

The Vipassana Retreat

Ven. Pannyavaro



E-mail: bdea@buddhanet.net
Web site: www.buddhanet.net

Buddha Dharma Education Association Inc.

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ABOUT THE VIPASSANA RETREAT

VIPASSANA MEDITATION requires long-term commitment. While it can be done to some extent in everyday life, realistically for the practice to deepen it needs to be done intensively in a supportive retreat situation. Vipassana meditation is developmental, so to realise its ultimate benefit it has to be sustained with appropriate intensity under supportive conditions such as the Seven Types of Suitability:

- Place or Dwelling—well-furnished and supported centre or monastery, secluded and quiet, easily accessible, few insects, basic requirements of food, clothes and medicine.
- Location—not too far or close to town.
- Food—a balanced diet, healthy, digestible and nourishing, taken in moderate amounts.
- People—other meditators as companions, considerate with good attitude and practice.
- Teacher (kalyana-mitta)—learned and respected teacher who speaks and listens well.
- Noble Silence—other than informative Dhamma talks and interviews with the teacher.
- Weather—not too hot or cold, i.e. a temperate climate.

Vipassana retreat centres specialising in the needs of vipassana practitioners have evolved around the world to cater for these requirements and conditions, usually to the exclusion of any worldly, religious or study activities.

The intensive Vipassana retreat centre catering for lay people is a quite recent trend in Buddhism. Originating in Myanmar (Burma) after the Second World War when the Burmese Prime Minister U Nu, a keen meditator, invited the late Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw to teach in a meditation centre he set up in Yangon (Rangoon), the Mahasi Sasana Yeiktha. This was the beginning of the modern revival of Vipassana meditation, which originated in Myanmar and soon spread to other Theravada Buddhist countries in Asia and then later to retreat centres in the West.

A worldwide insight meditation culture has now evolved which caters for lay meditators who are not necessarily Buddhists, often with lay teachers, supported by senior monastic teachers in the lineage. This style of practice, while demanding, has proved to be popular as vipassana techniques can be systematically taught, and now there exists a pool of knowledge and experience with a variety of trained teachers from many different countries.

An introductory retreat usually lasts two or three days, while the intensive retreats can run for ten, sixteen, thirty days or even up to three months. They are conducted in noble silence, which includes no talking, no communication through body language, no listening to music, no reading or writing except for brief notes recording the meditation experience. There are however, opportunities to discuss the practice with the teacher through individual interviews or group discussions.

A typical retreat day begins between 4 and 6am and usually ends around 10 or 11pm, with a rest period in the middle of the day after lunch. The whole day is spent practising sitting and walking meditation, cultivating continuous attention to the changing nature of the moment-to-moment experience. The retreat teacher gives evening talks to inspire and explain the

practice, providing a time for questions and answers, as well as conducting personal interviews usually every second day.

An intensive Vipassana meditation retreat is a serious undertaking, which requires effort and self-discipline. A retreat is not a chance to escape the pressures of daily life, nor a time out in which to do one's own thing. Rather it is an opportunity to cultivate the Buddha's way of liberation through the practice of ethics (sila), meditation (samadhi), and insight (panna). Walking this path, we can learn to abandon actions of body, speech and mind that bring suffering to ourselves and those around us, and cultivate actions that bring happiness and harmony to ourselves and those around us.

Above all, the Vipassana retreat requires that the meditator leaves aside mundane preoccupations and commit him or herself to the practice that can realise Ultimate Reality. The late Mahasi Sayadaw gave this advice, "If you sincerely desire to develop contemplation and attain insight in your present life, you must give up worldly thoughts and actions during training".

BASIC INSTRUCTIONS FOR VIPASSANA MEDITATION

by Ven. Pannyavaro
(Buddha Dharma Education Association,
Tullera NSW Australia)

THE MEANING OF VIPASSANA

THE PALI TERM ‘VIPASSANA’ is a combination of two words: *Vi* + *passana*. *Vi* means various and *passana* translates as right understanding or mindfulness (*sati*) of ones mentality and physicality.

The term *Vipassana* is also rendered as ‘insight’, that is, insight into the three universal characteristics of existence: change, unsatisfactoriness and insubstantiality. Alternatively, this practice is called Insight Meditation, which is derived from the Pali name for this practice *Vipassana Bhavana*, meaning the development of insight.

The Three Areas of Practice

1. Sitting—the primary focus is on the rise and fall movement of the abdomen, switching to secondary objects, such as pain, sensations, thinking, etc. as they arise.
2. Walking—the component parts of the steps in walking are noted and known in fine detail.
3. Daily Activities—detailed awareness of all body movements and mental activities, using the support of mental noting or labeling throughout the day’s activities.

Linking these three areas of practice together will create an unbroken ‘thread of awareness’ that will give accumulated momentum to the practice.

Technique of Mental Noting

A useful device to support meditative attention is naming or labeling the various objects during the investigation of your own body and mind. Used judiciously, it is a useful tool for focusing and sustaining the attention. The noting is done by repeatedly making a mental note of whatever arises in your body and mind experience. For example, 'hearing', 'hearing', 'thinking', 'thinking', 'touching', 'touching', etc. This is a powerful aid to help establish attentiveness, especially at the beginning of the practice, when it is vital to systematically note or label as much as possible to establish the attention. Otherwise, you are likely to get lost in unnoticed wanderings with long periods of inattention.

Only when you have succeeded in sustaining the attention, and the awareness has matured, should the mental noting be dropped. If the noting has become mechanical or is so clumsy that it is interfering with the subtle attention then one needs to do it more lightly. In noting, ninety percent or more of the effort should go into being with the experience of the object, the rest in the labeling.

Having acquired the ability to monitor your experience with just bare attention, you will need to return to the mental noting only when the attention weakens, is lost or needs to be re-established. The mental noting can be combined with the practice of orientating to your sense impressions by the naming of the physical and mental objects as they arise at the six sense doors. Be careful not to analyse what is being observed, just register or note it without reaction.

Instruction for Sitting Meditation

The first step is to find a balanced sitting posture. You should be relaxed, yet your spine should be straight, with its natural curve, you may have noticed how a 5-year-old sits up in a balanced way

without effort. Allow your head to balance freely on the spine, checking that it is not pulled back or fixed. Allow your chin to drop so that your eyes and ears are at about the same level with the face relaxed.

If sitting on the floor, use cushion(s) so that your knees are below your hips and in contact with the floor (otherwise your spine will collapse) or else use a chair with a firm base (not a sofa). Slumping only increases the pressure on the legs and discomfort in the back. Try radiating loving-kindness above and below and in all directions around you to check that you are not holding or contracting in the front or the back, etc. Check that your breathing is free and easy—any restriction indicates a fixed posture. Turn your awareness to the parts of your body, which contact the cushion, ground or chair, softening onto the supporting surfaces. It is useful to spend five minutes scanning the entire body part by part in order to relax each individual region.

Note that there is no such thing as ‘perfect posture’ and postural aches will come and go as a natural part of the unfolding practice. One’s posture will never be one hundred percent—it is more important to concentrate on the meditation process in hand rather than trying to achieve a perfect posture. If pain becomes overwhelming or is due to injury, mindfully adjust the posture after noting the various sensations. However, as concentration develops, sensations of hotness, stiffness and itchiness will arise as part of the contemplation of feeling and sensation, and it is important to note them mindfully without fidgeting.

It is important to attend to your posture with wisdom, not insensitive willpower. Posture will improve with time, but you need to work with the body, not use force against it. If you have a lot of pain during a period of sitting, change posture, sit on a small stool or chair, or stand up for a while.

Checking your posture

- Are the hips leaning back? This will cause a slump.
- The small of the back should retain its natural, unforced curve so that the abdomen is forward and ‘open’.
- Imagine that someone is gently pushing between the shoulder blades, but keep the muscles relaxed.
- Note and gently release any tension in the neck/shoulder region.

Once you have settled into a comfortable, upright, balanced position you can begin meditating.

On the basis of working from the gross to the subtle, i.e. from the body to the mind, feel the touch sensations of hardness or softness from the body’s contact with the ground or chair (earth element). This will help to anchor the attention to the body, especially when assisted by the mental label of ‘touching’, ‘touching’. Then tune into the natural rising and falling movement of the abdomen, making a mental note or label of ‘rising’, ‘rising’ concurrent with the upward movement and ‘falling’, ‘falling’ with the downward movement.

Make sure when noting the rise and fall movement of the abdomen that you are connecting with the airflow and are not merely knowing the conceptual form and shape of the abdomen. You are always looking for the specific characteristics, such as vibration, pressure, etc—the subtlest phenomena, the fine nuances of the movement.

It is important to be alert to the specific characteristics of the various elements under observation, e.g., the series of sensations from the movement of the abdomen (wind element) or the specific characteristics found in pain such as heat, throbbing, etc. (fire element). The traditional sitting posture gives the right environmental conditions and allows you to focus intensely and

apprehend, at a microscopic level, the body's elements and the subtle mind events.

The Transition in the Change Over

At the end of each sitting session make a gentle transition. That is do not abruptly drop the meditation, but carefully follow through to being aware of unfolding the limbs, noting the release of the pressure in the posture, the movements in standing up and stretching, thereby carrying the practice into the next activity. Take extra care in the traveling between the sitting posture and the formal walking meditation noting all of the detailed movements of the body. Try to do it without a break—as it is the continuity of the practice that will deepen it.

Technique in Walking Meditation

While meditation is usually associated with the sitting posture, vipassana meditation exercises are also practised while walking. The walking exercise is essentially about the awareness of movement as you note the component parts of the steps. Alternating walking meditation with sitting meditation helps to keep ones meditation practice in balance, and the mind fresh and the body relaxed.

Walking meditation is also a skillful way to energise the practice if the calming effect of sitting is making you dull or you are becoming over concentrated. Actually, for many experienced insight meditators it can be the preferred mode as it is meditation in action.

You will need to find a level surface from five to fifteen metres long on which you can walk back and forth. Your arms should hang naturally with your hands lightly clasped in front. Gaze at a point about two metres in front of you on the ground to avoid visual distractions. Establish your attentiveness by first noting the standing posture and the touch sensation of the feet

at the start of the walking track. Then as you walk keep the attention on the sole of the foot, not on the leg or any other part of the body.

For the first five to ten minutes or so, you can start with noting each step as 'left', 'right'; then you can move to noting three parts of each step: 'lifting', 'pushing', 'dropping'. Mentally note or label each step part by part, building up so that you are noting all six component parts: 'raising', 'lifting', 'pushing', 'dropping', 'touching' and 'pressing'—concurrent with the actual experience of the movements.

While walking and noting the parts of the steps, you will probably find the mind still thinking. Not to worry, keep focused on the noting of the steps, so long as the thoughts remain just 'background thoughts'. However, if you find you have been walking 'lost in thought' you must stop and vigorously note the thinking as 'thinking', 'thinking', 'thinking' until it stops. Then reestablish your attention on the movement of the feet and carry on. Be careful that the mental noting does not become so mechanical that you lose the experience of the movement.

Try to do a minimum walking period of half an hour and build it up to a full hour. Strategically it is better to do a walking period before a sitting session as it brings balance into the practice, specifically first thing in the morning as it loosens stiff muscles and after meal times as it helps to assist digestion. If you can alternate the walking and sitting sessions without any major breaks you will develop a continuity of awareness that naturally carries through into the awareness of daily activities.

Full Awareness of Daily Activities

For awareness to deepen, continuity, which gives momentum to the practice, must be maintained for at least a few hours in the day. Continuity arises through careful and precise attention

to movements, actions, feelings and mind-states, whichever is prominent, for as long as possible during the routine of the day.

Nothing can be dismissed as unimportant when noting daily activities: domestic chores, eating, cleaning your teeth; all are good opportunities for the meditator to practice. Repeatedly note any and every movement and activity in order to establish the habit so that it becomes second nature to note them in your daily routine. Of course, this is not easy to establish and so requires patience and perseverance—especially in being kind to yourself when you feel frustrated by constant forgetfulness!

If you are having difficulty, set yourself up to do a daily mindfulness exercise using a ‘trigger’ as a reminder. For instance, you could use contact with water as a trigger to remind you to be present with whatever you are doing while you are doing it, for instance washing your hands, doing the dishes, hosing the garden, washing the dog, etc. If you succeed only once in paying full attention it might be the start of establishing the habit of being mindful.

