

Vipassana Meditation Technique for Global Well Being: A Study of Dharamkot Vipassana Centre

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Abstract:

This paper examines the Vipassana meditation technique followed by Buddhists for mental peace and purity. Apart from tracing the history of the technique, an attempt has been made to study one of its most prominent centres in India, i.e. Dharamkot Vipassana Centre in Himachal Pradesh. The study is based on both, analysis of Buddhist literature, scholarly articles and my own personal experience of the practice.

Keywords —Vipassana, Buddhism, Mental Health, Meditation.

I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to introduce the importance of Vipassana meditation technique for the global wellbeing. As we are currently facing COVID-19 pandemic throughout the world and consequently complete or partial lockdown in various countries, we are hearing about several cases of mental illness which is a huge problem for global well-being. Mental illness has accelerated because while people are unable to go outside, they don't know what to do at home? Depression, tension, stress, sadness, suicidal tendencies, domestic violence and other problems have increased. Recently, famous film actor Sushant Singh Rajput also reportedly committed suicide due to unknown reasons. If we talk about the situation before lockdown, even then we all know that mental illness is increasing in the world everyday because of which we are facing many problems including depression especially amongst youth. According to me, a major factor behind mental

problems is growing commercialism and competition in the outside world as people have become competitive, materialistic and consumerist. Family ties and relationships have become weak. I believe Vipassana meditation technique is a very good way to maintain one's mental health.

In this paper, I will explain Vipassana in great detail basing myself on Buddhist literature and my own personal experience of the practice. It is very important for us to know what exactly Vipassana is, how it works, how many centres of Vipassana are in India and abroad. Vipassana, means *seeing things as they really are*, and it is one of the world's most popular meditation techniques described by Buddha 2500 years ago in India. But from the time of decline of Buddhism in India, its teachings, followers, and the practice totally vanished. However, Satya Narayan Goenka, a very renowned teacher of Buddhism, once again introduced Vipassana to India. His Guru Sayagyi U Ba Khin of Burma trained him Vipassana for 14 years under his

personal supervision. His guru told him to spread Vipasaana into India again and for this purpose Goenka returned to India in 1969 and started teaching this meditation technique.¹

According to Goenka, "Vipassana meditation is an experiential scientific practice, in which one observes the constantly changing nature of the mind and body at the deepest level, through which one gains a profound self-knowledge that leads to a truly happy and peaceful life."² The entire practice of Vipassana is based on the eight fold path of Buddha. The Eightfold Path consists of eight practices: right view, right resolve, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right Samadhi (which means meditative absorption or union)

II. HISTORY OF VIPASSANA

Vipassana can play a very important role in global well-being. But it is not fully popularized among masses yet; although its centres are around the world for helping people who are dealing with mental illness. It is as important as physical exercises we do, for example, yoga, jogging or walking to keep our body healthy and strong in our daily routine. Because if we do not do this then our body will become more weak and diseased. Nowadays it has become even more important for us to keep the mind healthy and strong because a calm mind is the only solution of stress and anxiety. And we as social beings, it becomes our necessary duty that we should not become weak and diseased. This mind exercise helps us to overcome anxieties,

worries, stress and fear. According to S. N. Goenka,

"Vipassana is actually the exercise of the mind that wakeups inner strength and confidence. Meditating morning and evening makes the mind strong and healthy; it is not a waste of time. We live in a complex and stressful world. If the mind is not strong, we lose the balance of the mind and become miserable. Those who do not know pure Dhamma, who have not learned this meditation, are unfortunate. But those who have received this benevolent teaching and are not using it are even more unfortunate. They have found such a priceless gem but have discarded it as if it is a useless pebble. What can be a greater misfortune? So,

kāya-pariyantikaṃvedanaṃvedayamāno, kāya-pariyantikaṃvedanaṃvedayāmi'tipajānāti; jīvita-pariyantikaṃvedanaṃvedayamāno, jīvita-pariyantikaṃvedanaṃvedayāmi'tipajānāti.³

*This means, experiencing sensation everywhere within the limits of the body, he understands, 'I am experiencing sensation everywhere within the limits of the body.' Experiencing sensation wherever there is life within the body, he understands, 'I am experiencing sensation wherever there is life within the body'."*⁴

Vipassana International Academy is today one of the most important centres of Vipassana Meditation in the world. It was the first Vipassana meditation centre in India. It was set up at Igatpuri, Maharashtra by S.N. Goenka. The centre was given the name of 'Dhamma Giri: Hill of Dhamma'.

