prepare the ground for the growth of insight by dismantling any notion of a substantial self or soul. Achieving this purpose requires first of all clearly discerning mental from physical aspects of subjective experience, and then apprehending their conditional interrelationship with the second of the insight knowledges. The *Visuddhimagga* illustrates the effect of the first insight knowledge of delimitating mind and matter with the example of understanding that a drum is different from the sound it produces:

It is just like sound that occurs in dependence on a drum being hit with a stick, the drum is one and the sound is another, the drum and the sound are not mixed together. In the same way, materiality is one and mentality is another, mentality and materiality are not mixed together.

(Vism 595: *yathā ca daṇḍābhihatam bherim nissāya sadde pavattamāne aññā bherī añño saddo, bherisaddā asamissā ... evam eva ... aññaṃ rūpaṃ aññaṃ nāmaṃ, nāmarūpā asamissā*).

Ingram (2008/2018, p. 198) considered this insight knowledge to be “a pleasant, clear, and unitive-feeling state.” Due to going through this first insight knowledge, “we may feel more alive and connected to the world. For some it may hit with unusual force, filling them with a great sense of unity or universal consciousness.”

Yet, the insight knowledge of delimitating mind and matter in the way described in the *Visuddhimagga* is about deconstructing the sense of compactness rather than establishing it. Another simile in the same work illustrates this insight knowledge with the example of cutting through something with a knife and thereby splitting it apart (Vism 593). It concerns a splitting up of experience in order to establish a clear-cut body-mind duality, by way of setting apart its mental and physical dimensions. This is the opposite of experiencing a great sense of unity.

The reversal in meaning evident in this way between the presentations by Daniel Ingram and the understanding of this particular insight knowledge in normative Theravāda meditation theory might have occurred due to the influence of the notion of insight absorptions. In fact, Ingram (p. 198) identified this insight knowledge with the first insight absorption, which he believes to be very close in nature to absorption attainment of the tranquility type. Overall, the scheme of

insight absorptions plays a considerable role in his presentation, evident from the following statement:

The vipassana jhana [insight absorption] model can really help people line up experiences across objects, traditions, and practitioners, as they get to the common ground of spiritual terrain in a more fundamental way than the ñanas [insight knowledges] may allow (p. 284).

Overall, his presentation appears to rely more on the insight absorptions than on the traditional account of the insight knowledges. Evidently unaware of the polemic origin of the notion of insight absorptions, Ingram (p. 147) attributed their detailed exposition to U Paṇḍita Sayādaw, a teacher in the tradition established by Mahāsi Sayādaw.

According to Ingram (p. 279), the basic idea of insight absorptions is already evident in the early discourses. His proposal relies in particular on a popular misinterpretation of the *Anupada-sutta* (MN 111). Briefly stated, the discourse describes contemplating the emerging, persisting, and disappearing of mental factors characteristic of an absorption. The popular interpretation holds that this reflects insight meditation, in the sense of contemplating the impermanent nature of mental factors while being immersed in a state of absorption. Yet, because being in an absorption requires the stable establishment of these factors, it is not possible for these to emerge or disappear while the absorption persists. Hence, contemplation of the emergence or disappearance of these factors can only take place either just before entering absorption or else immediately afterward (Anālayo 2017b). This was already clarified long ago by Vetter (1988, p. 69), who pointed out that “it is certainly not possible to observe ... the disappearance of these qualities in any of these states [i.e., the absorptions], because they are constituted by these qualities.”

Other Insight Knowledges

The knowledge of rise and fall (*udayabbayañāna*), another of the insight knowledges, involves a penetrative insight into impermanence. A central function of this insight is the arousing of dispassion. Examples for this pattern can be found already among the early discourses:

Monastics, cultivating and making much of the perception of impermanence removes all sensual lust.
(SN 22.102: *aniccasaññā, bhikkhave, bhāvitā bahulikatā sabbaṃ kāmarāgaṃ pariyādiyati*).

Cultivating and making much of the perception of impermanence enables removing all sensual craving.
(SĀ 270: 無常想修習, 多修習, 能斷一切欲愛).

According to Ingram (2008/2018, p. 208), however,

hypersexual ways of looking at the world and people are common in this territory. It is the stage most prone to creating vipassana romances ... heightened libido and increases in sexual ability may be noticed during this stage. Affairs with other meditators, teachers, and other types of people become more likely ... strong sensual or sexual dreams are also common at this stage.

