

What Vipassana Is

Foreword

For more than two decades, Tharmanay

1. The Definition of Vipassana:

Vipassana means seeing psycho-physical phenomena in a special way, that is seeing the impermanence of things and so on. There are ten stages of vipassana beginning with *sammasana* (the insight that discerns impermanence, etc.) and culminating in conformity insight (*anuloma* - the insight previous to *magga-phala* enlightenment). Two foundational insights, *nama-rupa-pariccheda* and *paccaya-pariggaha*, respectively, discern mentality and physicality and discern the conditionality of these phenomena, but not their impermanence and so on. Thus these two are not considered as vipassana insights.

Actually, these two insights can also be considered Vipassana in the figurative sense of leading to that end (*phalupacara*), as they are the basis for the attainment result in all the ten stages of insights. The discernment of mentality and physicality and the discernment of conditionality can also be considered vipassana in accord with the definition given by the Pali text called *Petako-padesa*, “Here, *vi* is just a decorative prefix, having no meaning, and *passana* means to see psycho-physical phenomena.” In this way, all the insights including these two initial ones can be called vipassana because they all see psycho-physical phenomena in terms of their characteristics, function, manifestation or approximate cause. So, vipassana can mean seeing or the insight that sees, observation or the insight that observes.

(Vipassana Guideline)

2. Concepts Conducive to The Practice:

Names or terms used in the vipassana practice such as ‘seeing,’ etc. - although they

observe psycho-physical phenomena directly. Conceptual forms will be seen only if we want to see them, otherwise, we will find absolute reality or *paramattha*, which simply refers to phenomena that can be directly experienced. At this point, our own experience proves the truth of the saying, “Where there is a concept, there is no reality; where there is reality, there is no concept.”

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4. Even the Buddha-to-be

Even the Buddha-to-be was not assured of his wholesome rebirth although he had previously attained insight into equanimity towards formations (*sankhar-upekkha-nana*), which is much higher than the purification through removal of skeptical doubt (*kankha-vitarana-visuddhi*). Let alone those who have obtained just *kankha-vitarana-visuddhi*, in which the mental faculties of faith, energy and so on are much weaker than in *sankhar-upekkha-nana*.

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are terms that indicate objects that really are (*tajja-pannatti*) - are likely to draw your attention to the conceptual names before the practice matures. At the beginning of practice, however, your mind can concentrate accurately on an object only when it is labeled properly. When concentration becomes stronger, the meditator can directly experience the true nature of mind and body, and penetrate into the unbroken process of psycho-physical phenomena until you see them arising and passing away moment by moment. When your practice gains momentum, every time you note an object, you can go beyond the conceptual names to directly experience psycho-physical phenomena.

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3. Concept and Reality

Before our practice is mature, there is the tendency to perceive the conceptual form or shape of an object when we note seeing, hearing, or touching. However, once the practice is mature, we can go beyond form and

5. Not Just For Chanting

The practice of noting the three characteristics of phenomena does not refer to simply chanting or intellectualizing, i.e. just saying or thinking “impermanence, suffering and non-self.” As a matter of fact, ‘noting’ refers to directly experiencing the psycho-physical phenomena as impermanent, suffering and egoless by observing them the moment they take place (*paccakkha*). Based on one’s own experience one can then infer the truth of these characteristics (*anumana*).

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6. Only Omniscience

No one but the Omniscient Buddha can know exactly how many (*cakkhudasakas*) there are in each moment of seeing, and how many (*kaya-dasakas*) there are in each moment of touching.

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7. To See the Passing Away

Most meditators clearly see the rapid arising and passing away of psycho-physical phenomena at the stage of insight referred to as *udaya-bbaya-nana*. However, those whose spiritual faculties are not yet strong, this may be experienced only at the higher level of the insight. For those with more mature spiritual abilities, they may begin to experience this even at the lower level of insight that discerns impermanence, etc. (*sammasana-nana*).

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8. The Bright Light

(At the early state of *udaya-bbaya-nana*, many practitioners experience bright lights.) Sometimes, you may see things even at night as clearly as in daylight, depending on the range of the light. You may experience the light clearly and remarkably in the daytime, too. Through this light, you may even see things that are covered or far away as if they were right under your nose.

Here, one might ask, “Does one see

the bright light with the naked eye or in one’s mind’s eye?” According to the Maha-tika, the light is seen in the mind’s eye, which can be compared to the divine eye. However, you may also be able to see it with the naked eye at times. In any case, you can decide this based on your own experience.

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9. Blackout Intervals

(A yogi is likely to experience blackout intervals, that is, somewhat like being unconscious.) You may experience it for a few moments while the practice is in a favorable condition especially during the states of *bhanga* and higher insights. After this interval, the practice continues on again as usual. It should be explained as *piti* (spiritual ecstasy or rapture) that results from powerful insights. Moreover, powerful tranquility (*passaddhi*) can also lead to such interval of blacking out, (which involves neither thinking nor observing, but somewhat like being unconscious). When you awake, you will find your practice

continuing on as good as usual. *Tatramajjhata-upekkha* (spiritual equanimity) also tends to result in such blackout intervals at times when the practice is going easily and smoothly.

