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## Practical *vipassanā* meditation

Dhamma talk by Venerable Chanmay Sayadaw Ashin Janakabhivamsa  
at Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre, 1998



When one wants to meditate, either *samatha* meditation or *vipassanā* meditation, it is necessary to purify one's morality by observing at least the five precepts. The purification of morality is important as a basis for meditation because it is conducive to concentration as a lesser insight. It is better to observe eight precepts so that there is more time to spend on meditation, for if only five precepts is observed, time must be given to preparing dinner and so on.

There are three types of training in Buddhism. One is training in *sīla* or morality, known as *sīlasikkhā*, accomplished by observing the eight precepts during the meditation retreat. The second is training in concentration, known as *samādhisikkhā*. The third is training in wisdom, insight or wisdom, or *paññāsikkhā*. Of these three types of *sikkhā* or training, *sīlasikkhā* is the first requirement for a person who wants to train his mind and gain concentration as a lesser insight or wisdom.

*Sīla* here means restraint on deeds and speech. When deeds and speech are purified by observing eight precepts, morality is purified. In Buddhism, we speak of *kāyakamma*, meaning bodily action, *vacīkamma*, verbal action, and *manokamma*, mental action. *Mano* is mind or mental, *kamma* is action or deed. By observing eight precepts, *kāyakamma* and *vacīkamma* are purified through the restraint of unwholesome deeds and speech.

However, a person cannot purify his mind by observing the precepts, but only through meditation, either *samatha* or *vipassanā* meditation. When one's deeds and speech are wholesome, one is happy because one has a clear conscience. If deed and speech are not purified, a meditator may feel guilty or unhappy, the mind is not clear and they are unable to concentrate well on the object of meditation. A clear and happy mind helps the meditator attain a degree of deep concentration and clear insight into phenomena.

Thus the eight precepts are taken as a basic requirement for meditation practice. The conscience is clear as morality is purified by observing the precepts, and this clear conscience is conducive to concentration as a lesser insight. So *samatha* or *vipassanā* meditation can be practised on the base of the purification of morality, known as *sīla visuddhi*, the first of seven kinds of *visuddhi*. Only *sīla* or morality is purified, but then the meditator can begin to purify the mind by concentrating well on the meditation object and attaining clear insight into mental and physical phenomena.

We are to practise *vipassanā* meditation based on this purification of the morality and not *samatha* meditation. Here we should know a little about the difference between *samatha* and *vipassanā* meditation. *Samatha* meditation is concentration meditation, practised with the aim of deep concentration of the mind only. *Vipassanā* meditation is practised to attain the cessation of suffering, *Nibbāna*, through realisation of mental and

physical phenomena in their true nature.

We practise *vipassanā* meditation to realise the true nature of mental and physical phenomena and to destroy all defiled and negative mental states, to attain the cessation of suffering. Though we are able to attain deep concentration of mind through *samatha* meditation, we can't attain cessation of suffering if we can't realise any mental and physical phenomena.

Here *vipassanā* meditation means the realisation of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and impersonality of all mental and physical phenomena. These are called the three general characteristics of existence: *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*. They are found in all mental states and physical processes. Only when a meditator realises these three characteristics of phenomena will they be able to remove the mental defilements which are the cause of suffering.

*Vipassanā* roughly translates as 'insight', which can be attained by bare attention to what is happening in body and mind. If insight practice is mixed with intellectual thinking or philosophical reasoning, it will not penetrate to the true nature of the body-mind process. The meditator will not be able to destroy any of the mental defilements. To develop insight knowledge by means of *vipassanā* meditation, do not think about the technique or analyse the object, nor conceptualise it, but see it as it really occurs.

That is why the Buddha said *bhūtam bhūtato passati*, meaning 'see a thing as it is'. We have to be mindful of a thing as it occurs. This is right understanding (*sammā ditṭhi* in Pali), seeing any mental phenomenon or physical process as it really occurs. That leads to insight knowledge, *vipassanā ñāṇa*.

*Vipassanā* meditation has many varieties of mental states and physical processes as objects of meditation. Any mental state or physical process has the three characteristics of impermanence, suffering and impersonality. Every mental state arises and immediately passes away, not lasting a millionth of a second. The Buddha said

*yad aniccaṃ taṃ dukkhaṃ*

meaning, 'what is impermanent is suffering'. Then we see the nature of impersonality, not-self or non-ego. The so-called self, ego or soul is understood as a lasting entity, but none of the mental states or physical processes is everlasting. They are not-self, not a person, not a being, not a soul. They are *anattā*.

