

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT INSIGHT MEDITATION (VIPASSANA)

By U Silananda

1. Where does the practice of Vipassana come from?

Vipassana meditation chiefly comes from the tradition of Theravada Buddhism. There are two major divisions of Buddhism in the world today—Mahayana and Theravada. Mahayana tradition developed as Buddhism spread to the Northern Asian countries of Tibet, China, Japan, etc. Theravada tradition stay in Southern Asian and spread to Sri Lanka, Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, Cambodia and Laos.

2. What does Vipassana mean?

The word Vipassana is composed of two parts—'Vi' which means in various ways and 'passana' which means seeing. So Vipassana means seeing in various ways.

3. What can Vipassana meditation do for me?

The ultimate purpose of Vipassana is to eradicate mental impurities from your mind altogether. Before that stage, there are benefits of tranquillity, peace of mind and the ability to accept things as they come. Vipassana helps you to see things as they truly are, not as they appear to be. Things appear to be permanent, desirable and substantial, but actually they are not. When you practice Vipassana meditation, you will see for yourself the arising and disappearing of mental and physical phenomena. And you will have a clearer comprehension of what is going on in your mind and body. You will be able to accept things as they come to you with less agitation and deal with situations in a more positive way.

4. Who needs Vipassana meditation?

Vipassana meditation is for the cure of diseases of the mind in the form of mental defilements like greed, hatred, delusion, etc. We all have these mental diseases almost all the time. In order to at least control them we need Vipassana meditation. So Vipassana is for all people.

5. When Vipassana is needed?

Since mental impurities are almost always with us, we need Vipassana meditation almost all of the time. There is no fixed time for the practice of Vipassana. Morning, during the day, before bed...anytime is the time for Vipassana. And Vipassana may be practiced at any age.

6. Do I have to be a Buddhist to practice Vipassana?

There is nothing which can be called particularly Buddhist in Vipassana meditation. There is no element of religion. It is a scientific investigation and examination of yourself. You just observe closely everything that comes to you and is happening to you in your body and mind at the present moment.

7. Is Vipassana meditation difficult to practice?

Yes and no. Meditation involves control of mind and mind is most unruly. You come to know this personally when you practice meditation. So it is not easy to practice Vipassana meditation because it is not easy to control the mind...to keep the mind on one and the same object. In another way, Vipassana meditation is easy to practice. There are no elaborate rituals to follow or much to learn before being able to practice. You just sit, watch yourself and focus your mind on the object. Just that.

8. Are there prerequisites for Vipassana meditation?

You need a genuine desire to practice and a readiness to follow the instructions closely because if you do not practice properly, you will not get the full benefits of meditation. You also need to have confidence in the practice and the teacher and an open mind to try it and see what it can do for you. Patience is also very important. When you meditate, you have to be patient with many things. There will be distractions, sensations in your body, and you will be dealing with your mind. You must persevere when these distractions come and you cannot concentrate on the object. Also in Theravada Buddhism, purity of morals is emphasized because without pure moral conduct, there cannot be good concentration or peace of mind. Thoughts of something wrong you have done will come to you again and again, especially when you are in meditation, and it will be more difficult for you to get good concentration.

9. What gadgets do I need for Vipassana meditation?

Actually, you do not need anything at all. All you need is a place where you can sit down, close your eyes and focus on the object. But I am not against using cushions, benches or even chairs and other things because in order to practice meditation, you need some degree of comfort. But while you do not need to inflict pain on yourself unnecessarily, you should take care not to be too much attached to comfort or sloth and torpor will come to you and you will go to sleep.

10. In what posture can Vipassana be practiced?

Vipassana meditation can and should be practiced in all postures—sitting, standing, walking, and lying down. Whatever you do, you should be mindful.

11. Is cross-legged posture essential in sitting meditation?

Although it is customary and traditional to sit on the floor to practice meditation, it is not essential in Vipassana. If you cannot sit cross-legged, you may sit any way you like as long as it is comfortable for you. What matters in Vipassana is just the awareness, not the posture.

12. Must my eyes be closed when meditating?

It is better to keep your eyes closed, but you may leave them open if you like, whichever is least distracting for you. But if you happen to look at anything, then you have to be aware of the "looking" and note it. The important thing is to have good concentration.

13. What should I do with my hands when meditating?

There are no strict rules as to how to put your hands in Vipassana. You may put them any way you like. The most usual position is on the lap one over the other. Or you may put them on your knees.

14. How long must I practice at a time?

That depends on how much time you can spend for meditation. There is no fixed rule. It is good if you can sit for one hour. But if you cannot sit for one hour at the beginning, then you may sit half an hour or fifteen minutes, and little by little extend the time, until you can sit longer. And if you can sit for more than an hour without much discomfort, you may sit two or three hours if you like.

15. Should I practice every day?

We eat every day, care for our bodies every day. Since we almost always have mental defilements with us we need to cleanse our minds every day. I recommend the morning hours because then your body and mind are rested and you are away from the worries of the previous day. It would also do you good to meditate in the evening before you go to bed. But you may practice any time. And if you make it a habit to practice every day, it will be good and beneficial to you.

16. Do I need a teacher to practice Vipassana?

This is important. Whenever you learn a new skill, you need a teacher. With the advice of a teacher, you learn quicker and you cannot go wrong. You need a teacher who is competent to give instructions, correct your mistakes, and give guidance when you have trouble in the course of meditation. There are some meditators who think they are making progress while in reality, they

are not making progress at all. And sometimes they are making progress but think they are not doing well. Only the teacher can tell, and so at such a time he or she is indispensable. If you cannot find a teacher, you may rely on books, although no book can entirely take the place of a teacher. You may be able to do fairly well by reading the instructions and following them carefully. But even then, you may have need for discussion with a teacher occasionally.

17. Can Vipassana be applied to daily life?

You can have awareness of whatever you do whether you are working, walking, doing, etc. It will not be as intense as in meditation or during a retreat, but a more general awareness. And when you apply mindfulness to problems in your life, you will be able to deal with them more effectively.

18. What is a meditation retreat?

A meditation retreat provides an opportunity to deepen meditation practice in a supportive environment with the guidance of an experienced teacher. Everything you do at a retreat becomes the object of meditation.

19. What happens at a retreat?

A retreat day consists of alternate periods of sitting and walking meditation, a nightly lecture and personal interviews with the teacher. Continuity of practice is developed by bringing mindfulness to all other activities throughout the day as well. Noble silence is observed during the retreat. Retreats can last for one day, a weekend, a week or longer.

20. Why should I go to a meditation retreat?

The intensive practice of a retreat is very beneficial for developing good concentration and quieting the mind. Since concentration is essential for penetrative wisdom to arise, a meditation retreat gives you the best possible opportunity to be able to experience for yourself the true nature of reality.