Vipassanā as a Method and a Change of Heart

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We begin the day by paying our respects to the Triple Gem—the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha—but the Buddha pointed out that the highest kind of praise and reverence for a teacher was not just to recite their virtues or make offerings of flowers and gifts to them. The highest kind of reverence for a teacher is embodied in carrying out their teachings. Thus, to actually practice the Dhamma is the most beautiful and complete way of showing our respect, our gratitude to the Buddha. To embody the Triple Gem is the best way of paying respect to the Triple Gem. So, we recite the verses of respect, reverence and homage. We also recollect the essential teachings: going through the Buddha's analysis of nature, body and mind, learning how to see it clearly, how to understand it as it is, how to examine our experience—we learn how our mind fabricates its experience of the world and how to see that process clearly and free the heart from confusion about it.

There are many different ways in which we can explore and analyze experience, but in this particular practice, the most useful tool, the approach that is most accessible to most people, is the division of the picture into what are called the Five Groups. These are physical form or *rūpa* meaning the body, and then the realm of the mind, which is divided into four different sections: *vedanā* (pleasant, painful and neutral sensations); *saññā* (perception—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching); *saṅkhāra* (thoughts, emotions, moods, intentions, memories, concepts, ideas, fantasies, fears, the whole realm of mental activity); and consciousness itself, *viññāṇa* (discriminative consciousness, that capacity of mind which cognizes and discriminates “this” from “that”). This is a simple way of grouping and describing the activities of body and mind: the body, feeling, perceptions, mental formations,

consciousness—*rūpa*, *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṅkhāra*, *viññāṇa*. The Buddha points out that it is identification with these five groups, these five chunks of experience, that causes, for example, the ego-centered delusion, “I am thinking, I am remembering, I am experiencing, I am acting”, and this is what is meant by “identifying with consciousness”.

This identification—the habits of grasping, in both body and mind—is what causes feelings of alienation, of incompleteness and dissatisfaction. That grasping is the very source of self-view, the engine of *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*. It is the deep-rooted habit of claiming, “This body is mine. It’s who and what I am. This feeling of pleasure or pain is who and what I am. These perceptions, what is tasted, what is heard and smelt, seen—these belong to me. These are mine. These ideas, these opinions, these memories—these are me, these are mine. These are my choices; my intentions; my ideas; my plans. I love. I hate...”. This is all “identification with consciousness”. It is the delusion that there is a “me” here who is knowing; a “me” here who is experiencing; a “me” who is a separate and independent individual.

Now, we can take a statement like “the body is not self” and try to believe that it is true. We can take it that since the statement comes from the Buddha, it must therefore be true. But just believing something that we hear from outside does not really help us. Maybe it is true or maybe it is not. The Buddha’s approach was not to make emphatic statements merely so that they would be believed. As in his teachings to his five companions in the Deer Park near Varanasi shortly after his enlightenment, his approach was rather to say, “This is how it looks to me. How does it look to you? Examine it. Explore it. Investigate it.” The Buddha identified the tools for investigation and the ways to explore, and in this way he helped his listeners to recognize the essential qualities of all things, whether physical or mental.

Thus instead of trying to force people to believe that the body is “not-self” or that it is “unsatisfactory”, the Buddha encouraged investigating so that we can know what it is by personal experience. In this method, the first characteristic of the body to which he pointed is change, transiency,

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instability—*anicca*. He asked: “Is it the case that the body is changing? Can you see that physical form changes?” Then, seeing that every material thing indeed changes, he went on to ask: “So if something is changing, can it be permanently satisfactory? Can it please us forever?” Well... no. It is either pleasant now, and then it changes and the pleasure ends, or it is already unpleasant now. Therefore, no experience can be permanently satisfying. And then he asked: “So if something is unstable, changing and is unsatisfactory, is it appropriate, is it suitable, to call it “me”? Is it realistic to say, “This is what I am; this is my true self?” The conclusion his companions were drawn to was “no”, because according to classical Vedic philosophy, if something was the true self, the *atman* in Sanskrit (*attā* in Pali), it would possess the qualities of permanence and blissfulness. Since the body clearly changes all the time, it cannot be “*attā*”; rather, it is “*anattā*”, not-self. So too with the other four *khandhas*, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness.

