



Conducting a Course on Vipassana Meditation

WHAT IS VIPASSANA MEDITATION?

The Vipassana technique of meditation requires no religious or dogmatic acceptance, but only practical and direct experience. It was developed 2500 years ago by Buddha and has been maintained in its original purity through a long chain of direct teachers.

This practice permits us to confront ourselves with our needs and conflicts, progressively reducing the degree of useless suffering and ignorance from which they are generated and which they themselves generate, simultaneously remaining fully involved in human relations and the changeable nature of life.

It is a technique created to purify and refine what we call a “pure mind”, initially through the practice of concentration and, successively, through the pure observation of our physical and mental processes.

WHAT IS A VIPASSANA RETREAT LIKE?

In the first three days of the course, we perform exercises to attain an increasingly deeper observation of the sensations connected with the process of inspiration and expiration, focusing our attention on the point of contact of the air as it enters the nostrils (Anapanasati).

In the following 7 days, we shall use the level of mental concentration achieved to progressively penetrate our body-mind, developing, through direct experience, a profound understanding of reality (Vipassana). Ten days is considered the period of time necessary and sufficient to develop a certain degree of concentration and begin understanding, through experience, the powerful regenerative implications of this technique. In order to permit the mind to turn to the development of concentration and knowledge, it is necessary for students to obey several rules, without which Vipassana meditation would be difficult to practice.

THE FIVE RULES

I°) Abstain from killing or damaging living creatures. Understandably, it would not take us far to attempt to conduct a course in Vipassana if the students were busy killing each other. But damaging living creatures may also mean voluntarily disturbing another student in his practice, perhaps only out of the desire to have

a chat, or to behave generally in a manner that is not respectful of others' needs.

II°) Abstain from taking what is not given. This means more than inviting students not to rob the cook's watch. There are some relatively subtle implications in avoiding taking what is not given voluntarily, concerning aspects of greed, which Vipassana meditation will help us to understand better.

III°) Abstain from incorrect use of language (lying, offending, speaking uselessly, etc.) There is great power in words, for good and evil. Using language to make reality even more confused, through alteration of the truth, or using language to inspire harmful emotions in ourselves and others, means accepting a weighty load of negative responsibility.

Using language in a futile manner means wasting energy and diminishing the mind's ability to concentrate, which is an indispensable instrument in the development of a clear vision of reality.

IV°) Abstain from sexual activity. Buddhism is not sex phobic. It is simply that sexual energy is very strong and when it is awakened, it generates great reciprocal agitation among the sexes, with the consequent loss of concentration, energy and clarity, which would make a Vipassana retreat difficult and unproductive. The purpose of the retreat is to avoid spending energy externally and to accumulate energy that must be used to observe ourselves more clearly.

V°) Abstain from the use of toxic substances (alcohol, drugs, medicines that are not indispensable, including tranquillisers and sleeping pills). Vipassana meditation leads to observation of the nature of the body-mind as it is; therefore, any substance that alters its natural state creates an imbalance and makes this subtle work unproductive.

OBEYING THE FIVE RULES

A note for your attention may be inserted at this point: Vipassana meditation has been demonstrated, in an enormous number of cases, to be a great resource for human beings who are afflicted by physical and mental disturbances of all kinds.

Nevertheless, it is not advisable for people who have suffered or are suffering from extremely serious mental or physical pathologies to participate in a 10-day intensive course. In these cases, it is better for them to experience the Vipassana technique in short 2-day intensive sessions and, only after several of these experiences, after the teachers have given their opinion, to possibly experience a longer intensive period. Clearly, it is advisable to maintain the Five Rules, even outside an intensive Vipassana meditation, conside-

ring, moreover, that in the everyday life of a layman, drinking half a glass of wine at table or a cup of coffee at breakfast does not hinder this practice, while the abuse of these substances or the use of truly toxic substances does. The same can be said of abstaining from sexual activity.

Anyone who is capable of chastity can definitely maintain this rule totally. Otherwise, considering that the extinction of the human race by de-population is not a Buddhist goal, one would do well to consider this rule as an indication of attention with respect to the development of pathological attachment to sexuality, or the use of sexuality as an instrument that causes physical or psychic damage to the partner.

THE THREE REFUGES

At the beginning of every retreat, the teacher asks the students to adhere to the Five Rules described above, with the commitment to obey them throughout the duration of the practice. The teacher will then take, together with them, the Three Refuges: in the Buddha, in the Dhamma and in the Sangha.

Taking the Refuges must not be understood as a strange propitiatory ritual, an act of religious faith or anything similar. Actually, it is an introductory, but important aspect of the practice. By taking the Three Refuges, the students orient their mind towards the qualities expressed symbolically by them. The qualities of the illuminated mind, free from ignorance, expressed by the Buddha; the qualities connected with recognition and respect of the intrinsic truth of the phenomena and laws that govern them, expressed by the Dhamma; the qualities of a sincere search to attain illumination and the end of ignorance, expressed by the Shanga, or the Community of practicing adherents.

The longer the experience of the student in the technique of meditation lasts, the easier it is to achieve spontaneous awareness and internal adherence to the qualities described, which sometimes turn out to be an unhoped for aid in the path of meditation.

