

VIPASSANĀ and the corresponding verb *vipassati* stand for the development of a form of vision that "sees", *passati*, in an "intensified" and also "analytical" manner, *vi-*, hence *vipassanā* stands for "insight". Such insight is of central importance for progress towards liberation. Progress towards liberation, in fact, sets the context for the early Buddhist conception of *vipassanā*, which stands for "liberating insight", that is, for the type of insight whose growth culminates in the total release of the mind from the grip of defilements and delusion.¹

The present article will first examine occurrences of the term *vipassanā* and the related verb *vipassati* in the Pāli discourses, in order to explore the significance of the term in its early Buddhist usage. Then, the practical development of *vipassanā* will be taken up, illustrated with the help of *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation. This is followed by turning to the relationship between *vipassanā* and concentration. The final part of the article will briefly survey modern day *vipassanā* meditation in the Theravāda tradition.

In the thought world of early Buddhism, insight is closely related to wisdom.² In fact, the chief task of *vipassanā* is the development of wisdom, which in turn leads to the eradication of ignorance, *vipassanā bhāvitā... paññā bhāvīyati, paññā bhāvitā... yā avijjā sā pahīyati* (A. I, 61). The development of wisdom requires insight into impermanence in particular. Thus, according to the standard definition in the discourses, to be wise is to be "endowed with wisdom regarding the arising and disappearance [of phenomena], which is noble and penetrative, leading to the complete destruction of *dukkha*", *udayatthagāminiyā paññāya samannāgato ariyāya nibbedhikāya sammādukkhakkhayagāminiyā* (e.g. M. I, 356). This passage sets the parameters for the development of wisdom and insight. Based on penetrative awareness of impermanence as the crucial foundation, the growth of true insight and wisdom manifests in a gradual ennobling of the practitioner and eventually culminates in total liberation from *dukkha*. In short, wisdom and insight, from an early Buddhist perspective, have a clear scope and purpose. Their scope is the true nature of existence and their purpose is liberation.

As the above description indicates, the basis for growing insight into the true nature of existence is penetrative awareness of its impermanent and therewith conditioned nature. Penetrative in so far as

such insightful awareness needs to quite literally penetrate into every aspect of personal experience, —*aniccato sabbabhavaṃ vipassaṃ* (Thag. 1091). Such comprehensive seeing with insight will ensure that the entire gamut of what is usually experienced as 'I' and 'mine' is instead seen with insight as a product of conditions and subject to change and alteration.

Comprehensive insight into impermanence then needs to lead on to insight into unsatisfactoriness and not-self or emptiness, '*aniccaṃ dukkaṃ'ti vipassa yoniso, 'suññāṃ anattā'ti* (Thag. 1117). That is, once a clear perception of impermanence, *aniccasaññā*, has been established, the progress of insight requires viewing what is impermanent as unsatisfactory, *anicce dukkhasaññā*, and that which is unsatisfactory needs in turn to be seen as devoid of a self, *dukkhe anattasaññā*.

The locative forms *anicce* and *dukkhe* indicate that the progression from one of these three characteristics to the next does not involve a change of object, but a change of perspective. What has been seen with insight as impermanent, is now seen as unsatisfactory, in fact it is precisely because it is impermanent that it is unsatisfactory. This dynamic is reflected in a standard teaching on the three characteristics, found often in the discourses, where the inquiry 'is what is impermanent unsatisfactory or agreeable?', *yaṃ panāniccaṃ dukkhaṃ vā taṃ sukhaṃ vā*, leads to the conclusion that it can only be unsatisfactory (e.g. M. I, 138).

The same teaching then continues by inquiring if it is appropriate to regard what is impermanent, unsatisfactory and subject to change as 'this is mine, this I am, this is my self', *yaṃ panāniccaṃ dukkhaṃ vipariṇāmadhammaṃ kallaṃ nu taṃ samanupassitum: 'etaṃ mama, eso 'ham asmi, eso me attā'ti?* The inevitable conclusion is that this would indeed be inappropriate. Needless to say, passages like this are guided forms of meditation for the development of insight.

In sum, once the impermanent has been seen as unsatisfactory, it is then to be viewed as devoid of anything that could justify the conceit 'I am' or any appropriation in terms of 'this is mine'. Concurrent with this progression of insight is a deepening appreciation of the conditioned nature of all aspects of subjective experience, an appreciation that from its

starting point as a corollary to impermanence reaches its culmination in the direct vision of not-self with the break-through to awakening.

