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The Principles and the Method of Vipassana Meditation

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Abstract

The current article is a scientific research of the method of Vipassana Meditation which was discovered by the Buddha. The paper briefly outlines the fundamental principles involved in the meditation practice regarding the concept of Anicca, Dukkha and Anatta. It briefly outlines method of Vipassana meditation step by step at it is practiced. More focus is given in revealing the practical methodology of the Meditation. Primary Buddhist texts of Tipitaka are taken for reference.

Keywords: Vipassana, aanicca, dukkha, anatta, suffering, nirvana, & equanimous mind.

Introduction

This paper is an attempt to outline the principles and study the practice of Vipassana. It was the Vipassana meditation that the Buddha discovered 2500 years ago, after six years of rigorous hit and trial method. It was through Vipassana meditation that the prince Siddhartha became the lord Buddha and attained the supreme spiritual state of Nirvana. Truly, Vipassana is the path the lord Buddha wanted the people to follow and end the suffering and cycle of life and death.

On that fateful night of full moon day at Bodhgaya, India, Siddhartha Gautama with his absolute determination, meditated to discover the path to end the suffering of mankind. Siddhartha Gautama Shakya was the royal prince of Kapilvastu who renounced the throne and became a recluse in search of the ultimate peace. People are simply fascinated by this wonderful life story but hardly anyone wonders what this man actually achieved. What was he doing under the pipal tree and attained the ultimate peace Nirvana? What is the true message he wanted to give to the world and attain the true peace in life, very few people take interest to this depth and do search and practice the path of the Buddha.

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Siddhartha saw suffering. He saw that behind the thin curtain of happiness and pleasure, misery is hidden. All the creatures that are born suffer from unfathomable physical pains, struggle, old age, disease, broken relationship, crime, wars and ultimately death. He realized through this Vipassana meditation the root cause of Dukkha, misery is Trshna, Desire. Desire is the cause of our sufferings. Extinguishing the desire, Nirodha, is the end of Suffering. And the path to end this Suffering is Sila (Precepts, Discipline), Samadhi (Meditation) and Pragya (Wisdom). As Guru S.N. Goenkaji states, “The goal of this technique is to purify the mind, to free it from misery by gradually eradicating the negativities within. It is an operation deep into one’s own unconscious, performed in order to uncover and remove the complexes hidden there.” (Goenka, 4)

At the heart of Vipassana Meditation practice lies the three fundamental concepts of Anicca (Impermanent Nature), Dukkha (Suffering) and Anatta (Selflessness). These are the natural phenomena that are going on within us every moment without our realization. When we observe within and without, in the spiritual or mental world and physical world, we find everything in a state of flux. Everything appears to be changing. This Anicca, Impermanent nature, is not just at the gross level, like water vaporizes when heated and turns to ice when cooled but at the very atomic level, matter is constantly changing. At the experiential level, our mind is also continuously changing its thought processes every moment. So, both the mind and matter are in the state of flux. Nothing remains permanent. We wish, desire our possessions, our pride, our life to remain the same permanently. But the reality is different. We lose our possessions, our pride is hurt and death ultimately claims our life. Anicca, change is the very essence of nature. And whatever that changes is Dukkha, Suffering. Thus, suffering is not just at the physical level of pain and disease but the very impermanent nature of mind and matter is suffering. And the changing nature of our mental thoughts and physical objects also means they lack any permanent Self as essence of our existence within as a soul. Though, mind as mental process exist as thoughts but there is no Self that claims the authority of these thoughts.

The meaning of Vipassana is “visesenati’ti vipassana’ ‘to look in a special way’ is Vipassana. ‘vi’ in pali language means ‘vishesh’ or ‘special’ and ‘passana’ means ‘to look’. Hence, Vipassana is a special way of looking to one’s own body and mind in a special way. What special way? Vipassana is basically a technique, a method, a practice with which we realize how our mind and body interact together. It is a meditation practice with which we remove the defilements and hindrances of our mind and ultimately realize Nirvana, the complete cessation of suffering.

Vipassana meditation is a very practical, simple to understand and start achieving the fruits, the moment we practice, as the Buddha says “it is Akaliko, instant fruit giving”. It is not a ritual that we perform expecting some auspicious outcome in the future. It is not prayer expecting to fulfilling our wishes. It is not repetition of any mantras. The practice is not to gain any super normal powers. The objective of the Vipassana meditation is to end our psychological miseries and free the mind from mental pains and defilements.

At the heart of Vipassana meditation lies the notion of Five Aggregates, *Panca Khanda*. A being is composed of mind and matter (*Nama* and *Rupa*), composition of five aggregates=*Skandhas*. They are *Rupa* (matter), *Vedana* (sensations), *Sangya* (Cognition), *Sankhara* (Reaction), *Vinnana* (Consciousness). Matter, being our physical body. What we call being is the composition and cycle of these Five Aggregates at any given moment.

