

Samādhi and Vipassanā: Two Interdependent Systems of Buddhist Meditation

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Abstract

Human desires and worldly pursuits are sources of suffering for individuals and society. The Buddha, time and again, taught that our freedom lies in our hands, more specifically in the boundaries of our minds. The heart of Buddhist practice to achieve freedom is a life of ethical conduct (*sīla*) and the practice of concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*). The two meditation techniques to achieve concentration and wisdom are *samatha* and *vipassanā* meditation. Although in Western culture, they are often separated by the popular focus on mindfulness or concentration meditation mainly, these two meditation techniques are not two separate methods. In Buddhist training for freedom, they form two interrelated parts of a whole, both crucial to attaining complete liberation. They are the methodical effort to tame and master the mind and to develop its capacity for calm and insight. *Vipassanā* is a path to wisdom, spiritual liberation, and the pursuit of freedom from the bondage of mental impurities, suffering, and repeated rebirth. Having achieved the foundational ground of concentration with *samatha* meditation, one can eradicate the deepest level of mental impurities with *vipassanā* meditation.

Keywords: *samādhi*, *vipassanā*, meditation, Buddhist training, spiritual freedom.

All sentient beings are united in their pursuit of freedom from suffering and the attainment of genuine happiness. This inherent urge is precisely what the Buddha makes the leading theme of his teaching, the cohesive source holding all the doctrines and practices together. The Buddha critically examines what constitutes suffering and the means to enduring happiness. Our assumptions regarding the source of happiness are often misleading, arising from a fixation on immediate gratification that overlooks our actions' more profound effects and long-term implications.

The Buddha identifies the cause of suffering in the boundaries of our minds. His teachings make clear that human desire and relentless pursuit are sources of suffering. Thus, following his enlightenment, the Buddha taught two main topics: suffering and the cessation of suffering. These two topics answer the following life questions: where does misery lie, how does it start, and how can misery be ended? His answers can be found in the Four Noble Truths: There is the misery of birth, illness, aging, and death. The root causes are ignorance, attachment, and greed. There is a way out of misery. Practicing the Noble Eightfold will lead to the eradication of suffering and the achievement of happiness.

At the heart of the Buddhist practice is what we call meditation, the methodical effort to tame and master the mind and to develop its capacity for calm and insight. The training begins with the undeveloped mind, unruly and clouded, afflicted by passions and defilements. It ends in the liberated mind, tamed, tranquil, bright, and luminous, freed from defilements and bondage to repeated existence (*samsāra*). The focus of Buddhist meditation is thus to be free from delusion, greed, hate, grasping, attachment, wrong view, and self, and most significantly to avoid future births in the lower realms of existence (*gati*; the animal, hungry ghost, or hell realms), that is to find freedom from the continual rounds of rebirth (Fronsdal, 1998, p. 6; Kala Acharya, 2016, ch. 3; Mahasi Sayadaw, 1979, p. 7).

TWO INTERRELATED SYSTEMS OF MEDITATION: SAMĀDHI AND VIPASSANĀ

The Buddhist practitioner, striving for liberation, begins cultivating wisdom by first securely establishing its roots—purified moral discipline and concentration by meditation (Gunaratana, 1980, p. 164). The methods of meditation taught by the Buddha fall into two interrelated systems (Gunaratana, 1980, p. 11; Bhikkhu Bodhi, in MN, p. 38). One is called the development of serenity (*samatha-bhāvanā*), also known as the development of deep concentration (*samādhi-bhāvanā*), and the other is the development of insight (*vipassanā-bhāvanā*) or wisdom (*paññā-bhāvanā*). These are the two branches of mental development. Serenity (*samatha*) is the concentrated, unshaken, peaceful state of mind (Nyanatiloka Thera, 2011, p. 36). Insight (*vipassanā*) is the intuitive wisdom into the impermanence, misery, and non-self (*anicca, dukkha, and anattā*) of all bodily and mental phenomena of existence, including the five aggregates (*khandas*). The Buddhist system relies on the practice of the four foundations, *Satipaṭṭhānā*, which is mindfulness meditation. This technique leads up to *samatha* and *vipassanā*, and deserves its own focus of attention due to its extensiveness. Therefore, in this work, we will firstly focus on the development of *samatha* and *vipassanā*.

The two interrelated systems of mediation, their qualities and results:

I. *Samatha-bhāvanā* or *Samādhi-bhāvanā*

- The development of serenity and strong mental concentration
- Calming, stabilizing, unified, and concentrated mind
- The single focus on one object forms a one-pointed concentration
- Aiming at the attainment of meditative absorption (*jhānas*)
- Provides the necessary foundation for gaining insights (*paññā*)
- Subjects of meditation are, e.g., mindfulness on the breath, recollection of the Buddha – loving-kindness or compassion:

II. *Vipassanā-bhāvanā* or *Paññā-bhāvanā*

- The capacity to remain balanced and unaffected by pleasure and pain, gain and loss, or any dualities: Equanimity (*upekkhā*).
- Purification of mental defilements such as anger, hatred, and greed
- Direct experiential insight (*paññā*) into the true nature of reality: impermanence, suffering, and non-self, leading to the dissolution of ignorance
- Insight into The Four Noble Truths
- The attainment of Path and Fruition knowledge: the stages of enlightenment known as Stream-entry, Once-returner, Non-returner, and Arahant, culminating in *Nibbāna* (liberation)
- Thus, the essential key to liberating insight (*paññā*) leading to the end of suffering

Meditation has been practiced in India since ancient times, even before the arrival of Buddha. There were many techniques of meditation prevailing during this time, most of the methods belonging to the development of serenity (*samatha*) or concentration (*samādhi*). Before his enlightenment, the Buddha mastered the two highest stages of *samādhi* meditation under the guidance of his early teachers. He found that on their own, *samādhi* meditation could lead to rebirth in higher, heavenly planes of rebirth, but not to the genuine liberation from suffering that he was searching for (MN 26.15-16, i 164: *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta*).

The generation of reacting, craving, aversion, or delusion, and suffering is yet maintained at the deep level of the mind. However, the unification of the mind induced by concentration contributes to clear understanding. The Buddha, therefore, incorporated the techniques of serenity meditation into his meditation system. He used meditation, aiming at concentration as a foundation and preparation for developing insight (*vipassanā*).

In the Buddha's mental training system, the role of concentration is subordinate to insight. Among the two, the cultivation of insight is considered by Buddhism to be the essential key to liberation. Insight is the crucial instrument needed to uproot the ignorance that causes suffering and *samsāric* bondage, and it's the method towards deliverance of the mind (Bhikkhu Bodhi, in MN, p. 38; Nyanatiloka Thera, 2011, p. 36). Insight meditation, *vipassanā*, is regarded as the distinctive discovery of the Buddha on the path to liberation. However, the growth of insight relies on a certain level of

concentration, and *samādhi* meditation facilitates achieving this; therefore, the cultivation of *samādhi* also claims an undeniable role in the Buddhist meditative practice. Concentration is the crucial foundation and precondition of insight by purifying the mind from impurities and inner obstacles of the five mental defilements or hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*). In sum, *samādhi* and *vipassanā* are two parts of the Buddhist meditation system rather than two separate methods. Combined, the two forms of meditation cooperate as two interrelated systems of meditation to make the mind a capable instrument for enlightenment.

Eradication of Mental Impurities to Achieve Freedom

The eradication of mental impurities or defilements to achieve liberation lies in the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga*), which belongs to the Fourth Noble Truth. The usual sequence of meditative training of the path proceeds from ethical conduct to concentration to wisdom. The Noble Eightfold Path refers to eight interrelated practices that are grouped into three trainings: the practice of ethics (*sīla*), the practice of concentration (*samādhi*), and the achievement of wisdom (*paññā*).

The first training is moral conduct (*sīla*)

➔ To refrain from unwholesome actions of body and speech through ethical conduct

The second training is concentration (*samādhi*)

➔ The practice of *samādhi* meditation

The third training is wisdom (*paññā*)

➔ The practice of *vipassanā* meditation

- SN 45.8: *Vibhaṅga Sutta*

What is causing us to experience suffering are the mental defilements, or mental impurities called *kilesas*. *Kilesas* are unwholesome qualities of the mind (Nyanatiloka Thera, 2011, p. 102), like greed, craving, attachment, hatred, ignorance, pride, or jealousy. The absence of mindfulness and meditation allows defilements to operate freely, day and night, in every sphere of activity (Mahā Boowa, 2012, p. 9). The three trainings or divisions of the Noble Eightfold Path (*sīla*, *samādhi*, *paññā*) serve as the countermeasure against the layering of the defilements in the mind. Thus, if we don't practice the threefold training of the Noble Eightfold Path throughout our lives, we will burden and harm the hearts and minds of many people.

The Buddha teaches that defilements are divided into three layers: the first stage of latent tendency, the second stage of manifestation, and the third stage of transgression (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 1998, p. 99). The deepest ground is the stage of latent tendency (*anusaya*); here, a defilement (ignorance) merely lies passive without revealing any activity. Ignorance is the chief generator of suffering. The second level is the stage of manifestation (*pariyutthana*), wherein a defilement triggered by a stimulus emerges as unwholesome mental activity: unwholesome thoughts, emotions, and volitions. Then, at the third stage, the defilement crosses beyond a mere mental manifestation to drive unwholesome action of the body or the speech. Thus, this level is called the stage of transgression (*vitikkama*).

Table 1

The three layers of the defilements (kilesas) and their countermeasure

<p>The Three Layers of Defilements (<i>kilesas</i>):</p>	<p>The Countermeasure: The Three Trainings</p>
<p>Third stage (upper level): The transgression (<i>vitikkama</i>) Defilements cross beyond a mere mental manifestation to drive unwholesome actions of body or speech.</p>	<p>Training of Moral Discipline (<i>Sīla</i>) Restraint of unwholesome actions of body and speech</p>

<p>Second stage (middle level): The manifestation (<i>pariyutthana</i>) Defilements triggered by stimulus emerge as unwholesome mental activity.</p>	<p>Training of Concentration (<i>Samādhi</i>) Mindfulness, <i>Samatha</i> meditation</p>
<p>First stage (deepest level): The latent tendency (<i>anusaya</i>) In the deepest grounded stage, defilements (ignorance) are passive, revealing no activity.</p>	<p>Training of Wisdom (<i>Paññā</i>) <i>Vipassanā</i> mediation</p>

To achieve complete liberation from the misery of cyclic rebirth, defilements must be eradicated. As the most fundamental defilement is ignorance (*avijjā*), the pathway to liberation revolves around cultivating its direct opposite, namely, wisdom (*paññā*). The statements in Table 1 show that to eradicate all three layers of defilements from the root, one needs to practice all three trainings without leaving any training aside or undeveloped.