It can be helpful to reinforce your efforts in being attentive in daily life by reviewing or taking stock of your daily mindfulness—but without evaluating or making judgments about the practice—and recording your practice in a meditation diary.

The Four Postures

Another practice that can be included in the awareness of daily activities is the noting of the four postures: sitting, standing, walking and lying down. It is a simple thing to do and it can be used as a ‘thread of awareness’ practice throughout the day. That is, you continually note or monitor the four postures at all times. You would start from the moment of awakening in bed in the lying down posture and note or be aware of all the touch contacts of the body on the bed; then as you rise note the sit-

ting posture—as ‘sitting’, and then having got out of bed, you are standing—note ‘standing’, ‘standing’, and as you move, note ‘walking’, ‘walking’.

You can monitor the four main postures throughout the day in this way until the end of the day when you lay down the body to take rest for the night. You can find more detail in the posture movements as you make a transition from one posture to another, as this will maintain the continuity of the attention, which in vipassana practice, is the key to its success.

THE RETREAT INTERVIEW

HAVING MASTERED the basics of the practice, students are required to report their experience to the teacher in a formal interview. As in the Zen tradition, the daily interview is an essential part of the Theravadin vipassana style of practice.

The interview is the basis for the relationship between the teacher and the student. It is crucial for the development of insight meditation as it is where the meditator reports his or her experience and can be guided and given further instructions by the teacher.

The communication with the teacher and the ability to report in the interview can greatly affect the outcome of the practice. While the teacher will try to encourage and inspire the meditator, it is not a counseling or therapy session. Rather it is more of a technical report by the meditator of what is happening in their practice.

The teacher will check the student’s grasp of the technique and make corrections, and if need be give further instructions. In this way it will assist the meditator to eventually manage their own practice and clarify what they are doing to help them progress further.

As meditators are working in unfamiliar territory, often one will find that they do not report their experiences satisfactorily or are unable to describe what they are experiencing precisely, even though they might have practiced well.

If the student is having difficulties in reporting his or her practice, the following questions that a teacher would ask about the practice in an interview will help to clarify the meditation experience as well as be the basis for a succinct report that will assist both teacher and student.

The interview can be either one-to-one with the teacher or in a group. It can be on a daily basis or on every other day, while the length of an interview can vary from five to twenty minutes.

What to report

Describe briefly and clearly what is happening in three areas: sitting, walking and daily activities.

Report only new experiences and stick to the point, please do not waste time.

1) Sitting

How long for?

How do you know the primary object of attention—rising & falling of the abdomen—and what do you come to know of it?

Are you able to know (the consciousness of) the objects of attention that is ‘pairing’?

How much thinking, and how are you handling the thinking?

What about pain, and how are you working with it?

What do you notice of feelings?

Are you checking your mind states, and mostly what are they?

Are there any unusual experiences and how are you relating to them?

2) Walking

How long for?

Are you noting the movement concurrent with the experience?

What are you finding in the movement, and what specific characteristics are you able to notice?

Is there much thinking during the walking, if so how do you handle it?

3) Daily Activities

What percentage of the day are you able to be attentive to what you are doing?

Are you able to note the moment of awakening and the moments leading up to sleep?

How detailed can you be?

Can you describe what you noted during meal times?

Are you able to keep a 'thread of awareness' during the day, by noting body movements or just the naming of walking, as 'walking', 'walking' as you get around the retreat centre?

Are there any new experiences to report since the last interview?

Day 1: Orientation to the Practice

The Practice

The Pali Buddhist term for this practice is *Vipassana Bhavana*, which translates as the development of insight. Keep in mind then that this practice is developmental—allowing it to evolve and grow. 'Practice' is repeated performance or the repetition of an action to develop a skill. The skill that is being developed here is that of ongoing attentiveness to mind-body processes,

which is the key to the development of insight.

Adjusting to the Intensive Retreat Situation

Whether this is a first time experience of intensive meditation or you're a meditator who has some experience in this style of practice, every meditator here will need to make some adjustment to the retreat situation as you need to at least wind down, and get into the rhythm of the practice.

Ongoing instruction on the basics of the practice of vipassana meditation will be given, supplemented by personal guidance and further instruction in the interviews during the retreat. For the practice to develop, it is important that the teacher and the students work together in tandem. The teacher must be a technician of vipassana meditation with some travel experience whose role is to instruct and guide the meditator. Even when one goes along with a guide they still have to do their own work, which in this case is quite demanding; because it requires honesty, attentiveness, patience, and above all, persistence.

First let us look how one practices in an intensive retreat situation, and the way to adjust to a retreat environment before we go into the instructional side of things.

A Practical Self-regulatory Approach

This is not a group practice, there are no formal group sittings. The walking and sitting meditation sessions are done individually at your own pace. The approach is self-regulatory practice. Therefore you need to learn how to manage yourself in the practice so that you can make your own adjustments as you go along with the help of the teacher. To 'self-manage' the practice requires that you have a thorough understanding of what one is doing—the techniques and strategies—and the teacher should be there to help you do that.

Putting Aside Unfinished Business

At the beginning of the retreat there can be a lot of busyness of an ongoing nature in the mind that is brought into the retreat. Perhaps there is some ‘unfinished business’ you have not dealt with, especially if it is of an emotional nature such as a problem in a relationship. So at the start of a retreat it is useful to make a determination (adithani) to put aside, as much as possible, all outside business for the duration of the retreat as this will help you to settle.

Be Gentle with Yourself

Be gentle with yourself as you are probably carrying a sleep-debt, are tired or perhaps stressed. Most people will experience some sleepiness and restlessness in a retreat—at least initially. If you allow for that without reacting to it you will very soon find yourself settling down into the routine of the retreat. For most people, it takes at least a few days to settle and for the mind to become reasonably quiet. So allow for this settling in period as you recuperate and let the mind wind down. Then you will be able to give your full attention to what is happening in the mind and body; and as the practice matures then one can perhaps experience the naturally silent mind.

Changing the Focus

In everyday life we are naturally preoccupied with the content of our minds—our story. For the most part we are externally focused on sensory objects. What needs to happen is a change in one’s focus from the sensory world with its external focus to an inner exploration of our own mind-body phenomena. In the intensive retreat situation, as the mind settles down, we switch to investigating the natural processes of the mind and body from a state of receptivity. Although the switch of focus will naturally

happen in the course of the retreat, it is useful to intentionally change the focus of our attention from the external to the internal by inhibiting the wanderings at the sense doors—the seeing, hearing, etc. In this way the attention is refocused to introspect or see into one’s own mind and body experience.

Getting Around in the Retreat Environment

Use the whole of the retreat environment as your practice area. Do not confine the practice just to the formal practice in the meditation hall. It is all about staying watchful and attentive as much as possible in the total retreat environment: in the bathroom, dining-room, sleeping place, and as you travel from place to place. Start by being more deliberate in your movements and actions as you move around the retreat, as this will help you to slow down—to settle. It is recommended that, as the meditator moves around the retreat centre, eyes are lowered with no verbal or non-verbal communication, as this supports the concentration.

Maintaining the Intensity

It is essential to maintain the intensity of the practice without straining. Steady and sustained application is needed in all areas of practice: sitting, walking, and detailed awareness of all activities throughout the day. Effort and energy go together. Nobody can be 100% at all times. One has to go with one’s natural rhythms—one’s energy cycles. A balanced effort is required that has to be as continuous as possible as it will produce the momentum and accumulated awareness that eventually deepens the practice.

Relating to your Experience

Notice how you are relating to your experience. Check whether you are evaluating or judging the practice. Have no expectations.

Right or skillful attitude is one of acceptance of whatever conditions and mind-states arise. Monitor your mind-states, emotions and feelings as much as possible without reacting to them, as this acceptance and non-reactive awareness will develop the maturity factor of equanimity.

HOW TO ACT DURING AN INTENSIVE RETREAT

Act like an invalid

During practice, a meditator needs to move slowly and take extra care while making body movements just like an invalid, as if he or she were suffering from extreme back pain. A person with a chronic back problem must always be cautious and move slowly just to avoid pain. In the same way, a meditator should try to keep to slow and deliberate movements in all actions. While it is not a slow motion exercise, per se, slowing down in intensive meditation is necessary to establish moment-to-moment awareness. If you are still operating in top gear, bring the mind to low gear and be patient with the change of speed until you are able to slow down and function in low gear at all times.

Act like a blind person

It is advisable for a meditator to behave as a blind person during the course of the training. A person without restraint will be constantly scanning around to look at external things that randomly take one's attention. Therefore, it is not possible to obtain a steady and calm state of mind. On the other hand, a blind person behaves in a composed manner, sitting quietly with downcast eyes. One never turns in any direction to look at things because, of course, they are blind and cannot see them. This composed manner of a blind person is worth imitating. A meditator should not go sightseeing. Stay focused on the meditation object without exception. If a sight happens to take one's

attention, they must make a mental note of it immediately, as “seeing”, ‘seeing”.

Act like a deaf person

It is necessary for a meditator to also act like a deaf person. Ordinarily, as soon as a person hears a sound, one turns around and looks in the direction from which the sound came, or they turn towards the person who spoke and makes a reply. A deaf person on the other hand, behaves in a composed manner. They do not respond to any sound or conversation because they never hear them. In the same way, a meditator should not respond to any sound or any unimportant talk, nor should he deliberately listen to any talk. If one happens to hear any sound or speech, one should immediately note “hearing”, hearing”. The meditator should be so intent on the practice that they could be mistaken for a deaf person.

In brief, act like a vipassana meditator—careful and aware, patient, restraint, no distracting communication, relaxed, self-monitoring, eager, accepting conditions, graceful, inquisitive, diligent, detached sensually, and equanimous.

Day 2: The Path of Purification

AFTER HIS ENLIGHTENMENT and when he had decided to teach, the Buddha said that he had rediscovered an ancient path, which he gave in a teaching called the Satipatthana Sutta, that translates as the discourse on the ‘presence of mindfulness’. This text is a path map with detailed instructions on the practice of ‘presence of mind’ or mindfulness. The purpose of this practice path is the purification of one’s mind and the outcome is final liberation or Nibbana.

This text maps out the process of transformation of the meditator's consciousness as practice develops, and outlines the stages of progress from the beginning of the path to its ultimate destination—transformation of consciousness, and thus liberation.

The Buddha very clearly stated the aims and outcome of this practice allowing for no doubt or misinterpretation. In the preamble to the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha said:

“Monks, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the ending of suffering (*dukkha*), for acquiring the true method, for the realisation of Nibbana—by means of the four *satipatthanas*”.

Within this path there are various routes one can take, but essentially the destination is the path of liberation, whichever route you happen to take. The choice of the route, and the subjects given, are to be found in the four divisions and twenty-one subjects in the text.

The framework for the practice consists of four divisions or contemplations: bodily phenomena (*kayanupassana*), feelings and sensations (*vedananupassana*), consciousness together with its associates (*cittanupassana*), and mind objects (*dhammanupassana*).

1. Contemplation of the Body or Bodily Phenomena (6 subjects)*
2. Contemplation of Feelings or Sensations
3. Contemplation of Consciousness and/or Mind States
4. Contemplation of Dhammas or Mind Objects (5 subjects)**

*Contemplation of Bodily Phenomena has six subjects:

- (i) Mindfulness of breathing
- (ii) Four postures of the body; sitting, standing, walking and lying down

- (iii) Clear comprehension of activities
- (iv) Contemplation of the 32 parts of the body
- (v) Four material elements; air, water, fire and earth
- (vi) Nine cemetery contemplations

Contemplation of Feelings consists of three qualities:
pleasant, unpleasant, neutral

Contemplation of Mind States are either:

- Wholesome i.e. happiness, elated, rapture, calm
- Unwholesome i.e. sadness, depressed, angry, restlessness

**Contemplation of Dhammas or Mind Objects has five subjects:

- (i) The Five hindrances
- (ii) The Five aggregates
- (iii) Six internal and six external sense-spheres
- (iv) Seven factors of enlightenment
- (v) The Four Noble Truths

Five Hindrances or obstacles to the practice:

- Sensuality
- Ill will
- Mental inertia
- Restlessness and worry
- Skeptical doubt

Five Aggregates of Grasping:

- Body
- Feelings
- Perception
- Mental formations
- Consciousness

Seven Factors of Enlightenment:

- Mindfulness
- Investigation of the dhamma (phenomena)
- Effort
- Rapture
- Tranquility
- Concentration
- Equanimity

Six Internal and Six External Sense-Spheres:

- Eye and sights
- Ear and sounds
- Nose and smells
- Tongue and tastes
- Body and tangibles
- Mind and thoughts, memories or reflections

Four Noble Truths:

- The fact of suffering
- Cause of suffering
- Ending of suffering
- Way to the ending of suffering, i.e. the Noble Eight-Fold Path

Access to Insight

This particular approach, or the access to insight, follows the lineage of the late Mahasi Sayadaw of Myanmar (Burma). The method is that of 'bare insight', where, by direct observation, one's own bodily and mental processes are seen with increasing clarity as the 'Three Universal Characteristics': impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-me, not-myself (anicca, dukkha, anatta).

