

Instructions for Vipassana Practice

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Jon Yaffe – March 2017

INTRODUCTION

Insight (or Vipassana) Meditation

Vipassana, or Insight Meditation, directs us to the realization of insight through contemplation, mindfulness and investigation of three specific characteristics.

1. Anicca: The impermanence or changing nature of all things.
2. Dukkha: The unsatisfactory or unreliable nature of all things.
3. Anatta: The emptiness of all conditioned things. (from a different source - “empty of self-existence” [from a translation of *The Heart Sutra*, by Red Pine])

Insight practice cultivates the capacity to directly know the truth of anicca (impermanence), dukkha (unsatisfactoriness) and anatta (not-self) underneath the surface of experience.

Insight transforms. It is the spotlight that puts experience into clear view. It is not intellectual understanding, ... or an experience that conforms to teachings read. Insight transforms the fundamental way we experience life.

When we see anicca (impermanence) for ourselves, we do not cling.

When we see dukkha (unsatisfactoriness) for ourselves, we do not cling.

When we see anatta (not-self) for ourselves, we do not cling.

These three insights prevent clinging. When clinging ceases, suffering ceases.

Paraphrased from a talk by Shaila Catherine –

<https://www.imsb.org/teachings/vipassana-practice/>

It is commonly taught that when we truly come to see any one of these – when we realize it is a defining truth of reality, reality both external and internal; why then we see the other two as well.

So – good news – we only have to see one of these, and bingo: liberation! How hard can that be?

Well, seeing even only one of these – let’s say impermanence – as a universal characteristic takes some powerful seeing – seeing that’s very clean, uncontaminated by wants, aversions, and the views we hold. So, understandably, vipassana is often taught as an advanced practice, after we have been taught and, at least to a degree, have mastered Concentration.

This makes sense. Through Concentration Practice we cultivate the ability to direct attention where we want it to go, to stay where we want it to stay, and to see whatever is

present with clarity – undistracted, undistorted, non-interfering clarity. Concentration practice teaches us a new and truer way of seeing; and then Vipassana practice takes this attainment as its starting place, to ask “what is it that we now see?”

When introducing vipassana practice it is common to offer new instructions, stressing how they differ from the earlier ones taught for concentration, as if we need to unlearn the first before we can move on to the next. There is a practical logic to this – we may have become quite attached to the methods we have found so helpful to date – but it can create a sense of “Don’t do that anymore. Now, do *this* instead!” that *this* makes vipassana practice feel like it’s one thing and one thing only, something that has to be swallowed whole. In fact it can be taught quite nicely as a progression of significant but manageable steps. As it would happen there are four of them. And these four are what I want us to engage in today, in the four sittings we will have this afternoon.

From where did these four steps come? From the Buddha. They are “hidden in plain sight”, in the well-known Anapanasati Sutta (MN 118, sections 13-16). I say hidden because they are so concise that, for most of us, they benefit from some reflection and “unpacking”, but they are there, and they are clear. I’ve mentioned these in earlier talks, but – especially for those of you who are new or may have missed them previously – here they are:

“He trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in contemplating impermanence’; he trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out contemplating impermanence.’

He trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in contemplating fading away’; he trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out contemplating fading away.’

He trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in contemplating cessation’; he trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out contemplating cessation.’

He trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in contemplating relinquishment’; he trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out contemplating relinquishment.’

We’ll get to all of these as the day progresses, and how they differ and build on the ones worked with before...

FIRST SITTING

... But for now let’s look at just the first of these and say a few things to give us a better handle on what’s being asked of us; what we are to open ourselves to see.

“He trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in contemplating impermanence’; he trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out contemplating impermanence.’

The term “impermanence” covers a *lot* – everything that is not totally and absolutely permanent, not unchanging, not unchangeable, and not perpetual (in the case of beings, we would use the term ‘immortal’) – everything which is **not** these things.

So, it covers things that rise and fall, swell and contract, increase and decrease, ebb and flow. It covers things that morph or change in any regard, things that arise or materialize – perhaps suddenly – in our experience; things that fade or suddenly disappear; things that are born, age and die. We most often use these last words to describe living beings, but they apply as well to our experience. Sensations, feelings, perceptions, thoughts and emotions are born in our experience, and age, and die, and then may be reborn, and on and on.

