

Vipassana

*Excerpt from Mindfulness in Plain English
Compiled from Chapter 3—What Meditation Is
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Vipassana is the oldest of Buddhist meditation practices. The method comes directly from the Satipatthana Sutta, a discourse attributed to the Buddha himself. Vipassana is a direct and gradual cultivation of mindfulness or awareness. It proceeds piece by piece over a period of years. One's attention is carefully directed to an intense examination of certain aspects of one's own experience. The meditator is trained to notice more and more of the flow of life experience. Vipassana is a gentle technique, but it also is a very, very thorough. It is an ancient and codified system of training your mind, a set of exercises dedicated to the purpose of becoming more and more aware of your own life experience. It is attentive listening, mindful seeing, and careful testing. We learn to smell acutely, to touch fully, and really pay attention to the changes taking place in all these experiences. We learn to listen to our own thoughts without being caught up in them.

The object of vipassana practice is to learn to see the truths of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness of phenomena. We think we are doing this already, but that is an illusion. It comes from the fact that we are paying so little attention to the ongoing surge of our own life experiences that we might just as well be asleep. We are simply not paying enough attention to notice that we are not paying attention. It is another Catch-22.

Through the process of mindfulness, we slowly become aware of what we really are, down below the ego image. We wake up to what life really is. It is not just a parade of ups and downs, lollipops and smacks on the wrist. That is an illusion. Life has a much deeper texture than that if we bother to look, and if we look in the right way.

Vipassana is a form of mental training that will teach you to experience the world in an entirely new way. You will learn for the first time what is truly happening to you, around you, and within you. It is a process of self-discovery, a participatory investigation in which you observe your own experiences while participating in them. The practice must be approached with this attitude: "Never mind what I have been taught. Forget about theories and prejudices and stereotypes. I want to understand the true nature of life. I want to know what this experience of being alive really is. I want to apprehend the true and deepest qualities of life, and I don't want to just accept somebody else's explanation. I want to see it for myself.

If you pursue your meditation practice with this attitude, you will succeed. You'll find yourself observing things objectively, exactly as they are—flowing and changing from moment to moment. Life then takes on an unbelievable richness that cannot be described. It has to be experienced.

In vipassana meditation we cultivate this special way of seeing life. We train ourselves to see reality exactly as it is, and we call this special mode of perception mindfulness. This process of mindfulness is really quite different from what we usually do. We usually do not look into what is actually there in front of us. We see life through a screen of thoughts and concepts, and we mistake those mental objects for reality. We get so caught up in this endless thought-stream that reality flows by unnoticed. We spend our time engrossed in activity, caught up in an eternal pursuit of pleasure and gratification and eternal flight from pain and unpleasantness. We spend all of our energies trying to make ourselves feel better, trying to bury our fears, endlessly seeking security. Meanwhile, the

world of real experience flows by untouched and untasted. In vipassana meditation we train ourselves to ignore the constant impulses to be more comfortable, and we diver into reality instead. The irony of it is that real peace comes only when you stop chasing it—another Catch-22.

When you relax your driving desire for comfort, real fulfillment arises. When you drop your hectic pursuit of gratification, the real beauty of life comes out. When you seek to know reality without illusion, complete with all its pain and danger, real freedom and security will be yours. This is not doctrine we are trying to drill into you; it is an observable reality, something you can and should see for yourself.



From the Buddhist point of view, we human beings live in a very peculiar fashion. We view impermanent things as permanent, though everything is changing all around us. The process of change is constant and eternal. Even as you read these words, your body is aging, But you pay no attention to that. The book in your hand is decaying. The print is fading, and the pages are becoming brittle. The walls around you are aging. The molecules within those walls are vibrating at an enormous rate, and everything is shifting, going to pieces and slowly dissolving. You pay no attention to that either. Then one day you look around you. Your skin is wrinkled and your joints ache. The book is a yellowed, faded thing; and the building is falling apart. So you pine for lost youth, cry when your possessions are gone. Where does this pain come from? It comes from your own inattention. You failed to look closely at life. You failed to observe the constantly shifting flow of the world as it passed by. You set up a collection of mental constructions—“me,” “the book,” “the building”—and you assumed that they would endure forever. They never do. But now you can tune into the constant change. You can learn to perceive your life as an ever-flowing movement. You can learn to see the continuous flow of all conditioned things. You can. It is just a matter of time and training.



