

Vipassana Meditation: A Unique Contribution to Mental Health

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Can everyone benefit from a ten-day Vipassana course? Are there people who should avoid these courses, temporarily or permanently? Can some types of problems, that are understood in the West as psychiatric disorders, be cured by Vipassana meditation? Would Vipassana help someone more than psychotherapy would?

I am asked these questions recurrently, but have found myself unable to answer them adequately in the moment that they are posed, because the questions are too general to be accurately applied to particular people in the context of their specific life circumstances. To accurately answer these questions, it is necessary to have a proper understanding of Vipassana's unique contribution to mental health. Then each person's circumstance can be reflected upon in the light of right understanding. In this article, instead of glib generalizations, I would like to describe in some detail what Vipassana can and cannot contribute to mental health.

1) Vipassana is Unique

Vipassana meditation is unique in many ways. As the meditation that was practiced by the Buddha and that led to his liberation, it is the cause underlying his subsequent historical role—it is the second womb through which he was reborn enlightened. No other person, or system of self-development, has influenced so many hundreds of millions of people, across so many historical eras, among so many nations and cultures, in such an unambiguous manifestation of compassion, harmony and peace.

Historically, before the Buddha, all religions were a mixture of moral injunction, propitiation of gods, magic, superstition, and ethnocentrism. The Buddha brought forth the idea of a limitless community, not based on language, ethnicity, locality, not even upon species! His teaching was the first to emphasize the commonality of all living beings as the basis of relatedness, and was the first to encourage spiritual development that was psychological and social, and that did not rest upon placating some fantasized god. The Buddha realized that liberation lies in our own hearts, rather than in aligning with a powerful external Other whom we may be able to cajole or coerce into saving us.

While other religions or cultures had praised virtue, the liberating role of ethics had been previously circumscribed by ritual and by other attempts to manipulate events. The Buddha brought to the attention of humankind the *identity* of virtue and exaltation. His teaching fused into one what had previously seemed like two aspects of existence—empathic ways of living, and gratifying personal feeling states. Through the practice of Vipassana, the Buddha raised into the consciousness of the human community a sunrise of universal, non-tribal, psychological, ethical, non-superstitious relatedness towards all, that advances its practitioner and his or her environment towards becoming vehicles of love and liberty.

Vipassana is not only what the Buddha practiced, but it is what he preached. He encouraged Vipassana practice as universally relevant and beneficent for kings, merchants, housewives and murderers. While he emphasized that not everyone could use Vipassana to become a Buddha within this lifetime, he claimed that everyone could grow on the path. The same sunlight falls on all of us. While we all view different scenes, when we awaken, we all see by the same morning light. Not everyone can benefit to the same *degree* but *everyone* can benefit from the equanimity and loving-kindness that form the

foundation of Vipassana.

The uniqueness of Vipassana also rests upon its basis in empiricism. The Buddha discerned the technique by observing what functioned effectively for him. Like any carefully tested observation of nature, Vipassana is a description of natural law that is reliable across time and culture. It is free of antecedent beliefs or assumptions, and contains the same timeless factuality as knowing the ocean is wet and the land is solid. It is more accurately described as an ethical psychology than as a religion. Even to the modern listener, it rings true, not because of ethnoscriptural authority, nor even because of the Buddha's historical apotheosis, but because it harnesses reason and observation to explicate personal experience. It carries us to the edge of the ocean of existence, where our life is bared to realizations that are obvious and inevitable, like the fact that we are temporary visitors in an ancient, ongoing, vast universe.

The definition of Vipassana meditation is: The method by which a person may attain total purification. Total purification means the absence of hate, fear, greed, and delusion, and the presence of love, compassion, and equanimity. Through the practice of Vipassana, a person became the Buddha, that is, he became unshakably anchored in goodness, incapable of harm, and able to explain his methodology to others so that, if their attainments were not as absolute as his, at least their direction would be the same.

Vipassana is merely the careful delineation of common sense. It captures what is common to all civilized communities, and extracts the essence: to avoid harming others, to help others, and to cultivate thoughts and emotions with those same patterns. Even this simple definition encompasses the social, interpersonal, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral development of the individual.

Vipassana is the only path we can take with the conviction that we are following the historical guidance of the most powerful, enduring, and authentic first-person testimonial about personal transformation into absolute goodness.

We are all mammals who identify with the sensations of our own bodies. We protect them at all costs and often grab immediate palliation and pleasure at the expense of virtues we like to believe we have embraced, but which in fact we place second to continuous self-mollification. We crave pleasure and fear pain. Our journey down the path beyond pleasure and pain can easily be diverted. We need to be grounded in a meditation that roots us in the bigger picture of what ennobles our life. We require a reminder, a discipline, a practice that helps us to draw away from shortsighted reactions to our sensations. We need restorative guidance to activate the life of love and reason in the real texture of our daily adventures. When we anchor ourselves in the perspective of Vipassana meditation, every thought and breath can be incorporated into a path of awareness. Then our smallest choices become the forces that shape our relationship to our bodies, our emotions, our neighbors and the world. We become travelers of the Path, people who live with conscious intention (though varying success) to activate wisdom in every moment.