The 'bare insight' meditator begins by watching the air element (vayo-dhatu) manifesting as vibration or movement in the abdomen in sitting, and as movement in the walking. This

is from the Four Material Elements meditation, focusing primarily on the wind or air element, combined with clear comprehension of activities. The other main sections of the Satipatthana Sutta: feelings, consciousness and mental objects are worked with as secondary objects when they predominate.

Two Types of Meditation

For clarity, one needs to know that there are two types of meditation: serenity meditation (*samatha*), which is based on fixing on a single object to achieve one-pointed concentration; and insight meditation (*vipassana*), which is an experiential investigation of one's own mind/body processes. These two types of meditation can be combined, or *vipassana* as 'pure insight' meditation can be done by itself.

Three Types of Concentration

As it is necessary for the meditator to know the two types of meditation and their outcomes, it is also useful to understand the three types of concentration in meditation, they are: one-pointedness (*appana*), access (*upacara*) and momentary concentration (*khanika*). As one-pointedness is largely confined to serenity meditation (*samatha*) it is enough here to explain the other two types of concentration found in pure *vipassana* meditation.

Momentary concentration (*khanika samadhi*)

The bare *vipassana* meditator uses momentary concentration, which comes about through the noting of *vipassana* objects, that is, noting the various mental and physical phenomena that occur in the mind and body, as they arise. It is called *khanika* (momentary) because it occurs only at the moment of noting and, in the case of *vipassana*, not on a fixed object as in *samatha* meditation,

but on changing objects or phenomena that occur in the mind and body from moment to moment.

Access or Threshold Concentration (*upacara samadhi*)

In vipassana, access or threshold concentration arises with fluency in the practice, but it is not specifically induced in any way. Access and momentary concentration are more than sufficient for vipassana practice as most of the subjects in the Sati-patthana Sutta lead only to access or momentary concentration. The exceptions are: mindfulness of breathing (*anapanasati*) and contemplation of the repulsiveness of the body (*asubha*). The other sections develop *upacara samadhi* (threshold) and *khanika* (momentary) concentration. Generally it can be said that a person reaches *upacara samadhi* when the five hindrances are inhibited.

It was necessary to briefly explain the concentration required in this practice because of the confusion and controversy regarding the type of concentration in vipassana meditation—whether it is better to do *Jhana*, that is meditative absorption, first or whether *khanika samadhi* is strong enough to do the job. So let me assure you that *khanika samadhi* is more than enough for this practice as is verified by the thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of meditators who have attained by going down the pure awareness path.

We are following the path of the dry or bare vipassana practitioner, without *Jhanas*, whose knowledge is not from learning, reading or listening to talks, but from intuition or one's own direct experience. By experientially knowing the characteristics of the mind and body with insight into their impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and insubstantiality, the meditator is freed by wisdom alone.

The conditions that exist in the modern world are not con-

ducive to developing the *Jhanas*. With the pressures and stressful pace of life, most people can find little time for meditation; the same can be said for the ordained Sangha as well, as they too can be caught up in administrative work and study.

Ways to Work with Mental Impurities

It is helpful to make a model of the mind to explain the three practices; of restraint, serenity or calm meditation and mindfulness meditation, that go with them, as a way to work with the impurities of the mind. The three levels of the mind are: dormant/hidden, manifest and expressed. The dormant or hidden level is where the impurities of the mind reside or are stored; the manifest level is where this material rises to the surface or to the conscious level of mind as thought; while the expressed mode is where this material is expressed in words or actions.

An analogy to explain how this works is that of a sleeping snake, which represents the dormant negative material, such as anger in the mind. When the snake is disturbed, it becomes active and thrashes about like angry thoughts in the mind; then the snake strikes, as when one expresses the anger in words or actions.

Thus, restraint (*sila*) is applied to inhibit the expression of the anger, as there is always some consequence from the expression of negative energy. But of course the anger is still active in the manifest level of mind; here we can use a pacifying, or calm concentration-based meditation such as loving-kindness to still the mind. But this negative material still remains in the dormant, or hidden level of the mind until vipassana or mindfulness meditation roots out the hidden mental impurities, or defilements (*kilesas*), of greed, hatred and delusion.

The Process of Purifying the Mind

As well as leading to the Insight Knowledges (*vipassana nana*)

and ultimately to Path and Fruition Attainment (*magga-phala*) through experientially knowing the Three Universal Characteristics of Existence, *vipassana Bhavana*, or the development of insight, is the process where the purification of the mind itself takes place.

The 5, 8, 10 Precepts or the 227 rules of the monk are undertaken by the meditator to restrain the mind and develop morality (*sila*). But precepts and rules by themselves do not purify the mind, especially as there is a tendency to ritualize them rather than actualizing them. While they can be helpful in restraining one's behaviour, being conceptual they are not experientially transforming of themselves.

Concentration (*samadhi*) by itself merely suppresses the mental impurities temporarily as it works only on the manifest level of the mind. It does not cleanse the dormant, or latent level, of the mind, that is, the inherent tendencies of the mind. *Vipassana* meditation is the one way, or direct path, the Buddha said in the preamble of the *Satipatthana Sutta*, to purify the mind.

Psychotherapy before Meditation?

In the Western meditation culture, there is a debate on whether one needs to do psychotherapy before meditation. This is because some meditators seem to be experiencing mental problems and difficulties as they meditate. Actually, from a Buddhist perspective it is the *kilesas*, or mental impurities of greed, hatred and delusion that meditators are experiencing which are not to be confused with psychological clinical conditions such as psychosis, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorders and such.

At least initially, it is an essential part of the *vipassana* experience that one goes through the natural purification process that the Buddha referred to in the *Satipatthana Sutta*. One has to allow a ventilation of the deep mental content as one medi-

tates, so that the dormant impurities of anger, lust, and delusion, etc. are released—that is cleansed.

The attitude of the meditator or the way he or she relates to the meditation experience is critical in the practice; as it is vital that one allows any negative material to surface and not react or play back into it. In this way, a non-reactive awareness develops that allows for a natural purging and cleansing of the mind.

Referring back to the text we have been following, the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha gave us a specific time frame for attainment in this practice, from 7 years to 7 days. For a beginner, a 10-day retreat is not enough time to complete the practice, but by working sincerely during this retreat you can establish the basis for an ongoing practice, which potentially can lead to the ultimate liberation and absolute peace of Nibbana.

Recommended source material:

*The Satipatthana Sutta can be found in Venerable Nyanaponika's first-rate book on vipassana meditation: "The Heart of Buddhist Meditation", or for a deeper analysis of the text "Satipatthana, the Direct Path to Realisation", by Ven. Analayo. Published by Windhorse Publications 2003.

Day 3: Investigating the Reality of the Body

WE LIVE in a world of concept and apparent reality, rather than what actually is—ultimate reality. The body, as matter or material properties (rupa), is one of the Four Ultimate Realities (paramattha dhammas) in Buddhism together with consciousness (citta), mental properties (cetasika), and Nibbana, and therefore is an object of vipassana meditation. To be free of

illusion one needs to penetrate to the actual reality of the mind-body phenomena. The vipassana meditator, working from the gross to the subtle, that is the body to the mind, experientially investigates the body to know its true nature, its reality.

The Buddha lists the body as the first of the five aggregates or groups we grasp at, that is, identify with as ‘me, myself’—the other aggregates are: feelings, perceptions, mental constructions and consciousness. The question then is: is it possible to have a direct experience of the body’s phenomenon without automatically identifying with it?

It is not so easy to be free of this identification, as medical science has well documented with the ‘lost limb syndrome’ where a person who loses a limb, will act as if the lost limb is still there, even apparently feeling painful sensations in the missing limb. There is an automatic and unconscious identification with the body’s form and shape. That is, we have a deeply imprinted image in our mind’s eye—a phantom—of the shape and appearance of the body, not what is actually there.

How then to access the reality of the body while not automatically identify with it? One way is to deeply investigate the body phenomena at its elemental level, that is, through the four primary elements of earth, air, fire and water, or the corresponding experiences of hardness and softness, movement and vibration, temperature, and fluidity. Such an introspection of the body will expose just the elements in the body and thus the meditator momentarily loses the sense of the body’s boundaries, thereby loosening the gross identification with the body to eventually experiencing the body with the other aggregates as just rising and passing away (anicca).

In investigating the body, the primary object in this meditation is the tactile bodily process of motion, evident in the rising and falling movement of the abdomen, at the centre of the body.

The 'inner wind element' is active in the body as motion, vibration and pressure manifesting itself in the passage of air through the body (e.g. in breathing) and also in the movement of limbs and organs. It becomes perceptible as a tactile process, as an object of touch, through the *pressure* or pushing feeling caused by it. The meditator is tuning into these particular, or specific characteristics, in the movement of the abdomen, which will then reveal or expose the Three Universal Characteristics of change, unsatisfactoriness and insubstantiality.

Insight meditators who focus on the body as their primary meditation object should have the same body consciousness as an elite athlete in training and preparing his or her body for their sport. Ideally, the meditator's body is open and relaxed so that he or she can tune into the internal and external movements from a state of mental receptivity.

If on the other hand, the meditator's body is tight and tense, the practice becomes a struggle and one is easily out of tune with the present moment. So at the beginning of a sitting session, check to see if the body is relaxed and if at any time during the session you notice that the body has tensed, do a body scan, that is, scan through the body part-by-part, relaxing each region as the awareness moves through the body, while softening into any tension or contraction you find. If the body is contracted so must be the mind. Be open and allowing, as the practice is about receptivity and openness, just tuning in to what actually is.

Do not interfere. Do not force or manipulate the movement of the abdomen in any way, just sense the natural movement. Beginners often assume that they must stay focused on the abdomen movement all the time and measure their success on whether they achieve this or not. In actuality, within say an hour sitting session, the abdomen movement might only be discernible for short periods of time; other objects such as body

sensations, mind states and thinking become predominant and so must be noted as secondary objects until they disappear.

While the meditator is focused on the body phenomena, there are actually two things going on that one needs to be aware of: the object and the ‘knowing of it’ or the ‘consciousness of it’, for example, body sensations and the associated awareness which knows the sensations, i.e. hearing and listening. This practice is known as ‘pairing’ and needs to be established from the very beginning of the practice. In this way the meditator will come to appreciate that what is observing the phenomena is just the ‘knowing’ or the mind knowing the mind and ‘not me or myself’.

To have the clarity that leads to insight, the meditator needs to be able to differentiate between mind and body. Normally, the mind and body tend to merge or we act as if the body leads. Yet the Buddha tells us in the first verse of the Dhammapada that: “Mind precedes all knowables, mind is their chief, mind-made are they”. Seeing the distinction between mind and body will create the mental space, which will free us from identification with the phenomena, allowing one to witness the mind and body relationship as an impartial observer without identification.

Walking meditation in *vipassana bhavana* is a practice of investigating movement in the six component parts of the steps during walking; the meditator slows down and pays close attention in order to see all of the movements and stages clearly. Then what had appeared to be just one continuous movement is seen to be clearly defined stages. He or she will know that the lifting movement is not mixed with the moving forward movement, and the moving forward movement is not mixed with either the lifting or the putting down movement. That is, the illusion of continuity is broken.

As the practice develops, the meditators will observe much

more. When lifting the foot they will observe lightness of the foot. When their foot is raised, it will become lighter and lighter. When they move the foot forward, they will notice the pushing sensations and the movement from one place to another. When they put the foot down, they will feel the heaviness of the foot, because the foot becomes heavier and heavier as it descends. When they put their foot on the ground they will feel the touch of the foot on the ground and the hardness or softness of the foot on the ground.