As it is shown, even though concentration meditation is pursued to the extent of the highest level of complete absorption, it cannot yet touch the fundamental root of affliction, the level of latent tendencies, the root or chief defilement: *ignorance* (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 1998, p. 99). Thus, in addition to achieving a deep, concentrated, absorbed mind, our mental development requires the practice of wisdom (*paññā*). Wisdom *alone*, acquired through *vipassanā*, can eradicate the latent tendencies at their root. As ignorance (*avijjā*) is the fundamental element nurturing and sustaining other defilements, wisdom is the antidote to ignorance. These statements address the high importance of the practice of *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā*, with special emphasis on the acquisition of *paññā* through *vipassanā* meditation – if one aims at complete liberation.

Insight Meditation: Vipassanā

Vipassanā is essentially the unique contribution from the Buddha to the world’s spiritual heritage. This method involves training the mind, the most essential component of the entire human entity. The mind is the forerunner and primary source of all wholesome or unwholesome physical, verbal, or mental actions; therefore, it must be nurtured and developed to its highest potential. Meditation is a technique through which the *Dhamma* can be comprehended and the transcendent bliss of *Nibbāna* can be experienced. It is a valuable discipline on all experience levels, from the ordinary worldly concerns of day-to-day activities to the highest realization and transcendent spiritual attainment.

The Buddhist dictionary defines the Pāli term *vipassanā* as insight into phenomena' true existence, ‘seeing things as they truly are’ (Nyanatiloka Thera, 2011, p. 231). It is, therefore, that *vipassanā* is also called ‘insight meditation.’ Insight refers to the intuitive light flashing forth and revealing the truth. Perceiving reality accurately means to see all phenomena in terms of the three characteristics of all existence (*tilakkhaṇa*): the contemplation of the characteristics of phenomena as being impermanent (*anicca*), therefore, painful or suffering (*dukkha*), and as not-self (*anattā*). The practice of insight involves examining mental and physical phenomena to perceive directly these three marks.

Impermanence implies the continuous rising and passing away of all phenomena, showing their fleeting nature. When grasped at fleeting objects or impermanent phenomena, it means suffering; impermanence and suffering combined show the absence of self (Bhikkhu Bodhi, in MN, p. 40). Upon fully perceiving all things characterized by these three markings, the noble disciple ceases to identify with them and refrains from taking them to be mine, I, or self. Consequently, the disciple becomes disenchanted with all formations; there is no longer contentment, fulfillment, or happiness with any formation. When one becomes disenchanted and disillusioned, lust and attachment disappear, and one’s mind is liberated from the impurities.

CONCLUSION

In the Buddhist Gradual Training towards Liberation, there are two interrelated systems of meditation: *samādhi* and *vipassanā* meditation. *Samādhi* will lead to deep concentration and mental absorption (*jhāna*), while *vipassanā* will lead to liberating insight (*paññā*).

In the scriptures, the Buddha emphasizes the practice of *vipassanā*, as this technique leads to the purification of mind and matter and the profound understanding of reality, which will lead to liberation. The analytical method of *vipassanā*

emphasizes cultivating mindfulness and understanding of reality. The meditator achieves perfect identification with his being and experience through sustained awareness of the present reality of existence. He recognizes the truths of impermanence, change, unsatisfactoriness, and non-substantiality in all existing phenomena and intuitively comprehends the true nature of his internal experiences. All entities are characterized by emptiness; in the ultimate analysis, nothing should be considered 'me' or 'mine.' The meditator observes the wholesome and unwholesome mental activity rising and falling in his mind. The defilements, the virtuous qualities, the evil, the good, the ignoble, and the noble are 'observed' and recognized in their authentic nature. Once the realities are directly sensed and experienced, they can be further analyzed and investigated. Self-knowledge and a profound understanding of realities are achieved through persistent effort and perseverance in practicing insight meditation.

The Buddhist training in mental development aims to lessen the conceptualizing proclivities and move towards appreciating the 'true nature of things.' True understanding of reality must be based on profound personal experience through *vipassanā*. When one sees things as they truly are, one will no longer be a victim of delusion. With continued practice, one will move from pain and discomfort towards true happiness, joy, and harmony; the profound result of having removed disillusion. Emphatically did the Buddha proclaim again and again that man is in full possession of all the resources of self-established freedom; this is the great message of Lord Buddha.

Sabbe Sattā Sukhena Sampannā Hontu

May All Beings be Blessed with Happiness.

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