So when we sit “contemplating impermanence” we breathe in and out seeing, feeling, knowing any and over time all of these. We are following the Buddha’s instructions. Good job!

As a further aid to “unpacking” these instructions, I want to bring in some teaching as well, from the Satipathanna Sutta.

Many of you know this key sutta. It offers instructions for meditating/reflecting on many topics; but throughout, the instructions tend to follow a formula, and here is the first piece of this. He says of the skillful monk (or practitioner):

In this way he abides focused internally on the [meditation object] in itself, or he abides focuses externally on the [meditation object] in itself, or he abides focused both internally and externally on the [meditation object] in itself.

What’s he saying here? First, to me “He abides” refers to “settling in and living there” - i.e., being settled, steady and undistracted. So, we do this practice from a starting place of being at least somewhat concentrated. It’s implicit here that if you are **not** somewhat settled and concentrated, **wait until you are** before moving into vipassana practice. There is no race underway here. Take whatever time you need to settle into concentration, take some time to appreciate having achieved this, and to build some confidence in having done so. And then move on. No rush.

That said, once you have attained a peaceful abiding, the Buddha next tells us to take note of both external and internal aspects of our meditation object, in this case impermanence.

So, we are invited to recognize impermanence in external events and objects – the causes and conditions outside us with which we have contact – giving rise to the ever-changing flow and mix of sights, sounds, smells, touches and tastes. And, we are invited to recognize impermanence *in ourselves* – our internal objects and events if you will – the comings and going of our awareness of these sensations; and the arising and passing away of reactions to them; of feeling tones, perceptions, thoughts, emotions and intentions. See how these too ebb and flow, based on ... what? Causes and conditions, some of which we explain away by fabricating explanations, some of which we allow to simply arise from and pass into mystery.

The Buddha tells us to investigate each of these experiences – external, internal – “in itself”. By this he means let each instant of awareness be a separate and distinct grain of experience, as much as possible relinquishing all tendencies we may have to connect such grains together to paint a bigger picture, or explain their origin or destination. Let grains of sand be separate grains; you don’t need to make them into a beach. Examine glass beads individually; you don’t need to string them into a necklace. The idea here is strikingly simple: if the building blocks of experience, at the smallest level, are seen and directly known to be intrinsically impermanent, how can anything built of them be anything other than impermanent? You may be able to build a castle out of sand; but you will not be able to live in it.

See this impermanence clearly, and the unsatisfactoriness of it, and the emptiness of it, will be evident. Accept this evidence, this truth, and there will be nothing worth the craving, nothing worth the clinging; and you will, to speak in common terms, give it a rest.

So these are the instructions:

- Breathe in, breath out; witnessing the experience and recognition of impermanence. See it manifesting externally, see it manifesting internally. Watch sensations come and go. Watch any reactivity or processing of this come and go. Keep it simple. You don't have to deliberately make anything of it. Insight will come effortlessly. See what there is to see.
- Let's sit...

SECOND SITTING

He trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in contemplating fading away’; he trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out contemplating fading away.’

The first instructions had us look at all aspects of impermanence, coming as well as going, arising as well as passing away. If we found our experiences somewhat distraction-based, one thing pushing another aside, that’s really okay. It served to make the point. Both things and our awareness of things are impermanent. Case closed – as far as it goes.

The second instructions ask us to be more focused, deliberate and steady with our attention. In effect, we are asked to be more concentrated and mindful; specifically mindful of the nature of things, once arisen, to pass away.

Why focus on this specifically? I believe the Buddha wants us to be aware of our especially strong resistance to this aspect of reality. We like the things we like to stick around. In many cases we even like the things we dislike to stick around. How often have you enjoyed righteous indignation, and resisted calming down from a good fierce anger? Things fading is about loss, and we find the idea of loss distressing. But the Buddha says, “Look. Isn’t it true that once arisen, things fade away?”

(Ring the bell and pause.) If you think about it, newness takes place in an instant, and everything that takes place after that is fading away. There is a 1 to 1 quality to it; in that

nothing fades away without first arising, but... (ring the bell again) for how long is there the newness of arising, and for how long is there there the aging of fading away? Fading away, the loss of newness, comprises much more of our experience than newness, but paradoxically is harder to see. Newness grabs our attention, while awareness of fading away is hard to maintain. Working against it is our tendency to be inattentive, to grow bored, to be grabbed by new, even if short-lived sensations – Squirrel!

