

Vipassana Meditation, Mental Health, and Well-Being

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I've never given a talk in an obstetrical hospital before. I hope everyone has not come here tonight to see me give birth!

I'm going to focus on Vipassana, which is one particular kind of meditation, and I'm going to clarify its unique contribution to mental health. I will not be saying that Vipassana cures psychiatric illness, which is a claim sometimes put forward by some other types of meditation. What I will be saying to you tonight has an ironic quality: the more a person practices Vipassana meditation to get health benefits, the fewer health benefits they will get. The more a person practices Vipassana meditation for its total contribution to their life, the more health benefits they will get. Vipassana is not a treatment. It is a way of life to enhance well-being at many levels in many ways. Only by focusing on its essence can one obtain its peripheral additions.

There is a famous story in our Vipassana tradition of our Teacher, Mr. Goenka, going to his Teacher and saying he wanted to learn Vipassana to cure his headaches. He was refused admission to the course! The goal of Vipassana meditation is not to cure headaches. He had to agree to take Vipassana for its spiritual core, for its total contribution to his life. He agreed to do so with initial reluctance, but he did finally enter the course in the manner intended. After ten days, Mr. Goenka ended up with his headaches being cured. Because he surren-

dered the narrow healthcare goal and embraced the larger humanistic goal, he benefited at the level of health but also at many more levels, which ultimately enabled him to become a world-wide teacher who has had a beneficial impact on the lives of hundreds of thousands of people, from Chile to Mongolia, from Canada to New Zealand.

Because Vipassana has such wide effects upon the total person, I want to tell you a story illustrating the difference between a focus on health, and a focus on the complex human dimensions of life. There was a young doctor who had recently completed his medical training. He was a very modern fellow, well informed about preventive medicine. He was committed to the idea, which most of us have also embraced, that diet and exercise can be very helpful in preventing illness. But he was also a post-modern man who unfortunately had lost touch with some of the higher aspirations and deeper dimensions contained in human life. He was a typical contemporary mechanist and materialist. Well, as the story goes, in the town where this young doctor was working in the emergency room, there was an elderly couple. The elderly man was known to have a weak heart. One day he had crushing chest pain and his wife wisely called the ambulance. The ambulance arrived, and immediately raced the patient off to the emergency department. The wife followed behind the ambulance in her car. Of course she could not keep up with the ambulance and arrived about ten minutes after it had. She was met at the door by our young doctor, who gave her terrible news. He said, "Your husband has died of a heart attack." Naturally, the woman was stunned with grief and began to

weep. But our young doctor, a good-hearted soul, tried to soothe her by saying, "Don't worry, don't cry—in the ten minutes between your husband's arrival at the hospital and his actual death, I was able to give him one last, modern, up-to-date lecture on the importance of diet and exercise."

There is more to life than life

Vipassana is a meditation Path, a meditation tradition that teaches us there is more to life than life. A human being wants more than merely healthy survival, although we want survival also. Vipassana is something that enhances existence by redirecting our sights higher than mere survival itself, towards the inspirational, universal realizations, which direct, ennobles, and bond our mere duration to higher meanings and purposes.

Vipassana is an ancient meditation tradition that is aimed at reorienting our lives.

The word "Vipassana" was used by the Buddha to describe the meditation that he himself practiced. But Vipassana is not the same thing as Buddhism. My teacher, Mr. Goenka, is not a Buddhist. I have never called myself a Buddhist. Instead, Vipassana is a practice that fits best with the empirical traditions, like medicine and science. Its basis is realistic observation of oneself.

Let's look at these two important words. Realistic means nothing added, nothing subtracted, no religion, no philosophy, just the facts. Observation means you yourself determine what the facts are, based on what you yourself experience while meditating.

Our great American poet, Robert Frost, wrote:

"Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak . . .

The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows."

In Vipassana we work hard to get the facts. By observing ourselves only, we open a window on the bigger picture.

One of the unique features of Vipassana as taught by Mr. Goenka, is that a student has to go away for ten full days in order to learn this

technique. Frequently, I'm invited to speak at a conference, particularly a medical conference, where different kinds of meditation are taught. The lecturers are asked to give a demonstration of the kind of meditation they are talking about, usually a ten-minute demonstration. Imagine my embarrassment when I have to say, "This meditation can only be demonstrated during a ten-day long period." Other people seem to teach meditation in minutes. Why does it take ten days just to learn to close your eyes and meditate? Vipassana has as its goal the ability to change your heart and mind.

