

Cognition in Sunyata meditation

This article is an introductory summary of the teachings of Zen Master Thích Thông Triệt on the topic, mainly based on the oral teaching of Bhikkhuni Zen Master Thích Nữ Triệt Như given for the Intermediate Meditation Course Level 1. For a comprehensive in-depth understanding, the reader is encouraged to attend the complete nine-seminar teaching program and read the writings of Master Thích Thông Triệt that are being progressively translated into English.

Summary

Master Thích Thông Triệt considers developing cognitive awareness as the only pathway that helps the meditation practitioner internalize the key abstract themes of Buddhism such as suchness, emptiness and illusion, as well as attain the highest levels of samādhi meditation. Cognitive awareness is the key that will help us unlock our reservoir of spiritual wisdom.

Definitions

We define “cognition” of a subject as knowing the subject very clearly, completely, through learning, through experiencing, with or without involving the senses, through emotions, consciousness or intuition. To gain cognition of a subject, we need to study it, understand it, repeatedly practice it and draw experiences and lessons from the practice. When we have gained cognition of a subject, we can present it very clearly and apply it with good results.

“Cognition” is not the same as “knowing” as it goes to greater depth and involves learning, memorizing, practicing, experiencing and the ability to present. On the other hand, “knowing” is primary, innate, does not involve learning, does not require practice and does not involve the urge to report or present.

With cognition, what we have experienced and learned about the object has been sifted, organized and stored in memory so that it can be retrieved rapidly without the need for lengthy thinking or examination.

Cognition through the Worldly Mind

From a meditation perspective, we need to differentiate between cognition through the worldly mind and cognition through the holy mind.

Cognition by the worldly mind is obtained through the thinking mind, intellect and consciousness. Cognition gained through the thinking mind can be called thinking cognition. This occurs, for example, when we know a subject very well through past experience. Cognition gained through the intellect can be called reasoning cognition. This occurs, for example, when we make predictions, which may or may not turn out to be accurate. Cognition gained through consciousness can be called differentiating cognition. This occurs, for example, when we know readily how to identify each flower in a bunch. Another form of cognition through the worldly mind is instinctive cognition, which is cognition gained through our instincts such as our survival instinct, our self-defence instinct or our sexual instinct. Humans also possess an empathy instinct, such as when we rush to assist someone who is in danger. Another form of cognition by the worldly mind is habitual cognition. An example is the ability to ride a bicycle, which is something that we can perform automatically without thinking as we have internalised the movements required to keep the bicycle in balance. Habitual cognition is similar to instinctive cognition.

In terms of location inside the brain, thinking cognition, reasoning cognition and differentiating cognition are located in the pre-frontal cortex just as are the thinking mind, intellect and consciousness. Instinctive cognition and habitual cognition are located in the insula, an area that is part of the limbic system.

The forms of cognition that are gained through the thinking mind, intellect and consciousness, like these functions, are based on language. Underneath worldly mind cognition are the ego and the mass of mental defilements, old habits, fetters and underlying tendencies. This is why this cognition is often distorted by biases, fixed opinions and prejudices. It also generates karma. By using worldly mind cognition, we can achieve some happiness, however this happiness tends to be short-lived, and we continue to be washed along by the endless cycle of births and deaths through the six realms of existence.

Despite its limitations, a wholesome worldly mind cognition is still the foundation of a purified mind. Without a correct perspective on life, we can easily be influenced by our passions, desires and emotions. We can easily fall into the trap of following our instincts, emotions, subjective views or society’s conventions. Unwholesome instincts such as our sexual instincts, self-defence instincts or survival instincts have then a fertile ground to grow. We then disregard morality and the law, and when we see an attractive object we can be swayed by greed, envy, lust, attachment, stubbornness and subjectivity into wanting to possess the object, to force the object to follow our will. Sorrow, greed, anger and evil will appear

in the mind and translate outwardly into deeds.

When we study and practice what the Buddha teaches, our Intellect becomes awakened to spirituality even though this process still involves language. Our perspective of life starts to change. We will experience less sorrow and start to generate good new karma and change the old karma. With the awakened Intellect, we can develop right perspective and right thoughts even though we are still in the domain of cognition with language.

Cognition through the Holy Mind

Cognition gained through the holy mind is developed through the activity of ultimate hearing, ultimate seeing and ultimate touch. When these three functions are repeatedly activated, the experience gained is stored in ultimate cognition. Holy mind cognition is a wordless cognition that is devoid of influence from instincts, thinking, reasoning and differentiating. It is a characteristic of people who have entered the holy stream. Cognition at this level is a wordless cognition that still involves the senses as it is formed through reaction to the senses.

At a higher level is wordless cognition without involvement of the senses. This is a self-awareness in which there is differentiation between the subject being aware and the object of awareness. Wordless cognition without involvement of the senses is the gate through which we can internalize abstract and transcendental Buddhist themes like suchness, emptiness and illusion.

