

Hans Georg Berger

## On Vipassana Meditation

No activity is more important in monastic life than meditation. It is through meditation that a monk achieves serenity, through meditation that he achieves insight-wisdom, and through meditation that he may attain his ultimate goal—enlightenment and nirvana.

Buddhism defines “three characteristics of existence”: suffering, impermanence, and non-self. These conditions must be understood by whoever aims to follow the Buddha’s path, liberating him- or herself from suffering, and ultimately coming to that extreme extinguishment of the cycle of rebirth that is called nirvana. The three characteristics of existence are understood, both intellectually and intuitively, by insight-wisdom which, in turn, can be achieved through Vipassana meditation. Indeed, the Buddhist scriptures call Vipassana meditation (also called insight meditation) a supreme tool that leads to understanding: the monk strives to be aware of all thoughts, emotions, senses, and distractions as they rise and pass away. A total, alert awareness of his own nature sharpens his intellect. Restraint of senses, sharp mindfulness and self-possession, and sincere contentment are the prerequisites for useful meditation.

There is a passage in the Majjhima-nikaya where someone approached the Buddha and asked him whether he could summarize his teaching in one phrase and, if he could, what it would be. The Buddha replied that he could, and he said “*Sabbe dhamma nalam abhinivesaya.*” *Sabbe dhamma* means “all things”; *nalam* means “should not be”; *abhinivesaya* means “to be clung to”: nothing whatsoever should be clung to. Then, the Buddha emphasized this point by saying that whoever had heard this core phrase had heard all of Buddhism; whoever had put it into practice had practiced all of Buddhism; and whoever had received the fruits of practicing it had received all the fruits of Buddhism.

The goal of Vipassana meditation is to fully understand this very phrase. On the way to this understanding, a series of body exercises (practiced in four postures—sitting, walking, standing, or lying still) may lead the way to other intellectual and deeply spiritual exercises.

The Buddha taught that not all meditations are suitable for every monk—the choice depends on the monk’s temperament: whether it is a greedy temperament, a hating, deluded, faithful, intelligent, or speculative temperament, or various combinations thereof. A senior monk, a “good friend” who has himself experienced different forms of meditation, is required to determine a junior’s temperament and to recommend appropriate meditations. Also Vipassana meditation needs a teacher who carefully accompanies the learning meditator’s efforts and development.

Calming the mind, inducing serenity, and heightening awareness are the very first rewards of meditation; a further achievement, though much more difficult to attain, is insight-wisdom. Monks meditate for extended periods, sometimes for hours on end; with extended practice, they may enter into the meditative process more easily and penetrate it more deeply. For some of them, after prolonged practice, there is a superb reward: they attain states of inner absorption, where the mind is unified and withdraws from sense experiences. When the monk’s meditation is pure, i.e., completely free from delusions and wrong views, when it sees in depth the true nature of things, it severs the final bonds with the world and ensures “deliverance of mind through wisdom.” Now the monk declares: “I have realized the Noble Truths; ended are rebirths; I have lived the pure life; what had to be done has been done; henceforth, there will be no further rebirth for me.”

Buddhism links intellect and intuition in a remarkable way: full understanding of the teaching of the Buddha (the Dhamma) can only be attained when intellectual learning and understanding of the texts is completed by the intuitive understanding and experience caused and achieved through Vipassana meditation.

Teaching of this meditation practice to the young monks and the novices is one of the fundamental elements of Buddhist education. Very closely, such teaching follows the example given by the Buddha himself.

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