Sometimes, the practice is going smoothly, but meditative objects and moments of noting consciousness become more and more subtle until they all fade away. From time to time, it may result in a long state of sleepiness. After one awakes, however, the practice continues on again without any drowsiness. This state should be attributed to sloth and torpor that take place when your energy gets low and concentration is still strong. You can overcome these states of blackout, which are caused by rapture, tranquility, equanimity or sloth and torpor, by noting more objects, or by noting more attentively.

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10. Insight into Dissolution

When you can continually see the noted

objects and noting minds themselves passing away one by one, you are said to have obtained the insight called *Bhanga-nana*. Here, dissolution means ceasing or disappearing, not breaking into pieces.

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11. To Feel

(At the stage of *Bhanga-nana*,) a terror of sorts becomes evident, unlike the two lower insights of *udaya-bbaya* and *bhanga* enthusiasm predominates. Here, the fearful feeling is not really due to fear, but simply from being fed up with phenomena, once you realize their true nature.

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12. Three Similar Insights

The three insights *bhaya*, *adinava*, and *nibbida* all see the defects of phenomena, but differ in terms of their level of maturity, being low, medium, and high respectively. That is why if you reach *bhaya*, the other two will

soon follow. Alternatively, you may find only one or two of them to be evident in your experience.

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13. The Difference

At the stage of the insight called *patisankha-nana*, you can experience a particular unpleasant sensation segment by segment every time you note it. This is not yet possible at *sammasana-nana*, and that is the difference between the two insights.

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14. One Insight Of Two Stages

The insight *Udaya-bbaya-nana* is of two stages, immature and mature, which occur before and after the insight is purified of the ten kinds of interference, respectively. In the same way, at the early stage of this *Patisankha-nana*, you may feel dissatisfied with your practice, due to the evidence of unpleasant sensations, but later, in the more mature stage, the practice will go smoothly with

16. Impermanence

Impermanence cannot be known just by seeing phenomena arising or coming into existence. You may, however, reflect on the fact that whatever arises will vanish. So, at the moment of arising or the moment of existing, impermanence is not obvious. It is only when one can see the phenomena passing away, that impermanence becomes obvious. That is why the commentary says that the impermanence reaches to its peak at the moment of disappearing.

Without experiencing psycho-physical phenomena in terms of their individual characteristics, you just see conceptual manner of impermanence, and your seeing cannot be said to be *anicca-nupassana* (insight into impermanence). As a matter of fact, only the insight into the true characteristics of mind and body, together with the discernment of mentality and physicality passing away, can be honored as the real insight into impermanence (*anicca-nupassana*.)

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no unpleasant sensations, and feel satisfactory. *Bhanga-nana* is likewise of two stages, immature and mature.

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15. The Same Insight, Called by Three Names

The three insights *muncitu-kamyata-nana*, *patisankha-nana* and *sankhar-upekkha-nana*, differ in terms of their maturity, being low, medium, and high, respectively. Actually, they are the same in terms of realization: that objects and awareness of these objects are all just conditioned phenomena. That is why it is said in the Pali text *Patisambhida-magga*:

“Being the same in terms of their characteristic, the insight called *sankhar-upekkha-nana* can be achieved shortly after the other two, *muncitu-kamyata-nana* and *patisankha-nana*.”

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17. Three Types of Seeing:

Anupassana means to see mind and body in terms of their individual characteristics. However, two initial insights, *nama-rupa-pariccheda* and *paccya-pariggaha*, cannot be called *anicca-nupassana*, etc., because they just see only mind and body, but not their impermanence, suffering and egolessness. Only at the stages of *sammasana* and higher insights, you can see psycho-physical phenomena to be impermanent, suffering and egoless. Thus, if you see them passing away, it is *anicca-nupassana*; distressing, *dukkha-nupassana*, and following nobody's will, *anatta-nupassana*. Each *anupassana* cannot be called by the names of the other two.

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18. To be Experienced; to be Realized

Psycho-physical phenomena - which are impermanent, suffering and egoless - are to be experienced (*nata-parinna*). The manner of impermanence, suffering, and

egolessness are to be realized (*tirana-parinna*).

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19. Unbroken Process

Santati-ghana refers to the unbroken process of mind and body, which is flowing so incessantly that it seems to be an everlasting continuity. Before a person has practiced deeply, this *sanatati-ghana*, this apparent continuity, conceals the arising and passing way of mind and body. As long as this *santati-ghana* conceals *anicca*, mind and body appear to be permanent. One can overcome this illusion only by being mindful of the psycho-physical process, which is arising and passing away from moment to moment.