A discourse in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* presents these three progressive perceptions – *aniccasaññā*, *anicce dukkhasaññā*, *dukkhe anattasaññā* – together with "perception of eradication", *pahānasaññā*, and "perception of dispassion", *virāgasaññā*; all five perceptions having the purpose of leading to liberation (A. III, 85). This presentation thus combines the scope of insight – impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self – with the purpose of insight, namely eradication and dispassion. Such dispassion, then, is the proximate cause for liberation in a dependent sequence that leads from ignorance to the destruction of the influxes (S. II, 30).

True insight is diametrically opposed to the four perversions of perception, of the mind and of views, *vipallāsa*, which are to 'mis'-take what is impermanent, unsatisfactory, not-self and unattractive for being the opposite, *anicce 'niccan'ti ... adukkhe 'dukkhan'ti ... anattani 'attā'ti ... asubhe 'subhan'ti saññāvīpallāso cittavīpallāso dīṭṭhivīpallāso* (A. II, 52). Undermining the force of these perversions through insight is what gradually eradicates the defilements in the mind and thereby leads to increasing degrees of dispassion.

Instead of succumbing to the perverting force of these four *vīpallāsas*, insight reveals an ever more correct vision of the world that is in accordance with reality. Such a vision is a necessary requirement for progress to liberation, in fact all "those who have been quenched in this world, had insight in accordance with reality", *ye cāpi nibbutā loke, yathābhūtaṃ vipassisuṃ* (D. III, 196; See in more detail YATHĀBHŪ TANĀNADASSANA).

Another quality of particular relevance for the development of insight would be the awakening factor of investigation-of-dhammas.³ The *Ānāpānasati Sutta* explains that this awakening factor stands representative for the activities of inspecting, scrutinizing and examining with wisdom, *paññāya pavicinati pavicarati parivīmaṃsaṃ āpajjati* (M. III, 85; see also VĪMAṂSĀ). A support for the awakening factor of investigation-of-dhammas, literally its 'nutriment', *āhāra*, is wise attention, *yoniso manasikāra* (S. V, 104; See also YONISO MANASIKĀRA). Such wise attention should be

directed towards what is wholesome and unwholesome, in the sense of what is blameable, inferior and dark in contrast to what is blameless, superior and bright.

This alludes at another aspect of the development of insight, a development that stands within an ethical context and inevitably has ethical repercussions. Genuine insight, from an early Buddhist perspective, needs to be based on a sound moral foundation. In turn, growth of insight will further strengthen this moral foundation, making certain unwholesome deeds an impossibility for one endowed with higher insight. Such gradual ennobling through insight reaches its culmination point with the *arahant*. By dint of profound insight and inner purity an *arahant* is simply incapable of undertaking such actions as deliberately depriving another living being of life, appropriating what belongs to others by way of theft, or consciously speaking falsehood, etc. (M. I, 523). That is, genuine growth of insight can be measured in terms of the degree to which true inner detachment manifests in ethical purity.

The potential of being endowed with insight in regard to wholesome phenomena, *vipassako kusalānaṃ dhammānaṃ*, can be seen in a discourse in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, where such insight occurs in the context of an instruction given to a monk who is under the influence of sloth and torpor as well as doubt and who no longer delights in living a life of celibacy (A. III, 70). According to this instruction, insight should be combined with sense-restraint, with contentment in regard to food and with wakefulness, and should lead to developing, day and night, the mental qualities related to awakening, *bodhipakkhikā dhammā*. These instructions set up a clear behavioural context for insight, and at the same time highlight its final purpose. The discourse reports that, as a result of this instruction, the monk in question overcame his problems and developed insight all the way up to full liberation. The awakening potential of the same type of insight is also reflected in another discourse in the same collection, according to which neither the monks nor the Buddha had ever seen or heard that anyone had reached final liberation without having developed insight in regard to wholesome phenomena in conjunction with sense-restraint, contentment with food, wakefulness, and development of the mental qualities related to awakening (A. III, 301)

The potential benefits of the path of insight are available to all those who engage in its practice and gender is of no relevance in this context, as the nun Somā pointed out to Māra, the Evil One. In reply to his insinuation that women are by nature incapable of higher attainments in meditation, Somā clarified that womanhood is of no relevance once the mind is well concentrated and the teaching is properly seen with insight, *itthibhāvo kiṃ kayirā, cittaṃhi susamāhite .. sammā dhammaṃ vipassato* (S. I, 129; see also *Thīg.* 61). Though the path of insight is open for men and women alike, yet, there are only few that see with insight, as for the most part the world remains blind, *andhabhūto ayaṃ loko, tanuk' ettha vipassati* (*Dhp.* 174).