Vipassana is unique as the path to total purification, the method of the Buddha, the source of his attainments, the outflow of his realization, and a practical, moment by moment psychology that is ethical, behavioral, emotional, cognitive and spiritual. But "unique" doesn't mean exclusive. Occasionally everyone is spontaneously practicing the same thing: observing how their reactions to little signals of bodily comfort gain too much clout in determining the direction of their lives, and attempting to gain some objective distance from these petty tugs, so that life can flow in harmony with greater and more numinous forces of gratitude, service, and joy. Just as exercise is to some degree intrinsic to human life— though it may be pursued by some people only haphazardly and minimally— Vipassana is the Buddha's term for a natural capacity of our minds. Many people hone it without self-consciously labeling it and many cultures teach aspects of it

under different names. All pure beings, regardless of what terms they use, have arrived where they are through detachment from narcissistic preoccupation with the sensations of their own bodies.

All loving, engaged, and generous lives are based upon the same psychological law: practicing equanimity within the sensations of our own life. Vipassana is unique not in the sense that it is better than some other path, but in the sense that it already lies within and flows with any teaching of helpfulness, nonharmfulness, and loving relatedness. Water—the solvent that enables cells, tissues, life—is a compound that is ubiquitous and clear. Rather than rarity, universality makes water unique. Vipassana is unique in its evocation of the general principle. It is unique not in contrast to, but as the active ingredient within all paths of peace. It is not a religion, but a religious psychology; it is not a psychotherapy, though it is psychotherapeutic.

Vipassana simply means clarifying human nature at its junction with the sensations of life. Its uniqueness isn't that it can be found only in an isolated, specialized locale, but that the path to Vipassana begins at every front door.

Because Vipassana commences everywhere, belongs to no one, and has no esoteric teaching nor priesthood to preserve it, it is *itself* only when it is purveyed as common property for the common good. When sold for profit, it is no longer Vipassana— just as physical or emotional intimacy, by definition, cease to be themselves if they are exchanged for money; just as friendship, by definition, has no fee. Vipassana is analogous to a supper among friends whom you have invited to your house, while professional psychotherapy is analogous to a restaurant. Vipassana is not comparable to professional healing, which is fairly dispensed for a livelihood by particular healers applying their skills to individual problems in particular ways at particular times and places. If Vipassana is like water, the universal solvent, then professional healing is analogous to medication—an elixir of medicinal use for a specific time, place and person.

2) A Psychological Systems Definition of Vipassana

Vipassana is an ancient, free, nonprofessional, nonsectarian, ethical, universal, psychology of spiritual development. It is based upon methodical, continuous, objective observation of oneself at the level of sensations. This special form of observation catalyzes a multilevel, systems development throughout the strata of one's personality. Part of Vipassana's unique contribution to mental health derives from its *constellation* of psychological actions. Vipassana can be conceptualized as the creation through meditation of a force field that energizes new patterns in six levels of personality.

a) Vipassana induces changes at the **molecular** level of the meditator's body. Systematic, increasingly refined and subtle self-observation, without reaction, alters the flow of stress-related chemicals. The practice of equanimity as a recurrent and lifelong focus, reduces the frequency and intensity with which somatic alarm signals release their neurotransmitters. Storage, release, amount and type of circulating messenger neurochemicals are altered by long term practice of harmony and non-reactivity in the place of anger, fear, or passion. The meditator's body to some degree will, over time, come to consist of different substances than formerly.

b) Vipassana changes the **biology** of the meditator's body. As reaction patterns change, as neurochemical composition changes, and as a self-aware and compassionate lifestyle increases, sleep, diet, and expressions of distress as well as patterns of pleasure may all be affected. Psychosomatic diseases, as well as basic functions like weight, heart-rate, or alertness may be altered. Meditators find themselves choosing to avoid old habits and choosing to cultivate new personal options that spring from a keener relationship to their bodies. If over a lifetime you select a calmer diet and more salubrious relaxations, you become a different animal. Our tissues have the capacity to remold themselves to

some extent in response to our friendship with them. Attunement to our bodies is automatically experienced as nurturance of them.

c) Vipassana has a dramatic effect at the *psychological* level. Old complexes are relinquished, new attitudes and virtues are cultivated, memories resurface, relationships are seen and developed in new light, the future is deconstructed and reopened in new ways, human history and community are known to have different potentials than was once believed, and event after event in one's life is reexperienced and reexamined in a new perspective. This is the most dramatic and obvious contribution of meditation and the reason it is attractive to many people.

d) Vipassana is value-based education. The goal of Vipassana is to manifest the virtues of love, compassion, joy and equanimity, and as a psychology it can be understood as incorporating direct learning. Virtue is cultivated in privacy, and it is also introjected from the examples of teachers, who may reside as nuclei of inspiration in the minds of their students. In this sense, Vipassana incorporates a *cognitive-behavioral* psychology, that encourages active practice of ideal ways of solving problems, of interacting with others, or of participating in society. Vipassana is also something you *do*. Reverence, respect, gratitude, service are ways to be in the world that can be learned, just like riding a bicycle, and meditation is also a discipleship to right action. Character building is a matter of repetition and effort, not just of sitting still with eyes closed. Vipassana is a training in psychological culture.