When these processes are perceived, meditators are knowing the qualities of the essential elements, i.e. heaviness, lightness, heat, vibration, etc. By paying close attention to the stages of walking meditation, the four elements in their true essence are perceived, not merely as concepts, but as actual processes, as ultimate realities.

As the meditator continues to practise walking meditation, he or she will come to realise that, with every movement, there is also the noting mind, the awareness of the mind. There is the lifting movement and also the mind that is aware of the lifting. In the next movement there is the moving forward movement and also the mind that is aware of the forward movement. In addition, the meditator will realise that both the movement and the awareness arise and disappear in that moment very quickly, like a flash of lightning. So the meditator will perceive mind and matter, arising and disappearing at every moment. At one moment there is the lifting of the foot and the awareness of the lifting, at the next moment there is the movement forward and the awareness of the movement, and so on. These can be understood as a pair, mind and matter (nama-rupa), which arise and disappear at every moment.

Another process that meditators will discover is that they lift the foot because they want to, move the foot forward because

they want to, put it down and press the ground because they want to. That is, they realise that an intention precedes every movement—that is, the mind precedes the body. After the intention, lifting occurs. They come to understand the conditionality of all these occurrences—these movements never arise by themselves, without conditions. There is a cause or condition for every movement and that the condition, in this case, is the mental intention preceding every movement.

When meditators comprehend mind and matter arising and disappearing at every moment, then they will understand the impermanence of the process of lifting the foot, and they will see the impermanence of the awareness of the lifting. The occurrence of disappearing after arising is a mark or characteristic by which we understand that something is impermanent. The next understanding is unsatisfactoriness, which is seen because of the constant arising and disappearing of phenomena and is experienced as oppressive.

After comprehending impermanence and the unsatisfactory nature of things, the meditator observes that there is no control over these things, that is, things are arising and disappearing according to natural laws. Thus, the meditator by this time has understood the three characteristics of all conditioned phenomena: change, unsatisfactoriness and insubstantiality.

The benefit of practising vipassana meditation is that it will free us from attachment and the desire for objects. It is by experientially knowing the three universal characteristics that desire or hankering in the mind is removed. We need to remove desire because we do not want to suffer. As long as there is desire and attachment, there will always be suffering. We come to realise that all things are just mind and matter, arising and disappearing, that things are insubstantial. Once this is deeply realised, attachment and craving for things will end and we are free.

Day 4: Full Attention to Daily Activities

A BASIC SKILL in vipassana meditation is to acquire the ability to give full or sustained attention or mindfulness (sati) to what we are doing; yet we rarely, if ever, give anything our full attention, at best it is just partial attention. The consequence of this is ‘faulty intelligence’, that is, not being in touch with reality, delusion (moha) or false view. If one does not have the right information one misreads the experience, lives in delusion and therefore suffers. The writer, Iris Murdoch wrote: “We live in a fantasy world, a world of illusion. The great task in life is to find reality”.

Regrettably, for the most part, we live in a shallow, superficial culture that lacks any real depth. Almost everything is geared to allow us to give only partial attention towards what is in front of us. The dominant software company, Microsoft has coined a phrase for the way we take in the world around us: ‘continuous partial attention’. Their products are all geared to be usable under such circumstances. Three or more task windows are open on my computer screen at any time. So we can skip from one to the other—just skimming and scanning, which is symptomatic of the rather shallow life the majority of us lead.

The task then, in this retreat, is to turn this around and train oneself to be fully attentive as much as possible. This will create ‘presence of mind’ with clear comprehension, which will uncover reality and in good time bring healing and transformation of consciousness.

To do this, we need to acquire the capacity for a sustained and close attentiveness of all our movements and activities down to the minutest detail throughout the day. This dynamic practice of close attentiveness with full understanding of one’s movements is the key to deepening vipassana practice, as it intensifies the

awareness or mindfulness, and exposes the reality of one's own physical and mental phenomena as constantly changing, as being unsatisfactory and as being a natural but impersonal process.

We cannot pretend that this is easy, as having continuous, close attentiveness goes somewhat against the grain—it is not natural to us. The Buddha described the practice of the Dhamma as “going against the stream”. As long as one swims with the current of the river, one remains unaware of it. But if one chooses to turn against it, suddenly it is revealed as a powerful, discomfoting force.

It is said that just prior to the Buddha's enlightenment at the Bodhi tree at Gaya, he floated his alms bowl on the nearby Nerangera River. And when the bowl went against the current he took that as a sign that he would be successful in his determination to attain enlightenment. I do not think we need to take this story literally, as I see it as more of a metaphor that points to the need to consciously face and explore one's own conditioning and assumptions in order to grow in the Dhamma.

The “stream” refers to the accumulated habits of conditioning. The practice of Dhamma means to turn around midstream, to observe mindfully and intelligently the forces of conditioning instead of reacting to their promptings. Therefore, we have to make constant effort to train ourselves to do this practice until it is so well established that it has become, as it were, our second nature—that is, it has become habituated, only then will deeper states of mindfulness develop.

It is very informative to read the instructions the Buddha himself gave in the Investigation of the Body in the subsection on Full Attention with Clear Comprehension (*sati-sampajanna*) in the text we are following: the Satipatthana Sutta or the Four Establishments of Mindfulness:

“And again, monks, a monk, while going forward or while

going back he does so with clear comprehension; while looking straight ahead or while looking elsewhere he does so with clear comprehension; while bending or stretching his limbs he does so with clear comprehension; while carrying the alms bowl and while wearing the robes he does so with clear comprehension; while eating, drinking, chewing, and savouring he does so with clear comprehension; while urinating or defecating he does so with clear comprehension; while walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking, speaking or when remaining silent, he does so with clear comprehension or full attentiveness”.

You can see here that the Buddha is emphasising the sustained continuity of awareness or mindfulness of all daily activities, with clear comprehension of all body movements in great detail—including what you do in the bathroom, nothing is too trivial that it is left out. This is the most important set of instructions and the most demanding to follow in the practice of intensive vipassana meditation. Yet most meditators often find resistance in the mind to being purposefully attentive of all daily activities and movements. So one has to overcome this disinclination to be mindful by consciously training oneself in the art of attention.

From the Buddha’s time down to the present there have been teachers who have suggested practices and strategies that support the attentiveness practice. One of the most prominent of these was the late Mahasi Sayadaw of Myanmar (Burma) who recommended and taught a very effective mental naming or noting technique in his book “Practical Exercises in Vipassana Meditation”:

“When making bodily movements, the meditator should do so slowly, gently moving the arms and legs, bending or stretching them, lowering the head and raising it up. When rising from the sitting posture, one should do so gradually, noting as ‘rising,

rising'. When straightening up and standing, note as 'standing, standing'. When looking here and there, note as 'looking, seeing'. When walking, note the steps, whether they are taken with the right or the left foot. You must be aware of all the successive movements involved, from the raising of the foot to the dropping of it.

When one wakes up, one should immediately resume noting. The meditator who is really intent on attaining the path and its fruition (*magga phala*) should rest from meditation only when asleep. At other times, in all waking moments, one should be noting continually the successive body/mind phenomena without let up. That is why, as soon as one awakens, one should note the awakening state of mind as 'awakening, awakening'. If one cannot yet be aware of this, one should begin with noting the rising and falling of the abdomen.

As one goes on noting in this way, one will be able to note more and more of these events. In the beginning, as the mind wanders here and there, one may miss many things, but one should not be disheartened. Every beginner encounters the same difficulty, but as one becomes more skilled, one becomes aware of every act of mind wandering until eventually the mind does not wander any more. The mind is then riveted onto the object of its attention, the act of mindfulness becoming almost simultaneous with the object of its attention. In other words, the rising of the abdomen becomes concurrent with the act of noting it, and similarly with the falling of the abdomen and all other activities."

It is important not to give the mind any chance to slip into its old habitual ways. We are very much creatures of habit operating on "autopilot" a lot of the time, making many unconscious movements and actions. In a retreat situation there is no need to hurry, in fact one is encouraged to slow down. Hurrying is an

indicator that you have slipped into automatic pilot. So turn off the autopilot and use the manual controls, by consciously and deliberately noting all your actions throughout the day. Effort has to be made in this practice, but the effort you make is to be in the moment, while being intimate with, and fully attentive to, whatever you are doing—just being, not constantly doing all of the time.

The beginner is advised to start by keeping a ‘thread of awareness’ on each particular action throughout the day, for example, naming the walking movement as ‘walking’, ‘walking’ without a break. Whenever the mind wanders from the noting of the walking to a secondary object such as thinking, seeing, hearing—then note the object that has taken your attention, before going back to the noting of walking. Then combine the noting of the walking with the noting of sitting, standing, and lying down, being especially attentive to the transition movements between each posture.

Take at least one activity during the day, such as eating and taking your time, try to do it 100 per cent, finding the minutest detail. When you are eating, all the senses are activated: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching and the six sense doors are activated and open. Try and label all the physical movements and note the biting, chewing, tasting, swallowing and savouring. This detailed noting is dynamic and intensifies the momentary concentration, thereby counterbalancing the static concentration that arises in the formal sitting meditation.

The practice then of full awareness is not a superficial, casual observation, as one must deeply penetrate the object under observation—‘presence’ is combined with clear, sustained comprehension. That is, one must see the specific characteristics of the phenomena, the subtle and fine nuances, and the minute details of the movement, without identifying with the limb.

Close and sustained attention is the key to the practice. Maintaining close attentiveness for, say, 75 per cent of daily activities for at least three to four hours or more in the day will carry over and increase the fluency of the practice in the formal sitting and walking meditation sessions. The benefit of this precise and detailed noting is that it will increase and intensify the momentary concentration (*khanika samadhi*) that is needed to insight deeper into the mind-body phenomena.

For meditators whose practice of full attentiveness has matured, they would be able to note or know nearly all their movements and actions—whatever is predominant in their experience—including the specific characteristics of the movements, for most, if not all of the day.

Then they will discover that what appears to be one continuous movement, is actually a series of individual discontinuous movements. Such an insight exposes the illusion of continuity. While this practice is not a slow motion exercise per se, it cannot be emphasized enough that the vipassana meditator must slow down all bodily movements as much as possible in order to be there, to be aware of the subtleties of the movements.

A benefit that is not so much appreciated from this attentiveness training is that, with presence of mind, the mind is wholesome, concentration can then be increased more effectively and insight will follow. Therefore you will feel good as you are freed from anxiety and worry and experience the blessing of being in the present moment.

The result of the practice of full attention of one's general daily activities is that it creates the momentum that deepens the practice, where one sees that all conditioned phenomena are impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-me, not-myself, that is, the direct experience of the Three Universal Characteristics of existence (*anicca, dukkha, anatta*).

Having established and habituated the practice of full attention in the supportive conditions of a retreat environment, one has the potential to integrate the attentiveness practices into everyday life. The benefits will be felt with an increase in sensitivity and awareness in all of your relationships and activities and can be the basis for an ongoing practice of mindfulness in daily living.

Day 5: Paying Attention to Feelings

FEELING IS THE KEY FACTOR in the Path of Liberation. Awareness of feelings has always, in the Theravada tradition, been regarded as an effective aid to the path. *Vedana-nupassana*, that is, paying attention to feelings, is one of the Four Establishments of Mindfulness, and is undertaken in the framework of that meditative practice aiming at the growth of insight or Vipassana.

It is difficult to make much progress in vipassana meditation until you can come to terms with feelings and emotions, as the practice itself, at least in the early stages, will often bring up intense and persistent feelings and emotions. In the practice of insight meditation or vipassana bhavana, positive or negative emotional states are acknowledged by noting without reaction as much as possible. Then it can be taken a step further by tuning into the underlying feeling tone that is associated with an emotion. In this way the feeling itself is highlighted thus allowing for the feeling itself to be investigated.

While the term ‘feelings’ (*vedana*) refers to physical sensations (*kayika vedana*) it also includes mental feelings (*cetasika vedana*) as well. The importance of the practice of attentiveness

to mental feelings should be stressed because by differentiating feelings from their associated emotions you can defuse the emotional charge once you have developed the ability to catch the underlying feeling tone.

