

Purpose and Method of Vipassana Meditation

Vipassana is a word in the Pali language, one of the ancient languages of India along with Sanskrit. Sometimes Vipassana is translated as “insight meditation” because one of the main effects of the practice is that you get deep understandings about deep universal issues such as how it is that pain turns into suffering, how it is that pleasure either becomes satisfaction or becomes neediness, and how it is that the sense of self arises.

Vipassana meditation is also called “mindfulness meditation” because we are very attentive. The main technique is to become extraordinarily attentive to ordinary experience. Unfortunately the word mindfulness can be a bit misleading if you interpret mindfulness to mean that you are constantly thinking about what you're doing. Mindful in the proper sense of the word simply means to be attentive and conscious about what's happening.

The word “insight” can be a little misleading too because it's not only a word from Buddhism, but also is a word used in psychotherapy. When you do psychotherapy you get insights. Of course those insights are very important, but they are typically insights into your own personality, and the specific issues of your life. The insights that come as a result of Vipassana are deeper and more general than those that are ordinarily encountered in psychotherapy. They deal with very broad issues that are multiply rather than singularly applicable. In science, a deep theory augers many specific applications. Out of a single fundamental breakthrough in science you may have dozens—or even thousands—of specific applications. So in the same way, the insights that come from Vipassana practice let us understand the very nature of personality itself, not just things about our own personality. So Vipassana is “insight” in the sense of deep insight and it is “mindfulness” in the sense of extraordinary attentiveness.

The basic premise of this practice can be stated rather simply. Whenever one brings an extraordinary degree of mindfulness and equanimity to ordinary experience this produces insight. And it also produces something called purification. Now, every word I just used is a technical term in Buddhism. Buddhism is a kind of inner science. The West developed an outer science with a technical vocabulary to describe, in a way that no other culture did, the external physical reality. In the East they have an analogously precise and technical vocabulary, but it is applied to the inner world. That is to say, the world of subjective experience: hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, the feeling body and the thinking mind. They developed a science of these six senses and it's called Vipassana.

I find in science a very appropriate metaphor for this particular kind of meditation. When you study science you know that you are going to encounter technical terms. When you encounter a technical term you should not project your own meanings onto it. You have to listen very carefully to the exact words that the teacher uses in defining that term. For example, in ordinary colloquial English, force, power, and energy are often used as synonyms, but for a physicist they are defined in specific—and very different—ways. (Force is proportional to acceleration and mass; energy is force applied over a distance; and power is the rate of which energy is being generated or consumed.) In a similar way, I'm going to give you some technical vocabulary from the Vipassana tradition.

One such term is “equanimity.” It does not mean a cooled out, passive or indifferent attitude. Rather, it means an attitude of not interfering with the operation of the six senses. If you have a sensation in your knee and it's painful and it wants to spread, you let it spread. Why? Because you discover that it is precisely the interference

with that sensation that causes suffering, not the sensation itself. Equanimity literally means "balance." It means not to push and pull the flow of the senses. It does not for a moment imply that one would fail to take action with respect to external circumstance, nor does it imply passivity, apathy or anything like that. Equanimity is radical permission to feel. Equanimity is a dropping of internal friction with respect to the flow of these six senses: hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, the feeling body and the thinking mind. As a state of radical openness, equanimity is equivalent to love.

Whenever one brings mindfulness and equanimity to ordinary experience, an evolutionary process takes place, consisting of two aspects. One aspect is insight and the other is purification. Let's talk first about what we mean by purification. We all have within us sources of unhappiness. You notice that very quickly when you sit down to meditate. You'll feel just fine and then there will be something that will make your world less than perfect. You get sleepy, or your mind wanders, or this or that emotion comes up, negative tapes start to come up, traumatic memories appear, you feel angry, you want to jump out of your skin, you're running all sorts of fantasies, doing things to divert yourself, you're aware of inner conflicts. We are chock full of sources of unhappiness which are completely foreign to our being. It is not in the nature of consciousness to suffer. However, we have acquired certain limiting forces: cravings and aversions, painful memories, inappropriate yet habitual behavior patterns, and so forth.

When we sit down and do this practice that's all going to come up. So you don't always feel good while doing Vipassana meditation. In fact you might feel lousy. I know, having heard that, some of you may want to leave right now. You say, "I thought meditation is supposed to make a person feel great." Yes, in the long run, but an important aspect of meditation is to sit down and start working through the sources of not feeling great, whatever they may be. You literally eat your way through them, one after another, after another, after another. How? By just being mindful and having equanimity, that's all. Whatever comes up, you'll observe it and you'll do nothing. You'll be very aware and that's all.

Now that may seem trivial at best, stupid at worst. But it is actually quite powerful. Let's say that one of these blockages to happiness comes up as we meditate—a negative tape, a craving, an aversion, an inner conflict, a congealing. If we reject it and say "I don't want you," we're pushing it away. But in order to reject it we have to "touch" it, by pushing on it. If on the other hand we identify with it, buy into it and let it pull us away, then again we've "touched" it. As soon as one touches it, one recharges the energy supply of that negativity. If you try to push it away or you let it pull you, you are identifying with it, touching it. Any touch whatsoever means that this particular negativity is able to "recharge its individual battery" as it were, from your general pool of your energy. But if we don't touch it then it has to play itself out on its own power source which is quite finite and if we continue to be alert and simply observe, eventually the intrinsic energy source of that negativity dissipates and it goes away forever. It gets worked through.