In this way, according to Daniel Ingram’s description, this insight knowledge can even “increase the temptation to indulge in all manner of hedonistic delights, particularly substances and sex ... craving chocolate, wanting to go out and party, etc.” Yet, from a normative Theravāda perspective, the thrust of this insight knowledge is rather toward dispassion and disenchantment as a logical consequence of seeing with insight that everything is just made up of changing processes.

The *Visuddhimagga* explains that progress from rise and fall to the next insight knowledge of dissolution (*bhaṅgañāna*) takes place when a meditator’s “knowledge proceeds, having become keen,” such that “formations quickly become apparent” to the practitioner (Vism 640: *ñāṇam tikkhaṃ hutvā vattati, saṅkhārā lahuṃ upatṭhahanti*). This implies a stage of undistracted meditation. According to Ingram (2008/2018, p. 221), however, “a hallmark of dissolution is that it is suddenly hard to avoid getting lost in thought and fantasy when meditating.” This is clearly not what this stage of insight stands for in Theravāda meditation theory.

Witnessing the dissolution of formations then leads over to the insight knowledge of fear (*bhayañāna*), described in the following way by Buddhaghosa:

At this stage, what is called the knowledge of the appearance of fear arises to one who sees: “formations of the past have disappeared, those of the present are disappearing, and formations to come into being in the future will disappear in the same way.”

(Vism 645: *tassa atītā saṅkhārā niruddhā, paccuppannā nirujjhanti, anāgate nibbattanakasāṅkhārā pi evam eva nirujjhissantī ti passato etasmim thāne bhayatupaṭṭhānañāṇam nāma uppajjati*).

According to Ingram (2008/2018, p. 222), this insight knowledge can take the following form: “I had a friend that hit this stage on a retreat in Asia at a center that was not very accommodating of his vegetarianism. He began to imagine that he would suddenly die of starvation and so left the retreat. That is a very classic Fear stage behavior.” Yet, such apprehensions do not require the previous development of insight

meditation and can happen to anyone facing a situation of food supplies inadequate to what are perceived to be one's personal needs.

The peak of the progress in insight comes with knowledge of equanimity toward formations (*sañkhārupekkhāñāṇa*). According to the *Visuddhimagga*,

The insight of this clansman who has now arrived at equanimity toward formations in this way has reached the peak and leads to emergence.

(Vism 661: *evam adhigatasañkhārupekkhassa pana imassa kulaputtassa vipassanā sikhāppattā vuttānagāminī hoti*).

The whole development of insight reaches a culmination in this knowledge, which can lead over to the breakthrough to awakening, here referred to as “emergence.” Yet, according to Ingram (2008/2018, p. 245), “high equanimity can happen in many unexpected situations, such as ... just doing ordinary things like watching TV.”

This suggestion continues a tendency to conflate deep meditative insight with daily life situations, already evident in the instances surveyed above. In relation to the first three insight knowledges, for example, Ingram (p. 198) suggested that “the first three stages in particular commonly arise during daily life, as plenty of activities in daily life cultivate factors such as precise attention and concentration that are sufficient to generate these insights.” Such conflation shows the degree to which the proposed ideas differ from the traditional understanding of the insight knowledges, which are products of deep meditation in intensive retreat conditions, not something that happens when watching TV.

The Dark Night

The tendency to extract the insight knowledges from their original setting in Theravāda insight meditation is also evident in the assertion by Ingram (p. 195) that “St. John of the Cross' *Dark Night of the Soul* does a good job of dealing with the most difficult of the insight stages.” In other words, the description offered by the famous Carmelite mystic is seen as corresponding to the progress of insight in Theravāda meditation.

Perusal of St. John's writing shows that he uses the expression “dark night” to designate a purgatory-like period imposed by God on a Christian contemplative, felt subjectively by the latter as a complete disruption of the inner connection established with God previously. The onset of this type of dark night can manifest in the loss of all the inspiration or joy earlier experienced when engaging in spiritual practices like prayer. All of these have suddenly become insipid and appear

meaningless. St. John described the predicament of those who undergo the dark night as follows (*Dark Night* I.8.3):

Not only do they not find satisfaction and pleasure in the spiritual things and good exercises in which they used to find their delight and pleasures, but instead of that and to the contrary, they find the said things distasteful and bitter. Because, as said earlier, God already feels that they have now grown up a bit; he weans them from his sweet chest and puts them down from his arms, in order to strengthen them so that they leave the swaddling cloth, and teaches them to walk on their own feet. (Silverio de Santa Teresa 1931, p. 375: *no sólo no hallan jugo y gusto en las cosas espirituales y buenos ejercicios en que solían ellos hallar sus deleites y gustos, más en lugar de esto hallan por el contrario sinsabor y amargura en las dichas cosas; porque, como he dicho, sintiéndolas ya Dios aquí algo crecidillos, para que se fortalezcan y salgan de mantillas los desarrima del dulce pecho, y abajándolos de sus brazos, los veza a andar por sus pies*; the translation is based on following a suggestion by the editor to understand *veza* here as conveying the sense *enseña*).