The potential of the development of insight is also reflected in the *Itivuttaka*, where a series of discourses take up various defilements – such as greed, anger, delusion, conceit etc. – in each case indicating that those who truly understand the respective defilement, by abandoning it with insight, *taṃ ... sammadaññāya, pajahanti vipassino*, will go beyond being reborn in this world (*It.* 1-3). The point made by this set of discourses is easily underestimated. Yet, it is only with insight into the nature of defilements, and more specifically insight into their arising in one's own mind, that they can indeed be abandoned.

Not only can defilements be overcome, but according to the *Ākañkheyya Sutta* even other types of aspirations can find fulfilment – ranging from merit for one's supporters via being dear to one's fellow practitioners all the way up to final liberation – if the development of insight is undertaken in conjunction with mental tranquillity and dwelling in empty places without neglecting the practice of meditation, *ajjhataṃ cetosamatham anuyutto anirākatajjhāno vipassanāya samannāgato brūhetā suññāgārānaṃ* (*M.* I, 33 and *A.* V, 131).⁴

The growth of insight also gradually removes sensual desire. Those who, mindfully meditating with calm and discerning mind, properly see the teaching with insight are no longer interested in sensuality, *ye santacittā nipakā, satimanto ca jhāyino, sammā dhammaṃ vipassanti, kāmesu anapekkhino* (*It.* 39). Dispassion as a net result of deepening insight can then also be applied to the meditative experience itself. Thus even a sublime experience like the sphere of nothingness, possible only after having developed

deep levels of concentration, should simply be contemplated from the perspective that any "enchantment is a fetter, directly knowing it like this, he thus sees it with insight", *'nandī samyojanaṃ' iti, evam etaṃ abhiññāya, tato tattha vipassati* (*Sn.* 1115).

The need to beware of attachment does, however, not imply that the development of insight needs to be a dreary and distressful experience. Rather, genuine insight will sooner or later be accompanied by joy and delight. As a verse in the *Dhammapada* proclaims:

"Secluded in an empty place,
a monk with calm mind
experiences delight beyond [that of ordinary]
humans
on rightly seeing the teaching with insight";
*suññāgāraṃ pavittassa,
santacittassa bhikkhuno,
amānusīratī hoti,
sammā dhammaṃ vipassato* (*Dhp.* 373).

Though the development of insight will at times involve the experience of sadness and even fear, in the long run the joy of letting go and the delight of inner purity and freedom are bound to make their appearance. For one who experiences such letting go and inner purity, according to the *Theragāthā*,

"There is no comparable delight,
[even from] five-fold music,
as when with a concentrated mind
one rightly sees the teaching with insight."
*Pañcaṅgikena turiyena,
na ratī hoti tādisī,
yathā ekaggacittassa,
sammā dhammaṃ vipassato* (*Thag.* 398, see also
Thag. 1071).

An extended simile in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* describes the situation of a man who has plunged into water and might either drown or else emerge again (*A.* IV, 11). In the context of this imagery, the one who emerges and is able to firmly remain above water and see with insight, *vipassati*, represents stream-entry. With this level of awakening, true insight has indeed emerged to such a degree as to become firmly established. Further deepening of insight then issues in full awakening, hence to be one who sees with insight and knows, *vipassina jāna*, is one of the epithets of a Buddha (*Sn.* 349 and *Thag.* 1269). The same quality

importance for the development of *satipaṭṭhāna* that it marks the difference between mere *satipaṭṭhāna* and its 'development', *satipaṭṭhānabhāvanā* (S. V, 183). The same mode of contemplation is also highlighted in a passage that is repeated in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* after each of the individual exercises. This passage indicates that mindful contemplation, besides needing to be undertaken in a comprehensive manner by covering what is 'inside' as well as what is 'outside', requires observing the arising and the passing away of the contemplated phenomena. *samudayadhammānupassī vā... vāyadhammānupassī vā* (M. I, 56). Such directing of mindfulness to arising and passing away ties in well with the importance of penetrative awareness of impermanence for the development of insight and wisdom, mentioned above. The detachment and equanimity that result from such contemplation are also reflected in this passage in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, according to which during contemplation undertaken properly one dwells independently, without clinging to anything, *anissito ca viharati, na ca kiñci loke upādiyati*.

Besides these key recommendations, the individual exercises listed in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* offer different approaches for the gaining of liberating insight. The four areas for the growth of insight through the deployment of mindfulness cover the body, feelings, mental states and *dharmas* (see in more detail SATIPAṬṬHĀNA). In regard to the body, the exercises recommended are:

- mindfulness of breathing,
- awareness of bodily postures,
- clear comprehension with bodily activities,
- reviewing the anatomical constitution of the body,
- contemplating the body as constituted of the four elements,
- recollecting the stages of decay of a corpse.

