



Introduction to Vipassana Meditation

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The technique of Vipassana Meditation is a simple, practical way to achieve real peace of mind and lead a happy, useful life. Vipassana means "to see things as they really are" and is a logical process of mental purification through self-observation.

From time to time, we all experience agitation, frustration and disharmony. When we suffer, we do not keep our misery limited to ourselves; instead, we keep distributing it to others. Certainly this is not a proper way to live. We all long to live at peace within ourselves, and with those around us. After all, human beings are social beings; we have to live and interact with others. How, then, can we live peacefully? How can we remain harmonious ourselves, and maintain peace and harmony around us?

Vipassana enables us to experience peace and harmony: it purifies the mind, freeing it from suffering and deep-seated causes of suffering. The practice leads step-by-step to the highest spiritual goal of full liberation from all mental defilements.

Historical Background

Vipassana is one of India's most ancient meditation techniques. It was rediscovered 2500 years ago by Gotama the Buddha, and is the essence of what he practiced and taught during his forty-five years of teaching. During the Buddha's time, large numbers of people in India were freed from the bonds of suffering by practicing Vipassana, allowing them to attain high levels of achievement in all spheres of life. Over time, the technique spread to the neighboring countries of Burma, Sri Lanka, Thailand and others, where it had the same ennobling effect.

Five centuries after the Buddha, the noble heritage of Vipassana had disappeared from India. The purity of the teaching was lost elsewhere as well. In the country of Burma, however, it was preserved by a chain of devoted teachers. From generation to generation, for over two thousand years, this dedicated lineage transmitted the technique in its pure form.

In our time, Vipassana has been reintroduced to India, as well as to people from more than eighty-five countries, by Mr. S.N. Goenka. He was authorized to teach Vipassana by the renowned Burmese Vipassana teacher, Sayagyi U Ba Khin. Before he died in 1971, U Ba Khin was able to see one of his most cherished dreams realized. He had the strong wish that Vipassana should return to India, the land of its origin, to help the country come out of its manifold problems. He felt sure it would then spread from India throughout the world for the benefit of all humankind.

S.N. Goenka began conducting Vipassana courses in India in 1969; after ten years, he began to teach in foreign countries as

well. In the three decades since he started teaching, he has conducted hundreds of ten-day Vipassana courses, and trained many assistant teachers who have conducted thousands of courses worldwide. As of 2006, more than one hundred centers dedicated to the practice of Vipassana have been established, ten in North America. The invaluable gem of Vipassana, long preserved in Burma, is now being practiced throughout the world. Today ever-increasing numbers of people have the opportunity to learn this art of living which brings lasting peace and happiness.

The Practice

To learn Vipassana meditation it is necessary to take a ten-day residential course under the guidance of a qualified teacher. Ten days of sustained practice have been found to be the minimum amount of time in which the essentials of the technique can be learned so that Vipassana can be applied in daily life. For the duration of the retreat, students remain within the course site, having no contact with the outside world. They refrain from reading and writing, and suspend any religious practices or other disciplines. They follow a demanding daily schedule which includes about ten hours of sitting meditation, with many breaks interspersed throughout the day. They also observe silence, not communicating with fellow students; they may speak, however, with the teachers whenever necessary and they may contact the staff with needs related to food, accommodation, health, etc.

There are three steps to the training. First, students practice abstaining from actions which cause harm. They undertake five moral precepts, practicing abstention from killing living beings, stealing, speaking falsely, all sexual activity and the use of intoxicants. This simple code of moral conduct, along with maintaining silence, serves to calm the mind which otherwise would be too agitated to perform the task of self-observation.

The second step is to develop a more stable and concentrated mind by learning to fix one's attention on the natural reality of the ever-changing flow of the breath as it enters and leaves the nostrils. By the fourth day the mind is calmer and more focused, better able to undertake the third step, the practice of Vipassana itself: the observation of sensations throughout the body, the experiential understanding of their changing nature and the development of a balanced mind by learning not to react to them. One experiences the universal truths of impermanence, suffering and egolessness. This truth realization by direct experience is the process of purification.

The entire practice is actually a mental training. Just as physical exercises are used to improve bodily health, Vipassana can be

used to develop a healthy mind.

Students receive systematic meditation instructions several times a day, and each day's progress is explained during a taped evening discourse by Mr. Goenka. Complete silence is observed for the first nine days. On the tenth day, students resume speaking, making the transition back to a more extroverted way of life. The course concludes on the morning of the eleventh day.