e) Vipassana is an *environmental* psychology, that stresses the feedback loop of harmony. The way we treat the world determines much of the response that we will get. This principle is not limited to the human world. The motivations with which we deal with cats, elephants, and trees are also expressions of our psyches, and set in motion responses which we will in turn be receiving back from the recipients of our outgoing messages. For a meditator, respect for life is a logical extension of self-respect. The air, the earth will reply to us and tell us how our wishes, fears and concerns are impacting them and therefore recirculating to us. The world is a sensitive receptor of our inner life. As our inner world expresses itself through actions, the membrane of our surroundings vibrates with the destruction or joy that we have generated. To the meditator, everything around us is a mirror in which we are revealed. Everything around us is also feeling the sting of our wrath, or humming our hum. Awareness of our living environment is the psychological sensibility of Vipassana.

f) Vipassana is a path to *nibbāna*, the transcendence of the material world. Encoded in the psychology of Vipassana is a faith in the More, an intuition of the Beyond. Vipassana is a psychology of the numinous, free from any concrete description, belief, vision, theology, anthropomorphism, fantasy, or reduction of any kind. Vipassana contains an experiential thrust beyond limits of concept and speech, to animating, personality-impacting faith in absolute good.

Vipassana is a unique tool of human growth, transformative from microstructure to illimitable expanse. Nevertheless, it has its proper uses and limits.

3) There Are Limits to Formal Vipassana Courses

Although Vipassana belongs to no one and can be practiced by anyone, anywhere, at any time, formal training courses in Vipassana are not appropriate for everyone at every juncture of their life. To submerge oneself in Vipassana practice all day, every day, for ten days is an intense experience that requires intelligent choice and some discretion as to who should do so, or at what stage of their life. Waiting, choosing the proper time, or forbearing from formal training are all part of the equation of choice.

During long hours of silent meditation, an individual's superficial conscious intentions are unmasked. Beneath our conscious minds are the primitive reactions

springing from contact with our body sensations—craving, dissatisfaction, passion, petulance, fear, hate. Can we be at peace with the impersonal ceaseless change of our bodies, that starts at birth and continues to death, and which is the fluid matrix over which we have constructed an image of our apparently stable but truly ephemeral self? The training of a formal ten-day Vipassana retreat is the ability to self-observe our archaic reactions, in the privacy of our own interior life, and to see and to transform who we are at the changing level of guts, bones and heart. Beneath whom we like to imagine we have been, who we really are is clarified and changed. Nothing new is dredged up nor provoked, but who we have always been is highlighted. In the process, our old habit patterns rise up from the unconscious to the surface of our mind. The temptation to act upon old patterns of thought, feeling and behavior is limited by the discipline of the course, as well as by new meditation-derived insights and skills in actualizing who we wish to become.

Formal ten-day courses in Vipassana meditation are built around ethical precepts of behavior, meditative concentration, and the perspective of personal transiency. For all of this to be catalyzed, there are also rules, regulations and timetables that facilitate an atmosphere in which character strengths are developed and maladaptive reactions released.

There are limits to who can benefit from these formally structured teaching events. People with particular medical problems may find the simple facilities, which are generally designed with modest comfort and the general public in mind, are inadequate for their unique needs. People with some psychiatric problems may also wisely choose to avoid organized Vipassana courses.

The student of such a course must be able to follow rules that ensure the privacy, quiet and proper instruction of all participants. The long days of silence and the detailed guidance require of the student a modicum of trust, cooperation, participation, and earnest effort. People whose psychiatric disorders provoke extreme suspicion, oppositionalism, or apathy clearly will not benefit. Ten days in a drug-free, alcohol-free, smoke-free, celibate environment may also be intolerable to some people.

A more complicated set of situations comes from essentially cooperative, addiction-free people who suffer from overwhelming states of mind, which may vary from intense, garrulous, agitated excitements, to rage, or to distrust, depression, or panic. Here, though there are many variations of possible events, the guidelines are clear: if by character, disease, or temporary state, a person's capacity to follow instructions or to cooperate with a teacher is overwhelmed or subsumed, he or she will be unable to use formal teaching retreats on the path. If in the past a person has suffered from overwhelming reactions, the technique of silent, days-long self-observation will certainly raise to the surface that same old pattern. Will the new skills in meditative alertness, observation, and insight enable that student to transform their old reactions, or will they once again be subsumed by them? The answer to that lies in the degree and intensity of those past reactions: no matter how severe a feeling may be, as long as attention, participation, working trust, and effort remain intact, Vipassana will provide remarkable power for the student to perceive it, to understand the root of the old reaction, and to find a new avenue of freedom from it.

If, on the other hand, the student knows that in the past their reactions have led to the loss of the constructive and organizing faculties of their personality, then a ten-day Vipassana course is unwise for them. Vipassana courses are not appropriate for the treatment of psychiatric disorders, nor for people with disorganizing mental states. People who require medication to control their emotions should refrain from Vipassana courses until their prescribing physician and they themselves feel confident that they can be both medication-free and able to participate in a course without harming or

endangering themselves. There is nothing kind about taking nonswimmers on long canoe trips.

