

Sayadaw U Pandita Retreat Practice Guidelines

Yogi Interviews – Reporting

In order to fully benefit from practicing under Sayadaw U Pandita's guidance, it is important that yogis learn how to report on their experience in the suggested way. Reporting correctly may well make the difference between a great and a frustrating retreat.

Like any other skill, reporting will take some time and practice to master. However, learning Sayadaw's reporting technique offers two important benefits. First, learning to report properly will help you to practice properly. Second, through a clear, precise report, Sayadaw will gain a clear picture of how you are practicing and what you are experiencing and will be able to help you to progress.

General Guidelines

In reporting, please try to be honest, clear, precise, and succinct. Try to describe *what* is happening, not *why* you think it is happening, or whether you think it is a good sign or bad. Our own interpretations, judgements, analyses and thoughts about what is happening are not useful to Sayadaw, our concise, accurate reports are.

The general rules in reporting are to describe:

1. what you became aware of,
2. what name or note it was given,
3. what details were noticed and/or how the object changed as it was observed, and
4. what happened next: 1.) what was observed, 2.) how it was noted, 3.) what details were noticed, 4.) what happened next, etc.

The Primary Object

You should always begin every report with a clear and full description of the primary object and how it was experienced in sitting meditation. Unless Sayadaw instructs you otherwise, this will be the rising and falling of the abdomen. Sayadaw can learn a great deal about your practice from your description of the primary object.

For example, someone using the primary object of the rising and falling of the abdomen might report. Observing the rising, I noted "rising," and I experienced stretching, pressure, and tightness. Observing the falling, I noted "falling," and I experienced movement, relaxation and decreasing tension.

Sometimes, because the description of the primary object is so important, you may want to tell how long you are able to stay with the rising and falling before the mind wanders off. For instance, one might report: I could only watch several breaths before the mind wandered off, but as soon as it did, I noted it and returned to the rising and falling.

Secondary Object of Awareness

After describing the primary object of meditation, you should also describe secondary objects. These are experiences other than the primary object to which the mind is drawn. All of our experiences will fall into one of six categories: sights, sounds, smells, tasted, bodily sensations (such as heat, cold, hardness, softness, itching, pain, etc.) and mental phenomena (such as mental images, thoughts, memories, plans, pleasant and unpleasant "feelings," and mental states such as boredom, discouragement, fear, confidence, happiness, etc.) Secondary objects too should be described in the same manner as the primary object:

1. what you became aware of,
2. what note or label it was given,
3. what details were noticed and/or how the object changes as it was observed, and
4. what happened next: 1.) what was observed, 2.) how it was noted, 3.) what details were noticed, 4.) what happened next, etc.

When possible, describe a period of several minutes of observation.

Pain

For instance, in the case of knee pain, one might report: There was a pain, and I noted it as "pain, pain." I noticed a stabbing pain. The stabbing changed to hardness, and I noted "hard, hard." I noticed a slow, pulsing hardness, which I noted again and again. It grew stronger for a while and at one point it started to grow weaker. Then I returned to noting the rising and falling.

Thinking

In the case of thinking, one might report: The mind wandered off the rising and falling and got lost in thinking. It took me a while to notice it, and then I noted "thinking, thinking." The thinking quickly stopped, and I returned to the rising and falling.

Emotions

In the case of an emotion, one might report: There was sadness, and I noted "sadness, sadness." The sadness grew stronger, and then gave way to anger. I forgot to note "anger" and the anger grew stronger. I became aware of tightness in the chest and noted "tightness." The area of greatest tightness seemed to move around slowly. As I continued to note "tightness," the sensations grew weaker. I was again aware of anger and noted "anger." I became furious and noted "furious, furious." Suddenly I became aware of a memory of a conversation I'd had I noted "remembering." As I continued noting "remembering" the memory slowly faded. A strong mental image arose, I noted "seeing, seeing," and the image quickly disappeared. Slowly, as I continued to note it, the anger grew weaker, and I returned to the rising and falling.

Please note, one does not mention why one was feeling sad or angry, or whether one often, seldom or never feels angry or sad. Nor does one describe parts of one's personal history, which might explain why these emotions arose. All that's important is what happened, how one named it, and what one noticed.

Wandering Mind

One might report: While observing the rising and falling, my mind wandered. After a few minutes, I noted "wandering, wandering." I returned to noting rising and falling for several breaths before the mind wandered off again. I was able to catch it very quickly and noted "wandering." The wandering quickly stopped and I returned again to the rising and falling. This pattern continued several times before I got tired and could no longer note it.

Walking Meditation

After reporting on sitting meditation, one should report on walking meditation, taking particular care to describe fully how one experienced the lifting, moving, and placing movements.

One might say: I noted "lifting," and I experienced... I noted "moving," and I experienced... I noted "placing," and I experienced...

General Observations

Sometimes, it can be helpful, at the end of a report, to give Sayadaw a more general comment of two about your practice, or to mention any unusual experiences that you have had. For instance, in the main body of your report you might say: There was sleepiness, and I noted it as "sleepiness, sleepiness", the sleepiness grew weaker, and I returned to the rising and falling. At the end, you could report: There has been a huge amount of sleepiness, and I've been falling asleep in almost every sitting.

Or maybe practice had seemed like it was going well, and though you did not do anything (like speak on the phone), which might explain the change, now you feel like you are unable to note or notice anything at all. This too you might indicate to Sayadaw in general terms.

However, please keep general observations very brief, if stated at all.