The idea of walking on one's own feet does not intend to convey that the Christian contemplative should now become active. In fact, St. John emphasized that there is no agency at all on the side of the soul in the dark night (*Dark Night* II.8.1):

God is the one who here goes about passively doing work in the soul, wherefore [the soul] cannot do anything. (Silverio de Santa Teresa 1931, p. 419: *Dios es el que anda aquí haciendo pasivamente la obra en el alma; por eso ella no puede nada*).

This is the case to such an extent that a soul undergoing the dark night is bereft of understanding, memory, and will power, thereby left with only faith to rely on (*Dark Night* II.4.1):

In poverty and abandonment, separated from all the understandings of my soul, that is, in the darkness of my intellect, the distress of my will, and the affliction and anguish as regards my memory, I was left in the darkness of pure faith. (Silverio de Santa Teresa 1931, p. 405: *en pobreza, desamparo y desarrimo de todas las aprensiones de mi alma, esto es, en oscuridad de mi entendimiento y*

aprieto de mi voluntad, en aflicción y angustia acera de la memoria, dejándome a oscuras en pura fe).

This is different from progress through the insight knowledges, which do not accord a role to God and require intellect, will, and memory rather than being based on faith only. Already the onset of such progress requires deconstructing the notion of a permanent soul, whose non-existence is confirmed with the arrival at stream entry. This prevents simply equating the path of contemplation taught by St. John with the scheme of insight knowledges taught by Buddhaghosa.

A comparison of the contemplative paths described by St. John and Buddhaghosa does indeed reveal at times substantial differences (Feldmeier 2006). Needless to say, similarities are of course also evident, in particular in relation to morality and also in regard to the cultivation of concentration (Harris 2018). This much equally holds for the closely related works of St. Teresa of Ávila (Cousins 1995; Millet 2019). But the cultivation of insight in the way described in Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* is substantially different from the path descriptions offered by Carmelite mystics.

In fact, even the promotion by Meadow et al. (1994/2007) of Theravāda insight meditation as appropriate for Christian practitioners wishing to follow the path of St. John of the Cross, an idea involving an overstating of similarities and a disregarding of differences, does not go so far as to suggest that the insight knowledges are inherently part of St. John's path. Such a position is too divergent from his actual writings to be seriously upheld.

St. John's Dark Night is not only a misfit for the traditional scheme of insight knowledges but also for Daniel Ingram's version of the progress of insight, as a state of being hypersexed has no place at all in St. John's writing. Yet, Ingram (2008/2018, p. 211) considered St. John to be of such central relevance to his purposes that he employed the term "dark night" for the more challenging insight knowledges as "what is called the 'Knowledges of Suffering' or 'The Dark Night of the Soul' (to use St. John of the Cross's terminology, which has such a nice ring to it)."

The reference to using St. John's terminology is of further interest, as the expression "dark night of the soul" does not occur at all in any of his works. It is only after his death that, in the process of editing his writings, chapter headings and brief chapter summaries were introduced. In the context of this editorial undertaking, the header for the first chapter of the second book of the Dark Night received the title "dark night of the spirit" (*la noche oscura del espíritu*). This expression would have provided the starting point for the popular usage of the term "dark night of the soul," the absence of which in the actual writings of St. John naturally strikes anyone who actually reads his works. This in itself rather minor point shows that Daniel Ingram's assertions about St. John are not based on an actual acquaintance with the latter's writings. In

other words, Daniel Ingram here seems to be quite ready to make confident assertions that on inspection turn out to be spurious.

Stream Entry

Another dimension of the same tendency to make bold claims that do not hold up on closer scrutiny emerges with Daniel Ingram's contention to have himself reached all the levels of awakening recognized in early Buddhist and Theravāda doctrine. In line with his tendency to conflate deep meditative experiences with daily life, Ingram (p. 444) presented the following account of his own experience of the insight knowledge of rise and fall when, as a child and being asleep, he had the following dream:

Far down the road appeared a cloud of grey dust, and suddenly emerging from that dust cloud was a huge black horse ridden by a huge witch dressed in black. She pulled out a wand and pointed it at us, and a blinding bolt of white light flew from the wand and my entire world exploded into fragments flying around the room where I had been sleeping.