Any mental state or physical processes is an object of *vipassanā* meditation, so the beginner may be puzzled about what to be mindful of. To avoid that difficulty at the beginning of the practice, the late Venerable Mahāsi Sayadaw taught his students to follow the rise and fall of the abdomen. On breathing in, the abdomen rises, on breathing out, the abdomen falls. When the abdomen rises observe it, making a mental note 'rising', and when it abdomen falls, observe it and note 'falling', in this way 'rising, falling'.

However, the abdomen moves in many ways, sometimes outwards then inwards, sometimes upwards and downwards, sometimes it moves around, depending on the meditator's physical constitution. If it moves upwards or outwards, note it as 'rising' and if it moves downwards or inwards note it as 'falling'. Note 'rising, falling' in this way precisely and attentively. The words 'rising' and 'falling' are not absolute reality, but concepts which help the mind stay focused on the movement of the object. The mind should not stay with the words but should go to the physical movement of the abdomen.

At the beginning of the practice, the abdominal movement may not be distinct enough to observe, and to make it so the meditator may try breathing somewhat vigorously or quickly. This should not be done. Breathing must be normal and natural, trying to observe the movement as much as possible. Gradually, as the mind becomes concentrated on the

abdominal movement, it will become more evident and prominent and the meditator can concentrate on it easily.

During contemplation of rising-falling, if you hear a sound, note 'hearing, hearing'. Observe both sound and the hearing consciousness, noting 'hearing, hearing' about four or five times before returning to the abdominal movement. In the beginning, the mind may not stay with the abdominal movement, no matter how hard the meditator tries to concentrate. The mind goes out very often, wandering off and thinking about something. When it does so, do not bring the mind back to the primary object, but observe the mind which is wandering, thinking or imagining, making a mental note such as 'wandering, wandering', 'thinking, thinking', 'imagining, imagining' and so on until the wandering has stopped, after which bring the mind back to the primary object.

We should observe this wandering because the aim of mindfulness meditation is to observe whatever occurs in body and mind as it really is. In the chapter on mindfulness of consciousness in the *Satipaṭṭhāna sutta*, the Buddha said:

*vikkhittaṃ vā cittaṃ vikkhittaṃ cittaṃ'ti pajānāti*

meaning, 'when the mind wanders, observe it as it is'. We have to be mindful of wandering, thinking or imagining because these are mental states known as *nāma*, mental phenomena have the three characteristics of impermanence, suffering and impersonality. To realise impermanence, suffering and the impersonal nature of wandering thoughts we have to be mindful of them as they are.

This is *vipassanā* meditation. In *samatha* meditation, whenever the mind goes out, we bring the mind back to focus on the primary object, because the purpose of *samatha* meditation is to focus the mind on a single object of meditation very deeply. In *vipassanā* meditation, we do not do so, as insight does not require deep concentration, but requires realisation of the three characteristics of mental and physical phenomena. To realise these, the meditator needs some degree of concentration that can be obtained by observing each mental state or physical process arising at this moment, from moment to moment.

In *vipassanā* meditation, the meditator has to focus attention on successive objects, one after another. If each object is observed attentively enough, the mind is concentrated on the first and following objects. In this way, the meditator attains a degree of concentration that enables them to realise the three characteristics of impermanence, suffering and the impersonality of phenomena. Let me repeat that when the mind wanders and thinks about something else, do not try and bring it back to the object but rather observe that wandering mind as it occurs until that thought has disappeared. Only then return to the primary object and note 'rising and falling'. When you note wandering mind, thinking or imagining, the noting should be more powerful, energetic and attentive to the process, noting 'wandering wandering', 'thinking, thinking', 'imagining, imagining'. As the noting mind becomes more powerful, it overwhelms the thinking process which gradually ceases, after which the noting mind will return to the primary object.

Whilst contemplating the rising and falling movement of the abdomen, there may arise unpleasant physical sensations such as pain, stiffening, itching or numbness. Leave the primary object and go to the point of pain or stiffening, itching or numbness and observe it as it is, making mental note, 'pain, pain', 'stiffening, stiffening', 'itching, itching' intently, until that unpleasant sensation disappears or subsides.

Pain or itching, when noted intently, appears to become more severe because the mind becomes more concentrated and thus more sensitive to the pain. Wherever the pain is in the body, be patient with it and observe it as much as possible. First of all, note the pain attentively and energetically, and if it subsides or disappears, return to the primary object. Most of the time the pain will seem to become more severe. In this case be more

patient with the pain and continue to observe it. If the pain increases so that it is no longer bearable, then it is time to get up and practise walking meditation for about one hour. Avoid changing position just to relieve the pain, since this becomes a bad habit, so that with more experience in meditation, even if there is no pain, the mind tends to want to change the bodily posture.