From the Buddhist perspective, we humans have a backward view of life. We look at what is actually the cause of suffering and see it as happiness. The cause of suffering is that desire-aversion syndrome that we spoke of earlier. Up pops a perception. It could be anything—an attractive women, a handsome guy, a speedboat, the aroma of baking bread, a truck tailgating you, anything. Whatever it is, the very next thing we do is to react to the stimulus with feeling about it.

For example, take worry. We worry. Worry itself is the problem. Worry is a process; it has steps. Anxiety is not just a state of existence but a procedure. What you've got to do is look at the very beginning of that procedure, those initial stages before the process has built up a head of steam. The very first link of the worry chain is the grasping-rejecting reaction. As soon as a phenomenon pops into the mind, we try mentally to grab onto it or push it away. That sets the worry response in motion. Luckily, there is a handy little tool called vipassana meditation that you can use to short-circuit the whole mechanism.

Vipassana meditation teaches us how to scrutinize our own perceptual process with great precision. We learn to watch the arising of thought and perception with a feeling of serene detachment. We learn to view our own reactions to stimuli with calmness and clarity. We begin to see ourselves reacting without getting caught up in the reactions themselves. The obsessive nature of thought slowly dies. We can still get married. We can still get out of the path of the truck. But we don't need to go through hell over either one.

This escape from the obsessive nature of thought produces a whole new view of reality. It is a complete paradigm shift, a total change in the perceptual mechanism. It brings with it the bliss of emancipation from obsessions. Because of these advantages, Buddhism views this way of looking at things as a correct view of life. Buddhist texts call it seeing things as they really are.

Vipassana meditation is a set of training procedures that gradually open us up to this new view of that most central aspect of reality: “me.” A close inspection reveals that we have done the same thing to “me” that we have done to all other perceptions. We have taken a flowing vortex of thought, feeling, and sensation and solidified that into a mental construct. Then we have stuck a label onto it: “me.” Forever after, we treat it as if it were a static and enduring entity. We view it as a thing separate from all other things. We pinch ourselves off from the rest of that process of eternal change that is the universe, and then we grieve over how lonely we feel. We ignore our inherent connectedness to all other beings and decide that “I” have to get more for “me”; then we marvel at how greedy and insensitive human beings are. And on it goes. Every evil deed, every example of heartlessness in the world, stems directly from this false sense of “me” as distant from everything else. If you explode the illusion of that one concept, your whole universe changes. Don't expect to be able to do this overnight, though. You spent your

whole life building up that concept, reinforcing it with every thought, word, and deed over all those years. It is not going to evaporate instantly. But it will pass if you give it enough time and attention. Vipassana meditation is a process by which that concept is dissolved. Little by little, you chip away at it, just by observing it.

The “I” concept is a process. It is something we are constantly doing. With vipassana we learn to see that we are doing it, when we are doing it, and how we are doing it. Then that mindset moves and fades away, like a cloud passing through a clear sky. We are left in a state where we can decide to do it or not, whichever seems appropriate to the situation. The compulsiveness is gone: now we have a choice.

These are all major insights. Each one is a deep-reaching understanding of one of the fundamental issues of human existence. They do not occur quickly, nor without considerable effort. But the payoff is big. They lead to a total transformation of your life. Every second of your existence thereafter is change. The meditator who pushes all the way down this track

achieves perfect mental health, a pure love for all that lives, and complete cessation of suffering. That is no small goal. But you don't have to go the whole way to reap benefits. The benefits start right away, and they pile up over the years. It is a cumulative function: the more you sit, the more you learn about the real nature of your own existence. The more hours you spend in meditation, the greater your ability to calmly observe every impulse and intention, thought and emotion, just as it arises in the mind. Your progress to liberation is measured in hours on the cushion. And you can stop during the process any time you feel you've had enough. There is no mandating rule but your own desire to see the true quality of life, to enhance your own existence and that of others.

Vipassana mediation is inherently experiential, not theoretical. In the practice of meditation you become sensitive to the actual experience of living, to how things actually feel. You do not sit around developing sublime thoughts about living. You live. Vipassana meditation, more than anything else, is learning to live. ☸