In this way, a child's nightmare becomes an insight knowledge and thereby fulfills the necessary preparatory function for the eventual attainment of stream entry, the first of the four levels of awakening. Other insight knowledges receive a similar treatment. The second knowledge of discerning causality (*paccayapariggahañāna*), for example, supposedly arose when having jerky steps while hiking as a boy scout, and the insight knowledge of comprehension (*sammāsanañāna*) manifested with tense shoulders due to the strain of the long hike. The correlations established in this way provide another opportunity for unwarranted generalizations, in this case by way of being related to the experience of soldiers during long marches. This generalization then leads to the odd query of "how much of PTSD-related [post-traumatic stress disorder] disability and suicides are in some ways related to Dark Night territory."

With progress through the insight knowledges already accounted for through childhood experiences, Ingram (p. 472) then offered the following account of his stream entry:

There was this little, vivid, fantasy-like daydream that showed up as I just sat there doing basically nothing. In it, I was imagining that there was this gerbil on a gerbil wheel, and that this gerbil was both a meditator trying to get somewhere and yet also God, and yet God was watching the gerbil that was God. Suddenly, the gerbil-God and the Big God who just happened to be

what seemed to be subject looked at each other, they recognized in this instant they were the same thing, or that their awareness was the same, and in that moment the “observing” side collapsed totally into the eyes of the little God-gerbil (specifically, the no-self door, which you probably already guessed), everything vanished, everything reappeared, and then the after-shocks following stream entry started coming.

Once again, a dream comes to be viewed as a deep meditative attainment. The repercussions of this attainment then took the following form: “the most barking crazy I ever felt during my whole practice history was during the three or so hours ... after my first Fruition [i.e. experience of stream entry], though luckily from the outset I just looked pissed off” (p. 273). Not only that, but “after stream entry I was a totally arrogant and possibly insufferable brat for a few months” (p. 277). In this way, “for the next few weeks, I, the great stream enterer, managed to alienate almost every individual who had the misfortune to speak with me for any length of time” (p. 475).

The meditation teacher referred to by Daniel Ingram repeatedly in his book, apparently considered by him to be the central authority for his approach to insight meditation, refused to accept his claim to have reached the first level of awakening, as he “believed that I was completely delusional” (p. 478).

Awakening and Freedom from Defilements

Undeterred by the lack of recognition by this and also by other teachers, Daniel Ingram kept viewing himself as progressing further and further along the path to full awakening. In relation to reaching the third level of awakening, with which according to the traditional account one becomes a non-returner (*anāgāmin*), a problem manifested: “the theory says that anagamis feel no lust, but I certainly felt lust ... that anagamis are unable to become angry, but I could” (p. 490). Faced with this problem, Daniel Ingram went in search of teachings that could better accommodate his subjective beliefs: “I started reading more books, poring through them to get a sense of ‘where I was’” (p. 490). Eventually:

Vajrayana teachings ... had the profound effect of largely liberating me from the ideals related to eliminating the negative emotions ... my ideals based on the Theravada had been largely shattered by that point, as their traditional models simply did not line up well enough with my experience anymore to make any sense to me (p. 495).

Daniel Ingram is of course perfectly free to adopt Vajrayāna teachings. But such teachings are the result of a historical development during which the aim of practice

shifted from the goal of becoming an arahant to the aspiration to become a Buddha. Therefore, these teaching cannot be used to authenticate Theravāda stages of awakening. Yet, Daniel Ingram titled his book “mastering the core teachings of the Buddha” and introduced himself on its cover as “the arahant Daniel M. Ingram.” The eradication of defilements is the core teaching of the Buddha, and the Pāli term “arahant” designates those who have accomplished such eradication. This is the case to such an extent that the discourses identify Nirvana and the arahant with complete freedom from defilements:

“Friend Sāriputta, one speaks of ‘Nirvana,’ ‘Nirvana.’ Friend, now what is Nirvana?” [Sāriputta replied]: “Friend, the eradication of lust, the eradication of anger, and the eradication of delusion: this is called Nirvana.” (SN 38.1: *nibbānaṃ, nibbānaṃ ti, āvuso sāriputta, vuccati. katamaṃ nu kho, āvuso, nibbānaṃ ti? yo kho, āvuso, rāgakkhayaṃ dosakkhayaṃ mohakkhayaṃ, idaṃ vuccati nibbānaṃ ti*).

“Regarding Nirvana, what is Nirvana?” Sāriputta said: “Nirvana is the complete eradication of sensual lust, the complete eradication of anger, the complete eradication of delusion, and the complete eradication of all vexations: this is called Nirvana.