This process of "watching negativity to death" is called purification. As we work through the blockages to happiness, our intrinsic happiness—the nature of our consciousness which is effortless effulgent joy—becomes evident. If the dirt is cleaned away from the window, the sun that was always there is able to shine through. The spiritual reality which is the nature of ordinary experience is able to shine forth.

Most people would affirm such a spiritual reality, but they don't directly experience it. They experience only their own projections, wishful thinking, or beliefs about it, without ever being able to see it directly. Yet

everyone has the ability to come into direct contact with the Source. Through the continued practice of attention (mindfulness) and openness (equanimity), one can work through what's in the way. It takes time, but the time is going to pass anyway, so why not live it to the max?

So the essence of this practice can be stated as a simple formula: ordinary experience plus mindfulness plus equanimity yields insight and purification. In this formula, each term is defined very precisely. Ordinary experience is defined as hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, the feeling body and the thinking mind. Mindfulness is defined as specificity in awareness, clarity in awareness, continuity in awareness, richness in awareness, precision in awareness. Equanimity is defined as not interfering with the flow of the senses at any level, including the level of preconscious processing.

When sufficient mindfulness and equanimity are brought to bear on ordinary experience, we arrive at purification and insight. And, as a result of the purification and insight, our intrinsic happiness, our true birthright and spiritual reality, gets uncovered and we discover that what we thought was the world of phenomena—the world of time, space, and matter—turns out to really be a world of spiritual energy, and that we are in direct contact with it moment by moment. Because, when the senses become purified, when the inner conflicts—at all levels—have been broken up, the flow of these ordinary senses turns into a prayer, a mantra, a sacred song, and we find that, just by living our life, we are in moment by moment contact with the Source. In the Christian contemplative tradition this is called the "practice of the presence of God." In the Jewish mystical tradition it is called "briaiah yesh me ayn"—the experience of things (yesh) being continuously created (briaiah) from no-thing (ayn), that is, from God.

For most people the senses are "opaque." Do you understand what I mean by the word opaque? A window is opaque if it is covered by soot; light can't come through. The soot is craving, aversion, and ignorance. When that's cleared away, the ordinary senses become literally transparent. It is very hard to describe what this is like. Hearing returns to being part of the effortless flow of nature, seeing returns to being part of the effortless flow of nature, and likewise with smelling, tasting, the body sensations whether they are pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, they all go back to being part of "God's breath" so to speak.

Even the thinking process returns to being part of this effortless flow. At the beginning stages of meditation one is very concerned with overcoming the wandering thoughts in order to develop enough calm and concentration to be able to practice mindfulness. But when you get further along in the process there will be no necessity whatsoever to have a still mind because the ordinary flow of thought will be experienced as not different from the activity of the Source.

So to do Vipassana practice means simply to be very precise and accepting moment by moment with regard to what is happening in your sense door. That may seem like a trivial practice. One might think, "What's the big deal. I'm sitting here, so now I'm clearly aware of an itch in my tush, or now I know that the sound is calling my attention. So what?" But when all the components of experience become distinct enough, when there's crystal clarity about exactly what's happening moment by moment, then the senses become literally transparent, i.e., insubstantial. And a reality that is beyond time and space can shine through. One is able to contact the Source as a pure "doing" continuously molding time, space, self and world moment by moment. Technically, this is referred to as "insight into impermanence." Well, once you've reached that point you'll never be bored again, I promise you.

Now let's talk a little more about this technical term: insight. In Vipassana you get insights and understandings into the most fundamental aspects of our being. Here we have another analogy from science.

When people observe under a microscope they start to discover things they could never see with the naked eye. There's no way to know that our bodies are made up of trillions of little cells. No matter how hard you look at your body with the naked eye, you'll never see them. But if you look under a microscope you will, and you will understand something deep and fundamental about the nature of all organisms: it's called the cell theory of life. This is the basis of modern biology and modern medicine. A microscope is an awareness extending tool that allows us to see something that is always there but not evident to the naked eye. The mindfulness practice is to the exploration of your internal world what the microscope is to the exploration of the external world. It allows you to see finer levels of structure that are absolutely invisible to people otherwise, but are very important.

For example, as you are observing, you'll be able to see that pain is one thing, and resistance to the pain is something else, and when the two come together you have an experience of suffering. You will get an insight into the nature of suffering ($S = P \times R$), "suffering equals pain multiplied by resistance." You'll be able to see that's true not only for physical pain, but also for emotional pain and its true not only for little pains but also for big pains. It's true for every kind of pain no matter how big, how small, or what causes it. Whenever there is resistance there is suffering. As soon as you can see that, you gain an understanding of what makes pain a problem, and as soon as you gain that insight, you'll begin to have some freedom. You come to realize that as long as we are alive we can't avoid pain. It's built into our nervous system. But we can certainly learn to experience pain without it being a problem.