These qualities, the characteristics of *anicca* (change), *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness) and *anattā* (not-self) are not just principles to be believed in; they are a means of exploring and examining our experience. They are tools with which to look into the nature of our moment-to-moment awareness of the world, how the world takes shape in our minds. Is something changing? Whether it is inside or outside, is it changing? Is this experience something completely satisfying? It may be sweet and delightful right now, but can it stay that way? Does it remain pleasing? Does it become ordinary? Does the attention drift from it? What happens? And what about the feeling of “self” around an idea, a perception or a memory? Can we find what the feeling of “self” refers to? What is it here that is doing the owning? What is it here that is the experiencer? Is there a self that is the doer, the knower? Or, if not, what is it?

These three qualities—*anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*: impermanence or uncertainty, unsatisfactoriness or incompleteness and not-self—are like three lenses with different strengths of magnification which we can use to look closely at the patterns of our experience. Whether it is a sound that we hear outside or a feeling in the body, whether it is a memory, an idea, a mood, whether it is the quality of cognizing, knowing itself—they are lenses to hold up to those experiences. To look. To see: “Is this changing? Is this satisfying? Is this really who and what I am?” Through that seeing, through that direct knowing within our own heart—“Look! It is empty. It is uncertain. No matter how hard I search for ‘myself’, the harder I look, the more what I take to be a ‘me’ or a ‘self’ is indefinable”—we see that “me and mine” is a faulty interpretation. There is awareness. There is a fundamental quality of knowing. But we see that to call this knowing “me and mine”, an ego, is a faulty interpretation. It is a case of mistaken identity.

With meditation, when there is a substantial quality of calmness and focus, when the mind is stable and can rest in

the present moment, when it can stay with the breath for extended periods of time and attend to the present reality without drifting; when you find that your mind has arrived at that kind of stability, there is no need to pay particular attention to the breathing. You use the breath as an anchor to help fix the attention on the present moment. The breath acts simply as a marker, a reference point for the present. But if the attention is resting easily in the present, you do not need to provide such an anchor. You do not need to fix the attention in place because it is already stable, attending to the present moment. When you find that the mind has arrived at that kind of steadiness—not drifting off into abstractions about past and future or distracted by sounds you hear or feelings in the body—whenever the attention rests easily in the present moment, allow the breath to become part of the general field of experience. Open up the awareness to all experience, to know the sounds you hear around you, the feelings in the body, the thoughts that come and go—broaden the point of attention to encompass the whole of the present moment, to include all aspects of experience.

Then, whatever arises, whether it is a thought, a sound, a sensation, the way to maintain the quality of clarity, of non-entanglement, is to apply the reflections on change, unsatisfactoriness and not-self. If we hear the sound of a plane going overhead, we maintain objectivity and clarity by reflecting that the sound is changing. Likewise with a feeling in the body—whether we like it or do not like it or it is neutral, just notice that the feeling is changing. The same with a thought in the mind, a mood or a memory. We use these reflections on *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā* to maintain that quality of non-entanglement. We are able simply to attend to the flow of experience. We watch the process of experience itself, rather than getting caught up with the content of what is being experienced. We therefore deliberately let go of the content in order to observe the process of experiencing, to watch the flowing of the river of our consciousness. There are rivers of perceptions and feelings. Thoughts come and go. Feelings come and go. Sounds and sensations come and go.

As we develop the practice, the heart can simply rest in that awareness, rest in that knowing, be that very knowing which receives all experience, participates in it, knows it fully without confusion, without adding anything to it. There is no need to buy into like and dislike, approval or disapproval. It is the simple knowing of the sound of a passing plane—that particular pattern of nature coming and going—arising, abiding, fading.

For some, the mind might already be quite calm and focused. For others, it might be agitated and busy. We have to know the material we are working with for ourselves. We have to decide for ourselves what is going to be useful, appropriate at any particular time. If the mind is still agitated and restless, drifting here and there, we carry on using the breath or the feeling of the footsteps in walking meditation, in a direct, deliberate way, to help establish more of a grounding. We need to use that anchor to

help keep the attention here in the present. But if the attention is already steady and clear, if there is a lack of distraction, you do not need that anchor of the breath.