Course Finances

All courses are run solely on a donation basis. There are no charges for the courses, not even to cover the cost of food and accommodation. All expenses are met by donations from those who, having completed a course and experienced the benefits of Vipassana, wish to give others the same opportunity. Neither the Teacher nor the assistant teachers receive remuneration; they and those who serve the courses volunteer their time. Thus Vipassana is offered free from commercialization.

A Non-Sectarian Technique

Although Vipassana has been preserved in the Buddhist tradition, it contains nothing of a sectarian nature, and can be accepted and applied by people of any background. The Buddha himself taught Dhamma (the way, the truth, the path). The technique works on the basis that all human beings share the same problems, and that a pragmatic method which can eradicate these problems can be universally practiced. Moreover, it involves no dependence on a teacher. Vipassana teaches those who practice it to be self-dependent. Vipassana courses are open to anyone sincerely wishing to learn the technique, irrespective of race, faith, or nationality. Christians, Jews, Hindus, Jains, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists and members of other religions -- monks, priests and nuns as well as householders -- have all successfully practiced Vipassana.

The malady is universal; therefore, the remedy has to be universal. For example, when we experience anger, this anger is not Christian anger or Hindu anger, Chinese anger or American anger. Similarly, love and compassion are not the strict province of any community or creed; they are universal human qualities resulting from purity of mind. People from all backgrounds who practice Vipassana find that they become better human beings.

Current World Conditions

Developments in the fields of science and technology, in transportation, communications, agriculture and medicine have revolutionized human life at the material level. But this progress is only superficial; underneath, modern men and women are living in conditions of great mental and emotional stress, even in developed and affluent countries.

The problems and conflicts arising from racial, ethnic, sectarian and class prejudices affect the citizens of every country. Poverty, warfare, weapons of mass destruction, disease, drug addiction, the threat of terrorism, epidemic environmental devastation and the general decline of moral values -- all cast a dark shadow on the future of civilization. One need only glance at the front page of a daily newspaper to be reminded of the acute suffering and deep despair which afflict the inhabitants of our planet. Is there a way out of these seemingly insoluble problems?

The answer is unequivocally, yes. People everywhere are eager to find a way to achieve peace and harmony, one that can restore confidence in the efficacy of wholesome human qualities and create an environment of freedom and security from all types of exploitation -- social, religious and economic. Vipassana is such a method.

The technique of Vipassana is a path leading to freedom from all suffering; it eradicates the craving, aversion and ignorance which are responsible for all our miseries. Those who practice it remove, little by little, the root causes of their suffering and steadily emerge from their former tensions to lead happy, healthy productive lives.

The individual is the key. Each person must be treated with love and compassion. Each must be trained to improve -- not by exhortations to follow moral precepts, but by being instilled with the authentic desire to change. Human beings must be taught to investigate their true natures, to initiate a process which can bring about transformation and lead to purification of mind. This is the only change which will endure.

Vipassana has the capacity to transform the human mind and character. The opportunity is awaiting all who sincerely wish to make the effort.

About Michigan Vipassana Association

In 2002, a small group of students of S.N. Goenka from Michigan organized the first 10-day Vipassana Meditation course in Michigan. A suitable site was found in Brighton, Michigan, within a one-hour drive from Lansing and Detroit. The course was held from 17th to 28th April 2002. Thirty-three new students, five old students and nine full-time dhamma servers attended the course.

On July 19, 2002, during the 2002 Meditation Now Tour of North America, S.N. Goenka honored his students in Michigan by visiting the group in Brighton. He gave Anapana instructions to the students attending the course. Mr. Goenka was very keen on the prospects for developing a Vipassana meditation center in Michigan. During the brief visit he recommended that the site be secured for conducting courses and establishing a center.

The Michigan Vipassana Association is a registered non-profit, charitable organization whose sole purpose is to provide Vipassana courses to the public. It attempts to fulfill this obligation by organizing meditation courses for adults and children on a continued basis. To date MVA has held twelve 10-day courses, two 3-day courses for old students, and one children's course. The rented facility in Brighton can accommodate 25 female and 20 male students and up to 15 servers, for a total of 60 participants. The MVA continues to offer 10-day residential courses up to three times annually.

From April 2002 to August 2006, over 500 students and servers came to learn and practice this non-sectarian, ancient technique of self-observation. Although a center has not yet been established in Michigan, there is a devoted community of meditators in Michigan who continue to strive towards this goal.