



bodhi tree
FOREST MONASTERY AND RETREAT CENTRE

Guidelines for the Practice – Ven. Pannyavaro

Now that you have been given the basic instructions and are doing the exercises to develop the practice, it is necessary to have an overview and a framework of the practice to guide you. In order to do this, we need to go back to the source material of the Buddha's teachings on Vipassana meditation.

In his first teaching, known as the 'Turning of the Wheel of the Dharma', the Buddha presented his core teaching: 'The Four Noble Truths', which focuses on the Eight-Fold Path as the practice that leads to freedom from suffering and highlights the key meditation skill of *sati* or mindfulness. Later the Buddha expands on the practice of being mindful or having presence of mind, in a teaching that consists of a set of instructions with clear directions called the *Satipatthana Sutta*, or the discourse on The Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

This text is a path map with detailed instructions on four frames of reference, which can be viewed as a framework for the practice of mindfulness. The Buddha very clearly states the aims and outcome of this practice, allowing for no doubt or misinterpretation. In the preamble to the *Satipatthana Sutta*, the Buddha is reported to have said:

"Monks - or practitioners - this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and remorse, for the ending of suffering, for acquiring the true method, for the realization of Nibbana - by means of the four *satipatthanas*".

Before we go any further, the Pali term '*satipatthana*' needs to be understood, as it is the essential practice in Vipassana meditation. As a compound word *satipatthana* consists of two words: *sati*, which means mindfulness or 'to remember' in the sense of remembering to stay present in the here and now, while *upatthana* means 'presence' i.e. of mind or literally 'placing near'. So the term, '*satipatthana*' can be understood as: attending with mindfulness or having close or focused attention.

(It would be more accurate to call this practice *Satipatthana* rather than *Vipassana*, as the actual practice is *satipatthana* while *Vipassana* i.e. insight is its outcome - but it seems we have to go along now with the established usage).

At its most basic the framework for the practice consists of four areas of attention:

(1) bodily phenomena (2) feelings and sensations (3) mind states and/or consciousness, and (4) mind qualities or mental phenomena.

To stay on track, the Vipassana meditator needs to be at least familiar with the text. A way to relate to it is to see it as a framework for the practice. It is not expected that the beginner can work with the complete set of instructions as given in the text, although it is useful to have an overview of the instructions and directions given. The entry level is usually some aspect of Mindfulness of the Body, while mature practitioners may have an affinity for a particular *satipatthana* object or some combination of them.

Here is just an outline of the text. However, I would encourage you to study the *Satipatthana Sutta* in depth, as it is the set of instructions that the Buddha gave for the practice of mindfulness meditation.

1. MINDFULNESS OF THE BODY

- Mindfulness of Breathing
- Four Postures of the Body
- Clear Knowing of Daily Activities
- Anatomical Parts
- The Four Material Elements
- The Corpse in Decay

2. MINDFULNESS OF FEELINGS

- Pleasant Feeling
- Unpleasant Feeling
- Neutral Feeling

3. MINDFULNESS OF THE MIND

- Four “Ordinary States” of Mind
- Four “Higher” States” of Mind

4. MINDFULNESS OF MENTAL PHENOMENA

- The Five Hindrances
- The Five Aggregates
- Six Sense-Spheres
- Seven Awakening Factors
- The Four Noble Truths

There can be many ways to the same destination. The particular approach that is followed here is the lineage of the late Mahasi Sayadaw of Myanmar. The method is that of 'bare insight', where, by direct observation, one's own bodily and mental processes are seen with increasing clarity, in the 'Insight Knowledges' as impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self.

The 'bare insight' meditator begins by tuning into the air element manifesting as vibration or movement in the abdomen in sitting and as movement in the steps taken in walking. This practice is taken from the 'Four Material Elements' meditation in the mindfulness of the body section. It focuses primarily on the air element and is combined with clear knowing of daily activities. The other main sections of the *Satipatthana Sutta* or the Four Establishments of Mindfulness are feelings, mind states and mental phenomena, which are worked with as secondary objects as they occur.

The Two Types of Meditation

For clarity's sake, one needs to be familiar with the two types of meditation techniques: Serenity Meditation, which is concentration based that fixes on a single object in order to attain one-pointedness, which induces a state of calm; and Insight or Vipassana Meditation, which is an awareness practice where one experientially investigates one's own mind/body processes. These two types of meditation can be combined. On the other hand Vipassana or 'pure' insight, can be done by itself.