(SĀ 490: 謂涅槃者，云何為涅槃？舍利弗言：涅槃者，貪欲永盡，瞋恚永盡，愚癡永盡，一切諸煩惱永盡，是名涅槃。)

This leads on to the related question about what makes one an arahant, which receives precisely the same answer, in that it is the complete extinction of lust, hate, and delusion that makes one an arahant.

Friend, the eradication of lust, the eradication of anger, and the eradication of delusion: this is called the state of being an arahant.

(SN 38.2: *yo kho, āvuso, rāgakkhayaṃ dosakkhayaṃ mohakkhayaṃ, idaṃ vuccati arahattaṃ ti*; whereas the Pāli collection has this as a subsequent discourse, in the Chinese collection the same material is organized as a single discourse).

Sensual lust having been removed without remainder, anger and delusion having been removed without remainder: this is called being an arahant.

(SĀ 490: 貪欲已斷無餘，瞋恚，愚癡已斷無餘，是名阿羅漢。)

Rather than considering that his assessment of his own progress could be mistaken, Ingram (2008/2018, p. 332) arrived at the following assessment of Theravāda (and early Buddhist) doctrine:

Its maps of enlightenment still contain a hefty helping of scary market-driven propaganda and so much garbage that is life-denying, dangerously out of touch with what happens, and an impediment to practice for millions of people. That the enlightened lineage holders of the modern Theravada and their ex-monk and ex-nun Western counterparts do not have the guts to stand up and say, “We are deeply sorry that for 2,500 years, many of our predecessors perpetuated this craziness to put food in their bowls and fool ignorant peasants so that they might be supported in their other useful work, and we vow to do better!” is a crying shame.

In this way, the cognitive dissonance of evidence contrary to his belief in his own superior status triggers derogatory comments and deprecating insinuations. The impact of a complete reliance on his own subjective beliefs, to the extent of assuming that those who disagree must just be dishonest, is similarly evident in other statements:

The traditional Theravada models contain numerous statements that are simply wrong about what an awakened being cannot do or will do. My favorite examples of this include statements that arahants cannot break the precepts (including killing, lying, stealing, having sex, doing drugs, or drinking), cannot become sexually aroused ... Needless to say, all are simply absurd lies (p. 356).

There are those who are “technically” awakened, who nonetheless can appear exceedingly ordinary, seem to be of distinctly questionable character, disposition, and moral virtue, or seem sometimes downright debauched, nasty, and insufferable (p. 358).

When some old monk with pudendal nerve damage (from extensive sitting), low testosterone, neuropathy from diabetes due to a rice-heavy diet with little exercise, and pudendal vascular disease finally cannot get an erection anymore, does that mean that all awakened men cannot get erections (p. 377)?

The early discourses are quite explicit about the inability of male and female arahants to engage in sexual intercourse, due to the degree of mental purity reached and not related to any physical disability. It would hardly have made sense for the Buddha to found a monastic order if celibacy was not considered a central aspect of the path to the final goal, let alone of having reached that goal. The inability of arahants to engage in sex is quite explicitly stated in the following passages:

A monastic who is an arahant, with influxes eradicated, is incapable of engaging in sexual intercourse. (DN 29: *abhabbo khīṇāsavo bhikkhu methunaṃ dhammaṃ paṭisevituṃ*).

A monastic who is an arahant, with influxes eradicated, is incapable ... of not being celibate and engaging in sexual intercourse. (DiSimone 2020, p. 212: *abh(av)yo ’rhadbhikṣuḥ kṣīṇāsravaḥ ... abrahmacaryaṃ maithunaṃ dharmam pratisevituṃ*).

A monastic who has eradicated the influxes and is an arahant ... does not engage in sexual intercourse. (DĀ 17: 比丘漏盡阿羅漢 ... 不婬).

The apparent impact of cognitive dissonance also seems to have led Ingram (2008/2018, p. 413) to envision his own position as a justified revision of harmful ideas:

Models of realization that involve high ideals of human perfection have caused so much dejection, despair, and misguided efforts throughout the ages that I have no qualms about doing my best to try to smash them to pieces on the sharp rocks of reality.

Yet, the true rocks of reality are rather to be found in awareness of the presence of defilements in one’s own mind. Such awareness can serve to demolish unfounded claims to having become an arahant. It is the decoupling of the final goal from freedom from defilements that is harmful, as this can indeed cause much dejection and despair, something fairly evident whenever this has happened.

For someone who has evidently not reached a level of awakening himself to disbelieve the possibility of reaching awakening is in itself not surprising. A simile from the discourses illustrates such confusion with the example of congenitally blind persons who claim that there cannot be any colors as they have never seen any (DN 23, DĀ 7, MĀ 71, T 45; Anālayo 2017a, p. 306). But to go to the extreme of vituperation against the very notion of awakening as involving a purification of the mind is rather remarkable.