Wordless cognitive awareness is the foundation of paññā wisdom. It is a self-cognitive awareness, it is cognition that knows itself. It does not require the senses because it does not require contact with the external world. In it, there is no subject or object, no differentiation, bias, fixed opinions, prejudice or subjectivity. In it, there are no mental defilements, old habits, fetters or underlying tendencies. As a result, freedom, serenity, realization and enlightenment emerge, as well as right perspective and right thoughts, which form the foundation of the Noble Eightfold Path. The practitioner would then experience long lasting peace, happiness, serenity, and harmony with other people and the environment.

Object of cognition

Cognition is always about an object or a reality. Without the object of reality, cognition cannot be developed. However, this reality can be concrete or abstract.

There are several types of objects of cognition.

Present object: this is a tangible object that exists and can be perceived by the senses. Examples are a concrete object, a sound, an emotion. Cognition is gained by the senses perceiving the present object and then the thinking mind, intellect and consciousness apprehending it. In this case, this results in a cognition using language. When the object is perceived by the senses and apprehended by ultimate hearing, ultimate seeing or ultimate touch, we have wordless cognition.

Absent object: This is the case where the object is not perceived directly, but is perceived by reasoning, imagination or insight. An example is when we say that there is a fire when we see smoke rising over the mountain, despite not actually seeing the fire. Another example is an abstract concept like the law of impermanence. We can apprehend it through our intellect or through wordless spiritual insight.

Metaphysical object: this type of object cannot be apprehended by the senses and only exists in our imagination. Examples are heaven or hell.

Transcendental object: these objects have a reality that cannot be apprehended by the worldly mind. Examples are suchness and emptiness. They can be experienced directly, but this is only achieved through wordless cognitive awareness.

Applying cognition to meditation practice

The only way that we can internalize – internalize means becoming one with the object – the most important themes of Buddhism such as suchness, emptiness and illusion is by wordless cognition. Wordless cognition also results in the development of intuition, premonitions, creativity, innovation, benevolence, compassion, empathetic joy and equanimity. Wordless cognition is also the foundation of paññā wisdom. It helps the practitioner attain the highest levels of meditation such as the Three Gates to Enlightenment that are Emptiness Samādhi, No-Appearance Samādhi and No-Will Samādhi (V: Không Định, Vô Tướng Định, Vô Nguyện Định). This is the reason why Master Thích Thông Triệt has identified cognition as the most important key in the practice of meditation.

When we want to develop cognition of a transcendental object, we must first completely comprehend the object by developing a cognition map and then repeatedly practice so that the map is embedded in our memory. When we need to make use of the cognition, we can evoke it while remaining in a wordless state.

A cognition map has four elements that correspond to the types of memory that are involved in establishing the cognition.

Semantic cognition: this is understanding of the terminology applicable to the subject. When we study spiritual subjects we often encounter definitions that we can qualify as academic, circular or popular. Academic definitions help us gain a deep knowledge of the subject; they are lofty and not easy to bring into practice. Circular definitions not only do not help us understand the subject but they may cause us harm if we try to practice in accordance with them. Popular definitions are simple, easy to understand, go to the heart of the matter and can be applied. This is why, when we practice meditation, we need to focus on popular definitions, and stay away from academic and circular definitions. Examples of popular definitions are: wordless awareness is knowing without words, suchness is what has no name. From these definitions, we can start practicing by using the No-Talk technique to internalize the wordless awareness mind and suchness.

Procedural cognition: these are the practical steps involved in the execution or practice of the subject. We need to practice these steps so that they are stored in our memory and we can execute them automatically without the need for thinking. Examples are the positions and gestures that we need to adopt before, during and after meditation. When we use our procedural cognition, we can execute them automatically, without the need for conscious thinking.

Episodic cognition: this is the knowledge of what to do at each stage of the process. For example, we need to know how to apply the No-Talk technique in meditation. We would have practiced the technique repeatedly before so that it is stored in our memory and our brain cells have established the pathways to execute it. Also, during our meditation, there are biological reactions that occur in our body, we need to be able to be aware of them while remaining in wordlessness so that our samādhi state is not disrupted. Examples of these biological reactions are: salivating, feeling of warmth, the head feeling heavy or very light, feeling like floating, feeling of blood flowing towards the extremities, etc.

Evoked cognition: Like the three other types of cognition, evoked cognition must be applied regularly so that it is committed to memory. For example, to deal with unwanted thoughts that pop up in the mind when we meditate, we can evoke “No-Talk”. We just evoke the idea of “No-Talk” without actually saying it silently and therefore we remain in wordless cognitive awareness. This is the method to deal with common meditation issues such as: wandering thoughts, drowsiness, apathetic stillness (meaning the mind is kept still but there is no spiritual insight emerging), falling into nothingness (meaning falling into a state of empty mind without any clear cognition of the subject) or vagueness (i.e. feeling dreamy, not knowing what one is doing).

Once we have developed the cognition map and practiced diligently, the cognition becomes a compressive cognition that stays inside the mind and can be evoked while we are in a state of wordless awareness.

