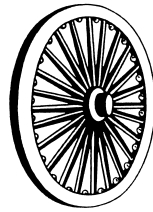


*Introduction to*

# *Vipassana Meditation*



*As taught by S. N. Goenka and his assistant teachers  
in the tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin*

[www.dhamma.org](http://www.dhamma.org)

THE TECHNIQUE OF VIPASSANA MEDITATION IS A SIMPLE, practical way to achieve real peace of mind and lead a happy, useful life. Vipassana means “to see things as they really are.” It is a logical process of mental refinement through self-observation.

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

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

## **Historical Background**

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

Five centuries after the Buddha, the noble heritage of Vipassana had disappeared from India. The purity of the teaching was lost elsewhere as well. In the country of Burma, however, it was preserved by a chain of devoted teachers. From generation to generation, for over two thousand years, this dedicated lineage transmitted the technique in its pure form. The invaluable gem of Vipassana, long preserved in Burma, is now being practiced throughout the world. Today ever-increasing numbers of people have the opportunity to learn this art of living.

## **S. N. Goenka**

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

S. N. Goenka began conducting Vipassana courses in India in 1969; after ten years, he began to teach in other countries. In over three decades since he started teaching, he has conducted hundreds of ten-day Vipassana courses, and trained more than 700 assistant teachers who are conducting thousands of courses in over 90 countries, including the People's Republic of China, South Africa, Russia, Taiwan, Mongolia, Serbia, the UAE, Cambodia, Cuba, Mexico and all the countries of South America. In 2001 there were more than 80 centres dedicated to the practice of Vipassana, including seven in Europe.

Mr. Goenka has been a guest speaker at such distinguished forums as the World Millennium Peace Summit at the UN, and the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. He teaches and embodies a consistent message: lasting happiness is only achieved by purification of mind.

## **The Practice**

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

communicating with fellow students; they may speak, however, with the teachers whenever necessary and they may contact the staff with needs related to food, health and such.

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

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

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

Students receive systematic meditation instructions several times a day, and each day's progress is explained during a taped evening discourse by Mr. Goenka. Complete silence is observed for the first nine days. On the tenth day, students learn to practice Metta (loving kindness meditation) and they resume speaking, as a transition back to their ordinary way of life. The course concludes on the morning of the eleventh day.

## **Course Finances**

All courses are run solely on a donation basis. There are no charges for the courses, not even to cover the cost of food and accommodation. All expenses are met by donations from those who, having completed a course and experienced the benefits of Vipassana, wish to give others the same opportunity. Neither Mr. Goenka nor his assistant teachers

receive remuneration; they and others who serve the courses volunteer their time. Thus Vipassana is offered free from commercialisation.

## **A Nonsectarian Technique**

Although Vipassana has been preserved in the Buddhist tradition, it can be accepted and applied by people of any background. The Buddha himself taught Dhamma (the way, the truth, the path). The technique works on the basis that all human beings share the same problems, and that a pragmatic method which can eradicate these problems can be universally practiced. Moreover, it involves no dependence on a teacher. Vipassana teaches those who practice it to be selfdependent. Vipassana courses are open to anyone sincerely wishing to learn the technique, irrespective of race, faith or nationality. Christians, Jews, Hindus, Jains, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists and members of other religions - monks, priests and nuns as well as householders - have all successfully practiced Vipassana.

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

## **Our Troubled World**

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

The immense suffering arising from racial, ethnic, sectarian and class prejudices affect the citizens of every country. Poverty, warfare, weapons of mass destruction, disease, drug addiction, the threat of

terrorism, epidemic environmental devastation and the decline of moral values—all cast a dark shadow on the future of civilization. One need only glance at the front page of a daily newspaper to be reminded of the acute suffering and deep despair which afflict the inhabitants of our planet. Is there a way out of these seemingly insoluble problems?

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

## **Vipassana and Social Change**

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

Ten-day Vipassana programs for prison inmates and staff have been introduced in many parts of India, as well as in the United States, Britain, New Zealand, Taiwan and Nepal. There are two permanent Vipassana centres in Indian prisons, where more than 10,000 inmates have attended courses. The seeds of this unique concept were first planted in 1975-1977 in Vipassana courses held inside the Jaipur Central Jail and the Jaipur Police Academy. They flowered two decades later with a huge course for over 1,000 inmates at India's largest prison, Tihar Central Jail, in New Delhi. This extraordinary undertaking was documented in the award-winning film, "Doing Time, Doing Vipassana."

The Indian government has recommended Vipassana as a reform measure for all jails. Additionally, thousands of police officers have completed Vipassana courses as part of their training at the police academy in Delhi.

In the U.S., Vipassana has been an ongoing part of the treatment program at the North Rehabilitation Facility (NRF) in Seattle since 1997. Due to the encouraging results of ten-day residential retreats at NRF, the National Institute of Health in 2000 awarded a three-year grant to the University of Washington to study the long term effects of

Vipassana meditation on addictive behaviour in inmates. Two Vipassana courses have also been held at the San Francisco Jail.

The civil service career of Mr. Goenka's teacher, Sayagyi U Ba Khin, is another noteworthy example. As the head of several government departments of the Union of Burma, Sayagyi instilled a heightened sense of duty, discipline and morality in his subordinates by teaching them Vipassana. Efficiency dramatically increased, and corruption was virtually eliminated.

The Home Department of the Government of Rajasthan was similarly transformed. And in 1996 India's most industrialized state, Maharashtra, began offering an expenses-paid leave to officials every three years for Vipassana practice, to help them deal with stress.

Tens of thousands of school children in India have been taught the breath meditation that is the first step of Vipassana. Both parents and teachers report improved concentration and decreased discipline problems among the children who participate. Vipassana courses have been organized for people with disabilities, including the blind and leprosy patients. Other programs have focussed on drug addicts, homeless children, college students and business executives.

These experiments underscore the point that societal change must start with the individual. Social change cannot be accomplished by lectures and sermons; discipline and virtuous conduct cannot be instilled in students simply through textbooks. Criminals do not become good citizens out of fear of punishment; ethnic and sectarian discord cannot be eliminated by punitive measures. History shows the failures of such attempts.

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

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

## European Meditation Centres

Courses of Vipassana meditation in the tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin as taught by S. N. Goenka are held around the world at established centres and also at rental sites. For more information, schedules and applications, please visit the Vipassana web site at [www.dhamma.org](http://www.dhamma.org) or contact the centres directly.

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