¹Johannes Bronkhorst, *The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India*, Motilal Banarsidass Publ.

²<https://sikhara.dhamma.org/en/about/goenka/>

³PaṭhamaGelaṅṅa Sutta - SaṃyuttaNikāya, XXXVI (II).i.7 from vridhamma.org

⁴<https://www.vridhamma.org/What-is-Vipassana>

The technique of Vipassana Meditation is taught at ten-day courses during which participants stay at the centre, learn the basic method and practice it for ten days continuously to experience its positive results. There is no fees for the course - not even to cover the cost of food and accommodation. All expenses are met by donations from people who, having completed the course and experienced the benefits of Vipassana, wish to give others the opportunity to also take benefit from it.

Apart from Igatpuri, Vipassana Courses are taught at numerous Meditation Centres across the world and also in temporary camps which are organized routinely in different parts of the globe. Each centre has its own schedule for the year. In most centres, an application for admission to these courses has to be made online. There are many Vipassana Centres throughout India and in different countries of Asia, North America, South America, Europe and Africa. Vipassana Meditation courses are also being taught in jails for the benefit and reformation of prisoners. A special 10-day Vipassana course especially for business leaders and government officials is being held occasionally at several places around the world. This non-sectarian technique aims for the total eradication of mental impurities and the resultant highest happiness in form of full liberation.⁵

Vipassana is a way of self-transformation through self-observation. It focuses on the deep interconnection between mind and body, which can be experienced directly by giving strict attention to the physical sensations that form the life of the

⁵<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/mar/31/meditation-retreat-vipassana-new-zealand-exhausting-silence-spiders>

body and that continuously interconnect and affect the activities of the mind. It is this observation-based, self-exploratory journey to the root of mind and body that dissolves mental impurity, resulting in a balanced mind full of love and compassion.

The scientific laws that operate one's thoughts, feelings, judgements and sensations become clear. Through direct experience, the nature of how one grows or his/her body functions, how one experiences suffering or frees oneself from suffering is understood. Life becomes characterized by increased awareness, non-delusion, self-control and peace.

III. A CASE STUDY OF DHARAMKOT MEDITATION CENTRE

If I talk about my own experience, then I want to say that I am very happy and lucky to have experienced Vipassana because this 10-day course totally changed my life and my views regarding life. When we are in emotional pain, we totally forget ourselves, what to do, where to go and ponder upon how to come out of this. But when we fail in this, what we are left with is only the support of our family and friends. But this support does not always work in the way we want it to during emotional breakdown. Mental illness comes in many different ways as I described above.

Dharamkot is the place where I went for Vipassana. It is a small hill station in Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh in India. From Dharamshala it is about 5 km away and just 2 km from McLeodGanj. It is one of Goenka's most famous meditation centres which is known as 'Dhamma Sikhara' and just near it is the Tushita Meditation Centre which is

a centre for the study and practice of Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism and traditions. It is very easy to reach the meditation centre because it is not so far from both the famous tourist places Dharamshala and McLeod Ganj.



Fig 1. Scenic view of Dharamkot

This centre comes on number 5th in ranking among top 15 Vipassana meditation centres of India.⁶ And the reason is that this centre has its own beauty of high mountain peaks, fresh air, moving clouds, towering pine trees and thunderstorm. How can someone deny to meditate in this environment especially the one who has suffered a lot in his/her life and is going through mental stress or illness?

⁶<https://www.tripsavvy.com/top-vipassana-meditation-centers-in-india-1539892>



Fig 2. Outside the Dhamma Sikhara

The word Dhamma Sikhara means “*peak of Dhamma*”. It’s the ideal place for practice of Vipassana that is spread into three acres of forested land of deodar cedar with picturesque view. This centre convened its first 10 day Vipassana course in 1994 and slowly but steadily gained its popularity among people. Most of the followers of this centre are foreigners because of proximity to McLeodGanj, a famous tourist location. Its 10-day courses take place fortnightly from April to November. It is closed from December to March due to extreme cold in the region. We can see every age group person inside the Dhamma sikhara centre. Participants are grouped by ages in case of children and teenagers.

