

Vipassana Meditation: reconnecting the mind-body matrix. - A personal perspective -

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Just recently, I experienced a ten-day residential course to learn the technique of Vipassana meditation. Like most people who embark on such an exploration, I was looking for something. What I found was a door into something more profound than I could have imagined. I feel so excited to have had this glimpse, but I have hesitated to write this article, realising the impossibility of adequately conveying such an experiential process neatly on two sides of A4! So in the true spirit of Vipassana, I will 'surrender' to the experience and just tell you what it was like for me.

A few years ago, the thought of staying silent for a ten-day retreat, with only two meals punctuating eleven hours of meditation each day, would have sounded extreme to me! But one's life experience and priorities change, and so three weeks ago I arrived at the Dhamma Dipa centre in Hereford having read the timetable, feeling vaguely confident 'I could do it' and at home with the following principals of Vipassana¹:

It is not:

- a rite or ritual based on blind faith
- an intellectual or a philosophical entertainment
- a rest cure, holiday, or an opportunity for socialising
- an escape from the trials and tribulations of everyday life

It is:

- a technique that will eradicate suffering
- an art of living that one can use to make positive contributions to society
- a method of mental purification which allows one to face life's tensions and problems in a calm and balanced way

The meaning of Vipassana is *to see things as they really are, not as they appear to be*. I had read that Vipassana meditation aims at the highest spiritual goals of total liberation and full enlightenment. As a by-product of mental purification, many psychosomatic diseases are eradicated. However, the purpose of this practice is never simply to cure physical disease¹. I did want to cure my painful knees though. (In the last couple of years the pain sometimes prevented me walking up and down stairs comfortably and I had finally been diagnosed with bilateral effusions of unknown aetiology).

Ignorance, aversion and craving are, according to this teaching, the three causes of unhappiness. With continued practice, the meditation releases the tensions developed in everyday life, opening the knots tied by old habit of reacting in an unbalanced way to both pleasant and unpleasant sensations². For the psychiatrist interested in psychological approaches for physical disease, and the potential healing aspects of altered states of consciousness, the Vipassana concept of the 'mind-body matrix' is intriguing.

On the first evening, after the Noble Silence began, we sat on our mats. I felt quite comfortable wrapped in a warm blanket on my cushion until my head started to pound. It was as though my head was in a vice and I felt sick. I could not do the meditation; I could not think my way through the pain, and I could not even 'not think!' I was just this huge mass of tension, not knowing what to do with myself. I lasted until

the meditation ended and fell into bed, feeling insecure in the knowledge that I had no Brufen with me and that the gong would be waking me at four o'clock.

I made it though - I got up and went into the hall. Ten minutes later, I ran out and threw up. No way, could I continue. I went back to bed. I had already failed on day one!

I woke with the next gong and realised I needed some food. The breakfast made me feel a little better (porridge and a choice of cereals, fruits, toast and spreads). I had a hot shower. The sun had risen and I went for a walk. The gong sounded again and I followed everyone into the hall.

For the first three days we were taught simple breathing meditation. This focussed our attention on the breath as it was in that moment, not how we wanted it to be. I followed the natural rhythm of each breath into my nostrils, feeling acutely the sensation around the edges. Sometimes I lost concentration. If I got annoyed with myself, my headache started, so I was gentle with myself. I thought about a lot of things. Some of them got me upset and then I noticed my breathing speeding up, reminding me to stop thinking and to just to follow the breath.

Each evening we watched a video of S.N. Goenke, the renowned teacher of this technique. Indian by descent and once a successful businessman, Mr. Goenke first learned the technique of Vipassana in Burma where it is an established part of Buddhist practice. Since then Mr. Goenke has been instrumental in spreading the teaching worldwide. His insights seemed always to be pertinent to exactly what I had just experienced that day, and I assumed that others found the same. Despite the Noble Silence, there was much laughter from all of us as we watched him speak. On that first day, he explained that when we sit, mind and body come together like cold water being thrown on hot coals to put out the fire. I remembered that initial sizzling of my 'mind-body matrix' and reflected on my apparent disconnection.

By day four, I was feeling calm and centred. Now the teaching of Vipassana itself was introduced. We were taught to scan our bodies, from the top of our head to the tip of our toes. We were required to notice any sensation, anything at all, and:

- Neither to like it or dislike it
- Neither to avoid it or to linger on it
- To remain aware and equanimous.

Over time my perception became more acute, detecting each and every sensation - sometimes gross pain, sometimes a change of temperature, or a subtle pressure. I understood that these sensations are the embodied aspects of our experiences and that reflection on them leads to deeper understanding. They become the substrate of consciousness and serve as important links between psyche and soma³.

Three times a day there would be a one-hour sitting of 'Strong Determination'. We were encouraged to remain physically still, with the mind maintaining equanimity. This practice enables the dissolution of deep dysfunctional patterns of the bodymind⁴, our sankharas ('mental defilements' - essentially either craving or aversion) and which are said to underpin emotional and physical pain.

In each of the evening discourses, we were urged to work hard in order to optimise our time and commitment to this practice. I felt determined to do this properly, and now that my head was settled, I had to deal with the pain in my knees. They hated staying in one position, bent or straight, and so I sat there, in a half lotus position, determined to get to the root of this dilemma. After thirty minutes the pain was unbearable and my knees were screaming to move. I was determined to remain still. I forgot about being equanimous and tears were streaming down my face. The words screamed out in my head, 'I've GOT to move!' I felt so desperate and trapped that I *had* to move, which was also agony. Defeated again! I had failed to complete

the hour of 'Strong Determination.' Ironically, having experienced that pain and finally moving, my knee joints were more flexible and some of the pain subsided.