The first of these exercises, mindfulness of breathing, brings home the impermanent and dependent nature of every moment of bodily existence, as one's very survival depends entirely on the next breath. In fact two discourses in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* recommend practising recollection of death by remaining aware of the uncertainty of being able to live even until the next breath (A. III, 306 and A. IV, 319). The next two exercises in this *satipaṭṭhāna* direct mindfulness to bodily postures and activities. A discourse in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* describes how a

wordling's mistaken notion of a self is intrinsically related to his or her performance of the four bodily postures (S. III, 151). This suggests insight into not-self to be a potential benefit of mindfulness of one's bodily posture, in fact according to the commentary on the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* a practitioner of this mindfulness exercise should keep in mind the question: 'who is going (etc.)?' (MA. I, 251).

Contemplation of the anatomical constitution of the body can lead to insight into the vanity of the idea of bodily beauty, offering a strong antidote to sensual desire. According to another discourse this contemplation constitutes indeed the method for arousing the "perception of unattractiveness", *asubhasaññā* (A. V, 109), whose purpose other discourses indicate to be the overcoming of sensual desire, *kāmarāga* (A. III, 323; cf. also A. IV, 47 and It. 80). Another benefit of contemplating the unattractive nature of the body is its potential to counter conceit, a potential revealed in a passage where this exercise is recommended to monks who are being excessively honoured and venerated (M. I, 336).

Contemplation of the body from the perspective of the four elements again points to insight into not-self, an insight alluded to in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* itself with the simile of a butcher who cuts up a cow into pieces for sale (M. I, 58). What formerly was 'a cow', has now lost its apparent compactness and is reduced to mere 'pieces of beef'. Similarly, what formerly was 'my body' can with growing insight be seen as simply a conglomeration of the four elements. Another discourse clarifies that it is a distinct quality of *arahants* that they know these elements to be entirely devoid of a self, thereby having gone beyond any clinging in relation to them (M. III, 31). A complementary aspect of the same contemplation would be insight into impermanence. This is reflected in the *Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta*, which reasons that, given that due to the cosmic cycles of destruction even the earth itself will eventually disappear, what to say of the impermanent nature of this body, made up of the same basic elements (M. I, 185)?

The final exercise described under contemplation of the body reviews stages of decay of a corpse in a charnel ground, where the task of mindfulness is to keep in mind that one's own body is bound to undergo a similar fate. An insight to be gained from such contemplation is, again, detachment in regard to the

idea of bodily beauty. This potential is reflected in a passage that employs the stages of decay as a way of bringing out the inherent disadvantage of a physical body, however beautiful it may have been earlier (*M. I*, 88). Verses in the *Theragāthā* document the actual undertaking of contemplation of a corpse and its potential of leading to liberating insight (*Thag.* 315-319, see also *Thag.* 393-398). A discourse in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* mentions the removal of conceit as yet another benefit to be expected from this exercise (*A. III*, 324). Another self-evident effect of contemplating a corpse in decay would be awareness of mortality. Death is fearful only to the extent to which one identifies with this body. Thus one who has insight into the impermanent nature of the body will gradually become able to dwell free from fear, *aniccam* ... *kāyam* *imam* ... *vipassamāno vītabhavo vihasam* (*Thag.* 1093).

The next chief subject of *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation are feelings, whose crucial position as the condition for craving in the context of the law of dependent arising, *paṭicca samuppāda*, makes their mindful contemplation a central ground for the arousing of insight. The task of insight here is to realize the degree to which the affective tone of feelings – be it pleasant, painful or neutral – conditions one's attitude and reactions to what is experienced. The instructions for this *satipaṭṭhāna* further distinguish the three basic types of feeling into worldly and unworldly types, *sāmiṣa* and *nirāmiṣa*, thereby drawing attention to the possible activation of the underlying tendencies to passion, aversion and ignorance through worldly types of feelings that are pleasant, painful or neutral (*S. IV*, 205). Another prominent insight perspective engendered through contemplation of feelings is impermanence. One who has reached full liberation will experience any type of feeling as something impermanent that is felt with complete detachment (*M. III*, 244). The constantly changing nature of feelings also reveals the characteristic of not-self, making it impossible to either posit feeling as a self or else assume that it is the self that feels (*D. II*, 67).

