

THE ART OF LIVING

*VIPASSANA
MEDITATION*

AS TAUGHT BY

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Vipassana-bhavana

Vipassana is often described as being a flash of insight, a sudden intuition of truth. The description is correct, but in fact there is a step-by-step method which meditators can use to advance to the point that they are capable of such intuition. This method is *Vipassana-bhavana*, the development of insight, commonly called Vipassana meditation.

The word *passana* means "seeing," the ordinary sort of vision that we have with open eyes. *Vipassana* means a special kind of vision: observation of the reality within oneself. This is achieved by taking as the object of attention one's own physical sensations. The technique is the systematic and dispassionate observation of sensations within oneself. This observation unfolds the entire reality of mind and body.

Why sensation? First because it is by sensations that we experience reality directly. Unless something comes into contact with the five physical senses or the mind, it does not exist for us. These are the gates through which we encounter the world, the bases for all experience. And whenever anything comes into contact with the six sensory bases, a sensation occurs. The Buddha described the process as follows: "If someone takes two sticks and rubs one against the other, then from the friction heat is generated, a spark is produced. In the same way, as the result of a contact to be experienced as pleasant, a pleasant sensation arises. As the result of a contact to be experienced as unpleasant, an unpleasant sensation arises. As the result of a contact to be experienced as neutral, a neutral sensation arises."

The contact of an object with mind or body produces a spark of sensation. Thus sensation is the link through which we experience the world with all its phenomena, physical and mental. In order to develop experiential wisdom, we must become aware of what we actually experience; that is, we must develop awareness of sensations.

Further, physical sensations are closely related to the mind, and like the breath they offer a reflection of the present mental state. When mental objects—thoughts, ideas, imaginations, emotions, memories, hopes, fears—come into contact with the mind, sensations arise. Every thought, every emotion, every mental action is accompanied by a corresponding sensation within the body. Therefore by observing the physical sensations, we also observe the mind.

Sensation is indispensable in order to explore truth to the depths. Whatever we encounter in the world will evoke a sensation within the body. Sensation is the crossroads where mind and body meet. Although physical in nature, it is also one of the four mental processes. It arises within the body and is felt by the mind. In a dead body or inanimate matter, there can be no sensation, because mind is not present. If we are unaware of this experience, our investigation of reality remains incomplete and superficial. Just as to rid a garden of weeds one must be aware of the hidden roots and their vital function, similarly we must be aware of sensations, most of which usually remain hidden to us, if we are to understand our nature and deal with it properly.

Sensations occur at all times throughout the body. Every contact, mental or physical, produces a sensation. Every biochemical reaction gives rise to sensation. In ordinary life, the conscious mind lacks the focus necessary to be aware of all but the most intense of them, but once we have sharpened the mind by the practice of *anapana-sati* and thus developed the faculty of awareness, we become capable of experiencing consciously the reality of every sensation within.

In the practice of awareness of respiration the effort is to observe natural breathing, without controlling or regulating it. Similarly, in the practice of *vipassana-bhavana*, we simply observe bodily sensations. We move attention systematically throughout the physical structure from head to feet and feet to head, from one extremity to the other, but while doing so we do not search for a particular type of sensation, nor try to avoid sensations of another type. The effort is only to observe objectively, to be aware of whatever sensations manifest themselves throughout the body. They may be of any type: heat, cold, heaviness, lightness, itching, throbbing, contraction, expansion, pressure, pain, tingling, pulsation, vibration, or anything else. The meditator does not search for anything extraordinary but tries merely to observe ordinary physical sensations as they naturally occur.

Nor is any effort made to discover the cause of a sensation. It may arise from atmospheric conditions, because of the posture in which one sits, because of the effects of an old disease or weakness in the body, or even because of the food one has eaten. The reason is unimportant and beyond one's concern. The important thing is to be aware of the sensation that occurs at this moment in the part of the body where the attention is focused.

When we first begin this practice, we may be able to perceive sensations in some parts of the body and not in others. The faculty of awareness is not yet fully developed, so we only experience the intense sensations and not the finer, subtler ones. However, we continue giving attention to every part of the body in turn, moving the focus of awareness in systematic order, without allowing the attention to be drawn unduly by the more prominent sensations. Having practiced the training of concentration, we have developed the ability to fix the attention on an object of conscious choosing. Now we use this ability to move awareness to every part of the body in an orderly progression, neither jumping past a part where sensation is unclear to another part where it is prominent, nor lingering over some sensations, nor trying to avoid others. In this way, we gradually reach the point where we can experience sensations in every part of the body.