People who can't take ten-day Vipassana courses are still able to benefit from the teaching, but not at the level of intensity provoked by ten days of silence and unbroken awareness of body sensations. Any day, to some degree, old habit patterns of anger, greed, and fear can be relinquished; new growth of tolerance, generosity, honesty, and sobriety can be developed. The practice of all of these beneficent ways of being is itself part of the path. Concentrative meditation, "*ānāpāna*," which focuses only upon breathing, for shorter periods than ten days, is unlikely to stir up deep old reactions, can be relaxing and may be a proper precursor to a ten-day retreat. All considerate words, all grateful memories, may help strengthen the foundation beneath a future of Vipassana practice. Even if a potential student is currently unprepared to face the upwelling of their old reaction patterns, they can still cultivate the character virtues—like gratitude and compassion—that may, over time, provide a containing strength that will eventually enable them to face a meditation course with confidence and success. After such a careful wait and thoughtful anticipation, the old reaction patterns might safely surface to be released during a Vipassana course in the future. The way you live while you wait to take a Vipassana course may be the best possible use of your time, and the wisest strengthening exercise. Some people may benefit from a considered pause before they launch into a ten-day course—a moratorium that may last from months to years—until they gain more confidence that they will be able to endure without cigarettes, or that their old panic attacks or depression have come under more control. Their wait is not an exile from, but a preparation for, a deeper experience.

In the life of a meditator, not all progress can or should be made during meditation retreats. Before and between intensive courses, individuals can employ simple, universal truths to improve their plight and to contribute to society. Having to wait and to work on a problem that would be overwhelming during a meditation course, may itself bring a therapeutic focus to bear upon that problem. It is good to take swimming lessons *before* a canoe trip. The Buddha himself had to search for Vipassana for six years. All valuable tutorials have prerequisites.

Because Vipassana is a natural function of the human psyche—though it was honed and purified and articulated by the Buddha—it has no owner or official institution. Every individual who approaches it is an independent agent whose volition is itself the key to the path. At its core, Vipassana is only the wish and will to cultivate love, compassion, joy, and equanimity. By definition, Vipassana cannot be developed through haste, recklessness, hostility, defiance, or deceit. Its methods and goals are identical.

4) Vipassana Is Not a Psychotherapy

Vipassana is not a psychotherapy because it is not a professionally trained activity, because it is not dispensed as a means of livelihood, because it is not based on a supportive and particularizing relationship with an individual healer, because it is not coadministered with medications or other therapeutic modalities, and because it is not intended as a treatment for psychiatric disorders. But a gray area remains: Vipassana rectifies maladaptive reaction patterns and nurtures character strengths ... isn't that psychotherapy?

The most important difference between Vipassana and psychotherapy is the place that these two activities are intended to occupy within a person's life. Vipassana and psychotherapy undoubtedly have some overlap in that both are designed to help people live better lives; other than that, they diverge in intention and practice. Psychotherapy is intended as a temporary intervention within the context of a paid, professional relationship, to heal psychological wounds. Vipassana is a free spiritual transmission, a way of life, and a vector beyond life itself. Though it may also bring relief to mundane

problems, Vipassana is the path to *nibbāna*, total purification, liberation from suffering. Its time-scale is long—“lifetimes,” in the language of the East—and its goals august and embracing. Although our own use of Vipassana in this current lifetime may be much more modest and limited, it still imparts to our lives a momentum beyond our own time and self.

Vipassana is directed towards hope and faith in the future as manifested in this current moment. Its goal is equanimity for oneself now and under all future conditions, and love and compassion for everyone else. It points our vision beyond the temporary horizon. Yet a person may also need an immediate cast upon their broken leg, an acute relief from the terrors of war, or personal help in overcoming past abuse.

A person considering a Vipassana course for the first time would be wise to ask oneself, “What is the intensity of my problem? What is the extent and pervasiveness of my problem throughout the matrix of my personality? What other skills and strengths surround the problem?” Some human dilemmas are powerful but circumscribed. Others are less explosive, yet more pervasive and insidious. There are an infinite variety of permutations of flaws and strengths in each one of us. All of us contain heaps upon heaps of both virtues and negativities, so that our character cannot be measured by a mere handful of either helpful or harmful traits.

Although no schematic, generalized formula can accurately be applied to every case, there are three angles from which scrutiny will be most revealing. Before taking a ten-day course, each person would be well advised to ask of oneself (and the course organizers will want to know): 1) Can I *participate* in rules, regulations, and guidelines that are intrinsic to a guided group experience? If I should develop doubts or mental quarrels with particular instructions, would I be able to discuss them good-naturedly with course managers and teachers, and abide by group guidelines and conclusions about them? 2) The heart of Vipassana is a unique basis for continuous self-observation. Is it probable that I will be able to muster *self-observation* through thick and thin, dawn to dusk, for ten days; or be able to seek help and follow guidance to learn new ways of doing so? 3) Both during Vipassana courses, and in daily life, continuity of effort is the secret of success. Am I mature and steady enough to give a *fair and earnest trial* to Vipassana?

Even if a person is capable of taking a Vipassana course, a certain ambiguity remains as to the proper step for any one person at any one point in time. Rather than this forming an unsolvable problem, the complexity, privacy, uniqueness, and ambiguity of the decision leads to the heart of meditation, which is fundamentally a transformation of motivation. When, why, and how we decide to meditate is itself a part of the practice.

Because every individual is unique, and because at each moment we are different than we had been a moment before, no one else can answer another person’s question: “Given these problems that I have, which aren’t so severe as to make it obvious that I should avoid a Vipassana course for the time being, should I take an antidepressant, go into psychotherapy, or do you think I would fare better (or worse) if I took a ten-day training in Vipassana?” Remembering the unique contribution of Vipassana, the limits of ten-day courses, and the distinction between Vipassana and psychotherapy, let’s look at the way these different behaviors effect individual lives, to highlight the variety of answers that people actually arrive at, and the likely outcome of these varying choices.