Construction of Meditative Experience

The insight meditation practice leading to the claims surveyed above consists basically of noting sensations, which according to Ingram (2008/2018, p. 45) “should be as consistent and continuous as possible, perhaps one to five times per second.”

Such high-speed noting is based on the conception of mindfulness as plunging into its objects, mentioned at the outset of this article. Ingram (p. 48) illustrated the nature of such mindfulness with the example of shooting aliens in a video game.

The impact of the tendency to construct meditative experience becomes evident in the report that he “spent hundreds of hours of practice time over a few years doing what I call slam-shifting *ñanas* and *jhanas*” (p. 481), in the sense that he would train himself to call up at will any of the experiences considered by him to be insight knowledges or insight absorptions. Ingram (p. 483) proclaimed that to do so “shows rare meditative competence,” in fact, “those who can do this are the true supertasters of the meditation world.” Particularly telling is his conclusion that “one of the remarkable things about this sort of training is realizing that any mind state or perceptual mode we find ourselves in is rapidly modifiable to something else by the mere inclination to do so.”

This helps explain in what way his meditation practice would have resulted in the mistaken claims surveyed above. Fast noting can easily proceed from noting what has just appeared, to what is just appearing, to what is just about to appear, to what one expects to be just about to appear. From this point onward, the act of noting can actually serve to create experience, even without the practitioner consciously noting that (pun intended). Combined with an aggressive type of mindfulness that is comparable with shooting aliens, such practice can turn into a construction of meditative experiences rather than being an insightful observation of what happens naturally. Due to the mind being so busy noting in quick succession, the construction of meditative experience to conform to supposed insight knowledges and even levels of awakening will not be noticed. Having trained oneself to create these experiences during formal meditation, the same easily continues during daily life. This explains the idea that the insight knowledges can be experienced in any situation, even when watching tv.

In this way, Daniel Ingram appears to have been misled by the idea of insight absorptions into creating for himself an inaccurate map of the insight knowledges, which in turn has served as a script for his meditation practice. He seems to have successfully trained himself in enacting the stages of his own model in practice, learning to cycle through the series until reaching a “drop out” experience of some kind, which is then conceptualized as either being a re-experience of a level of awakening already attained or else the realization of the next level. The degree of inner dissociation that can result from employing the noting technique confirms the subjective impression of having reached deep realization. At the same time, due to the constructed and ultimately fictitious nature of the resultant meditation experiences, genuine and lasting transformation does not take place. As the roots of defilement are left intact in the mind, the conceit of having reached deep

realizations leads to dismissing the truly liberating dimensions of Buddhist insight meditation. The meditative experiences constructed with the help of a self-made map serve as sufficient grounds to discard the entire insight tradition from early to contemporary Buddhism as fundamentally mistaken in their affirmation that defilements can be eradicated, to the extent of representing himself as one who smashes dishonest and harmful claims on the rocks of reality.

Meditation Maps

Central in this trajectory is an excessive concern with meditation maps. Ingram (p. 272) described the key characteristics of his own practice in this way: “I poured massive amounts of energy into practice ... and care incredibly much about the maps.” In the case of his supposed stream entry, such incredible caring appears to have been largely responsible for the negative repercussions he experienced. According to his own account, the teacher Christopher Titmuss recommended he let things settle, but “instead of listening to Christopher, I listened to the map-side of the available advice ... I powered myself deep into some amazing territory, and then trouble visited” (p. 473). Eventually, however, “I had the good fortune to get an interview with Joseph Goldstein. He said very little but did give me the excellent advice, ‘Nail down what you’ve got.’ Within a few weeks of relaxing and letting things settle” he was able to get on with his life (p. 476). Judging from the descriptions given, both Joseph Goldstein and Christopher Titmuss apparently wanted to help Daniel Ingram to cool down. His initial unwillingness to do so is in line with what he admits to be a recurrent pattern of resistance to teachers’ advice, when “map fixation prevented me from being able to hear or heed their wise words” (p. 491).

Although his own descriptions give the impression that the difficulties he experienced were of his own making, in line with a tendency already evident in some of the material surveyed above, he blamed others: “despite my continued contact with senior meditation teachers, no one was willing to lay out the practical information that I needed desperately and which I present here” (p. 475). “Was I bitter? You bet I was. Am I still? Yeah, probably” (p. 476).