When one begins the practice of awareness of respiration, the breathing often will be rather heavy and irregular. Then it gradually calms and becomes progressively lighter, finer, subtler. Similarly, when beginning the practice of *vipassana-bhavana*, one often experiences gross, intense, unpleasant sensations that seem to last for a long time. At the same time, strong emotions or long-forgotten thoughts and memories may arise, bringing with them mental or physical discomfort, even pain. The hindrances of craving, aversion, sluggishness, agitation, and doubt which impeded one's progress during the practice of awareness of breathing may now reappear and gain such strength that it is altogether impossible to maintain the awareness of sensation. Faced with this situation one has no alternative but to revert to the practice of awareness of respiration in order once again to calm and sharpen the mind.

Patiently, without any feeling of defeat, as meditators we work to re-establish concentration, understanding that all these difficulties are actually the results of our initial success. Some deeply buried conditioning has been stirred up and has started to appear at the conscious level. Gradually, with sustained effort but without any tension, the mind regains tranquility and one-pointedness. The strong thoughts or emotions pass away, and one can return to the awareness of sensations. And with repeated, continuous practice, the intense sensations tend to dissolve into more uniform, subtler ones and finally into mere vibrations, arising and falling with great rapidity.

But whether the sensations are pleasant or unpleasant, intense or subtle, uniform or varied is irrelevant in meditation. The task is simply to observe objectively. Whatever the discomforts of the unpleasant sensations, whatever the attractions of the pleasant ones, we do not stop our work, do not allow ourselves to become distracted or caught up in any sensation; our job is merely to observe ourselves with the same detachment as a scientist observing in a laboratory.

Impermanence, Egolessness, and Suffering

As we persevere in meditation, we soon realize one basic fact: our sensations are constantly changing. Every moment, in every part of the body, a sensation arises, and every sensation is an indication of a change. Every moment changes occur in every part of the body, electromagnetic and biochemical reactions. Every moment, even more rapidly, the mental processes change and are manifested in physical changes.

This is the reality of mind and matter: It is changing and impermanent—**anicca**. Every moment the subatomic particles of which the body is composed arise and pass away. Every moment the mental functions appear and disappear, one after another. Everything inside oneself, physical and mental, just as in the world outside, is changing every moment. Previously, we may have known that this was true; we may have understood it intellectually. Now, however, by the practice of *vipassana-bhavana*, we experience the reality of impermanence directly within the framework of the body. The direct experience of the transitory sensations proves to us our ephemeral nature.

Every particle of the body, every process of the mind is in a state of constant flux. There is nothing that remains beyond a single moment, no hard core to which one can cling, nothing that one can call "I" or "mine." This "I" is really just a combination of processes that are always changing.

Thus the meditator comes to understand another basic reality: **an-atta**—there is no real "I," no permanent self or ego. The ego to which one is so devoted is an illusion created by the combination of mental and physical processes, processes in constant flux. Having explored body and mind to the deepest level, one sees that there is no immutable core, no essence that remains independent of the processes, nothing that is exempt from the law of impermanence. There is only an impersonal phenomenon, changing beyond one's control.

Then another reality becomes clear. Any effort to hold on to something, saying "This is I, this is me, this is mine" is bound to make one unhappy, because sooner or later this something to which one clings passes away, or else this "I" passes away. Attachment to what is impermanent, transitory, illusory, and beyond one's control is suffering, **dukkha**. We understand all this not because someone tells us it is so, but because we experience it within, by observing sensations within the body.

Equanimity

Then how is one not to make oneself unhappy? How is one to live without suffering? By simply observing without reacting: Instead of trying to keep one experience and to avoid another, to pull this close, to push that away, one simply examines every phenomenon objectively, with equanimity, with a balanced mind.

This sounds simple enough, but what are we to do when we sit to meditate for an hour, and after ten minutes feel a pain in the knee? At once we start hating the pain, wanting the pain to go away. But it does not go away; instead, the more we hate it, the stronger it becomes. The physical pain becomes a mental pain, causing great anguish.

If we can learn for one moment just to observe the physical pain; if even temporarily we can emerge from the illusion that it is *our* pain, that *we* feel pain; if we can examine the sensation objectively like a doctor examining someone else's pain, then we see that the pain itself is changing. It does not remain forever; every moment it changes, passes away, starts again, changes again.