4) Examples

The following examples are intended to highlight some of the general principles that I have discussed so far. They are not about the most common experiences that students have on ten-day Vipassana courses, since the majority of meditation students have few conflicts or confusions on these points. The examples are intended to boldly outline the issues at the boundary of Vipassana and mental health, and are fictional composites, which I have divided

into three illustrative and somewhat arbitrary groups. Anyone who meditates properly would be a positive example for all three sections. Not so with negative examples. While one person utilizes meditation with understanding, perseverance, and faith, another student who appears similar may use Vipassana erratically or unwisely, leading to problems rather than to solutions.

I) Participation

The application process to a Vipassana course involves honest self scrutiny, as well as feedback from course organizers, but self-deceit or wishful denial occasionally lead a student to commence a ten-day course without the ability to face it.

A heroin addict from suburban New York denied his habit on the application form, and underrated his addiction to cigarettes, so that, from the start, he felt overwhelmed by dual chemical withdrawal. While polite and conversant, he simply refused to stay after the second day, clearly torn by his wish to find a way out of chemical dependencies, and by the power they retained over him, which made stillness and self-observation impossible for him in the face of his urgency and agitation.

A graduate student from the University omitted from his application form his history of delusional thinking and psychotic breaks. He had previously discontinued his medication and his appointments with his psychiatrist based upon his poignant wish for meditation to erase his past. On a Vipassana course, he strove for nearly a week, as he gradually deteriorated. When course managers noted bizarre mannerisms, fasting, and difficulty following the schedule, he was interviewed by the teacher who realized from answers to questions that this student was full of elaborate, self-generated deviations from proper Vipassana practice and was very disturbed, and quietly lost. His family was called, and course organizers and his wife cooperated to restore him to his doctor's care.

These two examples illustrate that meditation retreats aren't helpful to those who start with gross deceit, or who suffer from states of mind that preclude understanding, learning, and practicing as taught.

In contrast, a world-travelling drug user withdrew from multiple, hard-drug abuse, and joined a Vipassana course, describing on the application her past troubles and her yearning for a new start. Her honesty alerted the teacher to her possible need for extra help. Her cravings, though powerful, were not too acute for her to observe them using meditation techniques. She completed her meditation course triumphantly. After several months she completed a second ten-day intensive and settled down in a new geographical area for a new shot at life.

Similarly, an engineer described on his application how his college years had been disrupted by mental breakdowns. He had been hospitalized in a psychiatric hospital. Medication and years of psychotherapy had enabled him to earn his degrees, and he had begun his career. When he heard about Vipassana, he was attracted to it as a way to bring more love, compassion, and joy into his somewhat lonely and arid life, but he was wisely cautious about his ability to sit still and observe his reactions! In dialogue with the Vipassana Meditation Center, he began prudent, long-term planning. He continued to work until he had anchored himself in a stable way of life; he solicited his parents' backing; and he reestablished contact with his psychiatrist as a precaution. After several years of good mental health, he successfully started and completed a ten-day course, became an active volunteer at the center, and over a period of many years and many courses, he expanded his social world, opened his heart, contributed to the meditation of thousands of students through his donation of skill and time to the center's physical plant, and he continues to grow on the path.

It is not a diagnostic term, or a single past event, but attitude, understanding, planning, timing, and effort that predict successful use of the Buddha's teaching.

Vipassana is not an individualistic withdrawal into self, but participation in an ageless human community.

II) Observation

Completely disingenuous and sincere students may occasionally have to wait or to limit their exposure to Vipassana. This occurs when students carry within them emotions or reactions that erupt unexpectedly and overwhelm them. Despite devotion or commitment, at particular life-stages these students simply will not be able to activate self-observation as the Buddha taught it. To some extent that may be true of all of us! Who would dare to claim the equanimous, objective, self observation of a Buddha? However, among ordinary meditators, some people can persevere in observational effort, while other students, equally solid in almost every other way, cannot, due to the specific organization of the inner life that they bring with them into meditation practice.

For example, a young history teacher and his wife both became students of Vipassana. Delighted by the personal and spiritual results they experienced on their first meditation course, they continued their morning and evenings sittings at home together, took annual ten day courses, and contributed volunteer hours from time to time to the meditation center. They were diligent in maintaining the sober, moral base to their life that the Buddha encouraged, and they found their life increasingly blessed. But things changed. The history teacher's parents died, and he found himself in charge of his mentally ill sister. He was not only burdened with new responsibility, but provoked by memories of his father's drunken abuses that may have contributed to his sister's miserable, marginal existence. As his childhood memories intensified, and as his life became entangled in endless caretaking phone calls to hospitals, government bureaucracies, doctors and police regarding his sister, the history teacher himself became increasingly anxious. He signed up for another meditation course, hoping to deepen his capacity for equanimity under his new and tougher life circumstances, but during the course he was barely able to observe his sensations, as his mind raced wildly and desperately. Back at home, he continued to persevere in his daily meditation, but he began to explode into moments of terror that his family practitioner labeled panic attacks. Each one of these eruptions left him feeling shattered. Despite his noble efforts to reestablish equanimity in his mind, he felt he was going to drown in a plight similar to his sister's. Instead, he sought help at a medical center to which his family practitioner had referred him. For eight months, he participated in psychotherapy with a psychiatrist, who also prescribed him medication, and with whom he discussed in detail his family life, past and present, in order to be better able to cope with his own memories and with the demands of his sister's care. During this era of his life, he refrained from taking meditation courses.