Deciding What to Report

Obviously, much more will happen in the course of a day or two than it will be possible to speak about in a five or ten minute interview. You will have to select what to report. As a rule, describe what you have seen most clearly. Sayadaw knows that the strength of mindfulness and concentration will vary throughout the day. By describing what you have seen when your practice is at its clearest, you will be giving Sayadaw the facts he needs to guide you well. Do not worry that you are somehow deceiving Sayadaw if your other sittings are not as clear.

Practicing While Reporting

When going in to report, while reporting, and when leaving Sayadaw's room, try to continue to note and offer awareness to all of your actions. Sayadaw will be observing you carefully. Do not think of interviews as a break from practice.

Follow Instructions

If Sayadaw does give you instructions, please do all you can to put them into practice. They are given to you individually, to help you continue to make progress. Treat them as you would the advice of a doctor whom you trusted and on whom your life depended.

There's No Need to Worry

When practicing, try not to let having to report lead you into too much thinking or worry. Simply practice to the best of your ability, sincerely attempting to follow the teachers' instructions, and then try to convey to Sayadaw what has been happening to you – whether you are pleased with it or not.

Just Reporting

In general, try not to look for anything in an interview other than just the opportunity to describe to Sayadaw what has been going on. If, even unconsciously, you are seeking praise, encouragement or reassurance, or comments on or questions about your practice, you may well be disappointed. If you can report simply, honestly, and clearly, this retreat can be deeply beneficial.

Helpful General Information

The reporting form (described above) is the key to good communication with Sayadaw. Whatever you experience in practice can be included in your report, whether there be blissful, peaceful states or painful, difficult emotions or sensations. What happens is less important than how one relates to what happens and how clearly one observes what happens. And Sayadaw will always want to know, "How did you note it?"

What Does He Want?

Sayadaw is very demanding and will constantly work for the benefit of the yogis to help them improve their meditation practice. It is his job to encourage the yogi not to become lazy or complacent with what they have already accomplished before they have been able to realize what is of greatest value in meditation. And if one of his students does become complacent or lazy, Sayadaw will use every tool at his disposal to get that yogi back on track. Understanding that this is his motivation can be very helpful when the yogi has an interview or listens to Dhamma talks.

Doesn't He Care About Me?

During the course, while you are a yogi, Sayadaw will treat you in a formal way, as is customary in a teacher-student relationship in Burma. A retreat is not the time to develop a personal relationship with Sayadaw, it is the time to practice meditation whole-heartedly.

Why Is He Doing This To Me?

At times, Sayadaw may say little because you have not been following instructions or reporting properly and clearly, and therefore Sayadaw is limited in the help that he can offer you at that time. At other times, you may report your experiences and, though he does not say much, things may be going well. Sometimes he seems to follow the rule, "If it's not broken, don't fix it."

Do not expect from Sayadaw a lot of outwardly warm support, praise, and encouragement. He will seldom say, "Terrific, you're doing a great job." Sometimes, when things are going great, he will try to urge you on to even greater effort. He follows a policy of dealing with the biggest problems first. So sometimes, even when progress is being made, he will point out areas where even further refinement is possible. Some yogis mistakenly take this to be a sign that nothing is ever good enough for him. In truth, he does not want you to rest "until the goal has been attained".

As much as possible, try not to take anything that happens in your practice, or anything that Sayadaw says to you, personally. In other words, do not believe that if he points out your faults, then you are not a good person. The Buddha said, "If you see a wise person who points out your faults, you should follow that person as you would one who reveals hidden treasure" (Dhammapada 76).

My Practice Is No Good

Do not believe that if practice seems to be unusually difficult, then you are doing badly. *It is extremely difficult for yogis to evaluate their own practice.* It is not uncommon for yogis to feel that practice has regressed when in fact it has progressed. A yogi's job is not to judge their practice, but simply to do it in accordance with their teachers' instructions and to report their experience as honestly and accurately as they can.

Sayadaw's Ignoring Me

Sometimes you may enter Sayadaw's room for an interview, and it may appear that he is not paying any attention to you. This does not mean that he thinks that you are not worth his time. In fact, he is usually watching you very closely at such times. A humble, undemanding spirit is most helpful for yogis in interviews.

Working With a Translator

Particularly when working through a translator (or with a monk for whom English is a second language), it is important to use simple, direct language. Using long rambling sentences, poetic or metaphoric language or slang may contribute to misunderstanding. Short and simple is best. Do not use Pali or other technical language when describing your experience. Just describe your bare experience in easy, simple, clear language. Speak slowly and clearly and pause after each phrase so that the translator has a chance to translate. And do not use hand or arm gestures to express yourself.

Trust the Teacher

Sometimes we think that we are really seeing clearly, and it is not until we see even more clearly, that we realize that what we were seeing before actually was not so clear. This happens a lot, and usually the teacher knows by where we are in the meditation process, what it is actually possible to see. Some yogis have had disagreements with Sayadaw, swearing that they had seen something, and he insisting that they really had not. Not until later, when they were able to *really* see that object in a very clear way, did they understand why Sayadaw had said that they had not seen it.

To learn a new subject we have to go beyond the current limits of our understanding. It takes a trusting relationship with a skilled teacher to be able to transcend our ignorance.

Sayadaw U Pandita comes to North America and teaches out of compassion, out of a sincere desire to help yogis. He is an unusually sensitive and astute observer of yogis, and he is confident that he can help those who follow his instructions and report correctly.