Buddha divides the mind into four parts. *Vigyana* is the consciousness of mind. Which makes us aware of the outside world. When the matter or external stimuli touch any sensory organs of our body, a correlative sensation, *Vedana*, rises all over our body. These sensations are nothing but bio-chemical reactions in our nervous system which occurs by the stimulation of various hormones. These sensations are of three types. Sensations due to atmosphere, *Vatawarana*. We feel hot and cold, humidity from the external environment through our sense of skin all over the body. Since nerves are present throughout our body, both inside and outside, we feel hot sensations all over the body wherever the body comes in contact with the atmosphere.

The second type of sensations is the sensations due to *Ahara*, Food. The food that we eat and digest create its own sensations in the body. When we eat hot food, we feel hot and burning sensations in the body. But the sensations of interest for us in Vipassana meditation is the third type, that is, sensations due to previous conditioned *Sankharas*. In the past we have accumulated uncountable *Sankharas* by reacting as greed, anger, craving, hatred, jealousy, liking and disliking. At the present, when we touch an object, hold the hand of our loved ones, we feel pleasant sensation in the body. This pleasant sensation is due to *Sankharas* of the past. We feel pleasant sensation because this person is our loved and dear one. We have made pleasant sensation of love in the past. If the person is an enemy who has done something wrong to us, then we feel very unpleasant sensation in the body. This is because we have reacted in the past as hatred towards this person who has done something wrong to us.

With the contact of an external stimuli to an object, a person or a situation and our Consciousness, *Vigyana*, a correlative sensation *Vedana* arises in the body instantly. The second part of our mind *Sangya*, Cognition now arises to recognize or feel these sensations. This is because we already have made *Sankharas* in the past about these

objects, persons and situations. If the sensation is a pleasant one, *Sangya* recognizes it as pleasant one again as we have done in the past. This part of the mind is constantly aware of the different sensations that arise upon our physical body. The important thing to note at this point is that the *Sangya*, Cognition is not about recognizing the person as John, a flower or a place. But this *Sangya* is exclusively the Cognition of the Sensations that rises due to previous accumulated *Sankharas*. Its interest is in acknowledging the physical sensations that rises in the body. As the *Sangya*, recognizes the sensations as pleasant or unpleasant, now we immediately react according to these sensations. If the sensation is that of hatred, we once react to the person by hating him. We do this by thoughts of hate. We may utter harsh words to the person. And we may even physically abuse the person. Hence, this time our reaction could be different than the previous one due to change of situation, time and context. Hence, another layer of *Sankhara* is added to the reservoir. We repeat this cycle of *Panca Khanda* every moment. This is the essence of existence. These accumulated *Sankharas* is the food for Consciousness or *Vigyana* in the future. At any given time, without *Sankharas* of some sort, Consciousness cannot exist.

As we can see, in this vicious cycle, we are really not in our control. This is what the Buddha calls *Avijja*, Ignorance. Our attachments to these five aggregates give rise to suffering. “All the sufferings of life, if examined closely, will be seen to arise from one or another of these four attachments. In his search for truth, this is what Siddhattha Gotama found.” (Goenka, 25) People are ignorant about what is going on inside. They react only at the superficial level. Since, we have conditioned our mind by craving, hatred, greed etc in the past, we cannot help but react accordingly with our accumulated *Sankharas*. This is indeed suffering that the Buddha was talking about.

The discovery of cycle of *Panca Khanda* was indeed the most fundamental one for the Buddha. After realizing this cycle of *Khanda*, it was not that difficult for Siddhartha Gautama to find the solution to end the suffering.

The important thing to note here is that all these incidents happen so fast, at the atomic level automatically that we are hardly aware of them at all. But yet, each and every moment, it is happening. We have been caught up in this whirlpool of generating *Sankharas* since the time immemorial and never endeavored to get out of this bog where we are drowning each and every moment. This is exactly the phenomena that the lord Buddha discovered.

How to stop this cycle of Samsara and go beyond it? After six years of rigorous practice with many teachers and ultimately doing research on his own the lord Buddha discovered this technique of Vipassana for the sake of humanity.