THE RULES OF THE RETREAT

When people meet in a single place to give life to an experience like an intensive session of Vipissana, it is necessary to establish some simple internal rules, to permit the participants to perform their work in the best possible manner. These rules are born of the experience accumulated by a great number of teachers all over the world, in different ages, who have come into contact with an incalculable number of students.

1. MIXING DIFFERENT TECHNIQUES

It should be remembered that the Vipissana technique of meditation is extremely simple and effective, providing it is applied and experienced just as it is offered. It is therefore important that those who have experience in other techniques avoid using them throughout the course, concentrating on the indications they

receive from the teacher. Therefore, other techniques of meditation, such as mantra, massages, prayers, yoga, chanting, etc., should not be used during the intensive session, in order to avoid reducing or altering the understanding of what is practiced.

2. DISTRACTIONS

Concentration (Samadi) is the fundamental instrument that permits us to utilise the Vipassana technique in the most appropriate manner. To this end, the intensive session is organised so as to reduce external distractions as much as possible, because every time our mind is attracted by the evasive activities it is accustomed to, it loses part of the energy accumulated in the previous hours of meditation.

It is a good idea to bear in mind that after several days, or perhaps only a few hours, of meditation, it may suddenly seem extremely important to call someone on the telephone, write something down, read something else or rush home, because you miss your mother, husband or children too much.

Or you might think there would be no harm in popping into town for a minute to have a cup of coffee and buy some cigarettes. In other words, we could compulsively start to get interested in distracting activities or “means of escape”, which would only have the result of making us regress in the work done up to that point.

Therefore, before starting the intensive session, we must get our affairs into order and then leave home without remorse, cell phones, books, newspapers, videogames, etc., in order to dedicate ourselves completely to the experience we are undertaking. Otherwise we risk failure.

3. SILENCE

The longer we succeed in remaining continuously in the meditative experience, the better the fruits of our work will be. In order to permit the mind to observe, it must first of all stop chatting and making useless noise.

To facilitate this state of quiet attentiveness, participants are requested to maintain NOBLE SILENCE throughout almost all of the intensive period. Noble Silence is the voluntary abstention from communicating with the other participants in the course through words, signs, etc., to permit everyone to be with themselves, without useless distractions.

For any effective need, students may turn to the assistance personnel of the course, attempting to separate at the outset real needs from the desire to have a chat with someone.

For questions concerning possible clarifications on the meditative practice, students may apply to the teacher at particular times of the day, especially set aside.

4. IN THE MEDITATION HALL

A special hall is dedicated to the hours of common practice. Students are required to be present in the Meditation Hall at the beginning of the hours with the teacher, avoiding tardiness, which would necessarily be transformed into a disturbance for the other students practising meditation. If they desire, they may leave the Hall only at the end of the practice session, when the teacher has left. During the hours of meditation with the teacher or during the hours of free practice, students are also requested to maintain complete silence and avoid any disturbing noise.

Meditation is generally done in a sitting position, sitting normally on a cushion on the floor. In the event there are physical problems that make this position difficult, students may use a chair. In any case, students are requested not to lie down on the floor and not to assume a position pointing their feet in the direction of the teacher.

5. HOURS AND MEALS

The hours of meditation include waking up somewhat early in the morning, at about 4.30, and then alternating hours of practice and phases of rest for the remainder of the day, until 20.30. At that time it is advisable to go to bed. Food consists of simple vegetarian dishes, prepared with a certain amount of creativity, which are made available for breakfast in the morning and for lunch. In the afternoon the students may have some tea and fruit.

It should be born in mind that the light Spartan orientation of the hours and food are not motivated by the desire to mortify the body or for similar reasons. More pragmatically, as you will discover, after an initial period of adaptation, the hours in the early morning are particularly beneficial in practicing meditation and eating light meals is actually more than sufficient for the work we are doing. So it is a good idea to abstain from following the cook in the evening to get a piece of bread or rob sugar from the jars.

None of us are children of an undernourished society, contrary to other areas of the world; therefore we can easily put up with a bit of appetite in the evening. Naturally, pregnant students or persons who are required to adhere to a particular type of diet for serious medical reasons are excluded from these rules. In these cases the organisers of the intensive meditation course must be advised in advance so that they can provide for the various needs in a timely manner.

6. WHAT TO BRING

There are no particular needs. It is a good idea for students to bring whatever they think will be useful to them in the intensive session (taking the foregoing indications into consideration) including comfortable attire, a cushion to sit on the floor and a small blanket or shawl to use if necessary during practice hours.

Light footwear that doesn't make a lot of noise when you walk would also be suitable for use in the internal areas of the retreat. If other needs should arise, consult the members of the staff, who will do their best to help you.

7. ATTITUDE

Finally, it is recommended that we dedicate ourselves entirely to application of the technique in order to obtain the greatest possible benefit from these ten days, ignoring distractions or small inconveniences and working with our mind completely concentrated on our interior life. We will ensure that our actions do not disturb others and will ignore any distractions caused by others.

MAY ALL BEINGS EVERYWHERE BE FULLY ILLUMINATED

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