So let us take a closer look at feelings and how to work with them. In the English language we use the term ‘feelings’ interchangeably with ‘emotions’. For example, when we say, “I’m feeling delighted” we are referring to the emotion of happiness or delight. A Vipassana meditator would note that a pleasant feeling arises and that the emotion is one of delight, so in this context the term ‘feeling’ is used in the technical sense of a quality of pleasant (*sukkha vedana*), unpleasant (*dukkha vedana*) or neither pleasant nor unpleasant, that is a neutral feeling (*upekkha vedana*).

To make a statement of the obvious as sometimes the obvious can be overlooked: We are beings on the sensory plane. We live in the world of the senses—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching. It is through our senses that we experience the world, and it is through the sense impressions at the six sense doors that we experience feelings.

Feelings are the source of our liking and disliking. If we are not aware of the underlying feelings we tend to automatically react to sense objects with liking or disliking—which is what is conditioning us and keeping us trapped in Samsara. We ‘pull in’, have attachment to, what we like and ‘push away’, have aversion to, what we don’t like. So mostly it is just liking, disliking—‘pushing and pulling’.

Whether people are aware of it or not, feelings are all pervasive in human life. Peoples’ lives are mostly spent in unceasing effort to increase pleasant feelings and avoid unpleasant feelings. More pleasant feelings are sought as they bring temporary emotional satisfaction called happiness.

So one can appreciate the Buddha's pithy saying on feelings: "All things converge on feelings".

Yet feeling by itself, in its primary state, is quite neutral when it just registers the impact of an object as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Only when successive emotional add-ons are admitted, such as when one's personal story is involved, will there arise aversion, happiness, hatred, love, anxiety, greed or fear.

Feeling and emotions need not be mixed as they are separable, in fact, many of the weaker impressions we experience during the day stop at the mere registering of very faint and brief feelings. This shows that stopping at the primary feeling is possible, and that it can be done with the help of awareness and self-restraint, even in cases when the stimulus to convert feeling into emotion is strong.

For the vipassana meditator it is essential to work with feelings, especially one's mental feelings, or feelings associated with states of mind. By monitoring feelings one can maintain one's equilibrium in the practice, allowing the enlightenment factor of equanimity to mature.

There are occasions, when the mind is calm and alert and one is not totally preoccupied, to notice feelings clearly at their primary stage. Then it is just a practice of monitoring what feelings are present, even when they are faint and brief, throughout the day. In fact, working with feelings as a practice starts with establishing awareness on minor feelings, for example, many times during the day one can be noticing minor body sensations and or feelings that come and go.

If, however, one is unable at first to clearly differentiate feelings, it is a useful strategy to ask oneself a checking question: 'What feeling is present?' In this way, the meditator can highlight the predominant feeling and be able to focus on it rather than being confused by the jumble of fleeting feelings and their

successive emotional states of mind.

It is of particular importance to dissociate the feelings from the thought of 'I' or 'mine'. There should be no ego-reference, as for instance: "I feel", nor should there be any thought of being the owner of the feeling: "I have pleasant feelings" or "I have pain". Awareness of the feeling tone without the ego-reference allows the meditator to keep the attention focused on the pure feeling alone.

In working with feelings there should first be an awareness of the feelings when they arise, clearly distinguishing them as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. While there are degrees of intensity of feelings, with close attentiveness, it is clear that there is no such thing as a mixed feeling.

When noting feelings, attention should be maintained throughout the short duration of the specific feeling down to its ending or passing away. If the vanishing point of feeling is repeatedly seen with increasing clarity, it will become much easier to catch and finally to stop thoughts and emotions, which normally follow so regularly and are habitually linked, through conditioning, to their associated feeling tones. Pleasant feeling is habitually linked with enjoyment and happiness, while unpleasant feelings are linked with aversion or pain, while neutral or indifferent feelings are linked with ignorance and confusion.

When 'bare' attention, that is, registering the feeling without reaction in a state of receptivity, is directed to the rising and vanishing of feelings, the polluting add-ons, or defilements, are held at bay and inhibited from further elaboration. So gradually the gross feelings weaken and fall away—one loses interest—thus dispassion arises, which is a natural, effortless 'letting go'.

A trap to watch out for is not acknowledging pleasant feelings, especially pleasant feelings and sensations that arise from the fluency of the practice and later stages of insight. There

is usually no problem in noticing unpleasant feelings, but we should be wary and note pleasant feelings when they arise as we are predisposed to get attached to them very easily and thus lose equanimity.

Through one's own direct experience as a vipassana meditator, it can be confirmed that the ever-revolving round of the wheel of life (samsara) that we tread can be stopped, with kamma producing activities neutralised at the point of feeling, and that there is no inherent necessity that feeling is automatically followed by attachment or aversion. This is done by the practice of being mindful at one of the six sense doors and intercepting the bare feeling between the linkage of sense impression and craving.

Like all mindfulness exercises, it is essential that the practice of awareness of feelings be applied in everyday life, especially whenever feelings are prone to turn into unwholesome emotions. So by practising awareness of feelings the benefits will be immediately apparent in one's relationships and dealings with the external world, for example an increase in compassion and equanimity, as well as in one's own clarity and peace of mind.

In the teaching of the Five Aggregates of Grasping, the Buddha likened feelings to bubbles. If feelings can be seen in their bubble-like, blowed-up and bursting nature their linkage to aversion and attachment will be weakened until the chain is finally broken. Through this practice, attachment, which is a kind of 'stuckness' to feelings, will be skillfully eliminated.

This does not mean that this practice will make one detached or emotionally withdrawn. On the contrary, mind and heart will become more open and free from the fever of clinging. Out of this seeing, an inner space will be provided for the growth of the finer emotions: loving-kindness, compassion, patience and forbearance.

Day 6: How to Handle Thinking & Pain

AT THE BEGINNING of the practice at least, most meditators are much troubled by their thoughts as well as painful body sensations. Pain from the sitting posture is workable as the cause comes from not being accustomed to the crossed legged sitting posture. Thinking is more of a challenge, as it requires patience and skill to come to terms with it.

With thinking, meditators assume that somehow they must get rid of the thoughts or block them out to be successful in meditation. This might be the case in concentration-based meditation where the one-pointed concentration on the meditation object will eventually suppress the thinking process to produce a state of calm. But in vipassana meditation, however, we do not want to suppress the thinking merely to get some relief from the turbulence in the mind. Rather we seek to insight into the nature of the mind and to the thinking process itself.

Thinking, by its nature, cannot be of the present moment; thinking is either of the past or a projection into the future. Thinking creates ideas, plans, conceptions, or opinion produced by mental activity. It is symbolic, based on preconceived ideas, not on ultimate reality. It doesn't lead to the primary experience, that is, direct knowing.

The strategy in working with thinking in vipassana meditation is to first allow it to be, not getting into struggle with it—regarding it as just another object to be noted. In time, one becomes a witness to the thinking process without becoming too involved in the content, that is, noting the thinking process not the thoughts. It is like standing on the pavement watching the traffic going by until eventually the mind is quiet or until at least it quietens. It is the naturally quiet, or the silent mind, which is open to the direct experience of the phenomena under observation.

To have the truly ‘stilled mind’ is not so easy, for again and again the meditator finds himself or herself ‘lost in thought’—only catching the thinking retrospectively. Patience and perseverance is called for in this situation. Be assured that the train of thought will at least slow down sufficiently so that you will start to notice gaps—or pauses in the discursive thoughts. The circuit is broken and the mind quietens and the attention is able to resume noting the primary object.

So by being aware—even just occasionally—of the gaps in the thinking, there is an opening to be able—as it were—to catch the next thought as it is forming, that is the beginning of the thought. This can act as a circuit breaker. At this level the mind has quietened sufficiently to be just knowing, that is, the mind knowing the mind.

In the short term, there is another way to work with thinking using ‘skillful means’, that is using the mental noting of ‘thinking’, thinking’, to cut the incessant thought process. But it has to be done vigorously otherwise one can find one has drifted off thinking about the nature of thought! The mental noting of thinking can be a powerful tool to inhibit the thinking but has to be used judiciously.

Pain and Suffering

There is a saying: “Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional”.

Usually meditators want the unpleasant feeling or pain they are experiencing in the practice to go away. The underlying assumption is that by bearing the pain it will go away and then they will feel good, and without the pain they will have good experiences as a reward for their effort. When actually, in vipassana meditation, we are trying to understand the true nature of pain, that is, to investigate the so-called pain—not to get rid of it. The vipassana meditator is very fortunate to have pain, at least

posture pain, as it is an excellent teacher—with the added bonus that there will be no sleepiness in meditation.

Pain is the body's signal that something is wrong. The pain is telling one that they must attend to it. The painful sensations we work with in meditation are mostly those from the sitting posture, as the reason for the pain is that a person is not used to sitting crossed legged for long periods at a stretch. The rule of thumb when working with pain is to first check—given that it is not a pre-existing condition—whether it is a medical problem or not. Take note as to whether the pain that one was experiencing during the sitting goes away more or less immediately after the session. If that is the case, then one can be assured that it is only posture pain and no damage is being done.

When one experiences pain in sitting meditation, it is actually an opportunity to work with it. Regard it as your best friend, as one can learn much from it, so one does not want to drive it away. Invite it in and get to know it. It is not a matter of just bearing the pain. The practice is to investigate it—to penetrate it deeply. If you can successfully work with physical pain, then you will more likely be able to work with mental pain.

Understandably meditators tend to avoid pain. For example, every time they get to the threshold of pain they pull away, this then becomes the 'pain barrier', a block in the practice. They hope that they can build up a tolerance of pain without having to work with it. But unfortunately disinclination to work with pain becomes a major mental and physical obstacle to the meditator's progress.

How to Work with Pain

To work with painful sensations, first find the centre of the pain, thereby localising it, for example the knee area. Initially, there might be muscular reaction to the pain, like when one has a

dip in icy cold water, there is an initial shock, but once one is in the water usually one can bear it and stay with the cold sensations. Then relax and soften into the painful sensations, looking for particular characteristics in the pain—heat, tension, stabbing, throbbing, etc.

When there is no resistance to the pain, the particular characteristics will manifest. Then when the particular characteristics are aligned with the ‘knowing of’ the pain (consciousness of) this will reveal the general or universal characteristics of change, unsatisfactoriness and insubstantiality.

Besides posture pain, there can be all sorts of mysterious aches and pains in this type of meditation—so-called ‘vipassana pain’, that is, various painful sensations in the body, often so intense that you suppose there must be some medical condition causing them. But not to worry—it is all workable. They have a saying in the Burmese vipassana tradition: “Pain is the doorway to Nibbana”. The teachers are very pleased when you report interesting pain in interview, as they know that you can make good progress in the meditation if you are prepared to work with and can sort out the pain from the suffering.

It is the resistance to the pain that is causing the suffering. The mind is striking at the so-called pain, complaining about the pain, wanting it to go away or trying to dissociate from the pain. But once you are able to work with pain you will be able to differentiate the pain from the suffering, and thus how one relates to the pain will change.

The Three Kinds of Suffering

Not appreciating the basic premise of the Buddha Dharma—the 1st Noble Truth, that is, the fact of suffering (*dukkha sacca*) is the root of the problem, Vipassana meditators need to be able to understand and handle suffering. There are three kinds of

suffering: ordinary suffering (dukkha-dukkha) everyday ups and down, psychological, emotional and relationship problems. We all experience this ordinary suffering nearly everyday to some degree. If you are skillful it need not be a problem as you can work with this kind of suffering.

Then there is the suffering of change (viparinama dukkha) also known as the ‘suffering of happiness’. Whether it is a change in circumstances or just a mind-state, nothing can remain the same for very long, everything, absolutely everything is subject to change. But if one is not so attached to things or relationships, then again, this type of suffering caused by change is manageable.

The third kind of suffering is not so apparent—it is conditioned or existential suffering (sankhara dukkha). Ordinary people are not even aware of it. It is the deep suffering stemming from the mental constructions (sankharas). It is experienced in the ‘insight knowledges’ (vipassana nanas) in vipassana meditation when the intelligence and wisdom is so highly developed that one sees that all mental and physical phenomena are unstable, unsatisfactory and are just an impersonal process—not me, not myself. The maturity of this insight brings about a deep transformation of consciousness that finally frees us from all suffering.