He might have quit meditation at this point. He might have concluded, "I faced a crisis and meditation was no cure. Something is wrong either with me or with the technique." Instead, he stayed in touch with meditation teachers and friends, avoided judging either himself or Vipassana, and continued his meditation at home beside his wife as well as he could. Side by side, they remained confederates of faith and focus in a vertiginous time.

His morning and evening meditations were now so different, with such powerful mental diversions, such storms of feeling, so many haunting worries—such a deviation from the pleasant calm that he had called "meditation" in the past! His observation now was often limited perforce to his breath, and even that in a disrupted and fragmentary way. He might have concluded, "I can't meditate any more. I'm meditating wrong. My meditation is so bad." Instead, he had the insight to realize that he had to release his old definition of meditation as a reliably comforting and soothing relaxation, and to learn to meditate even minimally while snowboarding down an avalanche. His erratic daily meditation did not cure him, but it was helping him far more than he realized, preparing

future groundwork for a resilient meditation practice that had many dimensions and could withstand buffeting and travail, and over time gain more dynamic energy to restore equanimity even within acute distress. Meanwhile, he successfully kept in mind the realization: “This awful time, this life-stage, will change, just as my old life did.” As his illness responded to psychiatric treatment... he found that he was still a meditator, still bonded to a tradition, still an honest and sane observer of the reality of change in himself. In fact, he was a much deeper meditator than he had been before, because he now had a riveting memory of the reality of change upon change within the structures of what he called himself. The unwanted experience had actually been a stern but useful teaching. What an irony when he found, after completing his psychiatric treatment, that he was now an even more inspired Vipassana student!

No longer fixating on one type of mental experience and labeling it “good meditation,” no longer attempting to use meditation as a medical panacea, he understood Vipassana as a window into the universal reality of change, through which he could better face life’s storms. Sometimes he might have to seek help, but he would eventually outgrow that plight, while he continued to faithfully glance at ultimate truth through ongoing meditation. His psychiatric treatment had constituted a skillful helpseeking behavior that contributed to his longevity as a healthy meditator. For years now, he has required no further treatment; he can cope with his sister, and with himself, with greater balance. He continues to walk the path from which he was never fully disrupted, even when his world seemed detonated.

Continuity of effort to observe was the secret of his success. Vipassana continued to provide insight, meaning, and direction that surrounded and endured beyond professional medical help. His seemingly catastrophic trial turned out in retrospect to have been a fiery educational interlude, while his meditation, which had appeared token and enfeebled at the time, was in fact a unique bridge from the Buddha to him, before, during, and after his episode of intense suffering. His taproot in morality, and his realistic perspective, remained rudders even when his concentration seemed lost on high seas. When the big waves had at last faded, his devotion to objective self-observation was still on course. Psychiatry helped his mental health. The path of Vipassana moved him along a journey that points towards helping others, and towards gratitude for help received. With a long life yet to live, he may well continue his progress beyond well-being, into helping himself and helping others realize universal truths while disentangling from parochial suffering. Vipassana is as deep as the problem it is used to solve.

There is no wisdom in commencing a first meditation course while one is overwhelmed and beset beyond one’s ability to cope. A person wracked by agitation, anxiety, depression or doubt cannot expect instant, radical cure in ten days of flailing and dismay. Vipassana should be allowed to take root when there is no question that the heart of the Buddha’s teaching—objective observation of the vibratory basis of the false sense of self—can be comprehended, mobilized, and practiced. Once the path is properly learned, however, it can be kept alive through the severest trials. In fact, that is the whole point!

Many students quit meditating when life erupts into unwanted suffering, or when their concentration deteriorates under stress. Many people understandably feel belittled by the mountains of distress they contain. But there are many counter examples, of people who spin a thin thread of effort to observe properly even as they tumble down the mountain. In the long run, it is through this thread that they feel the belaying power of the Buddha’s teaching.

III) Fair and Earnest Trial

Two couples, old friends, came from the east and west coast to take their first Vipassana meditation course together, worked properly, and experienced the exhilarating sense of

accomplishment and joy that is so often the fruit of the first deep Vipassana practice. None of them had any particular difficulty participating in the course rules and disciplines, or in continuing to make efforts to return to objective observation of themselves. Each of the four, in the privacy of their own thoughts, was so inspired that they determined to continue the path for the rest of their life. But things did not work out that way.

The woman from California was interested in alternative healing, and she misconstrued the psychosomatic healing power of Vipassana and its bodily attention, as just one more “body-mind therapy.” She failed to grasp its uniqueness as a free, universal, ageless, multileveled path to *nibbāna*. She mixed it with superficial, tactical, soothing “therapy” workshops and weekends, gradually drifting from meditation, practicing it perfunctorily, and therefore with little gain. She calmed herself with red California burgundy instead of meditating in the evening. As she drifted from one healing fad to another, her anger, irritability and unhappiness, which had previously impelled her to seek out Vipassana, resurfaced. Augmented by the fantasies of happiness dangled in front of her by the New Age healing marketplace, her negativities oozed further into her daily life and marriage. Gradually, as her depression increased and her relationship with her husband deteriorated, she sought psychiatric help, and was medicated for chronic depression and attention deficit disorder. Incorporating these labels into her sense of self, she quit meditating and accepted the idea that she had biochemical, genetic deficits and would have to remain on medication for the rest of her life.