When we understand this by personal experience, we find that the pain can no longer overwhelm and control us. Perhaps it goes away quickly, perhaps not, but it does not matter. We do not suffer from the pain any more because we can observe it with detachment.

The Way to Liberation

By developing awareness and equanimity, one can liberate oneself from suffering. Suffering begins because of ignorance of one's own reality. In the darkness of this ignorance, the mind reacts to every sensation with liking and disliking, craving and aversion. Every such reaction creates suffering now and sets in motion a chain of events that will bring nothing but suffering in the future.

How can this chain of cause and effect be broken? Somehow, because of past actions taken in ignorance, life has begun, the flow of mind and matter has started. Should one then commit suicide? No, that will not solve the problem. At the moment of killing oneself the mind is full of misery, full of aversion. Whatever comes next will also be full of misery. Such an action cannot lead to happiness.

Life has started, and one cannot escape from it. Then should one destroy the six bases of sensory experience? One could pluck out the eyes, cut out the tongue, destroy the nose and ears. But how could one destroy the body? How could one destroy the mind? Again it would be suicide, which is useless.

Should one destroy the objects of each of the six bases, all the sights and sounds, and so on? This is not possible. The universe is full of countless objects; one could never destroy them all. Once the six sensory bases exist, it is impossible to prevent their contact with their respective objects. And as soon as contact occurs, there is bound to be a sensation.

But this is the point at which the chain can be broken. The crucial link occurs at the point of sensation. Every sensation gives rise to liking or disliking. These momentary, unconscious reactions of liking and disliking are immediately multiplied and intensified into great craving and aversion, into attachment, producing misery now and in the future. This becomes a blind habit which one repeats mechanically.

By the practice of *vipassana-bhavana*, however, we develop awareness of every sensation. And we develop equanimity: We do not react. We examine the sensation dispassionately, without liking or disliking it, without craving, aversion, or attachment. Instead of giving rise to fresh reactions, every sensation now gives rise to nothing but wisdom, *pahna*, insight: "This is impermanent, bound to change, arising to pass away."

The chain has been broken, suffering has been stopped. There is no fresh reaction of craving or aversion, and therefore no cause from which sufferings can arise. The cause of suffering is the *kamma*, the mental deed, that is, the blind reaction of craving and aversion, the *sankhara*. When the mind is aware of sensation but maintains equanimity, there is no such reaction, no cause that will produce suffering. We have stopped making suffering for ourselves. The Buddha said,

All sankharas are impermanent. When you perceive this with true insight, then you become detached from suffering; this is the path of purification. (Dhammapadda XX)

Here the word *sankhara* has a very wide meaning. A blind reaction of the mind is called *sankhara*, but the result of that action, its fruit, is also known as *sankhara*; like seed, like fruit. Everything that we encounter in life is ultimately the result of our own mental actions. Therefore in the widest sense, *sankhara* means anything in this conditioned world, whatever has been created, formed, composed. Hence, "All created things are impermanent," whether mental or physical, everything in the universe. When one observes this truth with experiential wisdom through the practice of *vipassana-bhavana*, then suffering disappears, because one turns away from the causes of suffering; that is, one gives up the habit of craving and aversion. This is the path of liberation.

The entire effort is to learn how not to react, how not to produce a new *sankhara*. A sensation appears, and liking or disliking begins. This fleeting moment, if we are unaware of it, is repeated and intensified into craving and aversion, becoming a strong emotion that eventually overpowers the conscious mind. We become caught up in the emotion, and all our better judgment is swept aside. The result is that we find ourselves engaged in unwholesome speech and action, harming ourselves and others. We create misery for ourselves, suffering now and in the future, because of one moment of blind reaction.

But if we are aware at the point where the process of reaction begins—that is, if we are aware of the sensation—we can choose not to allow any reaction to occur or to intensify. We observe the sensation without reacting, neither liking nor disliking it. It has no chance to develop into craving or aversion, into powerful emotion that can overwhelm us; it simply arises and passes away. The mind remains balanced, peaceful. We are happy now, and we can anticipate happiness in the future, because we have not reacted.

This ability not to react is very valuable. When we are aware of the sensations within the body, and at the same time maintain equanimity, in those moments the mind is free. Perhaps at first these may be only a few moments in a meditation period, and the rest of the time the mind remains submerged in the old habit of reaction to sensations, the old round of craving, aversion, and misery. But with repeated practice those few brief moments will become seconds, will become minutes, until finally the old habit of reaction is broken, and the mind remains continuously at peace. This is how suffering can be stopped. This is how we can cease producing misery for ourselves.