Few things to keep in mind here is that the facilities here are quite minimal but the management tries to help you with all you need importantly for which you have to inform the management one day before what you need. Most importantly I want to mention here that throughout the course you will feel some pain because of the tight schedule of meditation like back pain, muscle pain and headache. If you will ask for medicine for this pain then they will not allow you and also not let you buy medicines because on the 4th day of this Vipassana technique your all pain will go

itself and your body and mind comes at peace and when the healing process begins your all pain will go.



Fig 3. Room inside the Vipassana centre

Here students get a private room for themselves but some rooms are available in two to three bed share and some are with single bed. Toilets and showers are shared. And because the weather is mostly cold and damp in Dharamkot, you need to take a proper amount of clothes. You only have to pay for the laundry service. Here we get different varieties of food. Every day we tasted different food. We got breakfast, lunch and the evening snack. Most importantly or I can say sadly for the food lovers that you will not get dinner here. As every age group person attends Vipassana meditation so you will see the food according to their age or diet. For old people or diseased persons you get sugar free and gluten free food too. We got milk, coffee and tea as well.

On first day, all our personal gadgets and belongings including mobile phones, which made us remember something, were taken away from us

by the staff to give us complete isolation. All of us were allotted different rooms. We were not allowed to talk, make eye contact, and use perfumes. We were told to wear simple clothes. Next morning, our meditation started at 4 am and for first 3 days we were told to focus on our breath, check whether it was coming from one nostril or both and pay attention that till where the air was moving during inhaling and exhaling. I suffered from pain, itching, vibration and many other sensations in the body.

In the night, we were shown Goenka's videos in which he explained the reasons behind the various sensations felt in the body in a very interesting way. This three day practice is called *anna panna*. Making 'sheel' (moral conduct) our basis, practicing 'samadhi' (meditation) we have to achieve 'pragya' (knowledge) before reaching the final stage of 'vimukti' (liberation). For next seven days, we continued meditation and had to sit for atleast three hours per day without moving our body and feeling all the sensations. Our last day which was very emotional, we were allowed to talk to each other and share our experiences. I felt very strong and positive as if my body had taken a new birth. I had completely overcome the sadness which I was facing ten days before. I realized that the spread of awareness about Vipassana will really help our fellow humans to live a more peaceful and enlightened life.

THE COURSE TIMETABLE

4:00 am	Morning wake-up bell
4:30-6:30 am	Meditate in the hall or in your room
6:30-8:00 am	Breakfast break
8:00-9:00 am	Group meditation in the hall
9:00-11:00 am	Meditate in the hall or in your room according to the teacher's instructions
11:00-12:00 noon	Lunch break
12 noon-1:00 pm	Rest and interviews with the teacher

1:00-2:30 pm Meditate in the hall or in your room
2:30-3:30 pm Group meditation in the hall
Meditate in the hall or in your own
3:30-5:00 pm room according to the teacher's
instructions
5:00-6:00 pm Tea break
6:00-7:00 pm Group meditation in the hall
7:00-8:15 pm Teacher's Discourse in the hall
8:15-9:00 pm Group meditation in the hall
9:00-9:30 pm Question time in the hall
9:30 pm Retire to your own room--Lights out

IV. THE IMPORTANCE OF CODE OF DISCIPLINE

The technique is taught at ten-day residential courses during which participants follow a prescribed discipline code. The course requires serious hard-work. As I described above, there are three steps to the training. The first step is shila i.e. moral conduct. Hence, for the period of the course, one has to abstain from killing, stealing, sexual activity, speaking lie and taking intoxicants. This simple code of moral conduct serves to calm the mind, which otherwise would be too agitated to perform the task of self-observation. There are three additional rules which old students (that is, those who have completed a course with S.N. Goenka or one of his assistant teachers) are expected to follow during the course:

1. to abstain from eating after midday;
2. to abstain from sensual entertainment and bodily decorations;
3. to abstain from using high or luxurious beds.

Old students observe the first by having tea without milk or fruit juice at the 5 p.m. break, whereas new student has tea with milk and some fruit. The teacher may excuse an old student from observing

this rule for health reasons. The second and third rule will have to be observed by all old students.