In other words, from his viewpoint, the problem is not his excessive concern with maps. Instead, the problem is that he had not been given sufficiently detailed maps. Hence, he set out to provide as detailed a map as possible for others, ignoring the fact that providing such a map can easily lead others into the same trap into which he had maneuvered himself. The solution is not found in maps, but in seeing through the tendency to mistake maps for being reality.

The construction of meditative experience in accordance with maps is also evident in his report of how he attained the four absorptions and four immaterial attainments:

I wanted to see what the jhanas [absorptions] were like. During one sit I resolved to have the jhanas present themselves, and sure enough, one after the other, all eight jhanas presented, easily, nearly effortlessly, each shifting after a few minutes to the next one (p. 473).

The early discourses present absorption attainment as something requiring a high level of meditative expertise, to the extent that the Buddha himself underwent a sustained meditative struggle in order to master just the first absorption (Anālayo 2017b, 2019d, 2020). Clearly, the above description cannot be referring to genuine absorption attainment of the type described in the early discourses.

In line with a tendency to generalize his subjective beliefs, Ingram (2008/2018, p. 194) came to see his maps as enshrining universal truths: “the maps are describing basic human development. These stages are not Buddhist, but universal.” In the case of the insight knowledge of delimitating mind and matter, for example, according to his assessment, “it is this early insight that provides the benefits of some of the shallow-end-of-the-pool techniques, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)” (p. 198). Moreover, the insight knowledge of rise and fall “can happen off-retreat in daily life, spontaneously, without warning, in people who don’t think of themselves as meditators, and even in dreams and to young children” (p. 203). The reference to dreams and children apparently serves to authenticate his own personal childhood experiences. Ingram (p. 209) further asserted:

I have many friends, family members, and acquaintances who ran into these stages without formal training and in daily life. I know others who ran into them when doing hallucinogens ... others had them happen during yoga or tai chi practice.

These assertions lack a grounding in reality and appear to be simply the result of the author being misled by his own obsession with maps into constructing fictitious meditative attainments and then needing to find ways to authenticate them.

Daniel Ingram is of course free to call any experience he has by whatever name he wishes, be this an insight knowledge or a level of awakening. The point is only that the conclusions he presents pertain entirely to the realm of his own imagination; they have no value outside of it. The main problem here is that his rather strong claims are unfortunately taken seriously by some scholars and practitioners.

Universalist Claims

Based on his reasoning surveyed above, Ingram (p. 218) made the following assertions:

I rarely pull out the physician card in this meditation business, but I am pulling it now and throwing it down hard on the table. As a physician and trained scientist, I know as undeniable fact that the cycles of insight are an innate part of human development, occur on a broad scale, and cause profound physiological and psychological effects in significant numbers of people.

This assessment relates to the following:

I dream that one day chiropractors, physiatrists, physicians, mid-level practitioners, and physical, occupational, and massage therapists will all be taught these stages in school so that they can recognize them and help people cultivate some of the internal techniques that can help (p. 201).

I imagine that one day there will be training on the maps and basic generic, non-sectarian attentional, contemplative, and meditative development in elementary school, just as we learn about biology and math, such that it would be just another ordinary, accepted, standard part of human educational curricula. Then, everyone would know these stages for the ordinary, natural, human thing they are (p. 217).

In line with a propensity to blame others, already evident in passages surveyed above, are the following statements:

I must say that not telling practitioners about this territory from the beginning to give them a heads-up as to what might happen is so extremely irresponsible and negligent that I just want to spit and scream at those who perpetuate this warped culture of secrecy (p. 296). It seems only fair to have the same standards that we apply with such pronounced zeal and fervent litigation to drug companies and doctors also apply to meditation teachers and dharma books ... in the spirit of professionalism, I call on others who promote the dharma to immediately adopt a similarly high standard of open disclosure (p. 297).

The insight knowledges are described in considerable detail in the chief manual of Theravāda meditation already mentioned above, the *Visuddhimagga* by Buddhaghosa (translated by Ñāṇamoli 1991), and are similarly covered in a substantially later compendium, the *Abhidhammatthasāṅgaha* (translated by Bodhi 1993). They are explained in expositions

of insight meditation by Mahāsi (1971) and Ñāṇārāma (1983). Right at the outset of research into Buddhist meditation, attention was drawn to the insight knowledges by Kornfield (1979), followed by discussions by in Brown and Engler (1980) and Epstein and Lieff (1981). Instead of a culture of secrecy, information on the insight knowledges and their repercussions has been made available. The only new element is Daniel Ingram's misinterpretation of the insight knowledges, leading to a detailed map that stands good chances to do more harm than good.