Her husband became increasingly furious at her self-preoccupation. Proudly, he continued his twice-daily meditation alone, and returned for further ten-day courses. He felt pleased by the pleasant sensations of free-flow in his body as he meditated, and he increasingly looked upon these experiences of ecstatic dissolution as proof that he was holy and “attained.” Instead of a path of objective observation, he turned Vipassana into a path of sensual self-absorption; instead of a path of compassion, he turned Vipassana into a self-righteous fortress. As he meditated, he indulged in fantasy about his past and future lives, to the detriment of his current one. When his wife finally exhorted him to visit her psychiatrist with her for couples therapy sessions, the husband from California haughtily rejected the psychiatrist’s suggestion that he start psychotherapy on his own and take medication to reduce his self-aggrandizing and compensatory delusions.

The couple from California eventually separated. The wife now considered herself a purely medical case, taking psychotropic drugs and dabbling with herbs. The husband became defensively cocksure, and turned his antimeditation spurning of psychiatry into a testimony of his spiritual purity. That he was above ever stooping to psychotherapy or medication became the cornerstone of his self-esteem. He pursued an accusatory divorce, bitter, unhappy, and self-justifying. When Vipassana teachers failed to give him the approval he sought for his litigious aggression with its rebirth rationalizations, he quit meditation and threw himself into an “instant enlightenment” group in Los Angeles.

For meditation to be fruitful, there must be reasonable discernment to differentiate the path of a Buddha from trends and fads. Similarly, the use of doctors is optimal when there is a modicum of consumer inquiry. The story of the wife from California illustrates both of these points. Many essentially healthy people end up on medications for predominantly cultural reasons. In a society that encourages consumerism and that conflates health cures with love and meaning, people like this California wife may be diagnosed and medicated for syndromes that stem from overstimulation, subtle and casual intoxication, absence of discipline, and self-absorption. Having failed to find total enlightenment immediately, she grasped haphazardly until she hit the lowest common denominator that her culture offers. In a different era or culture, where individuals did not feel entitled to a chain of frivolous life choices, her purported attention deficit

disorder may have evaporated under a regime of constancy, simplicity, and devotion, and her depression might have melted from the warmth of constructive social contribution and loving family life. As it was, she did not have the knowledge or social guidance to know how to marry a person or a path.

The opposite of quick-fix living is also unproductive. The husband from California was steady but rigid, fanatical but not devoted. He worked long and hard in the wrong direction. He used meditation to feel mighty and aloof, rather than empathic and affiliated. He practiced improperly, setting his own goals and rejecting objectivity and equanimity in favor of bathing himself in pleasurable sensations and escapism. He placed himself above his teachers. Deviating from Vipassana, he engineered a unique contemplative discipline that amplified narcissistic delusion. Ironically, had he listened to his wife's overprescribing psychiatrist he might have nevertheless saved both his marriage and his meditation by at least reducing his delusions. He rejected both psychotherapy and medication not to deepen his capacity to face suffering with noble truths, but to magnify his own ego. In his view, he rejected psychiatry because as a student of the Buddha such mundane help was beneath him—but stubbornness and vanity were even less liberating. Ultimately, he failed to benefit from either psychiatry or Vipassana.

It is instructive to compare this couple to the history teacher. He avoided self-labeling of either medical-diagnostic or of “spiritual” varieties; he persevered in right efforts despite difficulty. He clearly differentiated between legitimate medical help and flattering sales pitches, and between the lifetime path of Vipassana and the state-specific - psychiatric rectification of psychopharmacology coupled to brief psychotherapy. He differentiated overwhelming necessity from merely convenient or placating misuse of medication; he never poured his pain onto his wife, but sat beside her as a cherished ally; he continued the moral and lifestyle aspects of Vipassana as treasured, self-selected guides that can always be practiced and are always beneficent. Avoiding despair or grasping at facile conclusions, avoiding judgment of his meditation according to the pleasure or turmoil in his body sensations, he walked, maybe staggered, forward, increasingly able to live with compassion for his sister, gratitude towards his wife, and increasing joy and equanimity in himself. Where will his forward motion ever end? What could ever stop such a devoted, even if troubled, practitioner of the Vipassana way?

The east coast friends of the California couple began Vipassana at the same time and with the same steps, but their path was to become quite different. They had an ostensibly more difficult road to travel, yet they *found* the unique contribution of Vipassana to mental health.

The husband had taken birth in a family with a generations long history of poverty and oppression. Exile, terror, and enmity had been part of the atmosphere in which he had grown up, and had permeated his developing nervous system with reactions of fear and despair. Years later he would come to understand that he met the criteria for and could have easily been diagnosed as having depression and anxiety. But after his initial exposure to Vipassana, he put down deep roots into the practice. He determined to use his distress as a continuous catalyst to face reality within himself as objectively and as equanimously as possible. His foray was not mere stoicism. He understood that the path is a way of life, not merely a tactic; he cultivated interpersonal concern and generosity as assiduously as “sitting.” He soothed himself with the cleansing calm that accompanies a sober, moral lifestyle. He walked forward with the timetable of a lifetime, not with a petulant time limit. Despite and because of his internal memory of deep suffering, he gradually blossomed as a music teacher and a high school chorus conductor. His marriage, suffused from two sides with respect, devotion, and affection, was a source of solace and joy in a life that continued to have its share of raw vulnerabilities. Along with his wife, he actively donated time and energy to make Vipassana more widely available to

others. His anxiety/depression was not treated by, but was subsumed under and rotated by Vipassana into a source of determination and direction.