Insight into impermanence and not-self continue to be central themes in the next *satipaṭṭhāna*, concerned with states of mind. The states of mind listed for mindful contemplation are presented in pairs of opposites, thereby inculcating in the practitioner the ability to clearly distinguish between what should be avoided and what should be developed. A central

purpose of contemplation of states of mind is to arouse awareness of the conditioning role of mental states and intentions on verbal and bodily activities, whose wholesome or unwholesome nature depends on the quality of the mind that has been their forerunner. An analytical perspective on mental states becomes evident in the *Anupāda Sutta's* description of Sāriputta's practice of insight in regard to things as they occur, *anupadadhammavipassanaṃ vipassī* (*M. III*, 25). His insight development took place through an analysis of the mental states experienced during a *jhāna* or immaterial attainment into their mental constituents, followed by contemplating their arising and passing away while at the same time remaining with detachment. The same analytical perspective is turned on deeper experiences of concentration in the *Aṭṭhakanāgara Sutta*, which indicates that seeing a *jhāna* or immaterial attainment as merely a conditioned product of the mind will yield such penetrative insight that either non-return or full awakening can be expected (*M. I*, 350).

Contemplation of *dharmas*, the final of the four *satipaṭṭhānas*, covers the following topics:

- the five hindrances,
- the five aggregates of clinging,
- the six sense-spheres,
- the seven awakening factors,
- the four noble truths.

Two related contemplations from the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna* are the first and fourth, which are concerned with the five hindrances and the seven factors of awakening. The insight to be developed here is closely related to meditation practice itself, as one should be able to clearly recognize these states and the conditions responsible for the coming into being of a hindrance or an awakening factor, and for their removal or alternatively for their further development. Another two related contemplations in this *satipaṭṭhāna* analyse personal experience from the perspective of the five aggregates and the six sense-spheres. Insight into the impermanent nature of the five aggregates of clinging features in other discourses as a particularly prominent cause for the break-through to liberation (*D. II*, 35; *D. III*, 223; *S. II*, 29; *S. II*, 253; *A. II*, 45 and *A. IV*, 153). The reasons for this potential are not hard to find, as appreciating the impermanent nature of what is clung to as 'I' and 'mine' erodes the very foundation of clinging. In the case of the sense-spheres, mindfulness should explore the fettering force

of experiences that arise based on the senses and their objects. Mindfulness developed in this way reveals the degree to which the binding influence of the six sense-spheres is the central condition for involvement in and reaction to the world. In fact the 'world' of experience arises just due to these six and is afflicted because of clinging to them, *chassu loko samuppanno ... channam eva upādāya, chassu loko vihaññati* (Sn. 169). In the case of the sense-spheres, too, impermanence is another insight to be developed, as knowing and seeing the impermanent nature of the sense-spheres can lead to the attainment of stream-entry (S. III, 225), if not higher.

The culmination point of the exercises listed in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, and at the same time the culmination point of the growth of insight, are the four noble truths. The supreme importance of insight into these four noble truths, which equals full insight into the dependent arising of *dukkha* and its cessation, is reflected in the circumstance that such insight features regularly in descriptions of the attainment of stream-entry during a gradual discourse given by the Buddha (e.g. M. I, 380; see also SOTĀPATTI), as well as in descriptions of the break-through to full awakening (e.g. M. I, 23).

The *Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta* delineates the actual tasks required for true insight into the four noble truths, indicating that the first truth needs to be fully understood, the second to be abandoned, the third to be realized and the fourth to be developed (S. V, 422; see also S. V, 436). Other discourses that take up the same four activities indicate that what needs to be fully understood are the five aggregates of clinging, what needs to be abandoned are ignorance and craving for existence, what needs to be realized are knowledge and liberation, and what needs to be developed are tranquillity and insight, *samatho ca vipassanā ca* (M. III, 289; S. V, 52; A. II, 247).

Vipassanā and Concentration

A noteworthy aspect of occurrences of the term *vipassanā* in the discourses is that this term mostly appears in conjunction with mental tranquillity, *samatha*. This is so much the case that the two are at times simply listed as two things in their own right (D. III, 213 and A. I, 95). The same pattern recurs in a survey of various aspects of the early Buddhist path of practice as the way to the unconditioned. This

survey mentions tranquillity and insight as one category and alternatively lists such categories as the four right efforts, the seven factors of awakening, or the noble eightfold path (S. IV, 360). What emerges from such listings is that, from the perspective of early Buddhist canonical scripture, *samatha* and *vipassanā* are two qualities that necessarily operate in conjunction.

The same principle finds a fitting illustration in a simile, according to which tranquillity and insight are a 'pair of messengers' whose task it to carry the message of *Nibbāna* along the road of the noble eightfold path (S. IV, 195; See also SAMATHA & VIPASSANĀ). Both *samatha* and *vipassanā* are required for progress from right view to full liberation (M. I, 294 and A. III, 21); hence both are recommended to a disciple in higher training for further progress (M. I, 494). A whole range of defilements can be overcome by developing both (A. I, 100); in fact *samatha* and *vipassanā* are of such importance that a monk, who realizes that they have not been developed, should make a determined effort in regard to both (M. III, 297).