In the sitting, be relaxed in mind and body, do not let the mind or body become tense. Keep the head and body in an upright position. The head should be kept in an upright position, not inclined forward or backward. The upright posture will slump when effort is weak, and when this is realised, straighten up again slowly, making a mental note 'straightening, straightening'. When the body returns to its upright position, return to noting the abdominal movement.

Some meditators sit in a cross-legged position, but this should be avoided because those not used to this position will quickly feel painful sensations as one leg presses on the other. Instead of crossing the legs, place them side by side evenly, one leg outside the other. Without pressure on the legs, there may be no pain for some time, though after some time there may be tension in the knee, which should be observed.

The purpose of walking meditation is to realise each movement of the foot very well. Movement of the foot is *vāyodhātu* (the wind element), but it also has the three characteristics of impermanence, suffering and not-self. When walking, look at a place about six or seven feet ahead, without gazing about here or there. Note one step at a time, 'left, right', 'left, right'. When taking a left step, observe the movement of the left foot, and when taking a right step, observe the movement of the right foot, making a mental note 'left, right', 'left, right'. Do not look nearer than six feet, since in a short time this creates tension in the neck or back, or dizziness. The eyes should be about half closed. When placing the foot, put it down flat, the heel first and the toes later as normally. To make the foot drop flat, keep the step short, about one foot apart, with steps not too close together, since this is unnatural and may cause loss of balance.

Once the movement of the right and left foot can be noted to a certain degree, increase the number of objects observed. Note the lifting of the heel, 'lifting', pushing it forward, 'pushing' and putting it down, 'putting' or 'dropping', in this way 'lifting, pushing, dropping'. When lifting the heel of the foot, you note 'lifting', being aware of the movement of the heel and when you push it forward, observing the actual movement of the pushing forward of the foot, making a mental note 'pushing'. When you drop it down, observing the actual movement of dropping as 'dropping'.

Later on increase your objects as in 'lifting, pushing, dropping, touching, pressing' and so on. But for the time being, for the first three days you should note 'left, right' for about ten minutes. After that continue to note 'lifting, pushing, dropping'. Determine in your mind not to look around when practising walking meditation, keeping the eyes ahead all the time. When a tendency or desire to look around arises, that tendency or desire must be noted as 'tendency, tendency' and 'desire, desire' until it disappears. As a result, there will be no looking around and concentration will not be broken.

On reaching the other end of the walk, stand still and note the posture as 'standing, standing' about ten times, while being aware of the upright position of the body. After that, there is the desire to turn the body and this intention must be noted, 'intending, intending'. Then turn the body very slowly with attention to each individual movement of turning, noting 'turning, turning'. Though it is possible to observe either the foot or body when turning, it is better to observe the turning movement of the body and to observe the foot whilst walking. When facing the opposite direction, stand still, observe the standing posture, the upright position of the body, noting 'standing, standing' about ten times.

In this way, walk for one hour, being well aware of each individual movement. Do not let the mind stray just with the words 'lifting, pushing, dropping'. The mind should go to the

actual movement of the foot, the phenomenon.

The duration of walking and sitting need not be equal but in the beginning of the practice generally walk one hour and sit one hour. If it is possible to sit longer, then do so, say, for 70 or 75 minutes. If you have a painful sensation after 30 minutes of sitting, observe 'pain, pain', while being patient with it. If the pain becomes unbearable, and it is necessary to change position, do so once only in the hour of sitting, no more. Later on it will not be necessary to change position in a sitting.

Walking to the sitting place, maintain mindfulness until you have taken your seat, observing 'lifting, pushing, dropping, lifting, pushing, dropping' without interruption. On reaching the mat, observe all actions and movements involved in the act of sitting down just as they occur. This is walking meditation in brief.

We have three aspects of practice, however: walking, sitting and awareness of daily activity. Awareness of daily activity is very important in making progress in meditation, so whatever the meditator is doing must be observed, say, while bending or stretching the arms, lifting, pushing and putting down the arms, holding the spoon in eating, looking at the food and so on. Whatever actions or movements are performed in your daily routine must be observed so that there is continuity of mindfulness for the whole day, as much as possible. Continuous and sustained constant mindfulness is the cause of deep concentration. Deep concentration enables the meditator to realise the three characteristics of mental and physical phenomena.

This has been an introductory talk on practical aspects of *vipassanā* meditation. May you all be able to rightly understand the technique of this mindfulness meditation. Strive earnestly and attain the cessation of suffering!