

ABOUT VIPASSANA MEDITATION

MEDITATION IN ACTION

Most people think that a life of action and a spiritual life have little in common. S.N. Goenka has shown otherwise. A leading industrialist in Myanmar (Burma) in the post-war years, he has become the foremost living lay teacher of Vipassana meditation and by his own example shown how meditation can be the foundation for a wholesome and socially beneficial life.

The practical, results-oriented nature of Vipassana is what appealed to Mr. Goenka. In 1955, he undertook a course and found that it was indeed a life-transforming experience. In the following years, he deepened his understanding of Vipassana and learned to apply it successfully in business and family life. His teacher, Sayagyi U Ba Khin, was a senior civil servant who held the post of Accountant-General and other top-level positions in the central government of post-war Burma. At the same time, U Ba Khin taught Vipassana and worked to spread its practice in public life.

A RESULTS-ORIENTED TECHNIQUE

While Vipassana is firmly rooted in the teaching of the Buddha, it is not a religion and involves no dogma, rites or rituals. Instead of a system of belief, it is a system of experience—a way to discover the reality of the world and oneself, in order to live a happy and productive life. In the words of U Ba Khin, Vipassana offers results that are “good, concrete, vivid, personal and immediate.”

In the ancient Pali language of India, the word *Vipassana* means “to see things as they really are.” It is a method of self-introspection, of learning to objectively observe the phenomenon of mind and matter, a process which gradually leads to self-transformation and real peace.

HOW VIPASSANA IS TAUGHT

Self-introspection is a serious task, and a Vipassana course is a major undertaking. For ten days the participants remain within the course site, cutting all contact with the outside world. They refrain from reading and writing, and suspend any religious activities. Among themselves they maintain complete silence, but are free to discuss difficulties or questions with the teacher or management. They begin by committing themselves to a code of ethical conduct: for the period of the course they agree to abstain from killing, stealing, sexual activity, harmful speech and use of intoxicants. These are all actions that agitate the mind and interfere with the work of introspection. Having agreed to avoid them, participants can proceed with the task at hand.

The first part of the technique is to develop concentration: students practice focusing on natural, normal breath within the area of the nostrils. They work at this for three days, and as they try again and again, they gradually develop the ability to keep their attention fixed on the object of their natural breath. By doing so, they turn their mind into a tool for penetrating self-analysis.

On the fourth day they begin the practice of Vipassana meditation itself. Instead of focusing on one spot, they move their attention systematically from head to feet and feet to head, observing in turn whatever sensations occur in each part of the body. Pleasant or unpleasant, every sensation is to be observed and accepted dispassionately, with the understanding that each is a changing phenomenon.

With repeated effort, this practice gradually brings into consciousness deeply suppressed complexes that are the source of mental agitation. Whether they manifest as emotions, memories, dreams or anything else, they are all accompanied by physical sensations. The meditators are instructed to give importance only to actual sensation, practicing to perceive its impermanent nature. Through trial and error they learn to observe even the most unpleasant or agreeable experience with equanimity, a mind at balance. As they do so, they find that agitation gives way to inner peace.

As the course approaches its end, most participants feel a sense of accomplishment, of well-being, and of having set aside a burden. Typically, the desire to share this peace with others arises. Through the formal practice of cultivating good will towards all, meditators seek to diminish unhappiness in the world and add to its peace and harmony, as they develop peace and harmony within themselves.

When they leave the course they have the opportunity of applying this practice in active life. For all it is a major challenge. But whether or not they succeed immediately, most understand that they have a goal worth striving towards. They now have the tools to become master of themselves by learning not to be overwhelmed by any experience, and to use this mastery in order to live a good life that brings happiness to themselves and those around them.

A TEACHING FOR ALL

Men and women of all walks of life are practicing Vipassana, including prison inmates and staff in India, the United States, Britain, New Zealand, Taiwan and Nepal. Courses have been held for people with disabilities, schoolchildren, drug addicts, street children, college students and business executives. A state in India encourages civil servants to attend courses as part of their ongoing job training.

As taught by S. N. Goenka, Vipassana is offered free from any commercial interest. All courses and all centers are financed solely by voluntary donations of students who have completed the ten-day training. No fees are charged for the teaching or for food and lodging. Neither Mr. Goenka nor his assistants benefit in any material way from their work. All are required to have their own means of financial support. They impart the teaching as a public service without discrimination of race, class, creed, gender and without self-interest.

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