A very important discovery in this meditation is the importance and the role of sensations. Whenever we see something beautiful, say a flower, we think that we like that flower, we are attached to it. We may become engrossed at the image of that flower and always think that it is the flower that we like. But if we apply the cycle of the *Pancha Skandhas* (Five Aggregates) and how it works, we make a great discovery beneath! It is not the flower that we are fascinated and attached but the concordant pleasant sensations that it gives rise upon our body. It is with these bodily sensations that we desire to repeat again and again. Our mind is addicted to these pleasant sensations and desire to repeat them. The same is true with any sensations that arise upon our body, including the most powerful sensation of sexual arousal. It is not his or her body that we are attracted but the erotic sensations that arises upon our body that we are after. Our mind constantly desires to repeat these sensations again and again and is constantly looking out for it. This is indeed the vicious cycle of *Samsara*, the World. This is indeed an amazing discovery of the Buddha.

As the Yogi keep observing the sensations with equanimous mind, he spontaneously realizes three nature of these sensations, that they are *Dukkha*=suffering, they are *Anicca*=temporary and *Anatta*=devoid of self. Among the five *Khandas*, we do not find any permanent Self dwelling. Because these *Khandas* are constantly changing. They are temporary and transient in nature. We do not have control over these sensations. And they are devoid of self, *Anatta*=Selfless in nature. We cannot call them ours as we do not have control over them. They keep rising and disappearing. In all these phenomena, one cannot hold them and call them mine. It is the flux, the flow. Even our so called Self is just a flux of sensations and ever changing thought process, completely devoid of any permanent self. What we call Self is simply the cycle of five *Skandhas*=aggregates. This very realization of *Anicca*, *Dukkha* and *Anatta* of one's own self is Vipassana." All the sufferings of life, if examined closely, will be seen to arise from one or another of these four attachments. In his search for truth, this is what Siddhattha Gotama found." (Kundala, 29)

With this great discovery of the cycle of *Skandhas*, it was not really difficult for the Lord to realize the way out of the misery from this cycle of *Samsara*. The Buddha realized that if this cycle of *Khandas* could be cut off at some point, then we break the chain and making of *Sankharas* are stopped, taking us out of the misery. With this he discovered that since external stimuli and sensation cannot be stopped, but one can stop forming *Sankharas* by cutting off at the chain of sensation, *Vedana*. The Buddha discovered that if we observe the sensations that keep on arising upon our body with perfect equanimous mind without reacting over it, without forming new *Sankharas*, this cycle of *Samsara* breaks and we stop making more new *Sankharas*. Moreover, with the equanimous mind, we not only stop making new *Sankharas* but old *Sankharas* keeps on surfacing upon our

and are removed, burnt at the same time. It is important to understand the meaning of Equanimous mind, *Samata*. During meditation, different type of pleasant or unpleasant sensations keep arising upon our body due to our reactions or previous Sankharas. A yogi should observe these sensations objectively, not reacting towards these sensations. '*yatha bhuta gyana dassana*', 'Observe as it is', the Lord says. (Goenka, 95).

The moment the yogi observes these sensations with objective or equanimous mind, without reacting to them, these *Sankharas* lose their energy and vanish as we do not feed them with any energy. Hence, we slowly change the habit of our conditioned mind, stop new *Sankharas* forming and keep removing old *Sankharas*. And according to the Buddha, this ultimately leads the person to Nirvana where all his deep unconscious *Sankharas* are burned out. The Lord gives an analogy of burning candle. The wax is our accumulation of *Sankharas* or Energy. Fire is our reactions. With perfect *Samata*, Equanimous mind, the wax keeps burning and ultimately, we add no more fuel and it is completely burnt out, extinguished. With all the defilements gone and no desires remaining; he arrives at the state where he experiences supreme peace of *Nirvana*. *Nirvana* is that state of mind where there are no more sensations because we have burnt all of our previously *accumulated Sankharas*. Since, we have stopped feeding the Consciousness, *Vigyana* with new *Sankharas*, and no more cycle of birth and rebirth take place. The person is liberated from this vicious cycle *Khandas* and is extinguished after his death because there are no more *Sankharas* for the new Consciousness to rise for the next life.

The practical advantage of Vipassana meditation is that it helps us to keep our mind cool and at peace each every moment. We can stay in the state of equilibrium mind in adverse situations. The true meaning of suffering is reacting blindly to outside situations and generating unpleasant sensations. In our daily lives, we react to the sensations senselessly and blindly, making ours and others life miserable. We always blame external things and persons for our misery and never realize that the root cause is within us. Vipassana makes us observe the root cause of misery within us and remove it. As we can see, there is really nothing so much mysterious about it. It is a very simple and practical method that anybody can practice anywhere. It does not require any special preparation or any tools at hand. This is a very scientific method because anyone can test and practice. Observation and Experiment is at the heart of Vipassana just like in science. This vicious cycle of *Panca Khandas*, Five Aggregates is occurring in all of us. It is independent of caste or creed. Anyone of any background can practice it and benefit from it.

Bhavatu Sabba Mangalam!

May all be happy!

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