It puts you on a path, a way of life that is healthy for body, mind, and spirit. From the healthy way of life, both physical and mental health benefits may flow. But the goal is not any specific physical health or mental health "fix", but a path of life itself.

Now let's look at what the teaching of a ten-day course is like. The course consists of nine days of Noble Silence. Noble Silence means you are free to talk to the Teacher or to the course manager if you have some problem, but otherwise your attempt is to be silent. Silence means not merely silence in speech, but silence of mind. You are asked to refrain from reading, writing, using a telephone, using a computer, watching television, or even taking

notes. The meaning of this is not to deprive you, but to free you up, to focus you and to diminish annoyances and distractions. Next, you are asked to take vows not to kill, steal, lie, use intoxicants, or to commit sexual misconduct. The goal of these vows is not to acquiesce to repressive religion, but simply to orient the jet to fly at the right angle when it takes off from the tarmac. The vows put you in the right frame of mind for learning a practice of observation and harmony. You are also to practice the teaching exactly as it's given to you, without adding anything, without subtracting anything, giving it a fair trial. The technique has been used for 2500 years, so the request is: "Try it as it is: don't change it at all, and give it a chance to reveal its value."

The course is explained in a clear, detailed, precise manner.

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There's nothing mystical, vague, or difficult to understand. Every day the directions change and a new feature is added, so the description I will be giving this evening will be somewhat simplified and generalized.

For the first three days you are asked to focus simply upon your breath going in and out. Remember our description of Vipassana as realistic observation. There is nothing other than ordinary facts of life. So the introductory form of meditation is observation of the simplest manifestation of life: breath goes in and out.

You have taken a vow to practice exactly as you're taught; in spite of your vow, you find out that you are completely incapable of following the directions! Your mind starts wandering into the past, your mind starts leaping forward into the future, your mind desires to do absolutely anything except stay with the breath.

A number of years ago we adopted a puppy from an animal shelter. He was a very wild little puppy and he reminded me of my own mind when I tried to meditate on the breath. Whatever you told him to do, he would just run around the yard for fun. Sitting still is so boring. Human beings are nice but they are so dull. He could see no purpose in sitting and obeying when there are sticks and balls to chase, not to mention cats.

Why is the mind so incapable of following a direction like, "observe the breath"? I have good concentration; I studied for about a million years to get through school. Why can't I meditate on my breath? All through life, we calm ourselves down by adding new stimulation to our nervous system. When I want to relax, I read a book, I watch a movie, I turn on music. I add stimulation to my eyes, to my ears, to my intellect. In ordinary life, we never relax through the removal of stimulation unless we are trying to fall asleep. The first three days of the ten-day course are the first time most people have ever just tried to sit still with reality. Just being with bare reality as it is, observing it, adding nothing, taking nothing away. You are not trying to entertain, stimulate, or amuse your senses. Once you begin to adjust to this calmness and simplicity, it becomes quite wonderful. In spite of the initial difficulty, at the end of these first three days most people feel they've opened a door to a new world. The self is satisfied to be within the self.

For the next seven days of the Vipassana course you are taught to expand your attention throughout your entire body. The teaching is stepwise; each day you expand your attention in a new way, so I'm just giving a general description. The focus, as you now understand, is realistic observation of the sensations of the body. The body is a collection of atoms and molecules organized into cells and tissues. Throughout this organism there are thousands of sensations all the time. Usually, we are aware of sensations in our body, but only very obvious ones; hunger, back pain, the pressure of our bodies upon the chair. Actually there are thousands, and I mean thousands, of sensations happening every minute all the time. Meditation is the skill of learning to keep your attention focused upon these sensations as they rise, fall, and change, without reacting to or interfering with them. A living organism is a dynamic, vibrating field of atoms and molecules. Change is continuous, incessant. The ever-occurring changes at the

level of atoms and molecules produces a ceaseless field of sensations. The meditator learns to observe them neutrally, without commenting, just observing.