The need to develop both *samatha* and *vipassanā* is taken up in more detail in a discourse in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, which describes altogether four types of practitioners, distinguished according to whether they have been able to gain:

- internal tranquillity of the mind, *cetosamatha*,
- higher wisdom through insight into phenomena, *adhipaññādharmavipassanā*,
- neither of the two,
- both.

According to this discourses, in case only one of the two or even none of them has been developed, one should search for instructions on how to develop the lacking quality. In its description of the inquiry that someone who lacks one or both puts to an experienced practitioner for guidance, this discourse indicates that 'internal tranquillity of the mind' stands for capability at concentrating the mind. In order to develop 'higher wisdom through insight into phenomena', one should know how formations should be regarded, comprehended and seen with insight, *evaṃ saikkhārā daṭṭhabbā... sammāsittabbā... vipassitabbā* (A. II, 94). Besides providing a definition of the contents of *vipassanā*, this discourse again underlines that both *samatha* and *vipassanā* need to be developed for

progress towards the destruction of the influxes, *āsavakkhaya*. The predicament of one who lacks both is comparable to someone whose head is on fire (*A. V, 99*), that is, something needs to be done immediately. Lacking only higher wisdom through insight into phenomena is still as detrimental as the predicament of a four-footed animal that has one of its legs crippled (*A. IV, 360*).

Though there is a time for the practice of tranquillity and there is a time for developing insight, *kālena samatho, kālena vipassanā*, only developing both at the proper time, together with hearing the teachings and discussing them, will gradually lead to the destruction of the influxes (*A. II, 140*). Once both have been developed, progress becomes natural, comparable to rainwater that fills the rivulets and rivers and gradually reaches the ocean. According to the *Yuganaddha Sutta*, progress to awakening can be undertaken by placing *samatha* first and then developing *vipassanā*, or else one might first engage in *vipassanā* and subsequently turn to *samatha*, or both may be developed in conjunction (*A. II, 157*; see in more detail YUGANADDHA SUTTA). That is, *samatha* and *vipassanā* can be combined in various ways and there seems to be no need to assume that one must invariably precede the other. At the same time, however, it is quite evident that this discourse does not envisage an approach to awakening that relies on only one of these two, practiced at the cost of excluding the other.

With the commentaries, however, a different perspective emerges, where *vipassanā* is perceived as something that can be developed on its own. Thus the *Visuddhimagga* refers to those whose vehicle is pure insight, *suddhaviṣṣanāyānika*, in contrast to those whose vehicle is tranquillity, *samathayānika* (*Vism. 588*). Alternatively, the same concept is also referred to in terms of practitioners of dry insight, *sukkhaviṣṣaka* (*Vism. 666*). The commentaries then gloss a reference to those who are liberated by wisdom, *paññāvimuttā* (see in more detail VIMUTTI), as implying that liberation has been reached without *jhānas* by dry insight alone, *nijjhānakā sukkhaviṣṣakā paññāmatteva vimuttā* (*SA. II, 127*). Elsewhere, the commentaries mention those who have destroyed the influxes through dry insight, *sukkhaviṣṣakakhināsava* (*MA. IV, 54*). Thus, "at some point in the evolution of Theravāda meditation theory, the practice of *vipassanā* came to be regarded

virtually as an autonomous means to realization that could be undertaken quite independently of any supporting base of *samatha*".⁷

This position does not seem to receive support from the discourses. A particularly explicit statement can be found in the *Mahāmāluṅkyā Sutta*, according to which it is impossible to overcome the five higher fetters without undertaking the path required for such overcoming, and this path is contemplation of a *jhāna* from an insight perspective (*M. I, 435*). Without having attained a *jhāna*, such contemplation can obviously not be undertaken. The need for the *jhānas* in order to be able to reach full awakening is also stipulated in the *Sekha Sutta* (*M. I, 357*), and in the opening section of a discourses that describes various approaches to full awakening, which are invariably based on the experience of a *jhāna* or an immaterial attainment (*A. IV, 422*). The same requirement also seems to apply to the case of non-return, as according to the discourses non-returners have fulfilled the development of concentration, *samādhismiṃ paripūrakārī*, to a degree similar to that of *arahants* (*A. I, 232* and *A. IV, 380*).