Mental Pain and Suffering

The purpose of Buddhist meditation, vipassana or otherwise, is not just for curing physical diseases. If physical healing happens to occur then it is considered a positive byproduct of the practice, nothing more. A whole range of stress related physical illnesses, such as stomach ulcers, angina, migraine, etc., could be alleviated by meditation practice. But meditation is not about miraculous cure—that is more of the nature of faith healing.

Healing and transformation is the outcome of the practice. All forms of suffering or mental pain, such as anguish, remorse, grief, etc., can be cured in vipassana meditation, through the purification of the mind. That is the real miracle. Whether medical science can ultimately cure all physical disease is problematic as it is the nature of the body to eventually break down. All phenomena have three phases: birth, life and death. Therefore, pain is inherent in nature. While we may or may not be able to cure physical disease, vipassana meditation is tailored to cure mental suffering.

Nobody wants to suffer and the underlying message of the Buddha Dharma is that suffering on all levels is unnecessary. We do not need to suffer. There is the fact of suffering, the cause of suffering, the ending of suffering and the way leading out of suffering. If we are suffering, it is because of ignorance—not knowing. What we usually experience is unnecessary suffering. But we do not need to suffer mentally at all, as the compassionate Buddha has shown us that the way to be free of suffering is through wise attention that insights into the true nature of our mind and body phenomena, finally freeing us from all mental suffering.

Day 7: Wise Attention at the Sense-Spheres

THE TEACHING of the six sense-spheres is to be found in the Contemplation of Mind Objects (Dhammanupassana) in the text we are following—the Satipatthana Sutta.

After each section in the text, you will find this passage: “In this way he abides contemplating the body as a body (or feelings, etc.) internally, externally, and both internally and externally”. What does this mean? It means that the focus of one’s attention

changes from the subjective (internal) to the objective (external) and by “both” is meant being “objective”, that is, it leads to an understanding of the contemplated object, without considering it as part of one’s own subjective experience, or that of others.

The focus of the practice so far has been mainly introspective, now the watchfulness or attentiveness can be expanded to include the external as well, that is the attention is switched from the subjective to the objective. This is done by orientating to the sense-spheres, which are about the relationship between oneself and the outer world. Practising both internal and external *satipatthanas* can prevent self-absorption and achieve a skilled balanced between introversion and extroversion.

The importance of contemplation of the sense-spheres is that it directs awareness to the six “internal” and “external” sense-spheres and the fetters (*samyojana*) arising in dependence on them. Although a fetter arises dependent on sense and object, the binding force of such a fetter should not be attributed to the senses or objects themselves, but to the binding force of desire (*tanha*).

A fetter is a shackle or something that causes bondage. Ten types of fetters are listed in the discourses which are to be abandoned: belief in a substantial and permanent self, doubt, dogmatic clinging to particular rules and rituals, sensual desire, aversion, craving for immaterial existence, conceit, restlessness, and ignorance.

All our experience is limited by the senses and their objects, with the mind (*mano*) counted as the sixth. The five outer senses collect data only in the present but mind, the sixth, where this information is collected and processed, adds memories from the past and hopes and fears for the future, as well as thoughts of various kinds relating to the present.

Each of these sense-spheres includes both the sense organ

and the sense object. Besides the five physical senses (eye, ear, nose, tongue and body) and their respective objects (sight, sound, smell, taste and touch), the mind is included as the sixth sense. Mind represents mainly the activity of thought, such as reasoning, memory, and reflection. Thus all perceptual processes rely to some extent on the interpretive processes of the mind, since it “makes sense”, out of the other spheres.

Here are the instructions for this practice: “He knows the eye, he knows forms, and he knows the fetter that arise dependent on both, and he also knows how an unarisen fetter can arise, how an arisen fetter can be removed, and how a future arising fetter can be prevented.

He knows the ear, he knows sounds, He knows the fetter that arises dependent on both, and... He know the nose, he knows the odours, and he knows the fetter that arises dependent on them both, and... He knows the tongue, he knows flavours, and he knows the fetter that arises dependent on them both, and... He knows the body, he knows the tangibles, and he knows the fetter that arises dependent on them both, and... He knows the mind, he knows mind-objects, and he knows the fetter that arises dependent on them both, and he also knows how an unarisen fetter can arise, how an arisen fetter can be removed, and how a future arising fetter can be prevented”. MI61

According to the text, to develop awareness and detachment in regard to these six internal and external sense-spheres is of crucial importance for the progress of insight. Especially in regards to the deeply rooted ‘sense of self’ that assumes it is an independent experiencer of sense objects.

Contemplation of the six sense-spheres can lead to recognising the influence of personal bias and tendencies on the process of perception and will uncover the root cause of the arising of unwholesome mental reaction. The task of mindfulness (sati)

then, is to observe the fetter that can arise in dependence on contact between sense and object.

The six sense-doors are depicted in the Tibetan tradition by a house with six windows and a door. The senses are the ‘portals’ whereby one gains an impression of the world. Each of the senses is the manifestation of our desire to experience things in a particular way.

This information falls under six headings corresponding to the six bases: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tangibles and thoughts. Beyond these six bases of sense and their corresponding six objective bases, we know nothing. All ones experience is limited by the senses and their objects, with the mind counted as the sixth. The five outer senses collect data only in the present but mind, the sixth, where this information is collected and processed, adds memories from the past and hopes and fears for the future, as well as thoughts of various kinds relating to the present.

Orientation to a Sense-door

To make an orientation to a sense-door, you start by literally coming to your senses: seeing, hearing, tasting, touching and smelling. These are the five sense-doors or sense bases; the ‘sixth sense’ is ‘consciousness of’, which is the mind-base with its eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, etc. You also need to be aware of the senses internally as well as externally; that is, the organs and their sense objects: nose/smell, tongue/taste, body/tactile objects, ear/sound, mind/mind-objects or consciousness.

Attentiveness or ‘presence of mind’ at one of the sense-doors during a sense impression is the way to practice. For example, most people are predominantly visual so being attentive at the eye-door allows you to notice the effects of the contact between the eye and the visible objects and how you are relating to them.

The process is this: there is the eye (the internal base), and a visible object (the external base). With contact or a sense impression between the sense-door and external object, consciousness arises followed by feeling. The moment of consciousness ordinarily is too rapid to catch while the feeling tone can be more easily known and apprehended.

This mindful orientation to a sense-door brings awareness of what is happening during the moment of contact or the sense impression, and with it the ability to monitor the associated feelings and consciousness that arise. When this feeling tone is apprehended, the link to liking/disliking is broken; therefore one is free at that moment from conditioned suffering.

This strategy of wise attention at a sense-door ties in with the practical implementation of the teaching of Dependent Arising (*patticcasamuppada*). In fact these two teachings, combined, will lead to the purification of mind and the realization of Nibbana.

The Law of Dependent Arising is a deep subject; it is the very essence of the Buddha's teachings. In the words of the Buddha: "He who sees Dependent Arising sees the Dhamma; he who sees the Dhamma sees Dependent Arising."

There was an exchange between the Buddha and his personal attendant, Ananda, when Ananda casually remarked that he thought it was an easy thing to understand. The Buddha responded by saying, "Not so Ananda, don't ever say such a thing. It is because people do not understand origination (Dependent Arising), that they are not able to penetrate it, that their minds are befuddled. Just as a ball of twine becomes all tangled up and knotted, just so are beings ensnared and unable to free themselves from the wheel of existence, the conditions of suffering and states of hell and ruin."

"How to untangle the tangle?" This is a quote from the

Visuddhimagga or The Path of Purification. The untangling can be done by insighting into Dependent Arising through the practice of attentiveness at a sense-door. What we are experiencing now is from a series of events that arose because of previous conditions and is linked as a causal chain of effects, that is, cyclic existence or samsara.

It is useful for the meditator to be familiar with the twelve links in the cycle of Dependent Arising, that is, the principle of conditionality, which lies at the heart of the Buddha's doctrine. They are the causal sequence responsible for the origination of samsaric suffering. The series of conditions can be mapped out in the abstract as follows:

With Ignorance (avijja) as a condition—Kamma formations (sankhara) arises;

With Kamma formations (sankhara) as a condition—Consciousness (vinnana) arises;

With Consciousness (vinnana) as a condition—Mentality-materiality (nama-rupa) arises;

With Mentality-materiality (nama-rupa) as a condition—Six-fold sense-base (salayatana) arises;

With the Six-fold sense-base (salayatana) as a condition—Contact (phassa) arises;

With Contact (phassa) as a condition—Feeling (vedana) arises;

With Feeling (vedana) as a condition—Craving (tanha) arises;

With Craving (tanha) as a condition—Attachment (upadana) arises;

With Attachment (upadana) as a condition—Existence (bhava) arises;

With Existence (bhava) as a condition—Birth (jati) arises;

With Birth (jati) as a condition—Suffering (dukkha) arises.

As the vipassana meditator experiences the series of causal events, they can be intercepted at the linkage between contact and feeling during a sense impression. The ability to do this gives one the potential of being free of the conditioned cycle of suffering that most people are unknowingly trapped in.

Try an Exercise in Orientating to a Sense-door

Check! Where is your attention at this present moment? What sense impression is predominant now? Is it the eye-door attracted by some visual object, the ear-door taken by sounds or the touch sensations of the body's contact on the cushion or chair you're sitting on? This moment is the time to establish the habit of being consciously present at a sense-door and notice what is happening during a sense impression.

So stop for a few minutes, choose a sense-door (most people are predominantly visual, although others can be more auditory inclined) and be attentive to what is happening there: what feeling is present, what is the quality of that feeling, is it pleasant, unpleasant or neutral; and particularly notice the changes. It is important to make a habit of asking yourself checking questions during your daily routine: what sense door am I at, what is happening there and what are the associated feelings that arise?

The Story of Bahiya

This is the enlightenment story of Bahiya, the wooden robed one, who was able to practise in this way. Bahiya was originally a merchant, who, when traveling at sea with all his merchandise, was shipwrecked and was cast ashore naked. He found bark to cover himself, and finding an old bowl on the beach, he went searching for alms-food at a nearby village. The village people were impressed by his seeming austerities and his reputation grew as an ascetic. He was tested when people offered him fine

robes, but knowing that they would lose faith in him if he accepted, he refused, keeping up the deception.

Bahiya was installed in a temple and worshiped as an Arahant (an Enlightened One), so that in time he came to believe that he was actually an enlightened being. He lived impeccably and gained good concentration powers. Sitting in meditation one day, it is said that a deva was able to persuade Bahiya that he wasn't really enlightened at all, that he should go and see the Buddha, an Arahant who could help him.

Bahiya made the journey to where the Buddha was staying at the Savatthi monastery and found the Buddha on the daily alms-round. Bahiya went up to the Buddha and implored him to teach him the essence of the Dhamma. The Buddha responded with these brief instructions:

“Bahiya, you should train yourself in this way:

With the seen, there will be just the seen; with the heard, there will be just the heard; with the sensed (touched, tasted, smelt) there will be just the sensed; with the cognized, there will be just the cognized.

When for you, Bahiya, there is merely the seen, heard, sensed, and cognized, then you will not be therein. Then you, Bahiya, will be neither here nor there nor within both—this is itself the end of suffering.”

Through this brief instruction, Bahiya was immediately enlightened—through non-clinging—thus becoming an Arahant.

Not long after the Buddha left, a cow fatally gored Bahiya. When the Buddha returned from the alms-round and heard that Bahiya was dead, he arranged for his cremation and a stupa to be built for him. When asked what the destiny of Bahiya was, the Buddha said that because he had grasped the meditation subject in the teacher's presence, and practised as instructed, Bahiya had attained Parinibbana—final Enlightenment.

The Buddha had given Bahiya a short instruction concerned with cognitive training, with the result that Bahiya immediately gained full awakening. This instruction directs bare attention to whatever is seen, heard, sensed or cognised. Maintaining bare attention in this way prevents the mind evaluating and proliferating (*papanca*) the raw data of perception.

By directing mindfulness to the early stages of the perceptual process, one can retrain cognition and thereby reshape perceptual patterns. The presence of mindfulness directly counteracts automatic and unconscious ways of reacting that are so typical of habits.

Bare attention simply registers whatever arises at a sense door without giving rise to biased forms of cognition and to unwholesome thoughts and associations. Establishing bare attention at the beginning of the perceptual process prevents the latent tendencies i.e. unwholesome tendencies (*anusaya*), influxes, root causes for the arising of *dukkha* i.e. sensual desire, desire for existence and ignorance (*asava*), and the fetters (*samyojana*) from arising.