If you've never meditated you may be completely lost as to what I'm talking about. You may even think I'm talking gibberish. And there's a good reason for that. For most people, by the time they are conscious of a physical or emotional pain they have already turned it into suffering by resisting it. The resistance begins at the preconscious processing level of each moment of experience. So the idea that you can experience discomfort without it being a problem doesn't make sense to most people because for them every time there's discomfort there's suffering. The distinction between pain and suffering and their relationship is invisible to the average person because you have to look with a sort of "microscope"—an awareness extending tool—to observe the pain over and over again with high states of concentration until you can begin to see that the pain is one thing and the resistance is something else and when the two come together you suffer, but when there's just pain you don't suffer. Pain is just part of nature. It's just as effortless as ripples spreading on a pond, or as the wind blowing through the trees. It is possible to actually "go on vacation" inside your pain. You don't have to go to the mountains or the seashore. Of course you can also go on vacation inside your pleasure or inside your neutral sensations. This is an example of insight. It's something that you can not see with the naked eye. I can tell you about it and you'll either believe me or not believe me. On the other hand, if you observe long enough and hard enough, you'll see for yourself that it is actually true. And will that be important? Just wait until the next time you suffer in some way and you'll know!

Spiritual insight is like a many-faceted jewel. One facet is called freedom from suffering. What are some other facets? Well, look at the other side of the picture, how about pleasure. Does pleasure bring lasting satisfaction for most people? Does each experience of pleasure transform most people? Does more pleasure also elevate your base-line of satisfaction in life? Usually not. In fact often the opposite. Often pleasure leads to drivenness, neediness, compulsion. Does that mean there's something wrong with pleasure? Absolutely not. Just as there is

grasping around pain ("resistance"), there is also grasping around pleasure ("craving"). Pleasure in and of itself is a very purifying experience, but if pleasure arises and there's any grasping or holding, even the slightest congealing around the flow of that pleasure, then that pleasure does not give much satisfaction. On the other hand, when the grasping is dropped, the pleasure gives really lasting satisfaction, something changes on the inside, and one's level of fulfillment is raised permanently. So pure pain purifies, pure pleasure purifies. What do I mean by pure pain? Pain without resistance. What do I mean by pure pleasure? Pleasure without craving.

Another facet of insights is related to a person's sense of self. There are things that are true and useful to know about how one's sense of self arises moment by moment. We think there is a "thing" inside us called a self, but upon closer investigation we discover that there is an activity called personality that rises and passes as part of the effortless flow of nature. That activity called personality is made up of certain ideas and certain body sensations that moment by moment give us the sense that "I am." When those ideas and body sensations are greeted with complete awareness and zero interference, then we have a wonderful paradoxical experience. Obviously if you have complete awareness and zero interference with those ideas and body sensations that in this moment give you the sense "I am," then we would have to say that you are allowing your personality to completely express itself. On the other hand, whenever you have any experience and maintain continuous awareness and zero interference, that experience becomes clear in the two senses of the English word as I described before. It becomes very distinct but it also becomes transparent. So the fully experienced personality is a transparent wave rather than an opaque particle. The fully experienced self is a "doing" rather than a "thing" and hence is sometimes called "no-self." Once you realize that, your sense of self becomes elastic like rubber, and you can expand and contract effortlessly with the flow of events. You can think of it as an elastic self which can get as big or as small as the circumstance requires, a bouncy and vibrant pure "doing" called personality. So you can learn how to complete your personality and in learning that you also learn how to sometimes let go of your personality. An elastic self can get as big as the whole universe and therefore can encompass all things and it can get as small as zero and therefore know a state of true rest, real peace and security.

So, with this practice we bring mindfulness (specificity of awareness) and equanimity (non-interfering with awareness) to ordinary experience. As a result, we get purification, which is a release of the blockages to happiness, and we get insight which is a deep, many-faceted understanding into the nature of our experience. As a result of this what happens? We become empowered, we become free. We have a sense of freedom that is not dependent on circumstances, we have a sense of happiness that is not dependent on conditions.

This process of developing a sense of happiness independent of circumstances is quite challenging but actually this is only half of the spiritual path. The other half of the path involves what you "put out" into the world. In addition to Vipassana mindfulness, one also cultivates habitual states of Loving Kindness and Compassion, and translates these subjective states into objective actions that are of benefit to others.

One might say that through mindfulness meditation the old dirty paint is scraped off the walls of the soul and through daily loving kindness meditation a new beautiful coat is put on one layer at a time.

There is much to be said about developing Loving Kindness and Compassion and the intimate link between Insight and Love on the spiritual path. Suffice it for now to say that through mindfulness and equanimity the very substance of the feeling self becomes porous, transparent, elastic, and vibratory. Being porous it can soak

up any flavor, being transparent it can take on any coloration, being elastic and vibratory it can resonate any tone. Through Loving Kindness and related meditations one intentionally imparts to one's feeling core a habitual coloration, flavor and tone of deep human warmth and beneficence. This constantly flows out and subtly but significantly influences the people around. At the level of action it translates into various expressions of effortless service to others.