

Vipassana

Intro: Some points about samatha

Posture:

Back straight
Seated at front edge of cushion
Knees lower than hips

Attention:

Begin with a few deep, relaxed breaths
Focus the attention on the place where you can feel the breath most strongly
Keep it there
When distracted, return to the breath

Vipassana

Tonight I'd like to discuss an aspects of meditation known as vipassana. But before we get to vipassana, let's review briefly what we already know about meditation. Chris has provided excellent instructions on the meditation technique known as zazen in the Zen tradition, but which isn't very different from the basic concentration practice in most Buddhist traditions. In the Theravada tradition, this practice is known as samatha, or tranquility meditation. In zazen or samatha we place the attention on a single object (usually the breath) and keep it there.

This simple practice has a surprising number of benefits, including the development of very pleasant states of tranquility and the strengthening of our powers of concentration. If practiced perfectly, samatha leads to a set of profound states of concentration known as jhanas. If you'll recall from our discussions of the Noble Eightfold Path, concentration (samadhi) is one of the eight factors. So the practice of samatha is beneficial in its own right and is a vital part of the Buddha's path.

But the intense concentration of samatha is only half the story. The quality that balances out samatha is known as vipassana (a tricky word to translate: literally, something like "clear-seeing" or "seeing in a special way," but usually translated as "insight"). Samatha is characterized by a very narrow focus. The goal is single-pointed concentration. We achieve this by keeping our attention on one object. If we lose our focus, we go back to that object as soon as we catch ourselves.

(As an aside, there's nothing uniquely Buddhist about this form of meditation. Both of the meditation teachers with whom Gotama studied before his enlightenment had excellent command of samatha techniques and the attainment of jhana, but Gotama realized that this in itself was not sufficient to bring about an end of suffering.)

Vipassana aims at a higher goal than simple concentration: to see phenomena as they really are. We approach this goal not by pursuing refined states of perfect concentration, but by using the concentration that we have developed to rigorously examine the physical and mental factors that make up our experience.

The scriptural basis of vipassana is the Satipatthana Sutta, which you've heard me reference a number of times in other contexts. This sutta is a catalog of the things that should be investigated as part of our practice, both on the cushion and in our normal activities. The objects for contemplation are listed under four categories: body, feelings, the mind, and mental qualities.

1. The Body: here, we examine our physical composition. Many teachers emphasize this practice almost to the exclusion of the other parts, perhaps because it is a relatively simple practice for beginners.
2. Feelings: here, we look closely at physical and mental sensations and how we experience them as painful, pleasant, or neutral.
3. The Mind: here we try to get a look at the overall state of the mind. Is our mind *as it is right now* characterized by grasping, hatred, tranquility, metta? What qualities are dominant?
4. Mental Qualities: This can be seen as an extension of #3. Here the sutta lists a number of our favorite Buddhist lists. (Yes, Buddhists not only have lists, we have lists of lists.) These include the five hindrances, five aggregates, six senses, seven factors of awakening, and the Four Noble Truths (which of course includes the Noble Eightfold Path). The point is to be able to notice these things in your mind in the present moment. Is hearing present? Is drowsiness present? Can you observe suffering or dissatisfaction?

So how do we go about actually practicing vipassana? We begin, conveniently enough, by focusing on the breath, just as we do for samatha practice. But instead of maintaining a tight, narrow focus on the breath, we cultivate a broader focus. We use the breath as a "home base," to which we can return when nothing else is commanding our attention. So let's say you sit for a few minutes, focusing on your breath, and you suddenly have a feeling of worry about an exam you'll be taking tomorrow. In samatha practice, you would perhaps give the thought a polite nod and then return promptly to the breath. In vipassana, we actually shift the focus of our meditation from the breath to the thought. This does not mean that we drop out of meditation and start worrying about the test. It means that we examine the thought itself. What does it feel like? How long does it last? Is it characterized by suffering? As a beginner in vipassana, this process may involve an element of internal dialog. As you gain experience, you'll find that you can drop the words and just silently observe.

Vipassana is a very subtle and sometimes difficult practice, especially with regard to the observation of mental factors. You may find yourself getting caught up in a thought rather than observing the thought from the outside. Or, if you do manage to

observe the thought, you might find yourself engaged in an elaborate monolog about the thought. If either of these things happens, don't worry—just go back to the breath.

You can do this same practice with physical sensations. Here's a place where any sitting discomfort that you may experience can actually be useful. If you notice that your knee is hurting, try to zero in on the sensation. Notice how it feels. Notice any thoughts that you may have about it. Notice any aversion that may be present. When the pain goes away, or when the mind loses interest in the pain, return to the breath.

I mentioned earlier that the practice of samatha falls under the heading of "samma samadhi" or "right concentration" in the Noble Eightfold Path. Vipassana falls more under the heading of "samma sati" or "right mindfulness." It is important to develop these two qualities in tandem.

Bhante Gunaratana explains their relationship as follows:

Concentration and mindfulness are distinctly different functions. They each have their role to play in meditation, and the relationship between them is definite and delicate. ... Concentration is pretty much a forced type of activity. It can be developed by force, by sheer unremitting willpower. And once developed, it retains some of that forced flavor. Mindfulness, on the other hand, is a delicate function leading to refined sensibilities. These two are partners in the job of meditation. Mindfulness is the sensitive one. It notices things. Concentration provides the power. ... Mindfulness picks the objects of attention, and notices when the attention has gone astray. Concentration does the actual work of holding the attention steady on that chosen object. If either of these partners is weak, your meditation goes astray.

So, while we may treat these in some senses as different processes, and may learn them separately, we see that they are both vital to the overall meditative process.

For our final sitting tonight, if you're interested, try to cultivate an element of vipassana in your meditation. I'd recommend that you begin as you always do, by taking a few deep, slow breaths, and then focusing your attention at the nostrils. Practice as you have been for a little while to stabilize your concentration. Then allow your focus to broaden a bit and allow yourself to notice any marked phenomena that may arise. This doesn't mean you have to give attention to every fleeting thought that passes. There is a sort of undercurrent of thinking that is present in most of us, most of the time. Only give your attention to phenomena that are really strong enough that you can't help but notice them. If you get lost or distracted, don't worry, just go back to the breath. If you find that this is difficult or frustrating, feel free to return to your regularly scheduled concentration.