Day 8: Combining Loving-kindness with Vipassana

ONCE THE MEDITATOR is well-established in the basics of vipassana meditation, loving-kindness meditation (*metta bhavana*) can be brought in to support the more demanding vipassana practice. While this is switching meditation modes to a concentration-based practice, its benefit is that it uplifts and sweetens the mind and helps the meditator to cope with negative emotions that they are not yet able to deal with in their vipassana practice.

Having cultivated sufficient loving-kindness to overcome

negatives in the mind, the meditator then can switch back to vipassana mode. The reverting back to vipassana mode is done by investigating the qualities of the mind-state that has been induced by loving-kindness, thereby changing to the vipassana mode of watching the particular characteristic of the mind-state that developed from the loving-kindness meditation.

Loving-kindness is a meditation practice that specifically retrains the mind to overcome all forms of negativity. It brings about positive attitudinal changes by systematically developing the quality of 'loving-acceptance'. It is the qualities of acceptance and receptivity that create the spaciousness and clarity of mind that allows for deepening attentiveness. That is why combining loving-kindness with vipassana is very supportive of the meditator's ongoing practice.

Loving-kindness can be developed, either to give the benefit of supporting and/or clearing the way for vipassana meditation, or it can be further developed, in a more systematic way, to achieve a level of meditative absorption or one-pointedness.

When loving-kindness meditation is developed systematically to the level of meditative absorption or one-pointedness, the five absorption factors of concentration are developed. The first two are causal factors—applied thought and sustained thought, followed by three effects—rapture, ease-of-mind and one-pointedness or unification of mind. It is not really necessary to develop loving-kindness to the absorption level, but it can be useful for the meditator to be familiar with the absorption factors, as some of them will arise during vipassana meditation as well. And being familiar with the concentration effects, the pure vipassana meditator is less likely to get attached to them when they arise.

The advantages of having gained the five absorption factors is that they counteract the five mental hindrances or the obstacles

for the meditator; but the pure vipassana meditator should be aware, that threshold concentration is sufficient to inhibit the hindrances as well.

The five absorption factors and how they neutralise the five mental hindrances:

- Applied thought, by arousing energy and effort, overcomes the hindrance of sloth and torpor or mental inertia;
- Sustained thought, by steadying the mind, overcomes skeptical doubt, which has the characteristic of wavering;
- Rapture, with its uplifting effervescence, prevails over feelings of ill-will;
- Ease-of-mind, by relieving accumulated stress, counteracts restlessness or agitation of mind;
- One-pointedness holds the mind's wanderings in the sense-fields to inhibit sensuality.

Because of its auto-suggestive nature, the positive attitude of loving-kindness, combined with deep concentration, will imprint the new positive conditioning to override old negative patterns. For example, the overly critical mind, which finds fault with anything and everything, is reprogrammed to be more accepting and allowing. So on the psychological level, the therapeutic benefits for the individual are considerable as old negative habits are broken and are replaced with new positive ways of thinking.

Loving-kindness is practiced as the first of a series of meditations that produce four qualities of love: Friendliness (*metta*), Compassion (*karuna*), Appreciative Joy (*mudita*) and Equanimity (*upekkha*). The quality of 'friendliness' is expressed as warmth that reaches out and embraces others. When loving-kindness matures it naturally overflows into compassion, because it empathizes with people's difficulties; while on the other hand one

needs to be wary of pity, as its the near enemy, merely mimicking the quality of concern without empathy. The positive expression of empathy is an appreciation of other people's good qualities or good fortune rather than feelings of jealousy towards them, which is the enemy of appreciative joy.

This series of meditations comes to maturity in the state of on-looking equanimity. This equanimity has to be cultivated within the context of this series of meditations or else it tends to manifest as its near enemy, indifference or aloofness. It remains caring and on looking with an equal spread of feeling and acceptance toward all people, relationships and situations without discrimination.

The structure of the practice is fairly simple. The meditator must start with generating loving-feelings and acceptance towards himself or herself. This is very important, as one needs to have loving feeling towards oneself before it can be projected towards others. Then one induces positive emotional feelings of loving-kindness towards four types of people, after which, one directionally pervades the loving-feeling to all points of the compass. The final stage is non-specific pervasion, which more or less arises spontaneously as the concentration intensifies and there is little or no self-referencing.

As loving-kindness is a concentration-based meditation one must not allow the mind to wander—when it does, gently bring it back. The time you need to spend doing this practice would depend on the time it takes to arouse the loving feelings. At least a half-hour session would be needed for the practice to develop sufficiently.

The practice must always start with developing loving acceptance of oneself. However, if resistance is experienced, then it indicates that feelings of unworthiness are present. Don't worry, as this indicates there is simply work to be done. Essentially

you are working with a quality of mind, and as the practice is auto-suggestive, any quality of mind, positive or negative can be changed. In good time, and with persistent practice, feelings of self-doubt and negativity can be overcome. Then you can move on to develop loving-kindness to others.

Four types of people are chosen to develop loving-kindness towards:

First: a respected, beloved person, such as a teacher or mentor (*kalyana mitta*);

Second: a dearly beloved person, that is a close family member or dear friend;

Third: a neutral person, somebody you know but have no emotional involvement with;

Fourth: a hostile person, that is, a person you are currently having difficulty with.

Starting with yourself, then moving systematically from person to person in the above order, the objective is to break down the barriers between the four types of people and yourself. In this way, it can be said to break down the divisions within one's own mind, the source of much of the conflict we experience in our relationships.

The key to the practice is being able to go beyond the barriers we create in the mind, for the Buddha describes the loving person as having 'a mind with the barriers broken down'. When a person has seen, and seen through the conceptually created barriers of gender, race, class, and 'mine' and 'not mine' they are able to love others unconditionally.

The effect of practising systematic loving-kindness meditation is that one is transforming the particular love one naturally has for one's close family members and dear friends—which

is actually an attached kind of love—to a more general, universal love that embraces everybody without exception, that is, altruistic love.

Just a word of caution. If you practice loving-kindness intensively, it is best to choose a member of the same sex, or if you have a sexual bias to your own sex then a person of the opposite sex. This avoids the risk of arousing the near enemy of loving-kindness, that is, lust. Try different people to practise on, as some people do not easily fit into the above categories, but do keep to the prescribed order.

Three ways to arouse feelings of loving-kindness:

Visualisation—create a vivid positive mental picture of oneself and the four people one has chosen, in order to promote a sense of loving-feeling, well-being and joyousness.

Reflection—think about the positive qualities of the person and the acts of kindness they have done, or make an affirmation, which is a positive statement about yourself, in your own words.

The exception to using the ‘reflection device’ is when working with the ‘difficult person’ because the thinking might trigger the painful relationship and aggravate things. So just a visualisation of the difficult person, reinforced by the auditory repetition is sufficient.

Auditory—This is the simplest but probably the most effective way. Repeat an internalised phrase such as ‘loving-kindness’, ‘loving-kindness’.

The visualisations, reflections and the repetition of loving-kindness are devices to help you arouse positive emotional feelings of love. You can use all of them or one that works the best for you. When the positive emotional feeling arises, switch from

the devices to the feeling, as it is the feeling that is the primary focus. Keep the mind fixed on the feeling, if it strays, bring it back to the device or if the feeling weakens or is lost then return to the device, for example, use the visualisation to bring back or strengthen the feeling of loving-kindness.

The next stage is Directional Pervasion, where one systematically projects the aroused feeling of loving-kindness to all points of the compass: north, south, east and west, up and down, and all around. Bringing to mind Dhamma friends and communities in the cities, towns and countries around the world can enhance the directional pervasion.

The last stage, Non-specific Pervasion, tends to spontaneously occur as the practice matures. It is not discriminating. It has no specific object and involves just naturally radiating feelings of universal love. When it arises, the practice has come to maturity in that it has changed preferential love, which is an attached love, to an all-embracing, unconditional love!

When the mind has been uplifted and is sweet with feelings of loving-kindness, you will find that the drier vipassana practice is very much easier—the meditator is in a heightened state of receptivity and able to tune in more sensitively to what is happening in the present moment.

Day 9: Difficulties Facing Meditators & Their Solutions

IN A WAY it is fortunate that there is no such thing as a perfect meditator, as all the problems and difficulties we encounter in meditation practice become ‘grist for the mill’—that is, they are ‘workable’. As in life, what we see as difficulties in meditation can be the cause of growth in the Dhamma.

This is especially true of vipassana meditation, where a lot of difficulties, both physical and mental, can be encountered. It is not until the maturity, or the enlightenment factor of equanimity develops that there will cease to be difficulties in the practice. That is why it is critical for the meditator to be monitoring feelings and emotions in his or her practice, as it is the ability to accept whatever feelings and subsequent emotions arise without reaction that helps the practice to stabilise and mature.

There are common difficulties facing all meditators. These hindrances or obstacles have been well signposted. They are called the *Nirvaranas* in Pali, which translates as the Five Hindrances:

1. Sensuality: (*kamachanda*) yearning after sense objects or preoccupation with the sensory world.
2. All forms of Ill-will: (*vyapada*) from resentment to outright hostility.
3. Mental Inertia: (*thina middha*) sloth and torpor, laziness or lack of mental and physical energy.
4. Restlessness and Worry: (*uddhacca kukkuccha*) agitation in the mind and body, as well as tracing back to the past or remorse.
5. Skeptical Doubt: (*vicikiccha*) persistent uncertainty either about one's own ability, the teacher or the technique.

Having mentioned the negatives, we should then look at possible solutions. An antidote for sensuality is the reflection on the repulsiveness of the 32 parts of the body (*asubha*) this is a powerful method in dealing with attachment to the body; for all forms of ill-will, loving-kindness meditation will change the quality of mind from negative to positive; arousing one's energy

and effort can help overcome mental inertia; with restlessness and worry, calming and stabilising the mind with a concentration meditation is helpful; skeptical doubt is more difficult to overcome unless one can develop sufficient trust and confidence in the Buddha Dhamma (saddha) to overcome the wavering in the mind—reflections on the qualities of the Buddha (Buddhanussati) can inspire and arouse the necessary confidence.

Concentration meditation can be relied on to give some relief from the five hindrances by temporarily suppressing them. Yet as threshold concentration (upacara samadhi) arises in vipassana meditation it too will inhibit the hindrances to some extent as well. But ultimately the mind is purified and completely cleared of the five hindrances through the cleansing power of vipassana meditation.

HANDLING DIFFICULTIES IN THE PRACTICE

Mind Wanderings: preoccupied with the content of the mind, being lost in thought or obsessive trains of thoughts requires skillful handling. It is not the object of the practice to repress the thinking. Rather one has to allow that, over the period of a retreat, the mind will naturally settle. There are two ways to work with the thinking: vigorously mentally noting the thinking as ‘thinking’, ‘thinking’ to cut it; or when possible, allow the train of thoughts to run and find the gaps or pauses between thoughts, and if one is sharp enough, then try to catch the beginning of the next thought as it is about to form. In this way at least the circuitous thinking pattern is broken and the mind tends to quieten.

Sleepiness: this is a common problem when people come to meditation retreats. Usually, it is just mental and physical exhaustion for a lot of people. We are so over-extended, stretched and

stressed, that people are just simply exhausted. In today's society we do not give ourselves enough rest. We are trying to function on less sleep while achieving more and more so we end up with a 'sleep debt' at the cost of our well-being. A meditation retreat gives us time out to recuperate and recharge ourselves. It used to take just a few days into a retreat for people to recover fully—now it can take a week or so, which indicates that the pace of everyday life is accelerating rapidly. It is possible that by focusing on the sleepy state with effort as one mentally notes it, the sleepiness will disperse.

Inability or Disinclination to Handle Pain: posture pain is being referred to here, not a pre-existing medical condition. Pain is inevitable in meditation as in life—only suffering is optional. The meditator should not try to make it go away, but regard it as a friend for then its true nature will be seen. One should work with posture pain by softening into the pain sensations and relaxing into any muscular contractions. Then find the centre of the so-called pain by noticing specific characteristics in it, such as tension, heat, throbbing, stabbing, etc. When the mind is quiet and there is just the knowing of the pain, i.e. the 'consciousness of', then the pain will change. It will probably come back but one achieves some insight into its true nature.