It may be that you are able to sustain the quality of open awareness for a while, clearly observing the flow of experience, but then the mind is caught by a particular sound or a memory and the attention is swept up, carried away by a string of thoughts and feelings. You get lost. Once this distraction is noticed, reflect: “This is just another impermanent thought. This painful memory is *anicca, dukkha, anattā*. This changing perception is empty, it’s unsatisfactory, it’s ownerless. It’s not who and what I am.” That might be all it takes and then the attachment dissolves—the heart easily goes back to an open awareness. Or it might be that the feeling, the sensation in the body or the opinion is so strong that we cannot just let it go. It is so compelling and fascinating that a reflection on uncertainty and transiency is not enough to let the clinging, the identification dissolve and fade. In that instance, the mind is thoroughly drawn in and carried away. If this is what is discerned, we need to go back to the breath and re-establish the quality of focus.

It is important not to ignore the fact that the attention has been carried away and is caught up in conceptual proliferation. Go back to the posture. Re-establish the balance of energy and calm, re-establish relaxation. Go back to the breath, focus on the present. Establish the clarity of attention. And when those basics have been reformed, re-established, made strong—a well-integrated posture, the attention grounded in the present—when that is steady and clear once more, again allow the breath to fade into the general mix of experience and see if you can sustain the quality of open awareness once more.

The application of these reflections, of this style of meditation, is called *vipassanā*, insight meditation. But there is *vipassanā* as a method and *vipassanā* as an experience. Recollecting that things are impermanent and unsatisfactory, naming a thought as “not-self” – applying those reflections is the mechanism of *vipassanā*. That is “*vipassanā* the method”; it is the recollection that all is impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self. But in a more complete and deeper way there is also “*vipassanā* the experience”, the actual change of heart which comes from seeing in a more profound way. That change of heart is the result of applying the reflection, “This is impermanent, uncertain and empty of self”. When that illusion is seen through, there is a letting go of identification. There is a moment of recognition: “Oh! How could this be mine? How could there be anything which owns the sound of that plane, or owns this mood...? Oh, look at that!” That change of attitude

is a true shift in the heart—there is the dropping of identification. That is the real *vipassanā*, or you could call it the substantial experience of *vipassanā*; it is the insight that changes the world.

This change of heart is what is liberating. Applying the method on its own is not liberating. The method is like the instructions on a bottle. The change of heart is what actually happens when we take the medicine that is inside the bottle. The change of view, the shift of attitude, the clear seeing—that is the actual quality of insight: the clear seeing of reality.

So developing *vipassanā* meditation is not just sitting and repeating the words “*anicca, dukkha, anattā, anicca, dukkha, anattā*” in response to every thought and feeling that arises. It is not just a matter of repeating those reflections as we walk, sit, stand and lie down, as we go about our daily activities; instead, it is allowing the heart to be changed, allowing our vision, our attitude to be changed. That is the real insight.

When those moments of true insight manifest, there can easily be an enthusiastic reaction in us: “Oh, wow! This is great!” And then the thinking mind and the self-creating habits can grab that experience. This is a natural enough reaction, but it is useful to make the effort not to buy into it. Rather, when there is that change of heart and letting go of identification, simply allow there to be a realization, a recognition, without doing anything else. You do not need to make anything out of it or buy into any thoughts about it. Just let that quality of vision be sustained, free of self-view. Allow the heart to be that—to rest in that. This is what is meant by realizing the ending of *dukkha*. When the Buddha spoke of the Third Noble Truth, he said: “The cessation of *dukkha* is to be realized.” When the grasping stops, the heart is free of *dukkha*—free of dissatisfaction, of alienation. Then, there is peace. The practice of the Buddha’s path is to simply realize that, to know it and to establish a full awareness of it. Then we can really enjoy the peace of non-grasping. We can enjoy Nibbāna itself.

We can know that peace and taste it fully; this is an opportunity that we all have. Ironically, we can be so busy with the “doingness” of diligently applying the method that we miss the peace which is the purpose of the whole thing; we miss the point towards which *vipassanā* aims. So please do not miss it. Let yourself notice. Be fully aware how it is when the grasping and the identification stop. How is it? How does it feel?

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