Now you may be thinking, "So what? There are a lot of interesting things to do in life; why should I just sit there observing all these body sensations changing?" This brings us back to the irony of meditation. Vipassana is the entry into a new psychological world in which, instead of expecting or demanding, we observe without comment. Instead of wrestling with reality, we befriend it. Because our observation is calm and peaceful, we become deeply aware of new levels of reality, at the same time that we are cultivating inner peace. We are following the suggestion of the English poet, William Wordsworth: "...among least things, an undersense of the greatest..." Instead of trying to manipulate life, to create health or anything else, we have taken a time period out of our routines to learn a new skill: the art of integration, the attitude of harmony, the skill of neutral observation.

As we make a continuous attempt to observe only body sensations, in fact we observe our minds as well. Mind and body are two sides of a coin. Every time the mind changes, the body changes. Every time the body changes, the mind changes. The two are completely interlocked. First, let's take a few very simple examples. If I don't eat for

a day, I will begin to get strong hunger sensations. As I get hunger sensation, my mind will start thinking about food, food, food. By changing my body, I've changed my mind. Supposing I begin thinking of somebody I really hate; I can't stand what they did to me; I'd love to give them a piece of my mind. My body will become tense, my neck muscles will tighten. By changing my thoughts, I've changed my body.

Those examples, of course, are very crude stereotypes. During the 20th century, modern psychiatry abandoned mind-body dualism. Today all the mental health professionals would agree that if you change someone's mind, you change their body, and if you change someone's body, you change their mind. This compound picture, replacing the previous mind-body dualism, was forced on Western psychological sciences during the era at the end of the Vietnam War. We had many traumatized veterans coming back to the USA who didn't seem able to recover from their trauma. They were completely rational people, yet they behaved irrationally. They would walk around in fear in a completely safe place like the small town where I lived and practiced psychiatry. You could ask these war heroes, "Why are you afraid; you are back in the USA; it's completely safe." They would say, "I know that it's safe, I simply cannot get rid of the fear". That's because fear is not just in the mind, fear is also in the body. Technically, we say that these traumatized veterans continue to emit the neurotransmitters of fear. Their nervous systems, their endocrine systems, are conditioned to continuously put out chemicals of fear. The external stimulus is gone, but the physiological habituation continues.

Fortunately, we are not all traumatized, but every one of us recognizes that what I just said is true of us also. We all have conditioned fears that are carried with us even to places where they are obviously not rational. If you have the good fortune to take a meditation course, at some point in the ten days, while you are just sitting quietly and peacefully, an old fear will come up on your mind. But meditation will give

you a new skill. Instead of rolling in the thoughts of fear, you will turn your attention to the body. You will not try to get rid of the fear. Instead, you will just try to observe, "What happens in my body during this state of mind?" At the obvious level there will be things like a racing heart and dry mouth, but at the subtle level there are many sensations that will be unique to each person. If you try to stop your fear it makes you more fearful because you realize that you can't stop your fear. That's why we call it fear! It makes you feel out of control. You feel you cannot control yourself. But if you learn to observe your fear in its intricate pattern of sensation on the body, it will arise for some time and stay for some time, and then pass away. Instead of repressing it, struggling with it, trying to gain control over it, or observe its mental contents (which are fear-inducing and will make you increasingly fearful), you have practiced the meditative skill of observing your fear at the level of the sensations that it evokes in your own body. Over time, this fear will become less strong and over more time it may well disappear. Of course we can't guarantee how quickly this will happen, or if for every person it will happen every time. But the principle is absolutely true for all people all the time. The principle is that by turning attention away from your thoughts back to your body, you become familiar with yourself in a new, calming, objective, rational, helpful way.

But it is not just fear that is stored in the body. Peace and calm are also stored in the body. Wisdom is stored in the body. Wisdom is not an idea. Smart and intelligent ideas are very good things but are not wisdom. Wisdom is already in the body, but it is not so easy to contact it when you are constantly distracted by external stimulation. If you learn to sit calmly, and to observe your sensations, wisdom will spontaneously rise up in your mind and in your life. What do I mean by wisdom? A great feeling of blessing to be alive, an appreciation for all that you've been given, a sense of companionship with all other living beings, a desire to help others. Whether you are a Marxist revolutionary, a Catholic, a Buddhist, an atheist, you will recognize this as wisdom. When you get rid of the noise and distraction, you will find that you already possessed wisdom to a certain degree. Wisdom is the cognitive component of the emotions of peace and love. As you practice meditation, wisdom can grow stronger and become more familiar to you. You will learn to contact it more easily. I describe Vipassana as being a search engine in which you can more easily locate the websites of wisdom without getting so many false search results.

