

Practice of insight meditation: types, uses and benefits



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The Liberating Practice of Insight Meditation

The practice of meditation has many benefits for its practitioners. Apart from enabling the person to experience a sense of freedom from oneself and at the same time oneness with the self, meditation can also be used to govern essential aspects of life. This has led to the development of several forms of meditation, including mindfulness meditation and insight meditation. Among these two most commonly practiced forms of meditation, this module would focus on insight meditation and how the practice of insight meditation can lead to the liberation of the mind while being able to understand things you would have not been able to without its practice.

- The Meaning of Insight Meditation

Insight meditation, also known as *Vipassanā* in Pali or *Vipaśyanā* in Sanskrit is a form of meditation practice with Buddhist origins. The word *Vipassanā* in the Pali language can be translated as being able to gain insight or to see clearly. These terms therefore are used to denote that insight meditation does indeed help an individual practicing it gain a deeper sense of knowledge of the reality of things and their true nature. The word *Vipassanā* in the Pali language can be translated as being able to gain insight or to see clearly.

Vipassanā also has a synonym in the word *paccakkha* in the same Pali language (*pratyaksa* in Sanskrit). This term means seeing things before one's eyes, expressing the perception of things based on experience. Owing from its roots in *Vipassanā* , there is a direct experience (or seeing) that leads to the perception of things. This perception is what would allow

meditators using *Vipassanā* to be able to derive meaning and knowledge from things, which can be said to be far better since they have experienced it.

The practice of insight meditation is also done in cultures other than those originating from Pali and Sanskrit. In Tibet, *Vipassanā* has a counterpart in the word *lhagthong*. This term is formed through a combination of two shorter words *lhag* and *thong*. *Lhag* means something that is greater, superior or higher; while *thong* is used to denote the phrase to see, or to view. Therefore, the Tibetan meaning of Insight meditation can be seeing things in a superior way, or being able to look into the essential nature of things. This means that *Vipassanā* can also be expressed as being able to lucidly see things, or view them clearly.

- The Roots of *Vipassanā*

Vipassanā has its roots in Buddhist and Yogic meditation practices, but it is not often mentioned in most suttas, although in the discourses and other old documents (most of which dates back to the time of the Buddha) written in the Pali language, terms such as *samatha* and *Vipassanā* existed. In these old writings, *Vipassanā* is used to denote clear-seeing, but then again the word itself is not directly quoted to be coming from the Buddha's lips. What the Buddha is quoted to have used is the word *jhana* when he tells his disciples to meditate, although *jhana* is not similar to *Vipassanā* or any similar meditation techniques.

Readers and scholars of the suttas claim that the suttas were not exactly the origin of the meaning of *Vipassanā* and its practice, although it is through the

interpretation of the suttas that gave rise to the meaning of *Vipassanā* .

These interpretations were based on the debates in the ancient times about the teachings of the Buddha and how they are to be interpreted, classified and put into a hierarchy. This is expressed in the Visuddhimagga.

- How the Practice of *Vipassanā* Helps Gain Insight

The manner in which *Vipassanā* is practiced is different from other Buddhist meditation practices in the modern times. It also has differences from other meditation forms that are not Buddhist in origins. This difference lies on one key aspect of *Vipassanā* , and that is because of the inclusion of techniques that aims to develop insight in the individual practicing it. This development of insight includes the practice of one's ability to contemplate on things, do an introspection in the meaning of these things, observe how his body experiences sensations, be able to meditate analytically and do observations on to this day-to-day life.

In Theravada Buddhist practice *Vipassanā* meditation is done together with the practice of mindfulness of breathing. Also, the impermanence of things and gaining insight into them is another key area of practice. This can be interpreted in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness as they appear in the Satipatthana sutta. These are:

1. The kaya or body (also sometimes interpreted as breath);
 2. The vedana or the feeling tone of the person (mostly in terms of sensations);
 3. The citta or the consciousness (sometimes interchanged with mind);
- and

4. The dhamma or the mind objects (phenomena).

Moreover, practices leading to development of insight are also used to be able to meditate using *Vipassanā* are cited in the suttas. These consists of being able to practice mindfulness breathing and the capacity to contemplate on impermanence of things.

