

The Buddha's Vipassana

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If the Buddha had a vipassana technique, it was never recorded. All we see of vipassana in the Canon is that it's a quality of mind that you bring to the practice of concentration, together with *samatha*, or calm. It's also a quality of mind that's developed through the practice of concentration. The Buddha said that you develop it by asking questions, and the questions are these: How should fabrications be regarded? How should they be understood? How should they be abandoned through discernment? "Fabrications" here is a translation of *sankhara*.

And the Buddha's answer is in another sutta where he talks about five things you do with anything that the mind is clinging to. You don't wait until you're in deep concentration in order to do these things. You can look at anything you're clinging to at any level, at any time of the day.

Ideally, samatha, calm, and vipassana, insight, should be developed together. But different people have different proclivities. Some people like to think things through and analyze things first, so that they will do the analysis and then back up and work on some more calm. Other people find it easier to get the mind into a good, calm state and then they have to work at analyzing things. But ideally, the two processes go together, because you're not going to get the mind into good solid concentration until you understand the processes of fabrication that are going on, here in the present moment; and you won't be able to analyze what's going on in the present moment unless you steady your focus.

The way you breathe is a kind of fabrication. The way you talk to yourself is another kind. Feelings and perceptions that lurk around the mind, those are another kind of fabrication, too. When you're getting the mind into concentration, you're going to be using all those fabrications. You're going to be talking to yourself about the breath and using perceptions—images you hold in mind about where the breath comes in; where it goes out; where you are focused in the body. Those are perceptions for the sake of giving rise to feelings of well-being and ease.

As you get the mind to settle down, you find that other fabrications, dealing with other topics aside from the breath, are getting in the way. Those are the ones you want to clear away. And that's where you do a little vipassana, a little insight with them. Here the questions come down to: Which fabrications are worth holding onto and which ones are worth letting go? You don't let go of everything all at once. If you did, you wouldn't be sitting here meditating. You'd just be out lying in a field someplace. There are certain things you've got to hold onto if you want the path to develop.

If you find that something comes in and distracts you from meditation, you can ask yourself, "Well, how does that come? How does it go?" Those are the first two questions the

Buddha has you ask. And the coming is not just a question of arising. The question is, "What causes it to arise? And what's the nourishment? What's the oomph it gives to you?" Some things arise simply through the past karma. If you don't take them on, they arise and just pass away like little blips. But if you take them on, suddenly it becomes your present karma, and that's what you want to look into. When something starts turning into a story, you're implicated. So you have to ask yourself, "Why did you want to get involved?" And then you notice when whatever it was that you thought you were getting out of it no longer interests you, you let it go. That's how it goes. And seeing that gives you some insight into what's going on.

Then the next questions are, "What's the allure?" In other words, why would you want to get involved with that? What are the attractive features? Or what does the mind tell you that you gain out of this particular distraction? Then you want to weigh that against the drawbacks, which is the fourth issue to look into.

Now sometimes the mind lies to itself about the allure. There are things we go for, and we're not all that proud about why we go for them, so we muffle them up; cover them up. But you gain glimpses every now and again. One of the best ways of gaining a glimpse of what's the allure is to say, "No, I'm not going to go there." And see what part of the mind objects, rebels. It may give a little bit of a reason as to why it wants to rebel. You want to look for that, because that's where you'll see the allure. Ultimately, it's when you really, really understand what the allure is: That's when you can effectively compare it with the drawbacks.

When you see that the drawbacks outweigh the allure, there's going to be some dispassion. That's the purpose of vipassana: dispassion. And that's the fifth question of vipassana: What's the escape? The escape is dispassion. You let go through knowledge, not just because you tell yourself to let go, but because you understand. The level of understanding you're going to have will depend on the level of your concentration. It's not that you wait until a certain level of concentration and then you start analyzing things. Your discernment and your concentration grow together.

When you have a low level of concentration, you'll be able to see things with a low level of clarity, but that will be enough to enable the mind to get more still. Then, as the mind gets even more still, you see other things with more clarity, which allows you to let *them* go, and the mind grows even more still. The two qualities grow together. So there's no hard and fast rule about when you start doing vipassana or when you stop doing samatha. You do them together in the process of trying to get the mind to settle down.

Then as you begin to get into the jhanas, it's the same sort of thing. To move from one jhana to the next, you have to see, "What are the drawbacks of the state of concentration I've got here?" Don't be too quick to take it apart. You want to get so that you can attain it at will before you start taking it apart. In the Buddha's image, you want to be like an archer who's good at shooting great distances, shooting big masses, firing arrows in rapid succession. In

other words, you want to get really good at it. And then you can ask yourself, “Okay, what in here is still unstable? What in here is still a disturbance in the mind?” Again, it’s the same sort of questioning: What in here is no longer worth holding onto?

Vipassana is a value judgment: seeing what’s worth holding onto and what’s not. Applying this judgment to your jhana, you eventually detect some instability in the concentration that doesn’t have to be there. For instance, in the first stage, you’ve been thinking about the breath and adjusting the breath. But there comes a point where, as Ajaan Fuang would say, it’s like putting water into a jar. When the jar is full of water, then no matter how much more water you put into it, it’s not going to get any more full than that. In the same way, you can adjust the breath up to a point and then it’s not going to get any better than that.

So you might as well settle down with what you’ve got. You can drop all the adjusting and just be with the breath. This is where the sense that you are one thing and the breath is something else begins to disappear. They begin to merge. You’re one with the object. Awareness fills the body; breath fills the body. Okay, maintain that. Steady the mind there. And only when you’re really good at that do you start taking another look at what else could be let go of as well.

So it’s stilling and questioning; stilling and questioning. These two things go back and forth. It’s like washing your hands. Your left hand washes your right hand. Your right hand washes your left. As you keep on washing, they get cleaner and cleaner. Your discernment develops your concentration. Your concentration develops your discernment. They get clearer; more still, to the point where the two activities are not quite so separate anymore.

You see this in the Buddha’s instructions on breath meditation. He divides it into sixteen steps, and the sixteen steps get divided into four tetrads. In the first three tetrads, the basic principle is that you get sensitive to the fabrication going on in the body or with feelings or with the mind. And then you calm that fabrication.

So you’re doing both vipassana—seeing things in terms of fabrication—and samatha, in terms of the calming. You begin to see that the two processes go well together. It’s when they go well together like this that they can really do their work. It’s simply a matter of which you want to emphasize at any one particular moment. And that requires that you gain a sense of what’s going on in your mind, learning how to read your mind to see what it needs, because insight is not simply a matter of putting the mind through a ringer, or bombarding it with the questions you’re told to bombard it with.

You start with those questions, but then you get more sensitive to see exactly what they mean in terms of your mind, your body, your feelings. The sensitivity is what becomes your insight. After all, vipassana is a quality of the mind that’s clear seeing. And you want to see more sensitively your body as you feel it from within, your feelings of pleasure and pain, or neither pleasure nor pain—and your awareness in the body.

Those three components of concentration—body, feelings, mind—are also the first three frames of reference in right mindfulness. They're precisely the things that need to come together for the mind to get into a good, strong state of concentration. Your awareness of the mind fills the body; a sense of ease, pleasure, or equanimity fills the body. Those are the main elements. This is where mindfulness and concentration come together; how right effort and concentration come together; how vipassana and samatha come together. They all merge. And it's when they merge that they can do good work in the mind.