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20. Empirical Knowledge

Simply chanting, “*anicca, dukkha* and *anatta*,” or reflecting on these characteristics, will not work. What really matters is the discernment of mind and body arising and

22. The Defilements Overcome By Vipassana

(The insight into impermanence helps to overcome the delusory sense of permanence, and its constituent defilements. Here, one might ask which defilements are to be overcome: present, past or future.) If you fail to see psycho-physical phenomena arising and passing away at the six sense doors, it will result in the illusion of permanence, along with its constituent mental defilements. These defilements are not past, as they never took place; nor are they future, as their future occurrence is uncertain; nor are they evidenced anywhere in the present. Actually, they are just potential, and cannot be described temporally.

Potential defilements, belonging to non-practitioners and those in training, are of two kinds. The first kind lies dormant in the mental process (*santana-nusaya*), and the second type lies in sense-objects (*arammana-nusaya*). The first kind can become active any time conditions are favorable, having not yet been eradicated by the path consciousness of

passing away, which occurs through noting these phenomena the moment they take place. If you try to understand *anicca*, etc., by chanting the words or reflecting on the concepts, it may well result in conceptual knowledge (*sanna*), which you may then confuse with empirical awareness (*panna*).

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21. Real Insight Into Impermanence

Seeing phenomena arising and passing away destroys the illusory sense of permanent solidity, *santati-ghana*. When you overcome this illusion, impermanence (*anicca*) becomes spontaneously obvious in one of two ways: either by seeing phenomena arising, existing, and passing away; or by seeing them passing away immediately after arising. Seeing *anicca* this way, realizing mind and body to be impermanent, is true *anicca-nupassana* (the insight into impermanence).

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enlightenment. The second, lying dormant in sense-objects that are unobserved, can become activated anytime the objects are recalled. This second one is also called *arammana-dhiggahit-uppanna*, which is the kind of defilement that the vipassana can overcome.

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23. If You See Real Anicca

If you correctly see phenomena arising and passing away, you will have no more illusion that any phenomenon is pleasant or belongs to a self.

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24. Conceptual Insights

Breaking of an earthen pot, for example, is not *anicca* impermanence because it is concerned with the conceptual form of the pot (*pannatti*), and has nothing to do mental or physical phenomena that can be directly experienced (*paramattha*). So it is just conceptual or artificial *anicca*. The same

thing is true of a person's death. Non-practitioners cannot be said to experience suffering in the ultimate sense when they suffer a thorn in their flesh or an ulcer, for instance. This is because their experience of suffering is tied up with the concept of a person, 'I feel pain'. At such times, the suffering experienced is not that related to ultimate psycho-physical phenomena, which can only be experienced by means of *vipassana* insight. So, the suffering experienced is not *dukkha* in the ultimate sense, but rather a conceptual kind of *dukkha*. That is why intellectuals at the Buddha's time such as Sarabhangha and his contemporaries, having investigated only this conceptual type of *anicca* and *dukkha*, could not realize real *anatta*.

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26. Inferential Knowledge

Seeing a present object passing away is empirical knowledge of *anicca* (*paccakkha anicca-nupassana*). This may be followed by inferential knowledge (*anumana anicca-*

object you note, moment to moment. This concentration is called *khanika samadhi*, or momentary concentration.

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29. Concentration and Enlightenment

One using the tranquility vehicle, *samatha-yanika*, must develop preliminary concentration or *jhanic* concentration to reach the *magga-phala* enlightenments. Otherwise, no enlightenment can take place. For one using bare insight as the vehicle, *vipassana-yanika*, momentary concentration is requisite in order enlightenment. Development of the three *anupassanas* (the insight into impermanence, etc.), on other hand, is necessary on both of these paths, for without these insights there is no way that the *magga-phala* enlightenment can occur.

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nupassana) when you realize intellectually that any phenomena that arise in the universe, whether past, future, or external, are impermanent.

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27. No Other

There should be no doubt that only the four establishments of mindfulness - on the body, sensation, mind, and mental objects - can properly be called the practice of four noble truths (*catu-sacca-kammattana*), the development of insight (*vipassana-bhavana*), or the practice preliminary to the noble path (*pubba-bhaga-magga*). No other practice can lead to *nibbana*.

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28. Momentary Concentration

When faith, effort, mindfulness, concentration, and knowledge progress in balance with each other, you will be able to observe objects continuously, without any hindrance. The mind becomes concentrated on every

30. Vipassana Insight of Three Levels

Advanced insights start from the insight into dissolution, *bhanga-nana*. This insight is accompanied by a high level of *khanika-samadhi* (momentary concentration). The intermeditate level of this concentration begins with the insight into arising and passing (*udaya-bbaya-nana*), and the foundational level from the insight discerning mentality and physicality (*nama-rupa-pariccheda-nana*).

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31. Every Observation is Wholesome

When you observe walking, for example, this observation involves the insight into psycho-physical phenomena, and arouses wholesome mental states such as faith, non-attachment, non-aversion, and so on. These are all meritorious and wholesome. Therefore, every observation results in *vipassana* wholesomeness. In the same way, when you prac-