So now we can see two ironies of Vipassana. The first is that it gives its best results to those who can surrender, before they start, the desire to fulfill a specific demand. The second irony is that the ability to observe without trying to manipulate or change the object of observation actually ends up transforming what we are observing. By accepting ourselves exactly as we are, we stop being who we were. The Buddha described this process with a natural metaphor.

Suppose there is a stagnant pool in a country like India, which has a monsoon climate. It has not rained for months. The water is black, fetid, thick with impurities. Now the monsoon has arrived. No god has sent the rain; it is strictly a product of impersonal natural laws.

The rains commence with a single drop. The raindrop hits the surface of the stagnant pool, and with it comes a minute amount of oxygen and light. Another raindrop . . . another tiny aliquot of oxygen and light. Now the monsoon clouds burst, and thousands of drops beat down into the previously stagnant pool, not only bringing oxygen and light, but stirring and churning the water so that bottom water mingles with the surface. As the rains soak their way in, the entire pool, from top to bottom, becomes purified by light and air, becomes sweet smelling and sweet tasting. In just this manner, the mind of the meditator penetrates the entire body with awareness and equanimity, and a healthy new life is born in the body of the old life. Purification

does not have to be added as a third process. The addition of light and oxygen, awareness and peace, itself brings transformation to mind and body.

After a person completes the ten-day Vipassana course, they have the opportunity to begin a new life. This new life is called "walking the path." That means that every day you have the opportunity to meditate in the morning and evening. The meditation acts like a compass. You keep getting lost and turning away from wisdom but the compass shows you the correct way back. Of course we all do get lost during our busy days, but it's a wonderful thing to have this compass to guide you. When you meditate and develop calm, peace and wisdom, when you meditate and let go of fear, anger, hate, you are doing a systematic treatment to your body and changing its neurotransmitters. Before, you systematically shot your body full of neurotransmitters of fear or hate fifty times a day. Now you shoot up that drug of fear and hate many fewer times a day. Before, you used to take a healthy herb of wisdom just in a small pinch every day. Now you take this healthy herb of wisdom in a pungent brew twice a day. Systematic, long-term meditation changes the biochemical basis of your body. Some neurotransmitters are system-

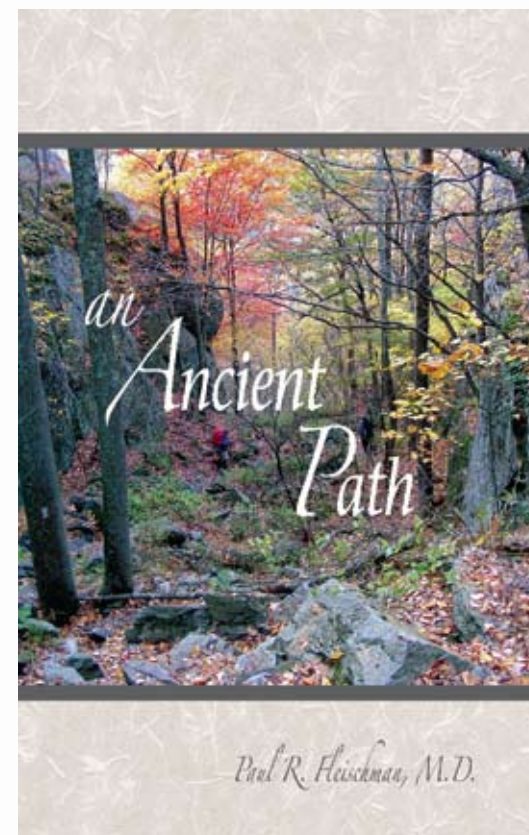
atically reduced, other neurotransmitters are systematically increased.