The east coast wife had been psychiatrically incapacitated in her early years. The suicide of her father, its eerie residue, and subsequent deficit in parenting, had left her immature, wanting and expecting other people to take care of her and stalled in the development of adult roles. Unable to constructively engage work or school, she slid into minor drug abuse and dependent sexual misadventures. When she found Vipassana, she worked with it as taught, and almost instantly applied its moral implications to her behavioral disorders, which dramatically disappeared almost overnight. But her growth on the path, like everyone's, was uneven, with some problems more superficial and more easily relinquished, but with others sandblasted into her. Her over-reactive, thin-skinned nature was deeply entrenched. Over many years subsequent to her initial dip into Vipassana practice, she constructed her marriage and her mothering around the Buddha's teaching. Gradually she and her husband built the loving and nurturing home she herself craved and never before had. Every day was a challenge for her to apply the insights which she developed in meditation to her own antithetical predisposition. Her tendency was to react to every minor stress as if it were the death of everything in her world. She had belief in but no familiarity with equanimity. The Vipassana way of life was neither easy nor natural for her, but for that very reason it was more valuable and rectifying, and the more it helped her reduce her fits and compulsions, the more her appreciation for it grew into a deep, well tested devotion. Never facile or saintly, her parenting seasoned from peevishness into balanced caregiving. Her children blossomed into more balanced and capable people than either she or her husband had been. Every day she walked the path, redirecting her life that was easily buffeted but well held. She did not run for therapy or medication to salve every irritation, but built mental muscle by exercising Vipassana against the stress and strain of living. Ironically, those who struggle most to establish Vipassana in their life may be the ones who gain the most from it.

The east coast couple both started life with moderate psychiatric disorders. They did not use Vipassana as a psychotherapy nor as a panacea, nor did it make them perfect or elevate them beyond all distress. But it gave them an efflorescent way of life, redolent with intimacy and appreciation, a home of determination and modesty, which was imbued with the light of the Buddha's love and joy. Their nobly imperfect well-being pulsed outward from them to their children, their friends and community like the earthy scent of spring grass.

The story of the east coast couple is about successful use of Vipassana by ordinary people beset by problems. Both of them were able to *participate* in the guidelines and restraints that enable meditation courses, meditation centers, and functional families. Though haunted initially by anxieties and despairs, they didn't use their personal suffering as rationalizations to disparage themselves, each other, or the disciplines of the path. Understanding the fundamental principles of Vipassana, they cultivated love, peace, and respect for everyone in their home—each other and their children. There was no room for such a heartfelt effort to go awry, based as it was simply on causal logic. When their foibles and passions began to tug them off course, they reactivated *observation* of themselves at the deepest level through devoted meditation at home and in annual retreats. They withdrew from the American national pastime of blame, accusation, and dissatisfaction, and they substituted self-scrutiny of their own contribution to the domestic tensions that briefly flared. Since both of them practiced Vipassana, no one was entitled to assume the role of the righteous accuser; no one was left holding the bag of the pious martyr. The harmony and joy that seeped into their otherwise arduous lives amply justified to them their faith in the path. The east coast couple exemplify the meaning of "a fair and earnest trial." All of this was done without any distinguishing

talents and with some nasty blemishes with which to commence. In a society awash in pills, litigation, and fairytale cures, they applied the classic, universal truths of insight and gratitude to the roots of their lives, and reaped the only possible harvest of such applications.

As their progress on the path continues, the endpoint of their development remains an ascending unknown. The east coast couple live something different from mere mental health, for they are part of the Path, the continuity of the Buddha's way of life. Briefly, their transient lives form a nodule of peace and rectitude in the tides of time.

Beyond the personal gain that they have gotten, the east coast couple have contributed one star to the sky. Many small vessels in the turbulent waters around them may be steering by their light.

The unique contribution of Vipassana to mental health is neither to fix psychiatric disorders, nor to ignore them, but instead to open individuals to the flow of liberation. Self-observation, equanimity, and sympathetic joy then use these people as conduits to enter and to ease the world. Their individuality, with its particular knots of suffering, unravels, and they align with deeper realities.

Summary

Buddhas are rare. They are so radiant, inspiring and exemplary that they lead millions of people for thousand of years. The further we follow the path they have walked, the closer we will get to the fruits that they have won. But in this lifetime we are likely to lack some strengths and to have many common human frailties. Vipassana meditation blossoms when we have realistic acceptance of ourselves. In every setback, whenever we are knocked down, there is no better time to activate what we have developed so far. Every moment is new, and an opportunity from which we can benefit no matter how long a chain of problems we have yet to solve.

Vipassana is like walking through a series of doors in the house of your own *kamma*. Door after door must be patiently opened, in room after room. Maybe one of these rooms with its slippery marble floors may take you lifetimes to cross. But if you keep going you will at last step out onto the back porch and beyond the house of yourself, beyond all doors at last. Someone may be singing the famous songburst that the Buddha sang at the moment he became fully enlightened, about how he had broken through all walls of himself. It may be you who is singing.