

Vipassana in Buddhist Practice

One's skill as a meditator lies in mastering a variety of approaches and developing the sensitivity to know which approach will work best in which situation.

Samatha and vipassana in tandem: *Samatha* means tranquillity. *Vipassana* means clear-seeing. *Samatha* and *vipassana* are complementary ways of relating to the present moment: *samatha* provides a sense of ease in the present; *vipassana*, a clear-eyed view of events as they actually occur, in and of themselves. These two qualities need to function together in mastering *jhana*.

Ending mental defilements: Anyone who wishes to put an end to mental defilement should (1) perfect the principles of moral behavior; (2) cultivate seclusion; (3) be committed to *samatha*; (4) be endowed with *vipassana*.

Mastering the jhanas: To master the *jhanas*, one should (1) be committed to *samatha* and (2) be endowed with *vipassana* – that is, *samatha* and *vipassana* are used together to master *jhana*. Such mastery involves three things: (1) gladdening, (2) concentrating, and (3) liberating the mind. *Gladdening* means finding a sense of refreshment and satisfaction in the present. *Concentrating* means keeping the mind focused on its object, while *liberating* means freeing the mind from the grosser factors making up a lower stage of concentration so as to attain a higher stage. The first two activities are functions of *samatha*, while the last is a function of *vipassana*. All three must function together.

Vipassana: To develop *vipassana* involves (1) "regarding," (2) "investigating," and (3) "seeing" which indicates that there is more to the process of developing *vipassana* than a simple mindfulness technique. These verbs apply instead to a process of skillful questioning called "appropriate attention."

Samatha: To develop *samatha* involves the mind becoming (1) steady, (2) settled, (3) unified and (4) concentrated. The verbs used indicate that in this context *samatha* means *jhana*.

Ending the mental fermentations (asavas): Once a meditator is endowed with both *samatha* and *vipassana*, they should make an effort to establish those same skillful qualities to a higher degree for the ending of the mental fermentations (*asavas* — sensual passion, states of being, views, and ignorance). This corresponds to the path of *samatha* and *vipassana* developing in tandem.

Example of samatha and vipassana in tandem: One knows and sees how the following actually are – (1) the six sense media (the five senses plus the intellect), (2) their objects, (3) consciousness at each medium, (4) contact at each medium, and (5) whatever is experienced as pleasure, pain, or neither-pleasure-nor-pain based on that contact. One maintains this awareness in such a way as to stay uninfatuated by any of these things, unattached, unconfused, focused on their drawbacks, abandoning any craving for them: this would count as *vipassana*. At the same time — abandoning physical and mental disturbances, torments, and distresses — one experiences ease in body and mind: this would count as *samatha*.

The Buddhist goal of release: Both samatha and vipassana are involved in the twofold nature of release. Through the ending of the mental fermentations, one remains in the fermentation-free *awareness-release* and *discernment-release* state, having known and made them manifest for oneself right in the here and now. Awareness-release occurs when a meditator becomes totally dispassionate toward passion: this is the ultimate function of *samatha*. Discernment-release occurs when there is dispassion for ignorance: this is the ultimate function of *vipassana*.

Appropriate attention: The *Sabbasava Sutta* (*Majjhima Nikaya*, 2) states that one's release can be "fermentation-free" only if one knows and sees in terms of "appropriate attention". Appropriate attention means asking the proper questions about phenomena, regarding them not in terms of self/other or being/non-being, but in terms of the four noble truths. In other words, instead of asking "Do I exist? Don't I exist? What am I?" one asks about an experience, "Is this stress? The origination of stress? The cessation of stress? The path leading to the cessation of stress?" Because each of these categories entails a duty, the answer to these questions determines a course of action: stress should be *comprehended*, its origination *abandoned*, its cessation *realized*, and the path to its cessation *developed*.