In fact, the idea that these stages are secret lore does not concord particularly well with Daniel Ingram's own claim that they are universal human experiences that anyone can have in daily life without even having meditated. If that had indeed been the case, it would hardly have been possible to keep them secret until now.

Adversities of Mindfulness

Although a good acquaintance with Buddhist doctrine would prevent a reader from taking Daniel Ingram's description seriously, the same does not necessarily hold for those trained in psychology. Given his "pulling out the physician card" as a way of presenting his credentials as a physician, it is perhaps not surprising that his claims have been taken up by other scholars in the field. For example, Tart (2010, p. 30) approvingly reproduced Ingram's "model of Buddhist Enlightenment" as if this was based on a reliable and sound analysis. Simpson (2017, p. 59) reported that "Ingram cites examples of 'people with decades of practice' who 'went out of their way to cause other people suffering quite intentionally,'" thereby endorsing, at least implicitly, Daniel Ingram's dismissal of the ethical transformation that takes place with genuine practice. Barford (2018) in turn offered the following assessment:

The negative effects of meditation are becoming more widely acknowledged within the meditation community. Daniel Ingram, a medical doctor and meditation teacher, was asked what in particular he thought meditation teachers were doing wrong. His reply was that they needed to warn novice meditators about the risks, provide more support and make these difficulties more widely known: "I wish it was taught in medical school and counsellors received training in this," he said.

Similar notions, although without explicit reference to Daniel Ingram, can be seen when Grabovac (2015, p. 590) reasoned that "some MBI participants may practice in a manner that is very close to traditional vipassana practice," and when Compson (2018, p. 1366) proposed that "the process of

meditative insight occurs whether one is practicing in a Buddhist framework or not."

Such assessments, although understandable in view of the precedent set by Daniel Ingram, are mistaken. A Christian mystic on the way to union with God, an insight meditator on the path to stream entry, and an MBSR student aiming at stress reduction and improved life quality should not be indiscriminately mixed up with each other. The Dark Night described by St. John is relevant to a Christian mystic and not to the cultivation of insight or a course in MBSR. The insight knowledges described by Buddhaghosa are relevant to a *vipassanā* meditator and not to a Christian mystic or a practitioner of MBSR, as neither involve the challenges that can arise in the Theravāda path of insight aimed at stream entry. In spite of some overlap, these three are doing distinct practices with different outcomes. For this reason, it is misleading if effects that might occur during deep insight meditation retreats are conflated with potential repercussions of daily life practice of MBSR and similar programs.

The findings presented here are not meant to discourage research on adversities of meditation practices (which can easily result from the construction of detailed but mistaken maps and consequent reliance on these as a script for meditation practice). In general terms, as rightly pointed out by Lutkajtis (2018, p. 210), "the view of meditation as a panacea and a relaxation technique may also lead to the underreporting of adverse effects by meditators whose experiences do not match the perceived ideal outcomes." To complement this presentation, however, it also needs to be noted that the impact of the type of agenda evident in the writings of Daniel Ingram could have a similar effect in the opposite direction, in the sense that promoting the view that meditation is inherently dangerous and even simple mindfulness practices are fraught with severe risks. Such ideas could lead to encouraging an overreporting of adverse effects by practitioners. In the end, all this points to the need to base assessments, be these positive or negative, on sound academic research rather than on unsubstantiated claims.

The alleged dangers of mindfulness have been taken up quickly and willingly, showing a sensitivity in the field to potential draw backs. For such sensitivity to lead to reasonable and trustworthy outcomes, however, there is also a need for researchers in psychology to have a good knowledge of Buddhist doctrine and practice in order to avoid being misled by unfounded claims.

The impact of subjectivity in leading to substantially distorted descriptions of meditation experiences is more than evident from the above case study. This implies that subjective reports by meditators need to be contextualized by taking into account their personal and meditative history as well as by consulting the meditation teachers and style of meditation practice involved. Otherwise, the resultant situation would be similar to a researcher without medical training who

collects subjective reports of patients disgruntled with the medical treatment they received, without examining their medical history and without consulting the doctors and nurses involved in the case and, based on that, then issues warnings to the public about the dangers of going to a doctor or hospital when one is sick.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval This article does not contain any studies performed by the author with human participants or animals.

Abbreviations DĀ, *Dīrgha-āgama* (T 1); DN, *Dīgha-nikāya*; MĀ, *Madhyama-āgama* (T 26); MN, *Majjhima-nikāya*; SĀ, *Samyukta-āgama* (T 99); SN, *Samyutta-nikāya*; T, Taishō edition; Vism, *Visuddhimagga*

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