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What Exactly Is Vipassana Meditation?

By Bhante Henepola Gunaratana

The distinction between **Vipassana meditation** and other styles of meditation is crucial and needs to be fully understood. **Buddhism** addresses two major types of meditation. They are different mental skills, modes of functioning or qualities of consciousness. In Pali, the original language of Theravada literature, they are called Vipassana and **Samatha**.

Vipassana can be translated as “Insight,” a clear awareness of exactly what is happening as it happens. **Samatha** can be translated as “concentration” or “tranquility.” It is a state in which the mind is brought to rest, focused only on one item and not allowed to wander. When this is done, a deep calm pervades body and mind, a state of tranquility which must be experienced to be understood.

Most systems of meditation emphasize the **Samatha** component. The meditator focuses his mind upon some items, such as prayer, a certain type of box, a chant, a candle flame, a religious image or whatever, and excludes all other thoughts and perceptions from his consciousness. The result is a state of rapture which lasts until the meditator ends the session of sitting. It is beautiful, delightful, meaningful and alluring, but only temporary. **Vipassana** meditation addresses the other component, insight.

In **Vipassana** meditation, the meditator uses his concentration as a tool by which his awareness can chip away at the wall of illusion that cuts him off from the living light of reality. It is a gradual process of ever-increasing awareness into the inner workings of reality itself. It takes years, but one day the meditator chisels through that wall and tumbles into the presence of light. The transformation is complete. It's called Liberation, and it's permanent. Liberation is the goal of all Buddhist systems of practice. But the routes to the attainment of that end are quite diverse.

The Oldest Buddhist Meditation Practice

Vipassana is the oldest of Buddhist meditation practices. The method comes directly from the **Satipatthana Sutta [Foundations of Mindfulness]**, a discourse attributed to the **Buddha** himself. Vipassana is a direct and gradual cultivation of mindfulness or awareness. It proceeds piece by piece over a period of years. The student's attention is carefully directed to an intense examination of certain aspects of his own existence. The meditator is trained to notice more and more of his own flowing life experience.

Vipassana is a gentle technique. But it also is very, very thorough. It is an ancient and codified system of training your mind, a set of exercises dedicated to becoming more and more aware of your own life experience. It is attentive listening, mindful seeing and careful testing.

We learn to smell acutely, to touch fully, and to really pay attention to the changes taking place in all these experiences. We learn to listen to our own thoughts without being caught up in them. The object of Vipassana meditation practice is to learn to see the truth of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness of phenomena.

We think we are doing this already, but that is an illusion. It comes from the fact that we are paying so little attention to the ongoing surge of our own life experience that we might just as well be asleep. We are simply not paying enough attention to notice that we are not paying attention. It is another Catch-22.

Meditation as Discovery

Through the process of mindfulness, we slowly become aware of what we really are down below the ego image. We wake up to what life really is. It is not just a parade of ups and downs, lollipops and smacks on the wrist. That is an illusion. Life has a much deeper texture than that if we bother to look, and if we look in the right way.

Vipassana is a form of mental training that will teach you to experience the world in an entirely new way. You will learn for the first time what is truly

happening to you, around you and within you. It is a process of self-discovery, a participatory investigation in which you observe your own experiences while participating in them as they occur.

“Never mind what I have been taught. Forget about theories and prejudices and stereotypes.”

The practice must be approached with this attitude: “Never mind what I have been taught. Forget about theories and prejudices and stereotypes. I want to understand the true nature of life. I want to know what this experience of being alive really is. I want to apprehend the true and deepest qualities of life, and I don’t want to just accept somebody else’s explanation. I want to see it for myself.”

If you pursue your meditation practice with this attitude, you will succeed. You’ll find yourself observing things objectively, exactly as they are-flowing and changing from moment to moment. Life then takes on an unbelievable richness which cannot be described. It has to be experienced.

Vipassana & Bhavana

The Pali term for Insight meditation is Vipassana Bhavana. Bhavana comes from the root *bh*, which means to grow or to become. Therefore Bhavana means to cultivate, and the word is always used in reference to the mind. Bhavana means mental cultivation. Vipassana is derived from two roots. Passana means seeing or perceiving. Vi is a prefix with a complex set of connotations. The basic meaning is “in a special way.” But there also is the connotation of both “into” and “through.”

The whole meaning of the word is looking into something with clarity and precision, seeing each component as distinct, and piercing all the way through so as to perceive the most fundamental reality of that thing. This process leads to insight into the basic reality of whatever is being inspected. Put it all together and Vipassana Bhavana means the cultivation of the mind, aimed at seeing in the special way that leads to insight and to full understanding.