The fulfilment of concentration is, however, according to the same discourses, not necessarily a quality of a once-returner. In fact, the concept of a once-returner is based on the principle that such a person will return once more to 'this world', *sakid eva imaṃ lokaṃ āgantvā* (e.g. *M. I, 226*). If *jhāna* abilities were required to reach this level of awakening, any once-returner should also be a *jhāna* attainer, and due to that should not be reborn in 'this world', the *kāmaloka*, but instead take rebirth in the higher Brahma realms. That once-returners do indeed come back to 'this world' is documented in passages that report the rebirth of once-returners in the Tusita Heaven (*A. III, 348* and *A. V, 138*). Hence, although some once-returners may have attained *jhāna*, this does not appear to have been the rule.

The same principle would then apply to stream-enterers. In fact, the most advanced out of a listing of stream-enterers, the *ekabījī*, is destined to be reborn in the human world (*A. IV, 380*). Though in order to be able to reach any level of realization the mind needs to be temporarily free from the five hindrances (*A. III, 63*), such removal of the hindrances would be possible without *jhāna* attainment. This can be seen in the standard descriptions of the attainment of stream-entry during a gradual discourse given by the Buddha,

which invariably mentions the absence of the hindrances (e.g. *M. I*, 380: *vinīvaraṇacitta*), even though while listening to a discourse one would not be entering *jhānic* absorption.

Thus from the perspective of the discourses it seems that a dry insight approach, which dispenses with the formal development of mental tranquillity up to the level of at least the first *jhāna*, may not be capable of leading to full liberation, but might suffice only for stream-entry and once-return. In fact, if uñ *jhāna* were simply irrelevant to the progress of insight up to full awakening, it would be difficult to understand why its practice and development has been given so much attention in the discourses, and why the four *jhānas* are included under the heading of right concentration as one of the factors of the noble eightfold path. Nevertheless, the dry insight approach has had a considerable influence on modern day *vipassanā* meditation practice in the Theravāda tradition.

Vipassanā Meditation in Modern Times

Whereas in the thought world of the early discourses *vipassanā* stands predominantly for a quality to be developed, in modern day usage *vipassanā* mostly represents a particular form of meditation, usually a specific technique whose practice marks off one *vipassanā* meditation tradition from another. Most of these *vipassanā* traditions have their origin in Burma, and in what follows three traditions that are particularly popular will be briefly surveyed.⁸

The approach to the development of *vipassanā* taught by the Burmese monk Mahasi Sayadaw (1904-1982) follows the commentarial notion of dry insight, in that it dispenses with the formal development of *samatha*.⁹ The main technique in this tradition is to apply mental labelling to anything experienced throughout meditation practice in order to sharpen clear recognition. During sitting meditation the practitioner observes the 'rising' and 'falling' motion of the abdomen, making a mental label of these movements any of any other occurrence that may happen; while during walking meditation the same mental labelling is used to develop distinct awareness of several parts of each step, such as 'lifting' of the foot, 'putting' it, etc. Sustained practice eventually uncovers the mental intentions that precede any activity. Becoming progressively aware of increasingly

subtler aspects of body and mind, practice leads to a sharpened awareness of the impermanent, unsatisfactory and insubstantial nature of all facets of experience.

The *vipassanā* meditation taught by the Indian S.N. Goenka (1924), a disciple of the Burmese meditation teacher U Ba Khin (1899-1971), centres on observation of *vedanā*. The formal practice of contemplating bodily sensations is based on the previous development of a foundation in *samatha* through mindfulness of breathing, to which in a standard ten days retreat the first three days of practice are dedicated. Subsequently, *vedanās* are observed through a continuous scanning of the body in the up and downward directions, leading to a penetrative awareness of their changing nature at increasingly subtler levels. Eventually, such practice leads to an awareness of the entire spectrum of body and mind in a constantly changing flux, thereby revealing its lack of inherent satisfaction and its insubstantial nature.

The method taught by the Burmese monk Pa Auk Sayadaw (1934) gives considerable room to the development of concentration, in fact ideally a practitioner should develop all four *jhānas* with the help of each of the meditation subjects listed in the *Visuddhimagga*. The insight approach in this tradition is based on surveying the body from the perspective of the four elements, recognizable by the experience of hardness, heaviness, warmth or motion etc. At first these qualities are identified in relation to particular parts of the body, but eventually are seen as existing in each atomic particle of the body. The subtle analysis undertaken in this manner is then extended to the mind, directing awareness to each aspect of the cognitive process and to discerning the conditions operative at the twelve stages of the scheme of dependent arising. Progress in this mode of practice will reveal the extent to which any aspect of the five aggregates of clinging is marked by the three characteristics.