For most of us, mindfulness of fading away requires cultivation. The reward of this is seeing even more clearly, and the ability to come to deep acceptance of the deep truth that once arisen, things fade away. With that acceptance comes a more peaceful and profound abiding with reality.

He trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in contemplating fading away’; he trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out contemplating fading away.’

Let's sit.

THIRD SITTING

He trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in contemplating cessation’; he trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out contemplating cessation.’

Once arisen, things fade away. Once faded away, things cease.

That things fade away can be hard to bear. That things completely cease to exist, that experiences and beings, even loved ones, die is for most of us the occasion for grief. It also may be the occasion for a whole collection of strategies meant to keep loss at bay – the classic list being denial, negotiating, anger, depression, and only at the end acceptance; but this is probably an incomplete list.

Of course, we tend to look at cessation of existence on a gross scale. And mistaking the inherently impermanent for the permanent – which would of course be wrong view – we find cessation unacceptable, unbearable and crushing.

The Buddha says, in essence, look at the little pieces. See how cessation is intrinsic to them. See that the little things that arise, fade away. See that the little things that fade away at some point cease to be. See that big things are made of little things, and so this *must* be true for them as well. Seriously. How else could it be?

Fading away evokes the hindrance of aversion. Cessation may do this too, of course, but it also evokes the hindrance of doubt. (Ring the bell – pause for the fading to become very soft.) Is the bell still sounding? Maybe it is, and you just can't hear it over background noise. Maybe it has stopped, but you're not sure. Wrong view looks at cessation and immerses us in uncertainty and speculation, both material and existential. Speculation draws us into delusion.

The Buddha would have us learn to recognize the deep truth of cessation, and hold this through Right View; that understands the inevitability of it, and its place in both the internal and external spheres. Cessation clears a path for new arisings. Cessation frees the

mind to hold fresh awareness and new mental formations. The truth of cessation points to the importance of Now and its inherent newness.

For most of us, mindfulness of cessation requires cultivation. The reward of this is seeing even more clearly, and the ability to come to deep acceptance of the deep truth that things fade away and cease to be. With that acceptance comes a more peaceful and profound abiding with reality.

He trains thus: 'I shall breathe in contemplating cessation'; he trains thus: 'I shall breathe out contemplating cessation.'

Let's sit.

FOURTH SITTING

This last stage is fascinating. After all, what is there after cessation? What else is there to see. What work is there still to do?

He trains thus: 'I shall breathe in contemplating relinquishment'; he trains thus: 'I shall breathe out contemplating relinquishment.'

What does the Buddha mean by "relinquishment"? He's pointing, I believe, to the last vestiges of attachment and clinging and reactivity that we hold in resistance to these intrinsic and immutable truths; of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta*; of impermanence, fading away and cessation.

Note that the sphere of relinquishment is strictly internal. External, even inanimate objects, demonstrate impermanence, fading and cessation; but only sentient living beings deal with relinquishment. We are speaking here of a trait unique to the human realm; and the Buddha here is asking us to cultivate a powerful and liberating trait that frees us from the lower realms; the hell realms, the realm of hungry ghosts, even the animal realm. He's asking us to cultivate that which will truly liberate us.

In the sitting, he's asking us to cultivate a keen awareness of what I'll call *stickiness*. As sensations, feelings, perceptions, thoughts etc. arise and pass away, note any and all aspects of clinging. Note when you cling to the object; note when it feels like the object is clinging to you. Are you fighting or allowing its fading away and cessation? Does grief or remorse arise; does meaning or purpose arise, do thoughts of good or bad arise? Do you see that all of these are sticky? Do thoughts of self arise; thoughts of self are very sticky.

Note as well those moments when you hold awareness free of all stickiness. Know awareness that is free and unencumbered, and know awareness affected by clinging. How does each feel? See this clearly. See this for yourself.

He trains thus: 'I shall breathe in contemplating relinquishment'; he trains thus: 'I shall breathe out contemplating relinquishment.'

Let's sit.