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The method we are explaining here is probably what Gotama Buddha taught his students. The Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha's original discourse on mindfulness, specifically says that one must begin by focusing the attention on the breathing and then go on to note all other physical and mental phenomena which arise.

We sit, watching the air going in and out of our noses. At first glance, this seems an exceedingly odd and useless procedure. Before going on to specific instructions, let us examine the reason behind it.

Why focusing is important

The first question we might have is why use any focus of attention at all? We are, after all, trying to develop awareness. Why not just sit down and be aware of whatever happens to be present in the mind? In fact, there are meditations of that nature. They are sometimes referred to as unstructured meditation and they are quite difficult.

The mind is tricky. Thought is an inherently complicated procedure. By that we mean that we become trapped, wrapped up, and stuck in the thought chain. One thought leads to another which leads to another, and another, and another, and so on. Fifteen minutes later we suddenly wake up and realize we spent that whole time stuck in a daydream or sexual fantasy or a set of worries about our bills or whatever.

We **use breath** as our focus. It serves as that vital reference point from which the mind wanders and is drawn back. Distraction cannot be seen as distraction unless there is some central focus to be distracted from. That is the frame of reference against which we can view the incessant changes and interruptions that go on all the time as a part of normal thinking.

Taming Wild Elephants

Ancient Pali texts liken meditation to the process of taming a wild elephant. The procedure in those days was to tie a newly captured animal to a post with a good strong rope. When you do this, the elephant is not happy. He screams

and tramples, and pulls against the rope for days. Finally it sinks through his skull that he can't get away, and he settles down.

At this point you can begin to feed him and to handle him with some measure of safety. Eventually you can dispense with the rope and post altogether, and train your elephant for various tasks. Now you have got a tamed elephant that can be put to useful work.

Related: Breathing

In this analogy the wild elephant is your wildly active mind, the rope is mindfulness, and the post is our object of meditation, our breathing. The tamed elephant who emerges from this process is a well-trained, concentrated mind that can then be used for the exceedingly tough job of piercing the layers of illusion that obscure reality. Meditation tames the mind.

Why Breathing?

The next question we need to address is: Why choose breathing as the primary object of meditation? Why not something a bit more interesting? Answers to this are numerous. A useful object of meditation should be one that promotes mindfulness. It should be portable, easily available, and cheap. It should also be something that will not embroil us in those states of mind from which we are trying to free ourselves, such as greed, anger, and delusion.

Breathing satisfies all these criteria and more. It is common to every human being. We all carry it with us wherever we go. It is always there, constantly available, never ceasing from birth till death, and it costs nothing.

Breathing is a non-conceptual process, a thing that can be experienced directly without a need for thought. Furthermore, it is a very living process, an aspect of life that is in constant change. The breath moves in cycles-inhalation, exhalation, breathing in, and breathing out. Thus, it is a miniature model of life itself.

Breath is a phenomenon common to all living things. A true experiential understanding of the process moves you closer to other living beings. It shows

you your inherent connectedness with all of life. Finally, breathing is a present-time process.

The first step in using the breath as an object of meditation is to find it. What you are looking for is the physical, tactile sensation of the air that passes in and out of the nostrils. This is usually just inside the tip of the nose. But the exact spot varies from one person to another, depending on the shape of the nose.

To find your own point, take a quick deep breath and notice and point just inside the nose or on the upper tip where you have the most distinct sensation of passing air. Now exhale and notice the sensation at the same point. It is from this point that you will follow the whole passage of breath.

Not Always Easy

When you first begin this procedure, expect to face some difficulties. Your mind will wander off constantly darting, around like a bumble bee and zooming off on wild tangents. Try not to worry. The monkey mind phenomenon is well known. It is something that every advanced meditator has had to deal with. They have pushed through it one way or another, and so can you.

When it happens, just note the fact that you have been thinking, day-dreaming, worrying, or whatever. Gently, but firmly, without getting upset or judging yourself for straying, simply return to the simple physical sensation of the breath. Then do it again the next time, and again, and again, and again.

Essentially, Vipassana meditation is a process of retraining the mind. The state you are aiming for is one in which you are totally aware of everything that is happening in your own perceptual universe, exactly the way it happens, exactly when it is happening; total, unbroken awareness in present time.

This is an incredibly high goal, and not to be reached all at once. It takes practice, so we start small. We start by becoming totally aware of one small unit of time, just one single inhalation. And, when you succeed, you are on your way to a whole new experience of life.



Learn more about [Vipassana here in Buddhism for Beginners](https://tricycle.org/print/?pid=34748).

Read how colonialism sparked the Vipassana movement in the feature article “*Meditation en Masse.*”

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