Three Types of Concentration

As it is necessary for the meditator to be familiar with the two types of meditation and their outcomes, it is also useful to understand the three types of concentration in meditation: they are one-pointedness, which is a meditative absorption or known in Pali as *Jhana*. Then there is neighborhood or threshold concentration, which falls just short of the full absorption of the *Jhana*. The type of concentration in Vipassana meditation is momentary concentration. As one-pointedness or a meditative absorption is confined to serenity meditation, it is enough here to explain the two types of concentration that can be experienced in the 'bare' insight meditation approach.

Momentary Concentration

The bare insight or Vipassana meditator uses momentary concentration, which comes about through the noting of Vipassana objects, that is, noting the various mental and physical phenomena that occur in the mind and body, as they arise. It is called 'momentary' - as opposed to fixing on a single object as in serenity meditation - because it occurs only at the moment of noting, as one is mindful of changing objects that occur in the mind and body from moment-to-moment.

Threshold Concentration

Threshold concentration precedes the full concentration state of on-pointedness or the meditative absorption known as *Jhana*. In Vipassana meditation, some degree of threshold concentration - also known as access concentration, will naturally arise with fluency in the practice, although it is not specifically induced in any way. Threshold and momentary concentration are more than sufficient for Vipassana practice, as most of the subjects in the *Satipatthana Sutta* lead only to threshold or momentary concentration.

The exceptions are mindfulness of breathing and contemplation of the anatomical parts of the body. The other sections develop threshold concentration and momentary concentration. Generally it can be said that a person reaches threshold concentration when The Five Hindrances are inhibited.

Unfortunately, the conditions that exist in the modern world are not conducive to developing the *Jhanas*. Yet in the latter stages of attainment most commentators agree that *Jhana* is necessary. However, with the pressures and stressful pace of life, most people find little time or the conditions required for *Jhana* practice; the same can be said for the ordained Sangha as well, as they too can be caught up in administrative work and study.

So we are following here the path of the dry or bare Vipassana practitioner, without *Jhanas*, whose knowledge is not from learning, reading or listening to talks, but from one's own direct experience. By experientially knowing the characteristics of the mind and body with insight into their impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and insubstantiality, the meditator is freed by insight alone.

The Process of Purifying the Mind

The Five or Eight Precepts, as well as the 227 training rules of the monk, are undertaken by the meditator to restrain the mind and develop morality. But precepts and rules by themselves do not purify the mind, especially as there is a tendency to ritualise them rather than to actualize them. While they can be helpful in restraining or moderating one's behaviour, being conceptual they are not experientially transforming of themselves.

Fixed concentration by itself merely suppresses the mental impurities temporarily as it works only on the manifest level of the mind. It does not clear the dormant, or latent material of the mind, that is, the inherent tendencies of the mind.

Vipassana meditation is the direct way to purify the mind of its latent tendencies. Deep vipassana practice leads to the 'Insight Knowledges' and ultimately to 'Path and Fruition Attainment' through experientially knowing the Three Universal Characteristics of Existence. This then, as the Buddha states, is the practice for the purification of the mind and the direct path for the liberation of beings

Psychotherapy before Meditation?

In the Western meditation culture, there is an ongoing debate on whether one needs to do psychotherapy before meditation. This is because often meditators, especially Vipassana meditators, can experience mental problems and difficulties as they meditate. Well, leaving aside whether a person comes to the practice with a pre-existing mental problem or not, from a Buddhist perspective it is the mental impurities of greed, hatred and delusion that meditators are essentially experiencing. These mental impurities are not to be confused with clinical conditions such as psychosis, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorders. For most people, the negative emotions as well as the latent tendencies hidden in the mind – however strong and entrenched they may be - are workable in the long run through Vipassana meditation on its own.

Again for most people, at least initially, it is an essential part of the Vipassana experience that one goes through the purification process that the Buddha refers to in the *Satipatthana Sutta*. One has to allow for a ventilation of the deep mental accumulation as one meditates so that the dormant impurities of greed, hatred, and delusion are released - that is, cleansed.

The attitude of the meditator, or the way he or she relates to the meditation experience, is critical in the practice. It is vital that one allows any negative material to surface, and doesn't react or play back into it. In this way, a non-reactive awareness develops that allows for a natural purging and cleansing of the mind.

Referring back to the text we have been following, in the *Satipatthana Sutta*, the Buddha gave a specific time frame for attainment in this practice: seven years down to seven months, then to seven weeks or even just seven days. For a beginner, a ten-day retreat is hardly enough time to complete the practice, but by working sincerely during a ten-day retreat you can establish the basis for an ongoing practice, which potentially can lead to the ultimate liberation and the absolute peace of Nibbana.

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