1. *Mindfulness of breathing*. To be able to successful practice *Vipassanā* , it is essential for the meditator to practice mindfulness of breathing first. This can be done by having the meditator watch his or her breathing patterns and notice them simply for what they are. This means that if he or she notices that the breaths are either long or short, these would be interpreted as such.
2. *Contemplation of permanence (Sampajañña)*. This is usually done after the meditator has successfully practice mindfulness of breathing. It is based on the belief that if you are aware of the changes your body goes through as you carry out breathing, then you can understand how the sensations you have in your body are bound to arise and pass away with time. This means that there is impermanence in the bodily sensations. When these things are contemplated on, an awareness on their impermanence and relevance is born, and with it the development of a sense of self that is independent from these things.

- Stages in the Practice of *Vipassanā*

The practice of *Vipassanā* has the aim to allow the meditator to gain different levels of insight into things which happens as a part of an ongoing process. This insight is deemed to be able to help in reaching a stage in

which the sensations and feelings experienced in the body (the *vedana*) slowly dissolves into the consciousness and are replaced by subtle sensory flow throughout the body. This subtle flow of sensations is called the *bhaá¹...gānupassanā ñāá¹ḥa* in the (Pali language, and *bhaá¹...gānupaĀyanājñāna* in Sanskrit) or the knowledge of dissolution. The final step into this distinct process is the possession of the meditator of mental purification.

The meditator practicing *Vipassanā* is also expected to experience decreased levels of attachments (or bodily cravings) and fears or aversion. After this happens, the stage of *saá¹...khārupekkhāñāá¹ḥa* (in Pali), or *saá¹fskāropeká¹ḥājñāna* in Sanskrit) will be attained, where the meditator would have a strong foundation of knowing that all formations or things are equal. This state of equanimity (or *upekkha*) can be considered as a state of Brahma in the Theravada Buddhist practice.

- The Benefits of Insight Meditation

Vipassanā or insight meditation can help its practitioner in developing the ability to gain insight into things or phenomena and their sense of impermanence. This ability to see this truth is what makes it possible for the meditator to be liberated from such things permanently. The longer the time that a meditator practices insight meditation, the better the improvement that he or she will gain in the perception of his or her existence. This is what most Theravada practitioners refer to as the evolution of knowledge during practice.

Coming from a different perspective, the practice of insight meditation also has benefits backed by science and medicine. In a study that were

conducted among Western people who were practicing insight meditation, MRI images revealed thicker brain regions in these individuals. These thickened regions of the brain are noted to be those that are related to visual (or pertaining to seeing), auditory (or hearing), somatosensory, and even processing sensations and stimuli interoceptively. These changes are also seen to differ depending on how long the meditator practice and also how long each day they spend practicing insight meditation. The thickening areas of the brain of those practicing insight meditation can be helpful in slowing the progression of cognitive decline especially in those experiencing it as part of the normal aging process.

- Requirements in the Practice of *Vipassanā* or Insight Meditation

Starting any meditation practice is usually a challenge for meditators. It is essential that those who are teaching meditation be able to help bridge the gap between successful practice and the willing meditator. The key lies in having set clear guidelines and explanation of the steps needed to be taken to establish a good foundation for good meditation practice. Doing insight meditation or *Vipassanā* is therefore no exception. The following steps may be helpful in attaining good foundation in insight meditation.

1. *Find a special place.* Insight meditation would require its practitioners to free their minds from all thoughts that would hinder it. A quiet place where the meditator can focus and do *Vipassanā* undisturbed would be best. This place may be a small corner in the house or inside the meditators room or even in his or her garden. As long as the place is

free from all things that can have negative impact in the practice of good meditation, then it is okay.

2. *Feel comfortable.* Most modern-day meditators come from environments that are high in stress and negative vibes. These things can work adversely if the person would want to practice meditation. Feeling comfortable not only with the environment and setting a special place of meditation is not enough. Being comfortable in themselves is also necessary. This can be achieved through cleaning the body first and the face before the start of meditation, or if there is still time before starting, a warm shower can do wonders in easing stresses and increasing the person's comfort level.
3. *Ensure proper posture.* Ideally, meditation does not require its practitioners to assume a certain position, but it would be quite difficult to focus and concentrate in just any position especially for beginning meditators. The suggested position for meditation in most literature would be the Lotus Position, although its modified Half-Lotus can also be used for those who have difficulty assuming the former. However, any position can be used as long as the back of the meditator is straight (or the spine is erect) and the manner of sitting or standing is not strained. This should be done while the person is completely alert of his surroundings, position and even breathing patterns. Just a word of caution, beginning meditators should be discouraged from assuming positions that can make them fall asleep as this would disrupt meditation.