I went to speak with the teacher and asked her whether the object of the meditation was to break through the pain barrier. She reminded me about the need to remain equanimous. Did I think I could find a different position? She gently told me to just try some more.

I did. Now I understood. I needed to remain equanimous as well as in full awareness of the pain. The key was not to generate more negativity. I had the image of a penitentiary self -flagellating monk, which through this new awareness felt so negative and self-defeating.

At the next sitting, my knee pain disappeared and remained absent for the rest of the course. But the new position presented me with another physical dilemma - back pain! I spoke to the teacher again, and with my new understanding explained that I didn't want to generate another sankhara by putting my back out. She gently suggested that was unlikely and to try again, as long as I did not think I was going to lose the balance of my mind. I smiled at myself. I hoped not.

By day six, time was beginning to lose its external essence. I had been sitting on my mat for several days now and was becoming posteriorly challenged on my allocated mat, (number 11). My mind still gently contemplated itself. In this space, images of duality began to flood my awareness. I thought of the figure 11 and the twin towers crashing on September 11th. Maybe half of the figure 11 was spiritual light and half was dark, the resurgence of that shadow from which we cannot escape? In order to maintain balance through the pain emerging in both my hips I became aware of the image of a pair of scales. There was a small figure on each side, like pawns from a chess set, one black and one white. I concentrated on keeping the scales balanced and remained completely still.

Suddenly the scales broke! In my mind's eye, I decided to hold one pawn in each hand. Sometime later, my awareness 'clunked' down a level. There was nothing there! Then I became aware of a strong, tingling heat, like an electric current, dark and sparkling all at the same time. It started at the base of my spine and moved up my trunk, shoulders and neck and over my face and scalp. It did not cover my forehead or nose. I was awestruck by this state of energy as it started to creep further up into my nose. I just stayed with it, part of me observing and part of me being with this warm black sparkling electric current. This was a physical experience; I became aware of a clear space flowing up into my head behind my eyes. At the same moment, I felt a unified peaceful sensation in the centre of my forehead. It was the most exquisitely tender, compassionate feeling that completely touched me and I just sat there on my cushion with tears silently pouring down my face.

The next day I woke with a streaming nose and a tight throat. I intuitively felt that something had been released from that area, not just intra-psychically but now physically. I am not exactly sure what this was but I think it happened because I had touched that deep place in the unconscious, beyond thought, what the Vipassana teachings refer to as the 'mind-body matrix' where mind and body meet as the continuum they truly are, and energy can flow as a connected whole.

This experience left me feeling profoundly clearer and lighter. When I spoke about it to my companions at the end of the course, I heard similar stories.

I wondered, as a liaison psychiatrist, whether there might be a therapeutic place for this technique in hospitals. I am not sure. The purpose of Vipassana is not merely the curing of disease but the essential healing of human suffering. It is a process that can be facilitated but not prescribed. The concept of maintaining equanimity towards one's pain, the embodied shadow of the psyche, flies in the face of Western medicine, in which the aim is to avoid suffering as much as possible. Do we want to look below the tip of the iceberg, or just shave off the sharp edges when they protrude from our unconscious? Do we have the strength, and the courage, to face our shadow and dig it out by the roots or shall we continue to run from it?

For myself, learning how to maintain equanimity while going through the suffering has cleared my mental and physical heaviness and left me with renewed vitality. I feel I have touched upon huge wisdom. But it would require a profound change of attitude in medicine and psychiatry if as a profession we were to move our healing potential further in this direction.

I would like to end with a quote from Robert Johnson's book 'Owning your own Shadow'⁵, in which he reminds us of the fundamental principal of the balance which we need to find within us:

'This ideal of balance is illustrated to us every day of our American lives but rarely noticed. Observe a US dollar bill, which is often in our hands. There is a pyramid with an eye at the apex. The bottom of the triangle represents the duality of our perception. On the ego-shadow axis, we see the pairs of opposites: right and wrong, good and evil, light and dark. As long as we concern ourselves with this scale the best we can hope for is an endless contradiction. But if our consciousness is sufficient, we can synthesize these warring elements and come to the all-knowing eye at the central point. On the dollar bill, the eye is raised above the opposites to indicate its superior position.

Light from this central place has no opposite. Like the Grail Castle, it is outside time and space. And we find it in a moment of transcendence. In a flash, what looked like a grey compromise becomes a synthesis of dazzling brilliance. Our own (Christian) Scripture tells us, 'If thy eye be single, thy whole body shall be filled with light' (Matthew 6:22). The singleness of the eye, the centre of the seesaw, is the place of enlightenment. This represents a whole order of consciousness; the inscription on the dollar bill – *novus ordo seclorum* - promises that new age'.

References

- 1 *Vipassana Meditation: Introduction to the Technique and Code of Discipline for Meditation Courses.* www.dhamma.org
- 2 Hart, W. (1987) *The Art of Living: Vipassana Meditation as taught by S.N.Goenke* Vipassana Research Institute
- 3 Chandarimani, K. *Vipassana Meditation: A Tool for Mental Health* Spirituality SIG Newsletter No. 4 June 2001
- 4 Pert, C. (1999) *Molecules of Emotion* Pocket Books
- 5 Johnson, R. (1991) *Owning Your Own Shadow* HarperSanFrancisco 1993

For further information about Vipassana meditation, contact the Vipassana Trust, Dhamma Dipa, Harewood End, Hereford, HR2 8JS. See also www.dhamma.org and www.vri.dhamma.org . I would like to thank Dr. Kishore Chandarimani for sending me his papers on Vipassana and the teachers and helpers at Dhamma Dipa for their commitment to this work.