Though these three traditions take different stances on the importance of concentration, and also approach the development of insight in different ways, they agree in employing the scheme of the insight-knowledges, *vipassana-ñāṇāni*, as the framework for evaluating the higher stages of *vipassanā* experience (See in more detail VIPASSANAÑĀṆA). The scheme of these insight-knowledges reflects in a more detailed

form the basic pattern described in the beginning section of the present article, where based on an appreciation of the conditionality of experience the development of penetrative awareness of impermanence leads over to insight into *dukkha*, which in turn issues in realization of *anattā*, thereby paving the way for progress towards liberation.

"One who meditates continuously,
endowed with subtle view and insight,
delighting in the destruction of clinging,
him they call 'a true man'."

*taṃ jhāyinaṃ sātātikaṃ,
sukhumadīṭṭhivipassakaṃ,
upādānakkhayārāmaṃ,
āhu 'sappuriso' iti* (S. II, 232 ; It. 74 and Thag. 1012)

Anālayo

References

- 1 Nanayakkara 1993: "Insight", *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, 5.4: 580 explains that "insight is not knowledge in the general sense, but penetrative knowledge acquired as a result of not looking at but looking *through* things".
- 2 The close relation between insight and wisdom is reflected in passages that combine both terms, such as *tato paññā vipassati* (A. II, 70); or *paññāyathamaṃ vipassati* (A. II, 23; A. IV, 3 and A. IV 4).
- 3 In fact the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*'s definition of *vipassanā* begins by listing 'wisdom' and 'knowing', after which it mentions the activities of 'investigating' and 'inspecting', followed by the 'investigation-of-dhammas awakening factor', *Dhs.* 16 (§ 55): *yā tasmīṃ samaye paññā pajānanā vicayo pavicayo dhammavicayo ... ayaṃ tasmīṃ samaye vipassanā hoti*.
- 4 Another discourse that makes the same recommendation additionally mentions delight in seclusion, *paṭisallānārāma*, as another supportive factor for progress to non-return or full liberation (It. 39).
- 5 According to the commentary (MA. V, 1), the term *bhaddekaratta* represents "one fortunate attachment", *bhaddaka ekaratta*. My translation follows the alternative sense of *ratta* as "night" (Skt. *rātra*), which is supported by the Sanskrit fragment readings *bhadragarātrīya* (fragment SHT III 816 V3 in Waldschmidt 1971: *Sanskrihandschriften aus den Turfanfunden*, Wiebaden, 3:32); *bhadrakarātrīyaḥ* (fragment 3b3 in Minayeff 1983: *Buddhist Texts from Kashgar and Nepal*, Delhi, 243), and by the Tibetan translation as *mtshan mo bzang po* (Peking edition *mdo shu* 171a7)
- 6 While the Pāli versions cover only three cases (knowing/seeing: neither inside nor outside, not inside but outside, both inside and outside), a counterpart in *Udānavarga* verses 22.13-16 has a complete set of four cases, as it also treats the case of knowing/seeing inside but not outside, *ādhyātmaṃ tu prajānāti, bahirdhā ca na śyati*.
- 7 Bodhi 2007: "The Susīma-sutta and the Wisdom-Liberated Arahant", *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, 29:63.
- 8 Restrictions of space do not allow a treatment of other meditation traditions or of the approaches to insight developed in the forest traditions. A survey of modern *Vipassanā* meditation that covers a broader range of teachers can be found in Kornfield 1988: *Living Buddhist Masters*, Kandy; King 1992: *Theravāda Meditation*, Delhi, 123-144 and Solé-Leris 1992: *Tranquillity & Insight*, Kandy, 125-153; see also Cousins 1996: "The Origins of Insight Meditation", *Buddhist Forum*, 4: 35-57.
- 9 This led to considerable criticism by those who affirm the need of *jhāna* abilities before being able to successfully develop *vipassanā*, see *Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Criticism and Replies*, Rangoon 1979. Perhaps in reaction to such criticism, the Mahasi tradition has developed the idea of *vipassanā jhānas*, representative of deeper stages of insight meditation, cf. e.g. Mahasi 1981: *The Wheel of Dhamma*, Rangoon, 98, or in more detail U Paṇḍita 1993: *In This Very Life*, Kandy, 180ff.

VIPASSANĀÑĀNA, "insight knowledge", refers to a key experience to be encountered during the progress of insight meditation.¹ A survey of the development of insight, given in the *Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha*, lists altogether ten such insight knowledges.² Other listings count more knowledges, due to taking more explicitly into account that the ten insight knowledges set in after the "knowledge of de-limitating name-and-form" and the "knowledge of discerning conditions",

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