The next step is to develop some mastery over the mind by learning to fix one's attention on the ever changing flow of breath as it enters and leaves the nostrils. By the fourth day the mind is calmer and more focused, better able to undertake the practice of Vipassana itself: observing sensations throughout the body, understanding their nature, and developing self-control by learning not to react to them. Finally, on the last day participants share the purity developed during the course with each other. The entire practice is actually a mental training. Just as we do physical exercises to improve our bodily health, Vipassana can be used to develop a healthy mind. Because it has been found to be really helpful, great emphasis is put on preserving the technique in its original and authentic form.

The results come gradually through continued practice. It is wrong to expect all problems to be solved in ten days. Within that time, however, the essentials of Vipassana can be learned so that they can be applied in daily life. The more the technique is practiced, the greater the freedom from misery, and the closer one is to the ultimate goal of full liberation. Even ten days can provide results which are very good and very beneficial in everyday life. One experiences the universal truths of impermanence, suffering and egolessness. This truth-realization by direct experience is the process of purification. The entire path of Dhamma is a universal remedy for universal problems and has nothing to do with any organized religion or sectarianism. For this reason, it can be freely practiced by everyone, at any time, in any place,

without conflict due to ethnicity, community or religion, and proves equally beneficial to one and all.⁷



Fig 4. S.N. Goenka

S.N. Goenka's official website Dhamma.org notes the following points about Vipassana:

- It is a technique that will eradicate suffering.
- It is a method of mental purification which allows one to face life's tensions and problems in a calm, balanced way.
- It is an art of living that one can use to make positive contributions to society.

Vipassana meditation aims at the highest spiritual goals of total liberation and full enlightenment. Its purpose is never simply to cure physical disease. However, as a by-product of mental purification, many psychological diseases are eradicated. In fact, Vipassana eliminates the three causes of all unhappiness: greed, anger and ignorance. With continued practice, the meditation releases the tensions developed in everyday life, opening the

⁷ Winston L. King (1992), *Theravada Meditation. The Buddhist Transformation of Yoga*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass

knots tied by the old habit of reacting in an unbalanced way to pleasant and unpleasant situations. Although Vipassana was developed as a technique by the Buddha, its practice is not limited to Buddhists. The technique works on the simple basis that all human beings share the same problems and a technique which can eradicate these problems has a universal application. People from many religious denominations have experienced the benefits of Vipassana meditation, and have found no conflict with their own religion.⁸

V. SOME OTHER RULES AND REGULATIONS OF MEDITATION

As I explained above, the process of self-purification by introspection is certainly never easy—students have to work very hard for it. By their own efforts students arrive at their own realizations; no one else can do this for them. Therefore, the meditation suits only those willing to do it seriously and observe the discipline, which is there for the benefit and protection of the meditators and is an integral part of the meditation practice.

Ten days is certainly a very short time in to penetrate the deepest levels of the unconscious mind and learn how to eradicate the complexes lying there. Continuity of the practice in seclusion is the secret of this technique's success. Rules and regulations have been developed keeping this practical aspect in mind. They are not primarily for the benefit of the teacher or the course management, nor are they negative expressions of tradition, orthodoxy or blind faith of some organized religion. Rather, they are based on the practical experience of thousands of meditators

⁸ S.N GOENKA, *An ancient path*, Vipassana research institute.

over the years and are both scientific and rational. Abiding by the rules creates a very conducive atmosphere for meditation; breaking them pollutes it.⁹

Students must declare themselves willing to comply fully and for the entire duration of the course with the teacher's guidance and instructions to observe the discipline and to meditate exactly as the teacher asks, without ignoring any part of the instructions, nor adding anything to them. This acceptance should be one of confidence and understanding, not blind faith. Only with an attitude of trust can a student practice properly and scientifically. Such confidence in the teacher and the technique is essential for success in meditation. During the course it is absolutely essential that all forms of prayer, worship, or religious ceremony — fasting, burning incense, counting beads, reciting mantras, singing and dancing, etc. — be discontinued. All other meditation techniques and healing or spiritual practices should also be suspended. This is not to condemn any other technique or practice, but to give a fair trial to the technique of Vipassana in its purity. Students are strongly advised that deliberately mixing other techniques of meditation with Vipassana will decrease and even reverse their progress. Despite repeated warnings by the teacher, there have been cases in the past where students have intentionally mixed this technique with another ritual or another practice, and have done themselves a great loss. Any doubts or confusion which may arise should always be clarified by meeting with the teacher. The teacher is available to

⁹<https://www.indiatoday.in/lifestyle/health/story/what-exactly-is-vipassana-the-meditation-technique-president-kovind-swears-by-1145720-2018-01-15>

meet students privately between 12 Noon and 1:00 p.m. every day of the ten day course. Questions may also be asked in public between 9:00 and 9:30 p.m. every day in the meditation hall. The interview and question times are for clarifying the technique and for questions arising from the evening discourses.