As you become more familiar with your body, you also make new choices. Those choices are different for everybody, but every continuous meditator will change habits in their diet or exercise, or their way of life. You also change your interpersonal habits. If you relate to people with less fear and hate and more love and compassion, you're changing your own biochemistry. If you become less hostile and less irritable, the people around you also get less hostility and irritability fed into them. It's possible that you even change the biochemistry of the people around you. There are studies that show that having a pet dog will increase your grades in school. There's a study showing a pet dog decreases your blood pressure and your heart rate. Susan and I both come from families where there's a lot of high blood pressure. Her father and all of his relatives had high blood pressure. My mother and all of her relatives had high blood pressure. Neither Susan nor I have high blood pressure despite our age. I don't know if that's because we have a dog or because we meditate.

You notice I'm hitting on two sides of the same point. Meditation is not a medical treatment for anything. If you have a mental health

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problem, or physical health problem, it's wise to seek the help of a good professional. Meditation is taught in large groups and in an educational atmosphere. All students are treated the same. Meditation is taught entirely for free; it is not a professional service. At the same time, I've shown you the logic of how meditation changes the biochemistry of your body, the choices that you'll make, and possibly even the biochemistry and the choices of people around you. I started by saying meditation helps by helping a person establish a healthy lifestyle, not by curing diseases. Everything I've described to you so far can be summarized by the metaphor of "Walking the Path." There's another metaphor that describes meditation: "Turning the Wheel."

Meditation has always been taught for free. It was never a commodity or service to be sold. Meditation is spread from person to person in a community of friends. It's a complex learning process that takes many days to learn and when you get it for free and learn to meditate, you have to help others learn it for free, or the wheel will stop turning. Therefore, there's another very important benefit of meditation: meditation places you in a community of like-minded people. There's no membership card, there's no dues. There isn't even an exact name for this disbursed group since we don't call ourselves Buddhists or anything else. But when you really enjoy meditation and are delighted by the benefits it's given to you, you feel eager to turn the wheel. Turning the wheel is an act of generosity. It's only fair because you got the technique from someone else who was turning the wheel.

But actually all human beings are selfish. I'm selfish. I turn the wheel because it helps me. There's a great philosophical discussion as to whether altruism really exists. I know quite well that I help people partly out of compassion and partly out of selfishness. There's nothing that feels better than helping people find something that will delight them, that will make them healthier, that will give them better mental and physical health while they walk the path. When we turn the wheel, that is, when we help others, that also changes our biochemistry. In studies of both healthy aging or studies of people who've been traumatized, the single most important factor in health is -having a network of people who care about you and who you care about. Not only that, the modern world is breaking down most of those interpersonal networks. But I'm myself the kind of person who doesn't like clutching and intrusive

groups. Meditation and the part of meditation referred to as "Turning the Wheel" helps you be part of people where all are trying to become a little better. You help yourself while helping others. You don't even know which comes first. The Buddha said, "Friendship is not an important part of the path. Friendship is the most important part of the path".

One final metaphor that can be used to understand Vipassana is the metaphor of Nibbāna. Nibbāna is a Pāli word, which is translated into English as, "no wind" or "no motion." But Nibbāna can't really be translated as a single word or phrase. It can be understood by approaching it from two directions. Nibbāna means a mind that is completely free of all negativity; free of anger, hatred, ill will, doubt or fear. Another direction for approaching Nibbāna is to think of it as whatever lies beyond the material and mental world. Nibbāna is the goal of the Buddha's teaching. Metaphorically you can understand it as that point where a pure mind punches through the veil of physical things to the unborn, unchanging, undying, Beyond. So Nibbāna, which is the goal of the path, can be understood as if it were the prow of ship, the point where two guiding things join together. Juan Mascaro, a famous translator of the Pāli texts into English, who was himself a Spaniard, likened Nibbāna to the pole star.

Whether Nibbāna is understood conceptually, or whether Nibbāna is not understood conceptually, is not as important as walking under the guidance of the pole star. Whether you arrive or not, on route you will be cultivating the purity of mind, compassion and love: and you will simultaneously be immersing yourself in an ancient and ongoing worldwide communion of like-minded friends who not only walk the path, but who are living manifestations of the path itself. You become a disciple of the pole star of Nibbāna. You feel gratitude to be following a star. You receive and convey loving-kindness, which is the fragrance that arises from a purified mind. These, not the healing of diseases, are the health benefits of Vipassana.

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Available from www.pariyatti.org*

*For more information on Vipassana meditation:
www.dhamma.org*