4. *Free the mind.* This can be started when the meditator seated comfortably and in peace and quiet. Relaxation is one of most

important things to bear in mind when trying to free the mind of all the thoughts that has the tendency to intrude on the meditation process. Emptying the mind from all thoughts that have a negative implication on gaining insight is important to successful meditation.

5. *Observe breathing patterns.* This is usually the first stage of insight meditation. Observing the way how a person breathes increases his or her level of awareness of changes that goes through the body with each breath. While doing this, awareness is gained in the nature of things, while freeing the mind from all things that clutter it. Regulate the breathing until it becomes as natural as it should.
6. *Smile.* In most beginners practicing insight meditation, the presence of obtrusive thoughts and negative feelings would be unavoidable. Adding a positive feeling tone would help block these thoughts from disrupting the attainment of insight. Smiling is one way to this. When the meditator smiles, there is release of endorphins which can contribute to a general good feeling. When the meditator feels good, he or she becomes less stressed, more relaxed and meditation is better.
7. *Meditate.* This is done when the meditator focuses on things and their nature in an effort to gain insight and have a clearer view of such things. More about this would be discussed in the succeeding modules.
8. *Extend the meditation process to loving kindness.* This stage is optional for meditators. Experiencing loving kindness can be attained through eliminating all emotions related to envy, self-pity, anger and hatred towards others. This would allow the meditator to extend kindness, understanding and love for others and in the process

extends this love not only to people but to the universe in general. The practice of loving kindness or *metta bhavana* requires first that the meditator learns to love himself and feel good about himself, while allowing the destruction of the selfish nature of oneself. Like other forms of meditation, this might be difficult to do at first, but continuous practice would help in mastering it.

- More Tips into the Practice of Insight Meditation

Since the successful practice of insight meditation requires time and practice, it is important for anyone teaching or guiding meditators to stress the need for patience when the expected results of the meditators are not seen in the first few times meditation is tried. Also, since the ability to focus and free the mind is not easy on the first few tries, ensuring that the environment is conducive enough is a must. The use of soft lights, mellow sounds (like the sounds of waves or raindrops, soft wind blowing, and nature) and music purposed for meditation can be used to create a warm, relaxing environment. Ambient noises such as the sound of machines being operated and phone ringing should be avoided. If possible, unplugging these devices is recommended. Keeping aromatherapy candles burning can also aid in relaxing and calming the mind of the meditator. Moreover, keeping candles burning can also aid in focusing since the flame from the candles can be used as objects of reference when freeing the mind and allowing the meditator to detach himself from his or her environment. The candle and its flame can also be used symbolically to denote the light of the doctrine from which insight meditation is based.

In coaching the meditator on the practice of Insight Meditation, the teacher must also keep in mind that the tone of his or her voice and the manner in which the lectures are delivered matter greatly. For one to be able to be effective in teaching a practice such as meditation, he or she should have first hand knowledge and experience on its effects to oneself. Influencing the meditator positively should be one of the goals, as well as exuding the relative peace and calm that insight meditation can do to its practitioner. And lastly, it is also important that any one who wants to guide or teach meditation to be free from all forms of dogmatic and judgmental thoughts to avoid passing these on to the practitioner. Remember that meditation, especially *Vipassanā* teaches deeper sense of understanding, clarity on the nature of things, and most especially being at peace not only with oneself but with the universe as well.

References:

Henepola Gunaratana, Mindfulness in plain English, Wisdom Publications

“ What is Theravada Buddhism?”. Access to Insight. Access to Insight.

Bikkhu Bodhi, The Connected Discourses of the Buddha

Ajahn Brahm, Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond: A Meditator’s Handbook.

Wisdom Publications, 2006

Thanissaro Bhikkhu, “ One Tool Among Many: The Place of Vipassana in Buddhist Practice

Glickman, Marshall (1998), *Beyond the Breath: Extraordinary Mindfulness Through Whole-Body Vipassana Meditation*, Tuttle Publishing, ISBN 1-58290-043-4