All students must observe Noble Silence from the beginning of the course until the morning of the last full day. Noble Silence means silence of body, speech, and mind. Any form of communication with fellow student, whether by gestures, sign language, written notes, etc., is prohibited. Students may, however, speak with the teacher whenever necessary and they may approach the management with any problems related to food, accommodation, health, etc. But even these contacts should be kept to a minimum. Students should cultivate the feeling that they are working in isolation.¹⁰

Complete separation of men and women is to be maintained. Couples, married or not, should not contact each other in any way during the course. The same applies to friends, members of the same family, etc. It is important that throughout the course there should be no physical contact whatsoever between persons of the same or opposite sex. Although physical yoga and other exercises are compatible with Vipassana, they should be suspended during the course because proper facilities are not available at the course site for combining the two. Jogging is also not permitted. Students may do exercise during rest periods by walking in the designated areas.

¹⁰https://www.huffingtonpost.in/shreya-kalra/10-days-in-prison_b_9725926.html

Religious Objects, Rosaries, Crystals, Talismans, etc. should not be brought to the course site. If brought by mistake they should be deposited with the management for the duration of the course.

No drugs, alcohol, or other intoxicants should be brought to the site; this also applies to tranquilizers, sleeping pills, and all other sedatives. Those taking medicines or drugs on a doctor's prescription should inform the teacher. For the health and comfort of all students, smoking, chewing tobacco, and taking snuff are not permitted at the course. It is not possible to satisfy the special food preferences and requirements of all the meditators. Students are therefore told to make do with the simple vegetarian meals provided. The course management tries to prepare a balanced, wholesome menu suitable for meditation. If any student has been prescribed a special diet because of ill-health, he/she should inform the management at the time of application. Fasting is not permitted.

Students must remain within the course boundaries throughout the course. They may leave only after getting special permission from of the teacher. No outside communications is allowed before the course ends including letters, phone calls and visitors. In case of an emergency, a friend or relative can contact the management. The playing of musical instruments, radios, etc. is not permitted. No reading or writing materials should be brought to the course. Students should not distract themselves by taking notes. The restriction on reading and writing is to emphasize the strictly practical nature of this meditation.

To clarify the spirit behind the discipline and rules, they may be summarized as follows:

“Take great care that your actions do not disturb anyone. Take no notice of distractions caused by others.”¹¹

It may be that a student cannot understand the practical reasons for one or several of the above rules. Rather than allow negativity and doubt to develop, immediate clarification should be sought from the teacher. It is only by taking a disciplined approach and by making maximum effort that a student can fully grasp the practice and benefit from it. The emphasis during the course is on meditation. A golden rule is to meditate as if one is alone, with one's mind turned inwards, ignoring any inconveniences and distractions that one may encounter. Finally, students should note that their progress in Vipassana depends solely on their own good qualities and personal development and on five factors: serious efforts, confidence, sincerity, health and wisdom.¹²

VI. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have tried to argue that Vipassana meditation technique is very crucial for global well being as its practice helps individuals to achieve good mental health. I propose that its meditation centres should be opened in every city of the world and the governments of various countries should come forward in funding such institutions. Ultimately, the ten day course teaches us that apart from the materialistic outside world there is an inner world which is deep inside us which Buddha has taught us to evoke. This self-observation makes us realise the momentary nature of things as the pain we feel in first three days gradually vanishes and the sensations we feel in the rest of the days come and go. This teaches us the lesson that

¹¹<http://www.dhamma.net.in/>

happiness and sorrow are also temporary things that come and go in life. While the consumerist world teaches us to go after material happiness, Vipassana teaches us about its temporary nature. Hence, it becomes easier to overcome our sorrows, control our emotions, behave in a balanced way and have a healthy mind if we continue this practice throughout our life.

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