Fears and Feelings of Anxiety: unpleasant feelings of apprehension or distress caused by the anticipation of imagined danger. It is the feeling of looking forward in dread to something that one supposes is going to happen that brings up the fear. The antidote for fear is to stay in the present moment. There is also 'fear of the unknown'. As a result some people stop meditating altogether. Deep within our minds lie unwholesome latent tendencies: the dark side or the shadow. Powerful material can sur-

face naturally during vipassana meditation, and most meditators can handle this adequately without breaking down. Only people deeply troubled with a neurosis or with a clinical condition such as psychosis, should not do intensive vipassana meditation without guidance.

Wrong Attitude: ambition to achieve results or wanting immediate effects, which is an acquiring attitude. Right attitude is an open acceptance of things as they are—without expectation. The Buddha in the Dhammapada describes the power we need in meditation: “Patience and forbearance is the power of those who meditate”.

Handling the Meditation Object Wrongly: unusual experiences and sensations can arise in meditation, such as: visions, images, voices, and lights. If you cling to them whether they are blissful or fearful you will become attached to the phenomena. It is critical that you remain neutral towards them by labeling them as ‘seeing’, ‘seeing’, ‘hearing’, ‘hearing’, etc. Never give any unusual experience, positive or negative, any significance. Report them to a qualified teacher or mentor who can assist you with an appropriate strategy or technique to handle them.

The ‘Sinking Mind’: that is dropping into the mental continuum (*bhavanga*) or the stream of consciousness, usually manifesting itself as a falling or dropping sensation during sitting meditation. This almost always occurs during any meditator’s practice at some point, but this can become a chronic problem that affects long-term meditators who practise without a clear object or focus and tend to lose contact or awareness of their body. A way to avoid this is never sit in meditation without a well-defined meditation object and keep some reference to the body, such as the sitting touch sensations.

Understanding these problems will help you manage your practice and give you the ability to make the appropriate adjustments, based on knowledge of methods and techniques. The path of meditation is a path of practice. Practice is repeated performance or methodical exercises to develop skills, which include the ability to self-manage your meditation practice.

Keeping the Balance

Generally, a lot of the difficulties encountered in practice can be addressed by balancing the three meditation skills in the Eight-fold practice Path of skillful effort or energy, skillful mindfulness and skillful concentration.

FOUR WAYS OF RELATING TO THE MEDITATION EXPERIENCE TO MAINTAIN THE BALANCE:

Witnessing your experience: an attitude of neutrality, which is restricted to the bare registering of physical and mental events without posturing or positioning oneself—‘just witnessing’.

Non-clinging: rather than seeking gratification of wishes, impulses, desires, there has to be at least some degree of non-clinging, that is giving up, to create the space to see—‘letting go’.

Removal of the Censor: an attitude of acceptance of all thoughts, emotions, feelings and sensations coming into awareness without discrimination or selection—‘uncensored’.

Cultivating Receptivity: vipassana meditation is tuning in and being sensitive to, and intimate with, what is observed from a place of spaciousness—‘receptivity’.

An image often used to describe the practice of awareness is that of walking a tightrope. In order to do so, you must necessarily pay attention to the balance. In meditation practice, this

applies to how you are relating to your experience. Reaching out to grasp the object (attaching) or pushing it away (rejecting) are both reactions that are unbalancing. Keeping your balance is developing a mind that does not cling or reject, like or dislike and is without attachment or condemnation. Balance and equanimity in the face of life's inevitable stress and conflict is to practise the Buddha's Middle Way.

For a meditator, developing the ability to adjust and manage one's own effort in practice is essential. A certain effort is involved in developing 'moment-to-moment awareness', but it is not the effort to attain anything in the future. The effort is to stay in the present, just paying attention with equanimity to what is happening in the moment.

The Buddha gave an example of just how attentive we should be. He told of a person who was ordered to walk through a crowd with a jug of oil, full to the brim, balanced on his head. Behind him walked a soldier with a sword. If a single drop were spilt the soldier would cut off his head! That is the quality of attention needed. So you can be sure that the person with the jug walked very attentively.

Yet, it has to be a relaxed awareness. If there is too much force or strain the least jostling will cause the oil to spill. The person with the jug has to be loose and rhythmic, flowing with the changing scene, yet staying attentive in each moment. This is the kind of care we should take in practicing awareness, being relaxed yet alert. In this way, the training helps to maintain your balance and the ability to live in harmony with others.

When all is said and done, the best way to work with difficulties in vipassana meditation is to seek a kalyana-mitta. This is not a guru who claims to do the work for you, but a meditation friend or teacher who has had some travel experience and can guide and advise you on the practice path.

There was an exchange between the Buddha and his attendant, Ananda, where Ananda said that he had heard all the teachings and therefore he could practise by himself. The Buddha responded to the effect that without a guide, a kalyana-mitta, the Dharma could not be realised. In the final analysis, it is not a matter of this or that technique, but the need for a guide with travel experience—a mentor in the Dharma.

Day 10: Continuing the Practice at Home

THE TIME AND EFFORT a meditator puts in, and the skills learnt in a vipassana retreat will not be lost if one continues to practise regularly at home. Of course, the meditation cannot be done as intensively, and will have to be done discreetly, allowing for the situation one is in. The real challenge after a retreat is integrating the mindfulness meditation practices established at the retreat into the daily routine.

It has to be acknowledged that incorporating meditation into a busy life is not easy. Therefore, the meditator needs to set oneself up to do it, good intention is not enough, it has to be purposely set up and there has to be commitment. One has to consider one's priorities: what will be of more benefit, hours sitting in front of the TV screen or time spent meditating?

The regular daily home sit, morning or evening, is the anchor for the practice, even if it is only mental hygiene that allows a discharge of the day's busyness. It is really a 'must do' as it will bring peace of mind and harmonise family and work relationships.

Most people will continue on with the sitting meditation after the retreat at home. A daily sit of an hour a day will just

keep the practice going, a block of two hours a day will maintain the practice to where one reached in the retreat. Three hours or more a day at home will allow the practice to develop, which might seem a lot with the many other commitments the meditator has, however, if one's priorities are examined closely, they may be surprised by what is possible.

When meditating at home it is a good strategy to combine loving-kindness meditation with an awareness exercise, as these practices compliment each other and will keep the mind wholesome, uplifted and alert. It is important to maintain the daily meditation sit at home as a way of sustaining and stabilising your practice. It has to become habituated though, otherwise if it is done only occasionally or only when one feels like it, then one is likely to find some excuse to put it off for another day until it is forgotten. Studies have shown that for any activity to be habituated, one must persist with it for three to six months before it becomes part of one's routine—by then the practice has become ingrained.

With a busy life it is easy to convince oneself that there really isn't the time anymore to maintain the regular sitting, or when feeling tired one will want to drop it. Naturally, when stressed or overtired, there is resistance in the mind to facing the stress by meditating, but usually it is only the initial resistance that has to be confronted before going through it.

What people are inclined to overlook when practising at home is the walking meditation. As most working people are stretched and stressed it can be difficult to immediately get down to a static sitting practice. Whereas a walking meditation session of a half hour or so, before a sitting session, will help a busy mind and body to settle and relax.

A particular advantage of vipassana meditation when applied to daily life is that it does not require any special place, equip-

ment or posture. In fact it can be done discreetly without anybody ever needing to know that you are practising it, as you appear to be doing nothing out of the ordinary. All that differs from normal behaviour, but is not apparent to others, is that the meditator has more 'presence of mind' in whatever they are doing.

When we are out and about in life, we can apply ourselves to what can be called 'situational mindfulness', which is another way of saying, use the circumstances and situations one happens to find oneself in as the practice environment, whether this is the home, the workplace or any public place. It is somewhat analogous to the sport of orienteering, where the objective is to navigate one's way through some terrain. With 'situational mindfulness' the objective is to navigate a way through the business of the day with presence-of-mind.

In the relentless busyness of most people's lives, there is a need for the practitioner to have a reference point to anchor their attention to. This acts as an aid to help maintain presence-of-mind. Such a reference point can be a touch point on the body, such as the sitting touch point, but it has to be habituated so one does not have to think about doing it. It has to become ingrained by practice that is, repeated performance or repetition until it becomes, as it were, one's second nature.

We lose a lot of energy and create unnecessary stress through the random wanderings of the mind, especially when we are not completely focused on the job at hand. So checking the wandering mind has to be targeted, as it is leaking energy. Intellectual work is more efficient and with less stress when we are properly focused. Daydreaming needs to be checked by noting the wandering mind as 'thinking', 'thinking'. If one is persistent, a lot of mind wanderings will be inhibited, and there will be more peace and clarity. The way to relate to all superfluous thinking

is as a witness watching the passing traffic of the mind without being involved in it, until eventually interest is lost and the mind becomes naturally still when not engaged in any particular task.

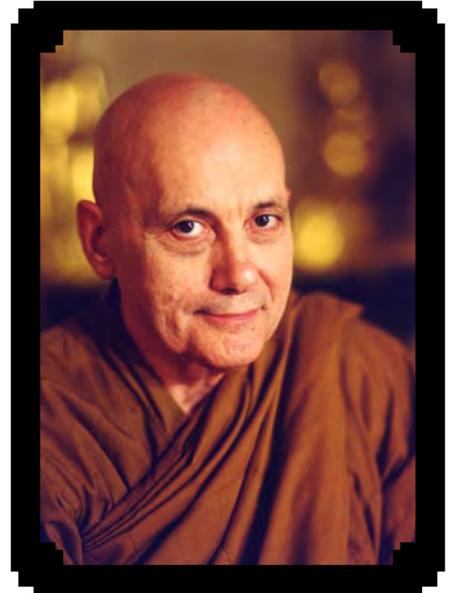
One could also be monitoring their mind states throughout the day. Just naming them as they arise: happy, sad, elated, depressed, whatever. We are simply noticing, not doing anything to change them. When the mind states are not noticed, we tend either to indulge in them, if they are pleasant, or resist them when they are unpleasant. By noticing mind states as they change, we go with the flow, not getting stuck, just being with the natural changes and rhythms of the day's activities.

If the presence-of-mind can be sustained for two or three hours in the daily routine, the mindfulness will noticeably improve. If one is so inclined, a check of the mindfulness every hour on the hour can be performed, as there is often much forgetting and times when the mindfulness is lost.

A useful way to manage the awareness practice is to review the day's mindfulness work at the end of the day or by keeping a meditation diary. In this way, the patterns of one's practice will become apparent, allowing adjustments to be made.

Avoid making negative judgments or evaluating the practice, as the reviewing will probably expose some weaknesses. However reviewing can also be helpful as it can suggest new strategies to improve the practice. So reviewing the day's practice is a very worthwhile thing to do, as one needs to be continually reinforcing the habit of awareness in daily life.





ABOUT THE TEACHER:

VENERABLE PANNYAVARO is an Australian Buddhist monk who has devoted his life to the meditational aspects of the Buddha's teachings. During his meditation training he practised under meditation masters in Sri Lanka and Burma including Venerable Sayadaw U Janaka of Chanmyay Meditation Centre, Rangoon, who is the foremost disciple of the renowned Burmese meditation master, the late Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw.

Ven. Pannyavaro was involved in the beginnings of a number of the very early Buddhist communities in Australia. He later received full ordination at Wat Borvornivet in Bangkok under Venerable Phra Nyanasamvarva, the Sangha Raja of Thailand.

For the past thirty years, he has from time to time studied and practised meditation in most of the major Theravada Buddhist countries, including long periods of intensive practise of Satipatthana-Vipassana meditation at the Mahasi Sayadaw centres in Burma.

As a Western meditation teacher, Ven. Pannyavaro naturally empathises with the concerns and needs of meditators in their own culture. His long training and life experience combine to bring a practical in-depth approach to the teaching of insight (vipassana) meditation in contemporary life.

Ven. Pannyavaro is presently the resident monk and teacher at the Bodhi Tree Forest Monastery and Retreat Centre, near Lismore in Northern New South Wales. He also gives retreats and meditation workshops from time to time in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and other Asian countries, but more regularly he conducts retreat at the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre, Medlow Bath, NSW Australia.

If you would like to develop your meditation practise further with this teacher, please feel free to contact:

Bodhi Tree Forest Monastery & Retreat Centre
78 Bentley Rd, Tullera, via Lismore
NSW 2480 Australia

Tel: +612 6628 2426,

Email: pannyavaro@buddhanet.net