Comprehending stress: Samatha and vipassana belong to the category of the path and so should be developed. To develop them, one must apply appropriate attention to the task of comprehending stress, which is comprised of the five clinging-aggregates — clinging to (1) physical form, (2) feeling, (3) perception, (4) mental fabrications, and (5) consciousness. Applying appropriate attention to these aggregates means viewing them in terms of their *drawbacks*, as inconstant, stressful, painful, alien, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, an affliction, an emptiness, a dissolution, not-self (*Samyutta Nikaya*, 22.122).

Questions: A list of questions, distinctive to the Buddha, aids in this approach.

(1) Is this aggregate constant or inconstant?

(2) Is anything inconstant, easeful; or, is it stressful?

(3) Is it fitting to regard what is inconstant, stressful, subject to change as: 'This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am'? (*Samyutta Nikaya*, 22.59).

These questions are applied to every instance of the five aggregates, whether past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle, common or sublime; far or near.

In other words, the meditator asks these questions of all experiences in the cosmos of the six sense media.

Knowing and seeing things as they are: Questioning is part of a strategy leading to a level of knowledge called "knowing and seeing things as they actually are" where things are understood in terms of a fivefold perspective: (1) their arising, (2) their passing away, (3) their drawbacks, (4) their allure, and (5) the escape from them — the escape, here, lying in dispassion.

Seven approaches to develop dispassion (to abandon the fermentations): Vipassana, as a quality of mind, is related to all seven, but most directly with the first. (Taken from the *Sabbasava Sutta*.)

(1) "Seeing," that is, see events in terms of the four noble truths and the *duties* appropriate to them. The remaining six approaches cover ways of carrying out those duties.

(2) Restrain the mind from focusing on sense data that would provoke unskillful states of mind.

- (3) Reflect on the appropriate reasons for using the requisites of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine.
- (4) Tolerate painful sensations.
- (5) Avoid obvious dangers and inappropriate companions.
- (6) Destroy thoughts of sensual desire, ill will, harmfulness, and other unskillful states.
- (7) Develop the seven factors for Awakening: mindfulness, analysis of qualities, persistence, rapture, serenity, concentration, and equanimity.

Each of these approaches covers a wide subset of approaches. Under "destroying", for instance, one may eliminate an unskillful mental state by (1) replacing it with a skillful one, (2) focusing on its drawbacks, (3) turning one's attention away from it, (4) relaxing the process of thought-fabrication that formed it, or (5) suppressing it with the brute power of one's will (*Majjhima Nikaya*, 20).

Needed motivation: One needs strong motivation to master these skills. (1) Appropriate attention requires abandoning dichotomies that are basic to the thought patterns of all people — "being/not being" and "me/not me". (2) One must be well-versed in the teaching and discipline of the noble ones — such as having conviction in their teachings about karma and rebirth, which provide intellectual and emotional context for adopting the four noble truths as the basic categories of experience. (3) In addition to observing the precepts, one needs skill in the seven approaches abandoning the fermentations.

Vipassana not a meditation technique: It's a quality of mind — the ability to see events clearly in the present moment. Although mindfulness is helpful in fostering vipassana, it's not enough for developing vipassana to the point of total release. Other techniques and approaches are needed as well. In particular, vipassana needs to be teamed with samatha — the ability to settle the mind comfortably in the present — so as to master the attainment of strong states of absorption, or jhana.

A program of questioning (appropriate attention): Based on the mastery of jhana, samatha and vipassana are then applied to a skillful program of questioning, called *appropriate attention*, directed at all experience: exploring events not in terms of me/not me, or being/not being, but in terms of the four noble truths. The meditator pursues this program until it leads to a fivefold understanding of all events: in terms of (1) their arising, (2) their passing away, (3) their drawbacks, (4) their allure, and (5) the escape from them. Only then can the mind taste release.

Part of a larger program: This program for developing vipassana and samatha, in turn, needs the support of many other (1) attitudes, (2) mental qualities, and (3) techniques of practice. This was why the Buddha taught it as part of a still larger program, including respect for the noble ones, mastery of all seven approaches for abandoning the mental fermentations, and all eight factors of the noble path.

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